



THE  
ALPHABETICAL  
ATHEIST

PROSE POEMS

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Even a careless reader will notice that every atheist in this book is described as a male. By and large, I intended the atheists described to have no specific gender, but the English language leaves little choice.

Therefore, I have settled on the “default” masculine pronouns throughout. However, it is not my wish that the atheists described be imagined as all male. Imagine every possible gender. Imagine impossible genders. By over-using the patriarchal male-as-default pronoun, I hope to call attention to the problem, not add to it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

“The Humane Atheist” first appeared in the limited edition chapbook *While Grasshoppers Mate* (Spare Change Press; Canton, OH).

## THE ARRESTED ATHEIST

The arrested atheist realizes that his trial is coming up, and that when he appears before the judge, he will have to swear on a stack of Bibles. He will not feel any weight beneath his palm. For him, the prospect of this empty gesture makes him think that even the most inconsequential trial is a pantomime, Kabuki theatre, a sham. When he goes to sleep, he has dreams to make even Kafka proud.

## THE BELIEVABLE ATHEIST

The believable atheist feels the soul of a writer growing inside of him. He knows what it is to create new worlds, man and woman, false gods, and snakes. He recognizes this kind of work when he sees it, and he respects it for what it is – a kind of truth.

Raised without church by a recovering Catholic of a father and an unaffiliated mother, the believable atheist became less and less interested in finding religion. His parents, on the other hand, were simultaneously born again and became Evangelicals.

*I cannot understand their obsession*, he says to himself. He cannot fathom how anyone could devote so much time to just one book. His eyes take in his many bookshelves and his tongue briefly savors the titles and exotic names of authors.

He believes not in the words, but in the work.

## THE CHILD ATHEIST

The child atheist grew up in Berkeley, California, without the benefit of the Tooth Fairy, Easter Bunny, or Closet Monster. Who could believe Santa Claus would arrive without snow, anyway? At an early age, his parents explained what an illusion was, and showed him how to turn his index fingers into sausage.

In his notebooks, he began to draw staircases that ran both ways, vases that turned into faces, and impossible three legged chairs. For his high school art class, his self-portrait could be turned upside down to look like a woman walking a dog.

He grew up a painter, creating illusions so real they made others weep.

## THE EVERYDAY ATHEIST

The everyday atheist tells me that I have a choice to make.

He says to imagine two grapes in the palm of my hand. *These are the last two grapes on the face of the earth.* What do I do with them, he asks.

*Would you eat them and enjoy them for what they are? Would you dry them into raisins? Or would you press them into a last glass of wine?*

I tell him that I would extract the seeds, plant them, and raise a new crop.

*Ah, but these are seedless grapes, and you, like an everyday miracle, have a choice to make.*

## THE FAMISHED ATHEIST

As a child, the famished atheist was told that watermelon seeds would grow in his belly, that chewing gum took eight years to digest, and that when he threw up it had something to do with butterflies.

His parents are at a loss to explain his anorexia, but his analyst knows the answer. And he can tell him in just a few sessions more.

## THE GENTLEMAN ATHEIST

The gentleman atheist dates a Christian. A Catholic, to be specific, but he suspects under that brittle veneer of piety lays a powerful atheist. He wants to press the issue, but he cannot. He would no sooner remove the saints and candles than strip the chrysalis of its hard skin. The phrase *you can't make an omelet . . .* is as meaningless to him as the Lord's Prayer.

They lay in bed, the Catholic and the gentleman atheist. Holding hands and still wearing socks, one whispers into the other's ear the words, *I love you.*

## THE HUMANE ATHEIST

The humane atheist chooses to work with the animals people have left behind. His particular shelter is located off Route 62, though it is not accessible from the highway. While volunteers flitter in and out, and those convicted of misdemeanors count down their community service hours, he files paperwork and checks the new drop-offs for worms, for fleas. He is the first one to brush out their matted fur.

