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All work in this issue was produced by inmates or ex-inmates of the various Arizona correctional facilities.

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Walking Rain Review XII presents the creative talents of those who are currently incarcerated in Arizona state prisons and those who have been incarcerated in Arizona state prisons in the past.

Creative writing in this issue ranges from the work of fledgling writers to the work of several who have been widely published and won national prizes and recognition. All but three of the contributors to this issue are currently incarcerated. Most of them have been members of one or another of the various Creative Writing Workshops in Arizona's state prison system.

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This issue of *Walking Rain Review*
is dedicated to the memory of
Richard Michael Rossi
June 30, 1947 - April 22, 2006

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Color art work by **David Palmer**

INTRODUCTION

When I was in that brief, incandescent period between childhood and adolescence, long before the days of television, the computer or the cell phone, I and a couple of friends discovered the recreational possibilities of the telephone. Our telephone activity was clandestine, something to be done when our parents were not at home. First we went to the phone book and looked up several tobacconists, smoke shops, or stores that carried tobacco. We would take turns calling each of them, placing a handkerchief over the phone receiver to disguise our voices. Why we did this I have no idea since the ability to trace calls or caller ID were far in the future, although it did add to the exciting aura of illegality. When a clerk answered the phone, we would ask: “Do you have Prince Albert in the can?”

Generally the clerk would say, “Yes, we do.”

“Shame on you!” we would shout. “Why don’t you let the poor man out!”

Then we would hang up and collapse on the floor in paroxysms of laughter.

I didn’t know who Prince Albert was, but I had a fairly good idea of what he looked like. My grandfather smoked Prince Albert tobacco in his pipe, and there was a picture of the Prince on the can of tobacco that sat beside my grandfather’s chair when we all listened to the radio in the evening. I loved the smell of that pipe tobacco and I adored my grandfather, who owned a farm in the valley. He wasn’t really my grandfather. He was my grandmother’s third husband whom she had married about five years before I was born, but she had finally got it right and he was everything I and her other grandchildren could have asked for. (My grandmother was born in 1881 and lived to be 103. She was not overly influenced by public opinion when it came to her private life, but she was a strong, good, and caring woman. I doubt that I would have survived childhood without her and her wonderful farmer husband, who smelled of cow manure and Prince Albert pipe tobacco.)

As he appeared on the tobacco can, Prince Albert was a middle-aged sort of nondescript guy with a beard. My two friends and I wondered why, at his age, he hadn't become a king, since that was the inevitable career move for a prince, and he wasn't getting any younger. But somehow he hadn't become a king, and he was still Prince Albert in the can, a source of endless pleasure for us on the telephone. In fact, I somehow came to think of him, not as the husband of Queen Victoria, as I later found out he was, but as a man who actually lived in a can. I imagined the can as about the size of a very small room, windowless and without a door, and very dark. There was no way out for poor Albert unless some powerful force removed the tightly fitting lid.

That early fantasy came back to me like a boomerang in about 1974 when I met a young black man in the Arizona State Prison at Florence. When he was sixteen he had been found guilty of a convenience store robbery in which his partner shot and killed the clerk. He was given a death sentence and housed on death row. He was illiterate at the time the crime was committed. When I met him he was in his early '20's, had learned to read and write, and was well on his way to becoming the considerable intellectual force he is today. His name is Melvin. After I got to know Melvin in 1974, I asked him what it was like to be illiterate.

"Well," Melvin said in his careful, thoughtful way, "It's like being in a box and there's no way out. It's dark in there and you're afraid all the time. All you know is your physical needs – food, water, sex, drugs. That's all you know or can feel. You think there must be signs somewhere that tell you how to get out, but you can't read them because it's so dark in there." Immediately I thought about Prince Albert in the can, but I wasn't laughing this time.

Since then, watching Melvin make his way out of prison and into the responsible and important position he now holds in the community, I keep thinking about poor Prince Albert and how "in the can" has become slang for "in prison," and how I

have come, during the last 32 years to work with hundreds and hundreds of people who are “in the can.” I keep asking myself, even as I meet with them each week, why are they here? How did I escape this bitter cup they must drink? In the United States we have now incarcerated more than two million men and women, more than in Russia. Why? And how were those particular two million chosen while the rest of us go free? Is it some kind of huge demographic lottery?

I keep asking questions, and I think I’m asking them of the right people, the people in prison. Why are you here? Yes, there was a crime, and you do not deny it. I admire your honesty in this matter. But what happened before that? Why did the crime take place? Where were you and what were you doing one year before the crime? Five years before the crime? Ten years before the crime? In many cases they reveal to me a pattern that places them “in the can” long before they came to prison. Not “in the can” to the extent Melvin was, totally illiterate, but in some kind of social or cultural situation that would lead, almost inevitably, to prison. There are notable exceptions to this, but they are exceptions.

Currently I know two young and extremely talented writers in prison who are working on memoirs, stories of their lives so far. I am fascinated by their stories. One is an African American and one is Hispanic. If I were asked to write a recipe, a how-to book on the way to make sure you get into prison, I couldn’t improve on either of their stories. It is obvious that both were destined for prison from earliest childhood. It is also fairly obvious that they knew it and did little to avoid it because they were programmed to go to prison. That phrase “programmed to go to prison” has to be faced, although I don’t want to face it. There are forces, somewhere, that are programming many of our children to go to prison. The terrible part is that those forces may be us. We always look beyond ourselves for the reasons for crime – the media, the public schools, the availability of drugs, the judicial system, etc. – and we can certainly find fault with all of these. But my questions of

people in prison have led me, often, to another source.

One of the inmates I questioned said, “Prison isn’t so bad for me. For the first time in my life I have a clean bed to sleep in and enough to eat. And we all sit down to eat together.” That last statement brought me up sharp. What it said was that prison has become the substitute, the surrogate, for the American family, where everyone, presumably, sits down to eat together. I find this hard to face. I want to believe that the American family is still what we assumed it once was in the days of *Leave it to Beaver*, but obviously it is not. What has it become in the intervening years?

Many families have been able to maintain themselves as nurturing, care-giving structures in spite of worsening economic and social conditions. But many of them have not. Faced with stagnant wages, rising costs, and rampant consumerism, many parents find it is all they can do to make a living – they have no time for parenting. Other parents are so tied up in their own problems – various addictions and dysfunctional relationships – that they have no emotional energy left to devote to their children. Others were so badly raised themselves and are so poorly educated that they have no idea how to go about raising their own children, especially since television is available as a twenty-four-hour-a-day baby sitter.

There is a point, and it could be plotted on a chart, where low economic class intersects with minority status, and at that point are thousands and thousands of children caught on the highway in the headlights of approaching disaster. Recently several Hispanic inmates from the Tucson or Phoenix areas told me that they have always expected to go to prison. One of them even used the term “rite of passage.” It was clear that they had been taught that they would someday go to prison and they had behaved in such a way as to insure that outcome. Every minority member in the room agreed with them. No one seemed to be particularly troubled about it except me, and I have been working in prisons for too many years to let my distress or anger show if I can possibly hide it.

The question is, of course, who taught them? And the answer is probably everybody. Certainly their parents, by not providing the positive role models and guiding their children's education, but also by lousy schools in impoverished neighborhoods, a lack of wholesome recreational activities, an economic system that defeats any attempt to improve one's situation, and finally, that thing we never want to talk about – built in cultural attitudes and expectations that can come in subtle ways from parents, but are usually more obvious in the form of peer pressure.

All of these teachers (influences) are affected by economic class, but ethnicity is also a factor. It is apparent that many young black and Hispanic men in America today would feel that their manhood was somehow called into question if they had never been to prison. Why else would they refer to going to prison as “a rite of passage”?

There is the possibility of hope in this situation, however. If people can be taught how to go to prison, they can be taught how to stay out. Such an education would require the cooperation of the parents, schools, government and society – a big order – but it is possible. At present there is very little in many male minority members' lives that can counteract the most vicious peer pressure to fail. *Bad is good. Marijuana and drugs are the highest form of good. Failure is success. Prison is a necessary part of growing up and will make a man of you. Women (except one's mother, of course) are bitches, good only for sex. Formal education should be avoided at all costs. Anything that goes on in a classroom is wrong and dangerous.* These are the attitudes that have led so many men to prison, and they are rigid, learned attitudes. They form the box, the can these young men are imprisoned in. I want to call up somebody and shout, “Let them out,” but who has the power to do that?

Maybe the President? But the President, because of his fiscal policy, is only making matters worse. As the song says, *The rich get rich and the poor have children. In the meantime, in between time, ain't we got....well it's not exactly fun.* It

comes very close to being suicidal madness.

I would not go so far as to say that the root of all crime is poverty. But the root of a great deal of crime is poverty, and financial poverty leads to many other kinds. Poverty results in the inability to make choices. Poor parents might choose to raise their children in a better neighborhood without the friendly dope dealer on the corner, but that is a choice they cannot afford to make. They might choose to send their children to a better school, but that is a choice they cannot afford to make. They might choose to spend more time with their children, to teach them things they need to know, but scrambling to make a living takes up all their time and energy. Poverty takes away the ability to make choices. And so, of course, many of the children of poor parents make all the wrong choices and wind up in prison, which they have been brainwashed into believing is “a rite of passage.” They are encouraged to view a disaster as an asset, since they are taught that it is unavoidable anyway.

At this point they come into my creative writing workshops, bright and often beautiful, and just beginning to suspect that the choices they made which led them to prison were not always wise ones. But any other choices would violate the belief system they have been taught.

Who can they trust? Certainly not me, with my white, professional, middle-class attitudes and my (seemingly) fancy education. They don't know that my father was a falling-down drunk with a sixth grade education who could not make an adequate living and took away from me what little money I had managed to save in order to keep me from going to college. I could have adopted his value system. But there were those others whose voices counteracted the negative attitudes of my father. A mother who, although not brilliant nor erudite, believed in reading and taught me to read before I started school. And there was that wonderful, wise grandmother and her third husband who encouraged me to “get away” and “get an education.” And so I did. The positive teaching and examples were stronger than the negative teaching and examples.

I try to teach my students in the prison how to write better, but I can't preach to them. I can't ask them to go back and relive their lives, listening to other voices in other rooms. I can only hope that as they mature they will see beyond the false voices they have heard too much of in the past, and that they will not perpetuate the threadbare myths they have lived by and extend them into the lives of their own children.

Richard Shelton
Editor

Tony Degges

When Plotting a Course

*She sang beyond the genius
of the sea*

Wallace Stevens

I never want to know
a time of arrival
on heading to a port
as emerald as virtue
what I want
is the flow and roll
that cradles sleep
in dreams like a sail winged
for a seven-knot breeze
A casual pace

the sea falls along the curve
its scent
like a lover leaves
I hear the conversation
of flying clouds
at rest in the hammock of your mainsail
while we surf waves
that lift your white hull
on following seas astern
Bow-spray glistens

jewels splayed
on the carved breast
of our maiden of the prow
She sings from the bowsprit
to sunlit silver dolphins
laughing laughing
laughing

Andrew Jaicks

By the Light

The moon could never find me here
in the cooing shadow of the brick wall
I cannot thank my lucky stars

When the traffic wind whirls my hair
and loose pages of porn follow and call
the moon could never find me here

Though gold-domed City Hall is near
with its lit squadron of trees sprouting knuckles
I cannot thank my lucky stars

I cannot climb newspaper stairs
they smell better as blankets and after all
the moon could never find me here

There is no crown of light from cars
and if the sidewalk's not a bad life just small
I cannot thank my lucky stars

I have the rain instead and years
learning the tongues of dogs and speaking well
the moon never could find me here
I cannot thank my lucky stars

Andrew Jaicks

Cherry Bombs

Because of a rogue rain
 drop by cold drop
 the dark cherries are lost
 still hanging on stems
while so hot
their tight skins pop
and a gathering rage of applause
echoes through the orchards
green rows waving
with the great indifference of grace

Because of rain
 the families
 who follow the harvest
 can only remain
 inside the chipboard shacks
where they sit
drinking out of amber bottles
coiled in cigarette smoke
under drumming roofs
the children will someday recall
in sorrows they think of
as the song of love

Andrew Jaicks

City of Innocence and Plague

Among tourists and break-dancers
where the cable cars are turned
on the dial at Market and Powell,
I see the same stubborn sentry
I saw circling through the crowd
the last time I was here
thirty years ago. The very same,
though who could believe me?
I believe myself little more
than any sane man would
this prowling sentry in a sandwich board
warning of the whore of Babylon.