A few years earlier, the state built a jailhouse next to the shelter. Although it blocks the shelter's view of the highway, their parking lots are not connected, and the humane atheist must drive a half-mile out of his way to get to work. Every morning he sees rows of black and white cruisers and the long, barbed wire fence of the jail. Sometimes a few officers stand outside laughing, having a cigarette. *In a humane society*, thinks the atheist, *even the jailers would hate their walls.*

## THE KEVLAR ATHEIST

The kevlar atheist believes he is ten foot tall and bullet proof. With tobacco, booze, and year round construction jobs, he has spent a lifetime making his body resilient to carcinogens, bar fights, and inclement weather. As a child he made sure to toughen up his heart, to protect it from injury, from loss.

When the kevlar atheist hits the gym, he hits it hard. It is him alone against the weights. When his muscles have warmed up, music and adrenaline pumping his veins, he feels his body soften. His muscles loosen; he is at harmony with the steel plates he lifts, the water he drinks. Something peaceful flows through him, although you would not be able to tell. He grimaces and swears with every rep. His personal language of love.

When he raises himself to the chin up bar, his shoulders burn. His hands explore the familiar bar and he elevates himself once more. From this height, he can see over the entire gym. His shoulders ache in exactly the spot an angel would grow its wings.

## THE MORALLY UNDEVELOPED ATHEIST

This is a subject to steer clear of. Or at least, wear protective latex gloves when handling. You don't know where this one has been. He does not meet our expectations, or our needs. He is morally undeveloped, as you can plainly see. He does not know what we mean when we say "the right kind of people." It doesn't matter we only say it behind his back; he doesn't know. Nor does he know much about fiscal conservatism. He's a spendthrift, maxed out on credit limits, taxed out on healthcare and college. And he doesn't know the first thing about family values. Did you see the thrift store clothes he wears, the beat up car he drives, the condition of his skin?

## THE QUIETEST ATHEIST

The quietest atheist is actually an oak tree. It has grown for nearly 170 years, although the last 40 have been the toughest. Passed over by the axe of colonizers looking for lumber, it watched rejection turn into salvation. Its leaves fell in a sigh of relief.

That is, until wood no longer became the thing of highest value, and factories of steel and cement grew up around it, and a city called Youngstown came into blossom. Its leaves no longer celebrated in the summers, but counted down the days until they could drop. Its bark, which never minded the cold blades of lovers, now seared and recoiled at the very thought of wind.

And now the city has lost its color, dried, and fallen. The tree remains, a prominent destination for dog walkers and sometimes for college students. The latter come out in the late spring to read, and the quietest atheist listens to their impassioned talk. It enjoys the philosophy students the most. They argue Sartre and Wittgenstein, sometimes eating fruit or cheese, and almost never litter.

## THE SCHOLASTIC ATHEIST

The words of the scholastic atheist come from the dark side of the mind. Beware of them, for they are written to convince and corrupt. It is simply insidious the way he operates, moving from school to school, from one science lab to the next, textbook by textbook.

He has never been to church, the scholastic atheist. He is an egghead, the kid who wore a slide rule on his belt in high school, and is now a threat to red-blooded Americans everywhere. He is what happens when people take “the life of the mind” too far. See how he displays his credentials – that’s vanity. He must think himself a god, looking down from the University at all of us.

We have laws against monopolies you know, so you’ll have to present both sides.

*Now open your Geology textbooks, children, to Chapter One: Genesis. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep . . .” Now what does that mean, children?*

## THE TOKEN ATHEIST

The token atheist has a grudge against god, which means that god exists and the atheist is already wrong, a walking contradiction. He has experienced something awful, perhaps molested as a child. Or his parents died tragically. For the maudlin, he may have a terminally ill child. Or he could have a face burned by acid for the more exotic.

He is now a desperate, hard drinking, nihilistic atheist. The kind just needing to be saved. One feels as though a single inspirational poster, complete with sun beams through clouds and a phrase like *Always have a joyful mind* would do the trick, snap him out of his downward spiral, bring a smile to his face.