The last time I checked in
wasn't the end just as near
and each quaint cable car,
turned by hand for the tourists,
for each return trip up the hill,
still obsolete?
Wasn't the whole city still
revelling along its silvering rails
of reduction into a theme park?
Of course we who knew seemed to whirl above,
sailing our blizzard of bones,
each of us a particular significance.
And I could laugh then
at this same red-faced prophecy man
so unhappy and so clearly insane.

Didn't all of us here then sailing laugh –
pitying the poor prophet,

the poor stalking man stabbing the air
and talking to an unseen enemy?
It *was* pity – please let it have been –
or let history lie
and lie light as the ashes
surrendered to the air off Golden Gate Bridge.
So many unspread friends spread to the air.
So many surrendered
to the ceremony of seed and ash.
Where is the world we wish we could dream
without joy always its own portent?
Must always the seed sailing ravel the worm?
And how much hope
and how much horror must we make
before the world is remade?

The last time I was here at Market and Powell,
the end was near and among others laughing
I laughed while harboring my secret hope
of a night deep within a neon red whore
(oh, any whore,
any seeming shudder amid painted burning).
I didn't know then
about the violence of innocence,
how no sin can compete with innocence.
Forgive me, I didn't know.
Please someone, forgive me.

Andrew Jaicks

The Shortline Bus Stop on Route 17

It is cold and Venus is there
in the cold pitch morning sky,
and one man
standing out in the morning
his moonbreath expelled pluming
as a separate thing
pale and no part of the regular air
if in fact there exists the actual air
and not instead just this other glittering
scentless and clear –
beyond bitter and clear –
with one man in its midst standing
against a brittle black sky
and the brittle bright stars,
all the splintering stars,
and the planets staring.

Andrew Jaicks

Along the Jersey Shore, Listening to a Shell

You are ashes now and the house has been sold,
possessions sorted by a second wife,
and the sun has been circled once and then some.
The grief that stole up and surprised expectation
has come and gone.
And come again.
And gone again.
Like the phasing moon
and the moonless morning hours before the birds begin;
like the beginning of birds
and the evening's settling discontent.
You are the chuff and chatter and the ruffling silence:
(things disappear with the ears that listen for them).
You are ashes now, and less –
an aging absence filling in;
a footstep tidied up by the sea's green drudgery.

Ralph Hager

Parking Lot – Space #103

wet paper
dried, brittle
accepting ink

like

the distance between us
is the length of air
undefined, hot, thick
thin, but weighing a ton
just like the word

love

the sound between us
silent as the day
distinct in its outlines
square as concrete buildings
rectangle hills
quietly rubbing the sky

massaging

the closeness between us
a canyon of slate granite
the outline of your pupils
eyes specked with mica
a Dali conception
to admire but never touch

Ralph Hager

3 Cold Verses from the Parking Lot

Mountains stand where they don't belong
and remind me the stars
have left tracks on the moon

light falls to the ground
 dust flies
a burn rose appears in the concrete

trees stand frozen like hair in winter
desert ice reminds me
cold stands where it doesn't belong

Daniel W. Cook

A Place to Call Home

I am going home, home to where my nightmares
began. Dealers on the street corners,
drugs of every kind.

On one corner stands a man preaching
the love of god. Says he wants to save
my soul, says he is a brother
of mine.

Lord, I don't know. He sure doesn't look
like anyone in my family. He says
he is going to pray for me.

Along comes the police
to take him away, leaving the dealers
on their corners for another day.

Traffic on our street slows
when the night is full.

I stand alone
looking into shadows and I see the old men
sleeping in alleyways, the place they call home.

Jaime Meza

Long Hand

When mustangs race behind optic endings,
empires rise in stone and crumble as glass.
Notes ring and spiral into the drum
and a chair sits full.
Ink bleeds on paper when the quill flows.

When the knockout punch comes, a love letter
detonates a grease fire, passion listens, strangled
by words and rams collide. Torrential sobs
smack concrete and the ground
boils when the quill flows.

Crows dance through images of bald sycamores
when the heart carries black lilies
for an incinerated parent. The spyglass
is out of focus; eyes are torn from their place
and set in a box when the quill flows.

Cherry blossoms fill the mountain air.
Heat waves won't settle and the nose
itches when the quill flows.

Craig Rogers

Gluttony

The nightmares, memories and toy marbles
are at the edge of the place called Eggshell,
also called home for three brothers.

Inside the fire place
like old brooms used for kindling,
like a mid-westerner's garbage held hostage
in a steel trash can, they crouch in fear and wait
with rosin on their adolescent knees
for the fire to enslave with its touch
and smokey halitosis on the back of their necks.

Their eyes are split like the moon in two,
legs shattered like falling stars
screaming into a nocturnal prison
and arms as useless as a falcon
with braided feathers on its wings.

Daddy, their deity, ate them first
while his anarchist apostles awaited the seconds
for their starving knives without rhyme.

With dehydrated feces covering the adults
they stand in front of the triptych-mirror
and smile at their *fucking* accomplishment burning...

Craig Rogers

The Catalyst

There are children with corn syrup all over their fingers
and hot dogs in their pockets who will be taught
to bow their heads to cognitive clouds with silver batons
instead of nuclear balloons
that explode like road kill somewhere
north-west of Denver in that secretive mountain.
That purple mountain with suicidal liberty, like the battleships
U.S.S. Arizona and Oklahoma, in a wave of patriotism
where heroic jet fighters still fly over and under
the purple hearts, looking for our next hellion
with stomach ulcers, heroin and cocaine. The hellion
who owns mustang horses that shit
on the faces of dead presidents of yesterday and tomorrow.
I'm tired of growing older, tired of trying to catch
up with current events with casts on my feet and hands,
grayer than they were this morning.
Left with options, I took a picture of myself
and bashed it into the walls, mirrors and windows
with radical tears in my eyes, and the words
vertigo and *silent*.

James Anderson

Changing Planes

My mother told me
once I'd grown old enough to bend
my mind, if we ever are "old enough,"
that while in either her
or my father's company
I'd flown around the planet
six times by the time I was six.
She spun a globe as she said this
spanning whole oceans
by lifting her finger.
"Did you know, Honey" she said
"that if you travel at just the right speed
you can fly into the sunset
and never stop – just keep
hold of that arc on
into the dying sun, round and round."
Older now, having plunged alone
into those shades of melting
ruby that is sunset above the clouds,
since I've slept around
some, had a few sordid affairs
with certain loose dictionaries
I think *I've heard of the practice
of mailing oneself a letter
having it returned then to sender
as a way to connect
with the other*

side of self.

*Back then my sense of wonder
must have served in lieu
of folded words, looping
through clouds through a day
to touch...*

But I was simpler then
and my mother's child,
and thought, feeling my age
*no wonder I'm so dizzy
no wonder my wings
hurt so much.*

This a Buddhist later confirmed.

So for five years
in this prison
and those before it
which have all been the same,
I've waited for my soul
to catch up. (I try
not to do the math.)
It's coming I hear it
screaming down
the corridors of my life.

I've broken my heart
five ribs, my sternum, thrown out my conscience
damaged my liver to make room.

Still, I'm worried
it'll be too big
big as whale sex
as an enormous owl
fledged in shades of charcoal
swamping the sky
with grey feathers.

James Anderson

Ulysses

You get up from your desk
a shelf of battleship
gray peeled institution paint,
you leave Joyce on the table
at the part where Bloom is
crapping in his outhouse reading the paper,
you set sail against the wind
you wind
through sweat and muscle...thick
arms fat guts
grunt hoisting prison made weight:
gallons of water in a trash bag
and you make it in the end
to the end of a concrete maze.

There's a young black
man at the turn with a 'zine:
skin flix and greased dicks
stunned frozen in their pumping;
it is grinding in your mind
the constipation is back.

Fish-cop: new recruit in control tower
lady in her cage with a mullet
told you that morning "Are you
going to breakfast, big guy." That's right
she *told* you- it wasn't a question.

Now she's using profanity like a spatula
she flips the old convict from one
burnt side over to the other –
there is no sunny side –
a wash of oil spackles the fire
spits and sizzles, you're blinded:
gleam of grilled gold.

You enter the stalls
toilets and sinks look like an oil spill
might have been recently bleached away
leaving dead hair and brine
in the checker-grout of spa tiles.
A man grunts and rises and lowers clipped wings
flex with every pull-up
on the shower curtain pole.

You piss and flush
the toilet with your foot
run cold water over hands, splash surf
into the coalmine of your face
use your elbow to knock the lever
to stop the flow.

Past dyke cop, around porn corner
down muscle alley where pale skin...
There is a shelf with a book
an existence with its own language
if only you can survive
such a long walk home.

James Anderson

Taking Responsibility Too Late

The last time I saw my brother
S.W.A.T. was kicking in my door.
I was in my office, barefoot
weighing out a pound,
a bottle of Knobb Creek by my leg.
I thought the pit bulls were scrapping
in the livingroom again– and rushed out
yelling “Sweetie! Baby!” ready
to scold and separate.
Screaming. Masks. Shotguns. Flak jackets
a black two-man battle ram
then a military issue boot on my neck.
As vertebrae dislocated sickly
I thought of my younger brother
his face so unlike mine, but still mine.
I saw him then clearly for the first time
even though he was in the kitchen
washing dishes for the barbeque,
ready now to meet something terribly real
his nerves already beginning
to shatter.
Everything’s mine I said loud enough
for my brother, Amber and the others
pinned to the floor.
Everything’s mine.

Gary S. Moore

Justified

Comes the police car rolling past my house
while I'm minding my own damn business
the questioning and accusations
the lawsuit for brutality
the acquittal and the slap on the wrist
the riots and looting of my neighborhood
Comes the sack lunch in the prison cell I sought to avoid in the first
place
now justified

Comes my cousins from Mississippi
and we talk in code over the phone
as the arresting officer stuffs his mouth
with Crispy Creme donuts
while the impatient silver messengers flee from the barrel
the scramble for safety
the bullet enters the back of his head
and exits the donut covered in blood and raspberry jelly
Comes the sack lunch in the prison cell I sought to avoid in the
first place
now justified

Comes the substitute teacher with a fake mustache
while my public defender
tries to steer me into signing a plea bargain
and the prosecutor's daughter kicks and screams
with the ransom note in the mail
and the deadline for the prosecutor's death
the Chinese food take-out driver is bound in the trunk
Comes regret as I realize what has happened
Comes the sack lunch in the prison cell I sought to avoid in the
first place
now justified

John Zurawski

Prison Shower

*When perceptions become
first-hand knowledge, fear crawls
across your sandals.*

Jon-luc

The water cascades over
our confined shoulders.

We close our eyes
divert our thoughts.

Abruptly
cigarette smoke or flatulence billows
from the next stall.

I turn the shower hot
to raise steam
cast away the smell like a filibuster
to the ozone layers, a high-
pressure hose constantly pushes water
down a drive way.

While 28 men pass
their way down
the dorm. The closest man to the bath
room – on shitter watch yells,

water's free!

Do you have a calculator?

No. Don't need one to add water.

Courtesy flushes
are a must.

Flushing gives the illusion
of an odor-free experience.
Some of us mask
with home-made cologne
prison
air fresheners, while
others need reminding.

Picking up fallen soap
wiping mosaic stains
our porters are brave men.

A trying job of tile gleam
no extra food on the tray.

Stepping into the shower
we're always aware
of the man
before and those to come.
Careful of the dead babies!
Shower shoes?
Mandatory!

John Zurawski

Prison Shower II

these days
the shower
stall used
by everyone
generic Noxzema
a dull razor
Irish Spring
a concrete
bench and wooden pegs
bits and pieces
to make you feel
small

funny

a warm towel
feels the same

this warm towel
makes me feel
human

Kyle Sharp

And Rumors of War

Let them have their Afghanistan
and their Congo
 just give me your quiet eyes
capturing the wicked samba of a candle's flame
 just let me watch you dance
one more time
 pulling free from the constraints
of civilized thought...and denim
 your nudity a study in contour
and carnality

We will stage our own *petit coup d'etat*
a private affair
I will overthrow your fear of commitment
with a seditious kiss
 and sing softly of redemption
while we await news of other fallen cities
and fleeing refugees...

Let them have their uprisings
 and their civil wars
There is always peace
 in the wake of our embrace

Lawrence Paxton

Help Me Down

We bounce
like rabbits
with clenched fists.
Sweat gleams
on our black skin
We look
like marble sculptures.

My opponent moves
swift like garbage
blowing in the wind.

He shoots a stiff jab
to my mouth.
I taste copper.

I shuffle away
waiting for the pain.
My teeth rattle
like loose change.

My head feels disconnected.
My eyes fog over.
I stumble into the ropes.

He moves in.

Gut-shot.
Can't breathe.
Left hook.
Can't see.

Right cross.
Can't smell.

Uppercut.

I fall
like the hope
of anyone who bet on me.

Here I am, Lord.
The lump on the canvas.

*He had a good heart, they'll say
But a jaw like glass.*

John Buri

Psychosomatic Onion

-for My Vegetarian Friends

I can't peel a psychosomatic onion.
I can't slice it. Can't
chop, dice, mince it
or sprinkle it on a frankfurter.

I can feel the crunch
between my teeth.

I can't sweat a psychosomatic onion.
It won't turn translucent.
It will not brown, will not tender.

I can taste the little
bastards in the gravy.

There is no such
thing as a
 sweet
 green
 Bermuda
psychosomatic onion.

But reality is a bite
of a hidden slice
in the best burger
I've ever had, and had
to leave the rest
untouched.

John Buri

Fear & Loathing in Our Atmosphere

Today emission & particulate levels
are slightly elevated, as cremated remains
of Hunter Thompson were shot
into the sky. Left to wind and whim
he swirled, hitchhiked on currents
funneled to the jet stream, disbursed
throughout our planet. Close your eyes
take a deep breath of fear & discovery.
Ashes to ashes...

1 - 900 - POEM

Monsoon wind has pushed
an underground newspaper
against our cyclone fence
neighbors are talking.
Grayscale Girls Girls Girls
toll free telephone numbers
personal ads, buy chat room minutes
buy personal toys, bi-curious, by
the time this afternoon storm ends
our entire town will think
I'm a pervert.

John Buri

The Session

-A Poem in Four Breaths

Nine blue down-
type cats
lay a track
of dirty thumb
hammer on
pull off bass.
Do-wop do four
part lips
straight two
on the *and* off beat no
hi-hat *oooh*.
Slip in a rim
shot lite brush
shh shh pop.
Palm mute
drive in A major
dunt-dunt *ahh*.
Sustain feed-back bay mic
floor tom
on the *one*,
Breathe
hmm hmm
fade.

Arthur L. Russo

Dream Hatch

A man sits alone at his breakfast table as dawn cracks open the sky, remembering the dreams he has left behind.

Like the dog at his feet, the fly on his wall, he waits to see what he will do next.

Nothing can go with him into his dreams. Even now his watch is on the bedside table ticking away the moments of his life.

He wishes he could take from his waking life and bring from his dreams, but the dream hatch slams shut quickly. Only sparks and the dust of chaos escape.

So he sits with his cup of hot coffee in his hands, his dog at his feet, the fly on his wall, waiting again for the hatch to open.

Gordon Grilz

Belated Farewell

If the only way
I can ever speak with you again
is to visit your grave
then I will come.

Do you recognize the footsteps
that approach you now?
It is me, your husband
who answered your betrayal
with a raging heart.

Do you see the gray man
who stands over you like the shadow of a cloud?
Do you hear the words of my confession
or smell the incense of the single rose
I place on your name?

I spent thirty years in a house of stones
waiting in penance for you to speak to me.
These tears are for you and for our children
who cried themselves to sleep without us.

Gordon Grilz

Elegy

Bury me under a cloudy sky
with a cold wind and the threat of rain.
Put me in the ground when the grass has died
before me and the trees stand naked
against the overcast haze
of some November morning and I will not
rue so much this passing
nor grieve so hard this leaving.

I will descend upon you in the snow that falls,
be with you in the changing of the season,
the turning of the leaves,
and the moving of the shadows.

Lessons of war

During the insurgency in Guatemala
a family went into town for supplies.
The corpses of the rebels who had been
hanged by government troops were
dangling by ropes suspended
from telephone poles. As they passed by
a six-year-old asked her father,
“Papa, what are those people doing?”
He answered,
“They are learning to fly.”

James Anderson

On Melting

To grow, as humans, is first about being able to read signs. I am thirteen years old, and scared, as I look out of a kitchen window in China and see the small scrub-brush of a tree decorated with hundreds of tiny glass bottles. They are secured with meticulously tied threads.

Wind runs the field in uneven sprints, and dull cacophonies of sealed, empty ginseng vials clatter to mark its relays. The meaning of the ornamentation is particularly Chinese: understated, ambiguous, and powerful.

Deng Xiao Ping is out of favor. He is China's Premier, one man who rules over a tripartite system: economics, military control, and a stagnant Communist Party. Deng's given name, 'Xiao Ping,' can be pronounced with subtle changes in inflection, to mean 'little bottle' – xiao ping. (Xiao, using the same tone, also means petty. Ping is found in compound words for 'flat, insipid, or dull'.)

Nobody saw the students responsible. They came at night with impressive stealth, considering the attention the agit-prop mobile is designed to attract. The little bottles hold Deng up to public scrutiny. Ambiguity ends three days later. The bottles are smashed.

July 2nd, 1989. I fight through crowds of students to make a Hong Kong bound train. Tens of thousands have taken to the streets. Their blue and green clothes create a sea of cheap material, bristling with the near-hairless and odorless bodies of a Chinese people agitated, excited, awestruck. It is a raw emotion to realize, to *feel*, that you may have a voice after all. I hold

tightly to my mother's hand as we battle the crowd below an overpass, the spit-covered pavement above clogged with a thrall of black bicycles and manic faces. Noise crushes us with even greater force than the congestion of people. We are torn and jostled as we gain nervous ground to the railway station. It feels as if all of Nan Chang's six million are rising, swirling to crescendo. Energy fuels itself, then curdles in its own momentum. The dependable dullness, the drab fugue of a post-cultural-revolution society that I've learned to belong in, as an accepted novelty, is gone. The glaze of acceptance in eyes I've been until this moment unaware of, gone. In its place a wild seed of revolution.

When one third of our planet's population shares in the nervous twinge of creation and possibility, earth itself becomes unstable. I am aware of being swept, swallowed in the fervor, carried by the torrent into a future of unknowns. It seems, though I would have been hard-put to express it, that gravity is holding its breath.

We make the station at last, and crawl toward Hong Kong through the night on a sweaty steam train. We drink weak tea in a cloud of Double Happiness Brand cigarette smoke. I watch foul yellow cotton balls puff-puff from the train's engine and hang in the sky. Our transport clacks and shakes at its top speed, a frustrated twenty-six miles per hour. In Hong Kong we reach Kai Tak airport with barely enough time to board our flight.

Gatwick Airport, sixteen hours later. Just south of London. We are met at the airport, and within minutes are comfortably hedgerowed, a short walk down the lane from the Sportsman – the local pub. We watch students on my grandparent's TV as they are crushed by tanks in Tian An Men. Nanchang has the second largest city square in China – second only to Tian An Men, but no mention is made of similar unrest – or its outcome – in the giant city of China's poor and anonymous south.

The world we'd lived in is ended. A home where most nights I'd cooked dinner for my family, where I'd learned to be

alone, cried myself to sleep for a very long first year – that life has just telescoped to an insignificant BBC window on a 19" Panasonic. I pet a purring 'Boots', one of my grandma's cats, and don't know what to think. We drink tea with milk.

We learn, from travelers and friends of relative's friends over the years that follow, of people we'd known who disappeared to re-education camps in the north. Some are still missing. In order to avoid their own re-education., other students are forced to write essays which expose their peers and praise the brutal acts of government.

I am privileged and unharmed, insulated by nationality and comparative wealth; still, I remain one of a multitude left without resolution. In its place bitter questions.

There are many reasons to travel, some are unconscious. The obvious purposes: to see new sights, meet different people, become exposed to a different culture. People travel in quest of excellent bargains to countries where a depressed economy makes them rich. And there are those who journey to enhance a social scrapbook, a repertoire of interesting segues at a dinner party.

"Oh yes, when Donald and I were on a safari in Uganda, we came across the most delightful/horrid..." Still others become mobile because home is unbearable. These are all conscious reasons, easily listed by travelers themselves.

What they don't say is important. There exists a painful, almost spiritual process that few speak of. Somebody clever once said that we leave home to find ourselves, and with luck, when we return home – there we are.

Soldiers who've gone to war, prisoners long caged, exiles learn the meaning of this phrase. So do the insane who are able to reach stable ground. (The 'exiled eloquent' find clear ways to express themselves only once cast out, then 'come home', either by returning, or making peace with themselves, finding autonomous balance; looking in from the outside.)

Travel is a window to what we leave behind. Madness, exile, trauma in a foreign climate, or a long prison sentence, serve almost identically with the shock of a mysterious culture and the

threat of strangeness which makes one think, not so much of a new world, but about one's last home, no longer physically real, and to feel about it both prescient and nostalgic. Admittedly, this dark side of travel lacks pleasantries, like air conditioning, or lobster bisque. It is a compression of experience, recapitulation of the past. Comfort may actually be an obstacle to its most real effect.

Thirty years old and in prison I am distanced from the world, and from myself. I've traveled extreme distances before: I know this pattern. I have some skill in reading the signs. I witnessed such an unfolding almost perfected, in the dynamic movement of at one moment being caught up in the undertow of change in a nation as old as history, to the next, which found me whisked away to the cerebral vantage point of a cozy English living room, watching dramatics conclude while sipping a nice cuppa'.

Distance allows a startling and embarrassed vision of that self, a new person whom I can write about, and operate on. Without wincing too much in sympathy, as my body jerks at incisions. To move in any direction, even inwards, creates perspective: signs are revealed. If not apparent *we can make them*.

It is 1988, the end of a sweltering summer, ten months before the Tian An Men massacre. My family boards a shipping freighter bound for Xia Men island and its adjacent mainland port on China's far-southern coast. We have just spent a month in Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong, we stayed at the YMCA, the new one. My father first courted my mother when he lived at the earlier 'Y'. They still have the brass doorknob to his single room, saved by a friend just before demolition of the long-condemned building. The room was tiny, he tells me, and he lived on steamed fish and rice, prepared in a little rice-cooker. It reminds me of my grandfather – his father – who tells proudly of how he lived on oatmeal and milk through lean university years, simple fare

prepared in close quarters, much like my father's happy hovel. The old 'Y' housed thousands of travelers and poor students and poor idealistic teachers for years after it was condemned. Half of the buildings in Hong Kong are condemned, fire hazards some, with families cooking meals over open coal stoves in hallways and stairwells, yet people go on living in them, as our family did two years later.

In Hong Kong I spend time wandering humid streets, stepping through vertical streams of icy air that mist out from open shop fronts, layers of 98° heat, 95% humidity – to ice box – to 98°... I explore seedy alleyways where I am fascinated by walls of pornography in plastic sheaths. I eat fishballs on wooden skewers and bags of steamed chickens' feet, tactfully called "phoenix claws," that are served in lieu of popcorn in the local all-Chinese cinemas. I ride the Star Ferry from Kowloon, across the harbor to Central, on Hong Kong island, marveling at the old Chinese men, looking themselves like phoenix claws, who swim in the horrendously polluted water.

To keep me busy, my father makes the kind and expensive gesture of buying me a top-of-the-line remote control car kit – a miniaturized version of the "Monster Beetle." I assemble it in three days, to his deflated approval. He is pleased to have a quick-minded son, but had hoped the project would occupy me much longer.

Our tickets lead us to a berth deep in the ship's bowels, separated by thin walls from a grinding engine room. We are driven at by heat and rhythmic pounding as if Vulcan himself is next door, forging steel. We avoid our low-ceilinged room most of the voyage, return only when exhausted to reluctantly collapse.

The ship's dining hall and bar are, by comparison, heavenly. Deserted, the bar and its lounge are cool and softly lit, ensconced in plush leather, deep couches rimmed in polished brass. A sunken half-moon couch rounds below a long visor of segmented windows, which look only to flat sea once Hong Kong

drops into the horizon. I listen to my new walkman, small by American standards in the late 80's, bought in the then still cheap Hong Kong electronics market. I've stumbled across a band called 'The Cure' in one of Hong Kong's many bootleg stalls; an album called 'kiss me kiss me kiss me.' One of its songs is a translation of a 19th Century French poem that describes an old man who holds two small children in the pouring rain, and a pretty, but petty and spoiled woman at the narrator's side who exclaims how ugly they are, and how she wishes they wouldn't look at her. Other songs have lines like "She used to just stand there and stare...even when the days got colder..." or "All alone in a snakepit..." It is narcissistic and morbid. I love every minute.

Books, like music, have a way of falling into my hands at synchronous moments. This trip I have "The Painted Bird" by Jerzy Kosinski. It is the story of a young Jewish boy separated from his parents (who are dead), wandering the German countryside during the holocaust. Not a cheerful book. But it is deeply effective. It contains scenes still graven in my mind, that I'm sure have influenced who I've chosen to be in life. The title is taken from a certain episode, particular in a long stream of graphic misery.