And then the token atheist falls in love. God is love, after all. And the clouds do part, and the rays of sunshine evaporate his nihilism like morning fog. His lover takes him to church, where he eats a Eucharist or sings a hymn. The token atheist is saved, and all is right in the world.

## THE UNREPENTANT ATHEIST

The unrepentant atheist finds himself under assault when his neighbor's words flare like rockets. They start out as small as sparklers in a child's hand. But with every sentence they grow hotter, angrier, redder, until one's fist feels like it clenches a lit M-80, an inhuman kind of energy, about to rip flesh from bone. The unrepentant atheist cannot find it in himself to apologize for this situation; only try to deal with it. He expects to laugh about it later. This gives him hope, keeps him nervous. Not being a Catholic, he cannot go to confession. There is no other way.

## THE VIRGINAL ATHEIST

The virginal atheist thinks that belief should remain untouched, like snow or sand without footprints. To him, faith is an all consuming endeavor, like starvation, requiring every ounce of will. Religion should be luminous as mother of pearl.

The virginal atheist thinks that if he were religious, he would have to be a very devoted monk. Anything less would seem improper, a mere shadow of devotion. *Where is the dedication*, he asks.

Sometimes he thinks his atheism a blemish, an imperfection. The word *atheism* itself is rough in his mouth, like sand or grit between his teeth. He curls his lips back, like the two halves of an oyster, and spits. The word *atheism* comes back out smooth as a pearl, and he is not all that surprised.

## THE X-RATED ATHEIST

The x-rated atheist is not as steamy as all that. He was told that masturbation would make him go blind, and that sperm would turn his palms hairy.

He was told that lust was a sin in his heart, known only to him and to god. He was told that sex sells.

He was told that unwed mothers had loose morals and biracial children would never be happy.

He was told that a desire for anal sex made him gay and being gay gave him AIDS.

He wanted to ask about the effectiveness of condoms, thought he had read something somewhere in the back of a book, but the teacher would never call on him.

He wanted to ask if condoms came in different sizes, could be made from material other than latex, or could be flavored like his favorite desserts: strawberry, chocolate, banana.

He wanted to ask where the federal monies that used to fund sex education have gone, and why politicians always retire wealthy.

But some things are better not spoken of, not in a polite society, so they get left behind, silenced or censored, stamped with the letter X.

# THE ALPHABETICAL ATHEIST

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*Freedom & Strength* Press



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Images from the cover include a photo of the Alps, taken in Bad Gastein Austria in May 2003.

The clouds image (with the moon) was photographed in Gurnee June 13th 2008.

The letters appearing in the background represent the letters of the alphabet  
that are covered in the Andrew Rihn poems in this chapbook.

## other publications from Scars:

**Magazines:** *Children, Churches and Daddies* (cc&d magazine), founded June 1993; *Down in the Dirt*, conceived 1994, founded 2000