The young boy is taken in as slave labor by an abusive man, a farmer who lives alone in squalor and raises rabbits. His rabbits bleed all the time, and it is made clear that he molests them. The boy is starved, thrown in a cesspool, and hung from a hook in a potato sack, where for days in the claustrophobic barn he is forced to witness various atrocities.

The farmer has a curious habit. It entails trapping a wild bird from the flocks that regularly descend on his fields. He takes the bird into his barn where he paints it, carefully, in garish colors. He waits until the flock returns, and releases it back to the sky. The society of birds are threatened by the strange markings, and the bewildered bird is pecked to death. If not immediately, it falls to earth, then returns determined, again to its flock – finding death.

These images, the dark absorption of The Cure, and the

primal, deep pulse of engine room, are the industrial womb that leaves me, nascent and blinded in sunlight on the docks of Xia Men.

Sun Blazes. White heat. A new southern dialect. “Dong suan, nan la” is a Chinese truism that means “north sour, south hot,” true of food, language, art, personality, and climate. Xia Men is a “Special Economic Zone.” A sprawl of development, it grows doggedly to assume the bustle of Guang Zhou, another SEZ outside of Hong Kong, called until recently, Canton. So in Hong Kong, they speak Cantonese.

Xia Men, mildly westernized, has wider paved streets than most Chinese cities, but fewer boulevards. It feels like a grid. A giant dusty computer chip in an old Apple IIe. It is spare and flat, and hot. It grows in young energy. The few niceties like stores that sell oatmeal and powdered milk do nothing to ease burning heat. We stay our first nights in teacher’s quarters on the campus of Xia Men University. We are surprised to find them so open and integrated with student life. Our doors spill right on to busy bicycle paths, windows fill with young voices. Yet we’re isolated, even from each other in the sun-blind. By 8 a.m. we are irritable and drained.

We decide to spend the last of our time in a nicer hotel. One with air conditioning up on a hill that overlooks the city, a slope deeply gouged by concrete drainage ditches. Recovering, we read our books in another vacant bar, and order from the seasonal menu. I eat lobster bisque.

This is my second birth. My first in Papua New Guinea in 1975 on the watch of a Filipino doctor, who, at its success, happily exclaims: “She’s a boy!” I am glad for that, a sign my mother shares with me, smiling. I am not male or female. Only a witness. Born again in Xiamen – which, in anatomical appropriateness, means “lower gate” – from steel womb beside a throbbing heart of ceaseless industry and diesel, tangled in afterbirth of images of the holocaust through the eyes of a frightened child. I described for myself new signs, which, distorted again, sexless and amorphous in the concrete womb of

D.O.C., I can decipher as my own.

This is what travel means to me. The signs of the journey are important. Telescoped in prison, I read some of my own maps. What I feel strongly now, is the dread of being a human I don't know. How do I navigate the unknown?

As the United States paints birds and releases them to a stirring, frantic flock, can I, tangled in its system, read my own designs? Have I traveled far enough from my plastic self to know what my freedom means? I am afraid. Afraid I find comfort in the role of victim, scared by how naturally I wear the familiar uniform of the victimized, take bitter comfort in being persecuted where expected. This dread is the almost impenetrable wall between me and unknown life. It is a prophylactic against union and process; it leaves a person unrealized, "like a patient etherized upon a table."

I learn the value of being clear. If I stay in the shadow of my past, turn away in fear of exposure, and choose instead a nurturing of dimness, I have given in. I imagine others, like me, plead with themselves like small children, to renounce the search for openness and painful questions, and let the confusing world close its jaw. Anything but the terror of standing alone, naked in the light.

And yet, in spite of the terror of being truly independent, I have an old man inside me, who goads me. He refuses to leave, and waits with patience for an unplugged television and a choice to make clear signs out of an overwhelming mess. In "The Elements of Style" by Strunk and White, in a chapter titled 'Be Clear', it reads: "Muddiness is not merely a disturber of prose, it is also a destroyer of life, of hope: death on the highway caused by a badly worded road sign..."

It is in being clear that I can use my own future as a roadsign. A predictable future that stretches before me in a rut, a secondary action, a social myth on sale that I am convict and failure. It points to a path I've learned *I don't have to take*. A known pattern, it signals nothing more than a mean narrow road in otherwise unexplored country. I choose the open world.

Frost writes that a successful poem – and, by inference, a successful life – is like a lump of ice melting in a pan over a fire, riding its own ice-melty floe into clarity. I see a defined shape, stubborn form, opaque and resistant to dissolution...it gives itself over to final fluid.

I am like that painted bird. I approach release into the judgement of the flock. I am painted and rigid, frigid in my responsibilities, my need for a gesture of surrender; willed sacrifice of stagnant form, release of self-definition.

And I am hesitant. Just as the ice resists to the last, the passing-through of light...to finally dissolve into clarity.

David Rucker

Disconnected

At the end of a beautifully landscaped walkway, the Vietnam War Memorial expanded before me. This long gray wall of names, a tribute to those killed, stood silently, gravely, holding information I'd come for.

Small groups of fellow seekers huddled along the site, some there to mourn, some to celebrate. These were comrades, wives, children, parents, and I took my place among them, beside their flowers and flags. There were tears and I honored them by not staring. I hoped to have my own.

I'd come to find my father's name. For years I'd been told of his death in the uncelebrated war. I held his fall, and this conflict like a shield against the questions of other children. I'd memorized obscure facts, readying myself for any challenge, but time had passed. I had grown, and had arrived seeking validation for my father and me.

The wall was imposing, with huge sections of names deeply etched in its stone surface. Each block listed its soldier's last name, then first, followed by his rank. There was no apparent recognition given to military standing. The dead seemed equal. I skipped past large sections of letters, passing the P's, Q's and into the R's. There were so many R's, but for me only one name was important; Rucker, David W., rank unknown.

I checked the second letters of each name, then the third. I was getting closer, growing more anxious by the moment. My fingers traced my long sought row: RUB, RUC, RUCH, RUD. I stopped, suddenly realizing I must have gone too far. I went back: RUCH., RUD, but stopped again, confused. Something was wrong. I knew it but went over it once more, then again, and again. With each pass I expected the letters to change, his name to appear, but it didn't. The results were the same. My father's name wasn't there.

I backed away, not really seeing the names anymore. I was remembering. There'd never been a picture of my father, no medals, no commendations, mementos. No one ever said I'd looked like him, had his eyes. He'd always been just a character in a tragic tale, a legend, and despite what I wanted to accept, the truth began to assert itself in my mind. My father had been no soldier. He'd never been a hero. He didn't exist, and in that moment neither did I.

There must have been hurt. I must have felt some anger, but I don't recall any of that. All I remember was the embarrassment, as if I were suddenly intruding in the lives of real mourners. They had a reason to be at this site.

On that cool Autumn day I left Washington, D.C., choosing apathy over shame. I never asked anything else, or told anyone what I'd found. The Vietnam War became disconnected history. My father became the same.

Ken Lamberton

The Man from Peck Canyon

"Ever been hit in the face by a Texas gate?" Dan Koskuba asks me, after I pull open this morning's third fence so he can drive through it. The gates lock in place with a chain attached to a heavy stick, which, if you're not careful, can spring loose and swing into your teeth like a pair of whirling numb-chucks.

We're a dozen miles north of Arizona's border with Mexico where Peck Canyon sweeps in from the southwest after carving out a narrow, fire-walled channel between the Tumacácori and Atascosa mountains called Hell's Gate. I visited Hell's Gate on my last trip into the canyon. The grotto's brick-red cliffs drip with black and sulfur-hued lichens, and some people see the face of the devil in its brimstone pinnacles.

After a couple of failed attempts at locating the site of the Peck Canyon massacre, I called Dan, a retired high school teacher and local history buff who lives in Rio Rico and he agreed to take my daughter Jessica, her camera, and me to the Peck homestead. "I'm working on a book about him, and I've been looking for an excuse to get up there again," he told me on the phone. We met earlier at Garret's Market off Exit 17 and Dan drove us through a maze of streets to forest service road 4151, his green 4X4 Cherokee Scout deftly maneuvering over the rutted and rock-studded track.

For years, I've driven past the highway sign on I-19 between Nogales and Tumacácori that marks a canyon named for a little-known miner and rancher. Every time, I've thought about the man, Artisan Leslie Peck, who in 1886 lost his family during one of Geronimo's last raids. But it wasn't until recently that I learned that Doug Cumming, whose family now owns Peck's former ranch, had placed a marker commemorating the site of the tragedy.

When the Scout can go no farther, we get out to walk,

following a fence line deeper into the canyon. Jessica and I shed our sweatshirts as our skin heats up. She wears her hair loose, her blonde curls unfettered by the usual colorful scrunchie. Her camera, her only burden since I carry our pack and water, she cradles in both hands as she steps in the gauzy sunlight. Dan, his bearded face shaded by a blue "Hoboken" ball cap (he's originally from New Jersey), grips a heavy walking stick, protection from rattlesnakes and falling, I guess.

"We're close," Dan says. "See that mesa up ahead? That's how I found it the first time, years ago." I stop to make a few notes, and Jessica and Dan move out of sight. Suddenly, I hear their voices. They have found the place.

I notice dark bricks scattered on the ground, which slopes away sharply toward a broad drainage dotted with walnut and cottonwood trees. Nearby, a column of cemented native rock rises three feet among the mesquite and catclaw. On its top, a tarnished metal plaque reads:

MRS. ARTEMUS PECK
and her infant
were killed here by
Apaches Apr. 27, 1886
Peck home site 200 ft.

According to Peck's daughter-in-law, Marguerite O'Brien Peck, who compiled an unpublished 500 page family history she calls *In the Memory of a Man*, Artisan Leslie (not "Artemus") met his wife Petrita Beatriz Quen in Hermosillo, Sonora, where he worked in the Minas Prietas silver mines. In 1883, he gave up mining, packed up his wife and baby daughter, Mary, and bought a farm in Kansas with his father, but he "didn't like the arrangements and decided to come West again." Apparently, his family didn't approve of his marriage and Petrita suffered their scorn.

Peck went back to the Prieta silver mines and "lived on coffee—the Mexican kind, beans, and tortillas." Then, sometime

in 1885, his daughter Mary died from typhus or yellow fever. Peck took ten days off from the mines, traveled to Nogales, and bought a ranch in this canyon that now carries his name. "I paid a hundred dollars for a 'right of way' to the man who owned the shack and the ranch I wanted... up the canyon from where the Calabasas school is," he told Marguerite. There, he built a house "with a dirt floor," quit the mines again, and started buying cattle from Mexico.

But his anguish would stalk him to this canyon. Marguerite says that "Dad Peck" never talked much about the Indian raid and she didn't press him for details because it clearly continued to upset him. Most of what she learned came from other sources, but when he did speak about it he avoided mentioning the murders.

On that day, April 27, 1886, Peck was with his friend, Charley Owen, the two of them "doctoring some cattle," Peck's euphemism for turning young bulls into steers. They had no idea of the danger approaching them. "We were about a mile from the house, and neither of us had any kind of a gun on us." When twenty or thirty Indians rode over a hill and began surrounding them, Charley shouted, "Indians, Peck! For God's sake, run!" They didn't have a chance. Geronimo, Naiche (the son of Cochise), and his band of Chiricahua Apaches, who had only a month before bolted custody during a rainstorm after agreeing to surrender to General George Crook, quickly closed in on them. They shot Charley from his horse and he died where he fell. Peck, his horse still tied to a two-year-old bull he had roped, had no where to run. The Apaches stripped both men, but for some reason left Peck alive.

Thomas Casanega, a former deputy sheriff who was living in Nogales at the time of the raid, would later describe this as a mystery. "Peck must have acted like a crazy man," Casanega says in his unpublished reminiscences. "It was known in Arizona that Indians never attacked a crazy man. So, the Indians made him pull off his boots and told him to go bare-footed towards his home...."

Tubac Historian Elizabeth Brownell, however, thinks what saved Peck may have been his red flannel long johns. "Possibly one of [the Indians] recognized him as a white man who had done them a favor in Mexico. When Peck was working in the Sonora mines he used to roll his shirtsleeves up over that same colorful underwear and the Indians, who liked him, called him Red Sleeves."

Peck stumbled with bleeding feet toward a black plume of smoke that twisted into the sky. He found his home collapsing in flames, its furnishings strewn across the ground. The Apaches had kidnapped Trinidad Verdin, Petrita's young cousin, who had been staying with the family (and who would be rescued six weeks later in Mexico). His pregnant wife and 14-month-old son lay dead.

I search among the scattered bricks for something less tangible than lichen-darkened, fired adobe. I want the tragedy to make sense, to seem less like a random act of violence buried under a hundred and twenty years of dust and gravity in some remote desert canyon. How could this have happened? Why? With so many variables coming together in time and space – Geronimo's escape and the location of the ranch among them—all of them colliding at this place, it seems as though the whole universe were arrayed against this one man. As if God, running out of Jobs, went looking for someone else to bring too much attention to.

The questions remain on my lips. What is the desolation I feel here, as sharp and gripping as catclaw spines?

I watch Jessica take photographs. Her body is small against the span of canyon and mountain, and there 's nothing swift about her movements except the flash of her eyes. An artist at work, measuring the frame, composing her subject. I listen to her boots on the stones, to the muted lashes of branches against her clothing. I feel her as she steps around me, father and daughter, our shadows falling together as water poured out. How would it be, I think, to lose a child in this place?

Dan, who has eyes for artifacts, shows me a bullet casing. "Smith and Wesson .38," he says. "I'd have to check, but it could be contemporary." He finds chips of blue china, horseshoe nails, pottery sherds, and a single broken diaper pin. Then he hands me a pearl button that looks like it came from a child's nightshirt. "Maybe it belonged to the baby," he muses. "Makes you think."

The *Tombstone Epitaph*, reporting about the murders, claimed that Peck had said, "I will kill every Indian in this country," and then mounted his horse and rode off never to be seen again. The truth is less romantic but much more heroic. After the killings, Peck never returned to the canyon but nevertheless remained in the area with its painful memories. Moving to nearby Nogales, he married Carmen Cañez in January 1887 and started another family. The two produced a son, Arthur (Marguerite's future husband), and four daughters.

In the years to come, Peck developed several mining interests, took a position as a superintendent of a mining company, and operated a livery stable on Morley Avenue. He became one of Nogales' leading citizens, serving on the City Counsel and the County Board of Supervisors. His misfortune with Geronimo, his prominence as a public servant, even his friendship with people like the celebrated Colonel William Greene never made him famous, but neither was the man entirely obscure. He was a man sculpted by this land, a place more raw and penetrating than most. His legacy, the one thing that does make some sense of his heartbreaking life, remains today as a border community he helped raise out of some rocky hills in southern Arizona.

Although Geronimo's fame would soon grow to legendary status, his warrior days wouldn't last beyond the year of the massacre. He surrendered to General Nelson Miles, General Crook's replacement, in early September at Skeleton Canyon, boarded a train bound for Florida, and never returned to Arizona territory.

As Jessica, Dan, and I hike out of the canyon, I consider how diminished I feel in this place. Compared to Al Peck, I am an infant in this landscape, foolish and uncomprehending. How can I even begin to touch the world he knew without panicking and fleeing? Peck loved his family, and for many long years, he lived with the graves of those he loved, remembering dates of marriage and birth, recalling in some personal ritual the days and events that could have been but weren't.

In my pack, I carry a photo of Artisan Leslie Peck, taken some years before he died in 1939 at the age of 94. It shows a taciturn face wrinkled with age but still framed by a full head of white hair. His large ears, thick, pursed lips, and broad nose cannot match the enormity of his gaze.

Ralph Hager

The Bottle

This bottle in my pocket has a genie inside I've known for a long time and have made love to without a second thought of the diseases I may have gotten. When I'm dead, they will bury me in a toxic waste dump.

Most folks have a tendency to shy away from me and even the police wear plastic gloves when they frisk me. I admit I smell a little rank once in awhile, but it's hard to imagine this warrants such treatment.

I have the feeling the human race will end up like the Martians in *The War of the Worlds*. This planet will become so clean and sterile that the smallest bug will destroy all mankind, except for me and others like me who stay well lubricated against ailment. Maybe the juice in my bottle helps me stay alive. I feel like a vampire, tongue dry, head pounding and a yearning for the blood of the grape every morning. I don't have to worry about being in my grave by sunrise, just down to the liquor store by the time it's open.

Some folks think I live an easy life, but I do work for my existence. It isn't easy wandering the streets, searching through dumpsters for recycleable items or begging from strangers for a bit of spare change. I do the public a service by collecting trash and selling it. The majority of people throw things away that can be resold. It amuses me to think someone better off than me is driving a car made from garbage they tossed and I sold. I wonder if these folks realize this while they shake their heads and discuss with their passengers what a terrible life I must be leading.

I talk with the genie in my bottle about life. I'm not sure she's listening; she has yet to answer. Some of my friends seem more fortunate than I, since they can hold long conversations with their bottles. Maybe I'm just lacking in faith. Actually, my genie is more of a lover than a friend. Each time I take a drink, the

warmth of her smile travels down my throat. My stomach feels the satisfaction a man experiences after making love. However, like any romantic interlude, the thrill is short lived and the desire for seconds is high.

A lot of folks may think I'm too drunk to eat, but this isn't true. I actually eat well and I don't get my food out of trash bins as television has portrayed. I do know people who stoop this low, but it's because they are new to the streets and haven't learned the arts of survival.

I hardly ever steal; it's against my principles. I do have principles I live by, though I refuse to follow the citizen's law. It seems to scare people that I won't behave in the manner prescribed by their laws. I figure man's laws are for people who can't function on their own. I don't get in anyone's way, nor do I harass folks who try to avoid contact with me. I don't need the aggravation, and normal people will call the cops when they become scared.

The cops like to take my bottle. I haven't told them about the genie yet, but they will find out sooner or later. They also like to manhandle me. For reasons I have yet to fathom, the cops feel as though I'm a dangerous criminal. Their biggest complaint always has something to do with the way I dress or smell. My clothes fit well and are as clean as I can get them. I really think cops are just envious of the life I lead.

I have the same worries regular folks do, but straights are so tied up with their own problems they can't see mine. Of course I don't publicly broadcast my concerns, but this is because I'd rather take care of things on my own. I accept help on occasion, as well as give a little in return. The group of people I associate with are close-knit. We have a pride and understanding that outsiders don't seem to grasp.

I find straights amusing, and sometimes I'll impart my wisdom of the streets to them. Some of the folks seem to be testing the waters, as if they were considering joining our ranks. I always try to discourage them, since most are married, have children and good jobs. It seems to me their only problem is they

are bored and want to run away from their humdrum lives. In no uncertain terms I let these folks know they can escape from their present troubles, but they must be willing to accept a whole new set of worries once they've gotten to the streets. The majority of men I talk to leave with disappointed looks on their faces.

However, when I do run into one of these men later, they always ask how I'm doing, and they stay to keep me company for a spell. It's as though they may have learned something from me. This could be why they always refer to me as a "friend."

Hugo Buelna

Sin Nombre/Nameless

The sound of the rooster crowing wakes me. I look at my wife sleeping by my side. I look around the room and see my baby boy sleeping in a second-hand crib. I get up, kick the bucket of water full from the leak in the roof. Pissed, I remember I have no food for my family. I have to get ready for work at the factory where the daily routine is eating away the best years of my life. I'm just like my father. He has worked at the factories for thirty years and still has little more than I do: an old adobe house where the living room and the kitchen are the same, a small ice chest for a refrigerator sitting on top of an old green dinner table with *el trastero* to match. A small bedroom where the back door leads to the out house. The yard has an orange tree and a garden of chamomile and aloe vera plants. He has two goats, a pig and five chickens. The old mangy dog he had was murdered by dozens of fleas that bled him dry. My mother never got to meet her granddaughter. She is cursed to live a life of poverty. Her illnesses are slowly killing her. "Not fast enough!" she says. She has an eternal sad look in her eyes. She wants the pain and sorrow to finally consume her. My sister Maria was seven months pregnant with Lupita when Julio, her husband, convinced her to go to the land of the dollar to look for a better life. The heat of the desert killed all three of them. Like hundreds of others, they never had a chance to work for their dreams. It was Julio's fault, my father says. He convinced Maria to go to the land where the government discriminates against us.

When I saw Federico come back to build his house after only three years of cutting grass for rich gringos, I felt the need to go in search of my dream. The one where my wife has the castle I promised I'd build her. I love my wife with all my heart, still, I wonder why she never complains. Every night I come home she

receives me with open arms, a kiss and a sparkle in her eyes that keeps me going.

This is why I must go and find the life she and my son deserve. My father is worried. My mother is terrified, and my wife is sad. She knows that I won't be happy until I take her and my son out of this semi-ghost town. They think I will either die in the desert like Maria, or I'll get sent to prison by *la Migra* for being an alien. I tell them the desert won't kill me and the border patrol won't catch me. They know I'm lying. If I do make it past the desert and the border patrol, I still have to worry about using my entire life savings to pay the *coyote*, Mario, a madman with no morals, who's waiting for me in a hotel half a kilometer from the border. There I will meet Monica, Rosa, Julia and Marta, four sisters whose father has paid Mario a lot of money to get them to Tucson, Arizona. There's also a couple, Fernando and Maria, and Carolina, their daughter. Carolina is eleven years old.

The next day we leave the hotel and begin a thirty- hour walk through the desert, where soon the unbearable heat is wearing us down. We hide in the bushes like animals, trying to avoid capture. The married couple's daughter is dehydrated. I don't think she's going to make it. Maria is trying to console the little girl, but she is too dehydrated to help her. I just want to survive. I have to. I cannot die like my sister. The night comes and Mario decides we sleep before going on. It's dark and I'm too tired to stay awake. Everybody else is sleeping. My eyelids are closing. I think to myself *I can't go to sleep*. Then I hear one of the girls crying. I think it's Monica. I get up to try to give her hope by telling her we are going to make it. The first thing she says to me is "Mario raped me, and now he's raping Marta."

Filled with rage, I turn to see where he is. Monica points to the place between the bushes. I slowly walk behind him. I can see he is on top of her. She has her head turned to the side. I grab him by his hair and throw him off her. As I start to kick him, he starts to scream. "Stop. Please. Don't hurt me."

I say, "You fucking piece of shit, I'll kill you." I can't do

it. It's not in me. Besides, without him we're lost. So I make him swear to get us to Tucson. By then everybody else is awake, and since there's no point in freezing, we all decide to keep walking, me behind Mario, the girls behind me, and Fernando, Maria and Carolina last, because the little girl can't keep up. She's cold and dehydrated. We have no water for her.

Mario is saying there's a ranch nearby. The sun is beginning to rise. We can get some water there. Since I'm now the new leader of the group, I decide to let everybody else wait there, while Mario and I walk to the ranch and bring back some water. We are only a few minutes away, Mario says, but we have to be careful. The rancher gringos will shoot us if they see us. This makes me very nervous. Mario says, "Don't worry. If you don't tell anyone what happened with me and the girls, I'll get the water. You just wait here." My instinct tells me he's not coming back, so I immediately say "No! We go in together."

Carefully we go through the three-strand barbed wire fence. Ducking like thieves, we walk up a small hill to the sound of the horses, then to the corral where the water trough is full of lifesaving liquid. But we have nothing to put the water in. Looking around, all I can see is a barn. We walk up to the window, and, inside, on top of the table, I see a bucket with some kind of feed in it. The green plastic bucket has a colorful sign on it. That's when Mario takes off running. *Shit, what do I do?* I stand there, deciding to either chase him or get the water. My heart tells me *save the little girl*. I jump through the window, get the bucket, dump the feed by the water trough, dip the bucket in the water, then start to walk back the same way I came. Poom! I hear a shot and some gringo saying something in English. My adrenaline starts flowing. I can't run without spilling the water in the bucket. I walk as fast as I can. Then I get lost for what seems like an hour.

When I finally get back, Monica and her sisters are gone. They thought Mario and I were not coming back. Maria starts to feed the water to Carolina, then desperately she and Fernando

drink from the bucket. I tell them take it slow, there's enough for everyone. I drink the leftover water. When they ask for Mario, I tell them what happened and that we need to keep walking, but Carolina has fallen asleep, so we decide to rest a little while longer. I lie back and close my eyes.

I wake up to Carolina and Maria throwing up and saying their stomachs hurt. Fernando is not moving. I try to wake him, but his skin is pale and cold. He's dead. *Shit. We're going to die like my sister did.* A feeling of helplessness overwhelms me. Then, from out of nowhere, a helicopter is flying over us. "*La migra,*" I say to Maria. She can't hear me. She's holding Claudia in her arms and feeling Claudia's life leaving her. I can't move either. The pain in my stomach takes over my body. I'm throwing up. I think *God I don't want to die. Please help me.* Then darkness.