**Books:** *Hope Chest in the Attic*, *the Window*, *Close Cover Before Striking*, *(Woman.)*, *Autumn Reason*, *Contents Under Pressure*, *the Average Guy's Guide (to Feminism)*, *Changing Gears*, *the Key to Believing*, *Domestic Blisters*, Etc., *Oeuvre*, *Exaro Versus*, *L'arte*, *The Other Side*, *The Boss Lady's Editorials*, *The Boss Lady's Editorials (2005 Expanded Edition)*, *Duality*, *Seeing Things Differently*, *Change/Rearrange*, *Death Comes in Threes*, *Moving Performances*, *Six Eleven*, *Life at Cafe Aloha*, *Creams*, *Rough Mixes*, *The Entropy Project*, *The Other Side (2006 Edition)*, *Stop*, *Sing Your Life*, *The Beauty and the Destruction*, cc&d v167.5 (*Writing to Honour & Cherish*, editor edition), *Blister & Burn* (the *Kuyppers* edition), *S&M*, cc&d v170.5 *Distinguished Writings* editor edition, *Living in Chaos*, *Silent Screams*, *Taking It All In*, *It All Comes Down*, *Rising to the Surface*, *Galapagos*, *Chapter 38* (v1), *Finally*, *Literature for the Snotty and Elite* (v1), *Sulphur & Sawdust*, *Slate & Marrow*, *Blister & Burn*, *Rinse & Repeat*, *Survive & Thrive*, (not so) *Warm & Fuzzy*, *Torture & Triumph*, *Oh*, *the Elements*, *Side A/Side B*, *Balance*, *Chaos Theory*, *Writing To Honour & Cherish*, *Distinguished Writings*, *Breaking Silences*, *Unlocking the Mysteries*, *the Book of Scars*, *We The Poets*, *Life on the Edge*, *Revealing all your Dirty Little Secrets*, *Decrepit Remains*, *Charred Remnants*, *Hope & Creation*, *Bending the Curve*, *Layers of Creation*, *Dark Matter*, *Infamous in our Prime*, *Anais Nin: an Understanding of her Art*, *the Electronic Windmill*, *Changing Woman*, *the swan road*, *the Significance of the Frontier*, *The Svetasvatara Upanishad*, *Harvest of Gems*, *the Little Monk*, *Death in Málaga*, *Memento Mori*, *In the Palace of Creation*, *R.I.P.*, *Bob the Bumble Bee*, *Remnants and Shadows*, *I Saw This*, *the Drive*, *Thomas at Tea*, *Crashing Down Nineteenth*, *Blue Collar Ballet*, *Hope & Creation*, *Bending the Curve*, *Layers of Creation*, *Dark Matter*, *Chapter 38* (v1), *Finally: Literature for the Snotty and Elite* (v1).

**Compact Discs:** *Mom's Favorite Vase* the demo tapes, *Kuyppers* the final (*MFV Inclusive*), *Weeds and Flowers* the beauty & the desolation, *The Second Axing* Something is Sweating, *The Second Axing* Live in Alaska, *Pettus & Kuyppers* Live at Cafe Aloha, *Pointless Orchestra* Rough Mixes, *Kuyppers* Seeing Things Differently, *SD/SD* Tick Tock, *Kuyppers* Change Rearrange, *Order From Chaos* The Entropy Project, *Kuyppers* Six One One, *Kuyppers* Stop, *Kuyppers* Masterful Performances mp3 CD, *Kuyppers* Death Comes in Threes, *Kuyppers* Changing Gears, *Kuyppers* Dreams, *Kuyppers* How Do I Get There?, *Kuyppers* Contact • Conflict • Control, *the DMJ Art Connection* the DMJ Art Connection, *Kuyppers* Questions in a World Without Answers, *Kuyppers* SIN, *Kuyppers* WZRD Radio (2 CD set), *Mom's Favorite Vase* and *The Second Axing* These Truths, *assorted artists* String Theory, Oh (audio CD), *Life At The Cafe* (3 CD set), *DMJ Art Connection* Indian Flux, *DMJ Art Connection* Manic Depressive or Something, *Chaotic Radio* Chaotic Radio Week #1, *Chaotic Radio* Chaotic Radio Week #2, *Chaotic Radio* Chaotic Radio Week #3, *Chaotic Radio* Chaotic Radio Week #4, *Chaotic Radio* Chaotic Radio Week #5, *Chaotic Radio* the Chaotic Collection Collection #01-05 (5 CD set) etc. (audio CD, 2 CD set), *Chaotic Elements* (2 CD set), *Chaos in Motion* (6 CD set), *SD/SD* Screaching to a Halt (EP), *PB&J* Two for the Price of One (EP), *Kiki, Jake and Haystack* An American Portrait, *Kuyppers/the Bastard Trio/Paul Baker/the JoAnne Powlers Trio* Fusion (4 CD set).