I wake up to the beeping of a strange apparatus. Disoriented, I see a nurse injecting something into a bag with a long clear plastic tube that's connected to the vein in my left arm. The nurse says something I can't understand and leaves the room. Looking around I see a window to my right, a bathroom to the left, a table and a chair beside it, a tv on a stand on the wall. A different nurse walks in, a white lady speaking broken Spanish to me. She tells me a border patrol officer is coming to talk to me soon. I ask about the little girl and her mother. The nurse says nothing and leaves the room. When the border patrol officer comes in, he informs me that I was lucky to make it. The couple and the little girl died of poisoning and dehydration. Mario was shot in the back as he ran from the ranchers. He bled to death. They have a record on Mario. They know he was a *pollero*.

I will be going in front of an immigration judge as soon as the doctor declares me healthy enough. The officer says this to me and leaves. As I lie in the hospital bed, I hear my mother's imploring voice. It tears my heart to pieces. I cry myself to sleep.

Three days later I am sitting in a cell with my broken soul,

waiting for my turn to go in front of the immigration judge. I'm still weak from the poison. My conscience attacks me. *I killed Fernando and his family. God, what have I done? A voice in my head says, It's not my fault. I did not know the bucket was full of poison. I'm not a bad person.*

The judge is a bald black man in his late fifties. He is looking at me with angry eyes. The young white man standing beside me says in Spanish "You are charged with entering the country illegally, with one count of burglary and three counts of negligent homicide." I try to understand what's going on.

The judge asks me how do I plead? On instinct I say, "I'm sorry. All I did is get water because we were dehydrating." The young white man translates my words for the judge, who looks at me like I am the enemy. He sets a court date and they take me back to the cell.

Mark Enriquez

Castrozzi's Stapler

Manolo had made yellow soup of egg batter by adding way too much milk as he thought, *when my dad comes over tonight he'll punch me in the teeth for stealing money and disown me for hanging around anarchists – terrorists in dad's opinion*, but stubbornly Manolo stood at the stove with a spatula pushing the milky slime around the frying pan over high heat, getting no results other than an occasional bubble of boiled batter splattering onto his forearm; and he heard for the first time the announcement over the radio, the morning D.J.'s saying, "Well, Brady, it's Tuesday, the big day all those Waterdogs go on strike..."

"You can't say 'Waterdogs'," Brady interrupted.

"When did we go politically correct? Okay then, this is the day that the illegal aliens, the hard working men and women of Mexico, in the state of Arizona, are going to not only refuse to work, but they're going to boycott. And why? Because there's a proposition on the ballot to deny illegals Medicare, and this protest, it's supposed to have a huge impact. But this is what I think, Brady, plain and simple, all this means is that for one day out of 2005 all the crap jobs are going to have to be done by *us*, Americans – not to mention that in all the grocery stores there's gonna be heaps of unbought cow tongue..."

As Manolo held the spatula in mid-air, letting goop drip onto the stove, he brooded over being left out – *why wasn't I told? I'm Mexican, not an illegal alien, but I'm Mexican, Chicano actually, the second generation born in the states. Sure, my mom is British and I don't speak a bit of Spanish, but still, my last name is Enriquez, my skin is brown, and I've been called wetback, beaner, spic, etc. Shouldn't I have been informed of the strike? Maybe I'm not needed or wanted in the strike – this thought, Mani tried to shake from his head like water out of his*

ear, and then, as the radio went into commercials, he noticed noises outside – high pitched bangs and music. Manolo dropped the spatula into the yellow ooze and dashed across his single room studio to the window. Pulling back the green bed sheet he used as a curtain, Manolo expected to see a protest parade filled with round, sweat-glazed Mexican faces. The street full of Mexicans, they'd all have raised banners and flags and paper-mache dummies of the Governor. But he must have heard a car drive by blaring a radio and dragging its muffler, because when he pressed his cheek to the window and strained to see out to the street. In the sliver of sight he had, the street was empty.

Was he going to strike? If he did not at least show up to work and explain, Manolo worried, the shift manager, who happened to be his cousin Lupita, would be pissed and might even fire him. It's a strike, not a sick day! But, as a Chicano, could Manolo expect illegals to ever be active in his Cause?

Unsure, he left the studio dressed in khaki cargos and a blue Pixies T-shirt – if he needed it, there was a green button-up shirt he kept at work in the file cabinet, a back-up shirt for the days he didn't meet dress code, which were frequent. And stepping out onto the sidewalk Manolo felt his skin smacked by the morning sunlight, his eyes squinting in the white hot rays, as his nose was struck by smells of fresh tar from the avenue and heat beaten ferns on the median. The collection agency where he is part-time mail room clerk is two city blocks east, not a bad walk in winter, but in summer when temps reach over 110°, it's more than enough excuse to buy a Slushee, and he buys one *every* day.

Manolo likes to leave for work early, not only to avoid the heat, but to avoid people who, shopping, might notice him pass by the windows checking out the reflection of his short bulky body, his father's barrel-chested build. Manola feels people in the shops would definitely make fun of him, that they'd point and laugh, as a lot of the time he stops in front of the windows to pose, especially at the florist that has a floor-to-ceiling window, and he flexes his biceps, blows a kiss or two, bounces his

eyebrows, and runs his fingers along his jaw, his nose, his lips, his face in general.

Manolo is bad with mirrors, like a canary. But it's not shameless vanity; it's the result of being haunted by William Blake poetry, the same four lines tumbling over and again behind Manolo's eyes:

*Oh, why was I born with a different
face?
Why was I not born like the rest
of my race?*

Manolo has his mother's long nose, her high brow, her mucky green eyes, and even her rosy cheeks, a very European face. And at twenty-four it still feels impossible to fit into two cultures when, physically, he looks like the other to the other, never like one of the same to the same.

But this Tuesday, as he stood in front of the florist's window, Manolo decided he was his father's son, *Mexicano*, and charged with a sense of solidarity in the day's strike, he would not work and would not, no matter how much he wanted to, spend two bucks on a Slushee. In fact, Manolo thought it was a perfect day for his first demonstrations, *plural*, a protest in front of 7/11 and then at work – chances to prove he was a real activist.

He puffed out his chest, *puro machismo*, but turning from the florist window he winced at the pain on his right side, like elastic snapped at his waist. The pain was good, great. It made him proud, the pain of fresh ink, his day-old tattoo still a huge unhealed wound from his hip to shoulder: a detailed depiction of QuetzalCoatl, Feathered Serpent, the ancient Tolteca ruler, as a deity, his body made of a pair of double-headed serpents. With one set of mouths gaping bearing teeth on the Ruler's knees at Manolo's waist line, and up over his ribs the snakes twisting up twice. Where the snakes separate is a half-plate conch shell necklace and the Ruler's head, just below Manolo's armpit, turned to the sky. The serpents continue around Manolo's shoulder, one to his chest, the other to his back with their mouths

open but their fangs sheathed to delicately hold the Quetzal, a green bird that resembles the peacock – The Feathered Serpent.

To have put permanently under Manolo’s skin QuetzalCoatl, a god of the Nahuatl (the indigenous peoples of pre-colonial Mexico), took five hours. A tattoo parlor would’ve charged over \$1,000, but on Sunday, in cousin Lupita’s dim lit bedroom that stunk of dollar store potpourri, Manolo was sprawled on his side in the bed, his right arm stretched up over his head as Chucci – he’s Lupita’s brother – sat with a slow-burn joint in his mouth, and he tattooed Manolo’s ribs with a homemade gun. Four AA batteries powering a quarter colored-quarter sized motor taken out of a walkman, and an empty plastic pen holding a sharpened guitar string – that’s the needle of this tattoo gun Chucci perfected the construction and use of while in prison, down for five years on felony drug-sale charges.

Chucci is “hood,” some type of Crip gangsta living off his sister, but behind the prison yard stare of his black eyes set in his coffee brown face, and somewhere far beneath his scalp of greased hair cast back always in a hair net, there is extraordinary talent. And perfectly sadistic enough to be a great tattoo artist, he’s the only one Manolo would get work from, and all Chucci charged was a twenty-four pack of Budweiser.

Two hours into the tattoo Chucci’s eyes are glazed – he swears he works best faded – the Ruler’s legs and half of one serpent are done, and inside Manolo’s body enough endorphins have kicked in to numb the pain so that he quits squirming. To keep his mind off the needle cutting him, Manolo reads a book – some *crazy* poem called *The Divine Comedy* – but only a few pages at a time because his eyes are absolutely drawn to watch the needle slice lines, opening his skin like a wetsuit unzipped. And as the serpent’s scales are shaded, the ink being pressed under the flesh over his ribs, Manolo’s liver is shaken by the vibrations, he can’t read – he has to see, shifting to get a good look. Chucci stops to dip the needle in the cap of black ink on the table next to him, and with the gun buzzing in his right hand he lifts his left above his head and drops that hand to slap the

tattoo – it sounds like he smacks raw, thawed bloody steak – Manolo cringes feeling a burning breeze rush through his chest to his lungs as he sucks in air. He starts to turn to Chucci but the needle is pressed into his skin to shade another of the hundred scales, and so he lies vulnerable as Chucci tells him, “I told Lupita that you want to be a terrorist. She’s gonna talk to your dad about it, ay. Oh, and she’ll probably tell him about this tattoo.”

Dad? Not cool. Manolo asks, “Why?”

“WHY?” Chucci says, showing his frustration with a deep dig of the needle. “Because you’re hanging out with terrorists, ay. Or revolutionists – whatever you’re gonna call them. I’ve met those types. They hate the government and stuff, and they want to destroy America. They’re crazy, ay, those people. *Real Psychos.*”

Manolo says, “So I’ve met a few, um – *radical thinkers* is what I’ll call them, not terrorists, Chucci. Most of them are from the sub-urbs. They go to school with me – I haven’t seen them all summer! I honestly don’t know what the problem is.”

“Oh?” Chucci says, “So you run around school with them now? Like a gang? They’re gonna get you kicked out, and then what?”

“I’ve already decided to take a semester off from school.”

The tattoo gun stops as, again, Chucci slaps the tattoo. Manolo’s nostrils flare and his teeth clench, and he turns to see Chucci’s face is stern, his dark lips pressed inward. Chucci asks, “Do you hear yourself talking, *pendejo*? Let me tell you, Manni, all la familia talks about you – more than they talk about me. And I get embarrassed, ay, because I try to stick up for you! They don’t understand you, and I don’t either. I dunno, maybe it’s because you’re a half breed and you don’t think like a *Mexican*? Or maybe la familia is right and you’re crazy like a schizo? Maybe you’re just slow in the head?”

“Okay, first you make friends with terrorists – ‘*radical thinkers*,’ muy bad – and no one’s gonna understand that. Even your mom’s gonna freak out. Manni, damn it, but then your dumb ass drops out of school. What do you think everyone’s

gonna say? Do you ever think?"

Manolo says, "Chucci, school? Let's be honest. My degree won't mean shit in the end, will it? I'm just not sure it will – maybe one day in the very distant future I could teach a class, and that would be productive and all, but I want to change the *world...*" Chucci sucks his teeth, "...just think of the exploitation – the *criminal* exploitation of the average Joe and his family, and as the world toils and labors I'm in class getting educated and cultured. It doesn't feel right. I want to get out there in the streets, pump my fist, be in the trenches."

"Okay, Manni, whatever," Chucci says. "Turn back over. We're not even close to finished with this tattoo."

QuetzalCoatl Tupiltzin as a living ruler was said to be tall with a light, almost fair complexion and a full beard, characteristics much different than all the Nahuatl people; a face different from the rest of his race. Maybe he spent a lot of time in the mirror? Some scholars say QuetzalCoatl was of European blood, and some call him a "Christ figure." He *was* a martyr. His death on a raft full of flowers sounds romantic, like a beautiful demise, but it was due to his overwhelming shame – over a total scandal. *Incest*. It's legend: QuetzalCoatl was seriously ill one night, and his constant rival, a true enemy, Tezatlipoca (Smoking Mirror) tricked the Ruler by sending a "powerful curing potion" which was actually *pulque*, a strong liquor strictly outlawed at the time. And once intoxicated QuetzalCoatl summoned his sister, Quetzalpetlatl to drink, then – the way Manni imagines it – in a palace room of sandstone colored walls decorated with immense tapestries full of exotic colors, greens and maroon and turquoise, and a few lamps lit, there they were, brother and sister, two people of power talking, laughing, and having a good night, way too drunk. Manolo doesn't hold it against them After the incident, QuetzalCoatl burned all his possession and property to the ground, and he *banished himself*, waving good-bye to his people as they stood on the gulf shore and watched their beloved ruler on the flowered raft drift out to sea to die. But he'd made a promise to return from death. A "second coming." A hybrid of

serpent/bird/man, QuetzalCoatl was worshiped as the god of wisdom, one of the only Nahuatl gods who didn't demand human sacrifice, but instead asked for butterflies and flowers.

Chucci thinks flower sacrifices are “sissy la-la,” and Chucci also blames QuetzalCoatl for the “genocidal colonization of the Mexico (Nahuatl), because when Spanish ships were in the gulf, at the very shores of ‘mexico,’ the Mexico ruler Motecuhzoma – that punk ass – thought QuetzalCoatl had returned in a ‘castle on the sea,’ and so, instead of killing Cortez and the rest of the gold greedy Conquistadors, Motecuhzoma let those bastards walk up and take one of the greatest kingdoms and civilizations of all, **TENOTCHTITLAN!**”

It's surprising Chucci not only agreed to do the tattoo of QuetzalCoatl but thought the god was just right for Manolo's flesh. Chucci knows – he'll never agree, but he knows that in Manni's mind the Feathered Serpent, his legend in particular, helped bring about the mestizo, the blood mixture of Nahuatl and Spanish. No matter how violent the history, Manni accepts the mestizo as part of his heritage as a chicano which is also hybrid – Nahatl and Spanish-born American. But this is controversy. Chucci doesn't want to discuss it with Manni.

He wants to know, “And what about your Dad? Ay? He sends you money for books and stuff. Are you going to tell him and get no money?”

Of course he would ask about money since his hands were always digging in Manolo's pocket, money for groceries, for clothes he swore were for job interviews, beer, and the week before Chucci needed money to pay Lupita rent. Manolo expected the question. He wishes Chucci wouldn't have asked, but he answers, “My dad already sent most of my allowance and book money.”

The tattoo gun shuts off and Chucci says, “Manni, you took that money from your dad, my favorite Tio? That's like stealing. And I bet you're going to give it to your ‘cause’? For like a donation or something?”

“Chucci, where do you think I got money to lend you last

week,” and Manni flinches thinking his side is slapped.

“Holy shit,” Chucci says, calm, and grabs another beer. “You aren’t a terrorist, you’re not even slow in the head. You’re an evil genius, ay. Really. I bet you figure I won’t bring it up to Lupita now, since I’m guilty by association? Oh, you’re good, ese. You tricked me.”

“I didn’t *trick* you, Chucci. You needed money. I helped you, cousin.”

“*I helped you, cousin,*” Chucci mocks Manni. “You need to get your head checked because you’re the craziest, most out-there vato I know, and I’ve been locked up with some insane muthafuckas.” Chucci chugs the can of beer, and after pounding his chest to force up a burp, he says, “Manolo, your dad is one of the friendliest people I know but he may never talk to you again. He’ll disown you, Manni. You’re fucking up too much. *Stealing?* Manolo, I can accept you wanting to help the world and all that stuff, ay. You have an open heart like that, but you *have* to, Manolo. I’m dead serious, you have to tell your dad that you dropped out – that you *‘took a semester off.’* Okay, Manni? At least you’ll earn some respect by being honest. So, be a man. Tell your dad before this tattoo heals.” And with that said, Chucci rolls Manni over to get back to work, and he says, “But, hey, you don’t have to say shit to Lupita about the money you lent me, because she kind of doesn’t know I’m broke. She thinks I have a job, ay.”

* * * * *

Anxiously bouncing foot to foot Manolo was posted up at the 7·11 entrance, on a single man picket line, of course with no picket sign, waiting for the morning rush of coffee customers so he could stop them and convince them to boycott. By holding up two fingers, together not in a peace sign, he tried to get the first few people’s attention on a one-to-one basis long enough for him to say, “Boycott! Support the rights of *all* humans. The illegals need medicare.” But everyone was busy and brushed right past

Manolo, entirely avoiding eye contact, and one guy who stopped to hear Manni's first few words kept going into 7·11 unpersuaded and laughing. Manni has affected no one, made no real demonstration, he didn't even alarm the store owner who only glanced over once or twice with his eyes squinted and head tilted, not at all threatened, but rather puzzled because he knew Manni was not a panhandler or a ranting looney toon. The store owner was a middle aged balding white man with a belly big and round making, him look jolly in this brown/orange/and green 7·11 shirt. His name tag read, Robert, but Manni always called him Bob-O. Since everyday Manni was in to buy a Slushee from him, Bob-O considered them on a friendly first name basis.

Bob-O couldn't figure out why Manni was at the store trying to stop the customers, but there was someone who knew the deal, an unnoticed on-looker peeking around the corner of 7·11, his jet black hair in tangles from root to tip dropping over his oddly wide eyes that gawked dark as asphalt. His pale face, riddled by acne scars, had a scruffy beard covering his cheeks, and his lips, chapped to the point of having bloody fissures, spread out, grimacing, and puckered back in pain as he spied on Manni for nearly twenty minutes until he finally came out from around the building. He was in a wheelchair, his legs amputated at mid-thigh. Dressed in all black with a piece of scribbled-on writing paper safety pinned to his shirt's breast pocket, he wheeled directly at Manolo, almost over him, practically pushing him off to the side to stand next to the garbage can.

The guy told Manni, "Young Person, you're going about this all wrong, and you're going to make me puke for, um, the third time this morning. So, out of gratitude for the *NAUSEA* I'm going to show you how this is to be done. Okay? Right. Now you keep your gorgeous green eyes on that bulbous creep behind the counter in there. Me and that *Mister* have a rough history. He still blames me for, um, Young William – a brilliant kid, very curious, he needed guidance from someone without inhibitions. It's a shame, and a long story, a sordid soap opera really. I won't get into it."

He held his arms out and hands up, stretching, Manni assumed, warming up like a crossing guard about to halt highway traffic, and he said, “Okay, here is a practice run. Hut-ugh.” And keeping his only two limbs out stiff he threw his head back and yelled, “THE HANDS OF DOOM IS A JUDEO-CHRISTIAN MEDITATION OF PAPER-ROCK-SCISSORS!”

Wait, what? What the motherfuck does that mean Manni wondered as the wheelchair guy dropped his chin to his collar, hanging his head like an exhausted thespian, saying, “That, Young Person, that was serious business, very complex and philosophical, but for you it was a great lesson because, as you see, I used big words and a mention of religion. People react to that guaranteed. It doesn’t matter if they get the message. It’s all sub-conscious. What matters is that you get their attention, get into their brains.” And out of nowhere, keeping his face down, he yelled, “I RETURN FROM MY SPIRITUAL NEST TO MY CARDBOARD MAT SOAKED WITH PISS!”

He lifted his head, and with a smile that opened the cracks on his lips, he explained, “That was just another quick zinger you can use on someone you really want to get a hold of. Maybe a girl, *eh?*”

Manolo was awed, his mouth drop-jawed, eyes bugged, and eyebrow halfway to his hairline. Thinking the guy’s a perfect loon, one of those insane homeless creatures, Manolo slowly looked back over his shoulder to check on Bob-O; he was at the back of the store stocking the coolers with soda.

The wheelchair guy introduced himself, “My name is Paulo Castrozzi. My friends call me Paulo. I want you to call me, Castrozzi.”

Stunned, without a clue of what to say, Manni just stared down at Castrozzi, repeating the name in his head. *Paolo Castrozzi.*

Castrozzi said, “That’s alright. I don’t need to know your name. I was going to call you Young Person regardless. The important thing is that, today, you learn something about causing a ruckus. *Demon-stration.* Oh, look, here comes someone now.

I'm going to show you the works. Young Person, this is not a drill." He spun around to the parking lot as a car pulled up in front of them.

Castrozzi, rolling his shoulders and shifting in his chair, prepared himself to stop the woman getting out of her car, and when she slammed the door shut and started for the store, he put his hands up like a kung-Fu master about to chop through eight 2 x 4s. He yelled, "BUZLO YOUR OWN TEMPLE AND CALL IT THE VOODOO CYCLOTRON! DO IT TODAY!" And the woman, clutching her purse, stopped. Manni was surprised – was the woman scared, reaching for mace? Or was she actually interested, willing to listen?

Castrozzi whispered over his shoulder, "Okay, Young Person, spit your propaganda! She's *listening*."

So Manni made an attempt, uttering, "Umm, Boycott! Support all humans. Umm..."

The lady smiled, amused, and she walked into 7-11, chuckling politely under her hand. Castrozzi turned around, looking in disbelief, with his top lip furled like Rocky Balboa's, and he said, "You can not be fucking serious? Here I am offering you a gift, and you're nodded out on the toilet bowl! What is wrong with you, Young Pee?"

"I, uh, I'm not really sure what's going on Mr. Castrozzi."

"Not *Mister*!" Castrozzi scolded. "Damn it, never call me a Mister. A *Mister* is someone like that chubby chump who owns the 7-11! And you know? That's your problem. You need to loosen up – do you want some vodka, is that it? Damn it, pull yourself together!"

Manni asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"To help you," Castrozzi answered, turning back to the parking lot. "Because I care. Because the world has to be bashed over the head with the voice of dissidence: the *staple* of social change. And we're going to get it right. We'll wait for the next prospect and you'll have your voice heard. Just follow my lead. Now, gather yourself."

Manolo turned back and noticed Bob-O at the register

with that lady buying coffee and a newspaper. He had a worried look on his face, peeking over a cigarette display at Castrozzi. They had history? Manni gave Bob-O two thumbs up, made a jovial face and bobbed his head like a laughing muppet to let him know everything was cool. Not being entirely honest. But the last thing Manni wanted was for Bob-O to come out and get verbally tackled by this guy, Castrozzi.

Manni spun around as he heard a car pull up and the engine cut off. A man leapt out in a hurry, rushing towards the picket line.

Castrozzi lifted his hands to the sky like a southern Pentecostal preacher moving his fingers to shaken tambourines, and he shouted, "TURN ON YOURSELF! TURN YOURSELF ON! STRETCH YOUR MIND AND MAKE YOUR DREAMS *BLEED!*"

The man ogled Castrozzi and muttered under his breath, and Castrozzi yelled again, "WE SOON WILL DRAIN OUR TICK FEVERED HOST! THE BLUEST BLOOD THRILLS US MOST!"

The guy rushed past, and Manni just knew he wouldn't stop, but he did; opening the door he looked back, first at Castrozzi then at Manolo, and he told them, "Why don't you get jobs? No, better yet," he lowered his voice and sneered, "kill yourselves. Both of you. You're sickening."

Turned away from the man, Castrozzi said, "Remember his face," speaking solemnly, "and always wish misfortune upon him." And just like that he seemed over it, looking out to the parking lot for the next prospect, patiently and for the first time quietly.

But not over it was Castrozzi's newest enemy, the man who went into 7-11, almost knocking over the woman on her way out as he darted to the counter, and immediately he began to complain, pointing at Manni and Castrozzi. Bob-O tried to talk the man down, offering a free beverage, but the guy refused, gave Bob'O a few harsh words and stormed out.

It had worked! Manni could have jumped in place and

screamed, happy, like a highschool cheer leader. One consumer had been stopped from spending money! But Bob-O, pissed-off, pointed at Manolo and motioned that he ‘stay put.’

“Hey,” Manni spoke from one side of his mouth, telling Castrozzi, “Bob-O is coming out to get us.”

Just as the angry customer – or *non*-customer– was leaving, Castrozzi wheeled around to the door. Bob-O walked out and without a word from his pursed lips he faced Castrozzi. The gloom-Goth rebel with lethal vocabulary and the cool-headed owner of a Slushee machine stared at each other for nearly one whole minute, and Manolo, not about to get involved, wondered what was being said in that intense silence. Death threats? Vulgar insults? Nasty jokes about each other’s Mothers?

Finally Bob-O broke the tension. He looked to Manni and said, “Hey, Manni, what’s going on? Why are you getting mixed up with this man out here? He’s bad news, *trust me*. I’ve known him far too long.”

Castrozzi didn’t start hollering like Manolo thought he would, but instead nodded his head, expectantly, like Manni was supposed to stick up for him. Manni said, “*Man*, Bob-O, there’s a boycott today, state wide. I’m sorry, man. And, um, I guess I’m protesting your store.”

Manolo braced himself for Castrozzi to lash out at him for being a wimp, but Castrozzi stayed quiet. And Bob-O spoke, “*Manni*, I’m cool. I’m hip. I listen to the radio. Hey, I support your people. I’m not going to vote to take away their medicare, Manni, why would you even think I’d do that? Come on, it’s me your pal, Bob-O. I’ll tell you what, you can come inside and help me make a sign that shows my support.”

Noticing Castrozzi’s hands had a death grip on the arms of the wheelchair, Manolo shook his head, no.

Bob-O asked, “Aren’t you at least going to get a Slushee? You get one every morning. Tell you what, your Slushee is on the house.”

And Castrozzi, leaning forward almost out of his chair, shouted, “He doesn’t want your product, Capitalist Pig!”

Bob-O's face flushed red as he said, "Alright, that's enough of you, Paolo..." *Paolo?*... "Maybe I should call the cops this time? I mean it. Don't go getting this fine young man mixed up in your shenanigans."

Cops? Manni jumped in, "Whoa, Bob-O, you don't have to call the police. Castrozzi was trying to help me – um, yeah, I think. And we got a little carried away. It's my fault. Please don't call the cops."

Castrozzi said, "He won't call the Pork Chop Patrol. He never has." And he started to roll at Bob-O, saying, "Come on, Robert. I dare ya. I triple *dog* dare, ya."

Manni stepped between them, holding out his arms, his hands at each of their chests, and Bob-O, with tears collecting on the edge of his bottom eyelids, whined, "Manni, this devil ruined my nephew, William. Paolo, do you ever think of William any more, or is he just another memory you've drunk away? Don't you feel any guilt, damn-it?"

Castrozzi yelled, "All I did was introduce William to friends who would care for him. I got news, Robert. Your nephew was damaged goods – I tried to help, thought I could save him."

Both men had said more than they'd wanted, and Manolo, in the middle of the stand off, caught the flames from each of their glares. He hoped they wouldn't try to fight – he almost laughed at the thought of it, Castrozzi in his wheelchair, and Bob-O, a guy who used the word "shenanigans." But Manni remained serious, with a lot of effort, for a little over a minute – no lie, it was long enough for his arms to get tired and drop.

Castrozzi ordered, "Damn it, earth to Young Pee. Come on, help me out of here."

"Wha'?" Manni asked.

"Get me outta here. My home is just down the road. There's some things I want to show you which may be helpful to *The Cause*. Know what I mean? So, grab the handles on the back of this chair – you see the handles? Good. Now push me to my home, *now*. It's right around this corner."

“Um, Bob-O” Manni said, “I’m just going to get Castrozzi home. I don’t want any trouble with you two. Cool?” And pushing Castrozzi away, Manolo left Bob-O rubbing his palms over his belly.

Castrozzi lived one block north of 7·11 in a run down jazz club called, “Metropolphabobia,” Manni had lived in the area for two years and never noticed it. Metropol-pha-bo-bia. Inside, all the windows and wall were painted black and it smelled like wet cement and potatoes. Isn’t vodka made with potatoes, Manolo wondered as he checked out the bar along the wall, and he pushed Castrozzi, zig-zagging through the scattered tables and chairs. There was floor space cleared for dancing, and in the far corner stood a one foot high stage made of pallets and ply wood barely stable enough to support the instruments on it: rhythm and bass guitars, a drum set, a very used xylophone, and a mike stand held together with duct tape.

Paolo spread his arms and said, “This is our modern jazz lounge. Get familiar with it on your own time. Now, push me to the back room. *Come on.*”

Originally an office, the backroom had become Costrozzi’s bedroom. A queen size mattress, fluffy and fairly new but without sheets, on the floor, took up one side of the room littered with empty bottles of Absolute, and on the other side of the room were thirty milkcrates stacked up to the ceiling, leaving barely enough space for Castrozzi to back in his wheelchair and park against the wall. Manni could sit on the floor in front of the wheelchair, or stand. Castrozzi motioned for Manolo to sit on the mattress, but Manni didn’t even consider it. He stood with his hands behind his back like he was in a museum.

The stacked milk crates were used as cubicles, small display cases that all together held an impressive exhibition of treasure and CRAP. There were books by Beckett, Miller, and one by Manson, and there was poetry by Ginsberg, and volumes of political literature from a Communist Manifesto, Bill Clinton’s autobiography, a series on anarchism which, the very sight of,

made Manolo's palms sweat as his toes clenched with excitement. And there were hundreds of tapes, most of which Manni never heard of: Sparta, Acid Bath, Theloneous Monk and Miles Davis, and Gelian Welch. Then, Manni noticed the objects, *some strange shit*; a stuffed squirrel posed, looking rabid on top of a rubber, human hand, and there was one thing particularly disgusting and disturbing; it looked like a brown vibrator with facial features, huge eyes, ears, and there was a mouth carved into it. Someone had worked hard to make that peniscular thing – *is penis-cular a word?* Manolo was thinking as Castrozzi told him, “You’re welcome to take anything you want. Everyone else does, but they also bring stuff back, just little junk. Like that rusted toaster. And those airplanes made of popsicle sticks and toilet paper rolls, they’re nice. Do you see that lime green bowling ball, it’s cracked in half. Well I swear you can see David Bowie’s face in it. Oh, and a nice young woman brought me that bird’s skull – look how perfectly clean it is. That was thoughtful. Someone will end up taking it for sure. They just take the shit and replace it. It’s kind of a tradition here at Metropolphobia.”

“Uh-huh,” Manni said. The bird’s skull was fascinating, but Manolo was still studying that thingy, its face, the details, holes in the ear lobes where earrings go, and on the mouth, small grooves on the lips – not open splits like Castrozzi’s but subtle lines of soft elasticity.

“Hey,” Castrozzi said, “you’re probably more interested in the books and tapes. You seem to me to be one of those college–dialectual–learning type of persons, interested in everything but not at all involved. Am I right? Do you go to college?”

Manolo, keeping his hands behind his back, turned to Castrozzi and admitted, “I’m dropping out this semester, a Junior. I, um, I’m not sure school is for me.”

“Why,” he asked, “because you don’t know what you want to do with yourself? Because you majored in philosophy and found you’ll never get a real job with that? Are you afraid of being a delivery boy with a Master’s because you won’t be in

demand? Just like a lot of other Young Persons, afraid of the future! HA!”

“No, I majored in literature. My dad told me that a ‘degree in books’ won’t get me a job in the real world. Maybe he’s right. I’ll be a mailroom clerk who appreciates Mark Twain.”

“HA!” Castrozzi laughed. “But I’ll say you will do better than that. *Maybe* you can one day be mailroom *supervisor!* HA! Look,” he said, wheeling closer to Manni, “Young Person, I’m going to do you a favor because there seems to be more to your story. I’m going to give you *Throbbing Grissle.*”

Manolo backed away, not sure what to expect “Throbbing Grissle” to be, especially after seeing that phallic Mr. Potato Head. Manni decided he’d hung around Metropolphabobia long enough that morning, but he didn’t turn and run soon enough. Castrozzi reached up into one of the crates and rummaged around, then, he pulled out a cassette tape. *Throbbing Grissle: 20 Jazz Funk Classics.* Offering the tape, he said, “I’ve met these people. A great group, defunct a long time ago. They’ve influenced a lot of the musicians you crazy young bastards listen to. Anyways, the entire group, they were all very timid people, just like you seem to be, but they have a strong voice in music. Maybe, if you study them long enough – in your case, I’d say at least two years – you’ll learn to say what you want, and *how* to say it. And maybe you can come back to Metropolphabobia some time to check out the talent that performs, and to meet the other Young Persons who like it here. It’s a *home* here. A lot of us find this place a great spot to practice speaking out.”

Holding out the cassette tape and nodding his head, Castrozzi looked Manolo in the eyes, but , feeling like he was being recruited into a cult, Manni said, “No, thank-you.”

Paolo yelled, “Take it, you Motherfucker!”

Manolo took the tape *and* the opportunity to leave, backing up and mumbling, “Yeah, well okay, Costrozzi, so I’ve got to go. Maybe I’ll see you around – I don’t know why I haven’t seen you before. Yeah, um, I’m off to my job, to protest,

it's a STRIKE, you know? I'll show myself out. Don't worry.
Uh, see-ya."

* * * * *

At the collection agency, Manolo charged in with a simple plan, intending to ignore all and any Mexican employees – the scabs – starting with the lobby receptionist, Olivia, a mid-forties heavy-set married woman who, Manni believed, might have been secretly in love with him. She always smiled at him, gave him shy waves, and she always punched in his time card at 7:00 a.m. even when he was hours late. Manni didn't know what else that meant, besides a crush. Even though he was angry because Olivia was at work on that Tuesday, she was a great gal and he couldn't help but flash her a grin and give a quick wave with his index finger, hello. Down the hall he walked – with a bounce from the ball of his foot, it was more of a march – drumming his fingers on the cassette in his pant pocket, and he yelled into the mailroom, "suckers!" And in his head Manni was piecing together, "freestyling," a poem that, standing center stage on the collection's floor, he'd recite from the top of his lungs like one of those slam poets. Radical and romantic, morbid and Mexican, and most definitely melodramatic, the poem was hard to hold in his thoughts: *Your policy is our executioner...*

No, the poem's got to have more edge, got to have *Castrozzi* – a mention of religious stuff!

...I am the Eternal Now nailed to the cross! With the sight of a breathing still born, I watch...

Of course, Manni thought, it won't be a surprise that when I confront Lupita, she'll stand stiff in her starched business suit, calmly look down, as she towers four inches over me, and she'll either boom laughing or begin to lecture me, depending on her mood and how busy it is, but I'm going to recite this poem – it's gonna be *bananas*. Crazy! Maybe the poem will start a riot, and I'll get to smash someone over the head with a stapler!

...the world being moved in a campaign of fallacy!

On a war path Manolo stepped onto the collections floor, a warehouse of occupied cubicles that *was* busy with people running around with arms full of files, the computer techs screaming at monitors, and the phones wailing unanswered. Lupita was in her office, talking on the phone with her head in her hands. She looked up, and from the open doorway she spotted Manolo. She leapt from her cushy leather chair, sending it rolling behind her and crashing against the bookshelves, knocking over one of the twenty-something plaques on display. She shouted into the phone, "I'm sick of your lies, Chucci. This conversation is over!" And from around her desk she spun about to hang up the phone but she was wrapped up in the cord. She looked over her shoulder to Manni as she threw her elbows about, untangling herself. Once freed, she slammed down the phone, and snapped her body in Manolo's direction. Her eyes locked on him. She ran from the office, making a dash across the collection's floor, to head Manni off.

He'd noticed her; Lupita's face, her skin looked stretched tight and paled by stress, her eyes only slits open between black eye shadow, and her puffy lips chewed bare of gloss. It was a sign of a code-red chaotic morning. Manolo stopped at the center of the room, straightened his spine, and it was then he decided on the poem's last line, *THE WAR IS CLOSE!*, just as Lupita met up with him. Manni began, "I am the Eternal Now..."

She grabbed his arm, yanked him, dragging him two feet to the side, and scolded him, "Oh, no, Manni. You won't make a scene here. Somehow I knew you might try some stupid shit today."

"Uhh," Manni's words came slow, "there's a strike today. For, um, all Mexicanos."

"Manni," she sighed, bending down to look him in the face, "the strike is for *Mojados*."

"Who?"

"Wetbacks, Manolo. The strike is for illegals. You were born in Virginia! You're more white than anything," she said poking his shoulder, "but I know you Manni. I'm two steps

ahead. So, last week I adjusted the schedule to give you the day off today. So go home. Olivia has already clocked you out.” Lupita’s eyes narrowed almost completely shut.

Other employees had started to turn in their seats, straining their necks to see Manolo. Some people popped their heads up out of the cubicles, like prairie dogs. Manni wanted a stapler. It was his chance to express the voice of dissidence. Checking the desk tops near him for a stapler to bash heads with, he shouted, “It’s a strike!”

“Malicia la, Manolo.” Lupita screeched, shaking his arm. “No crelles que heres el grand Mexican Revolusionario! Aparte heres guero!”

“Wha?” Manni asked.

Lupita leaned back and frustration become anger rippled over her face; her lips twitched and opened like she wanted to speak, but she bit the tip of her tongue between her coffee stained teeth, and she made a clicking sound with her mouth as her eyes widened and narrowed. Her grip on Manni’s arm tightened, and telling him, “Come with me – come on,” she dragged him across the room. Her skirt made an irritating swish noise.

In her office Lupita slammed the door, and walking behind the desk she took a moment to fix the fallen plaque, then she turned and pointed at a chair in the center of the office. With her eyes menacing Manolo standing with his back to the door, she said, “You. Sit. Now –NOW, Manolo!”

Manni’s left knee began to shake uncontrollably – he was so amped up, ready for action – and he pictured himself in a wheelchair because that way Lupita wouldn’t notice his leg shaking and he wouldn’t even have to consider sitting in her chair. This would be the first time he ever stood up to his cousin. He said, “No, Lupita.”

She stood rigid, staring at Manolo as evil thoughts of strangling him stirred behind her brown eyes, and then, “You little shit, spoiled brat,” she said. “I’ve had it with you. Right now, Manni, we’re calling your dad. And you’re going to tell him everything. Your school gang of anarchists. Your trying to make

a scene here, at work, Manni, where I work! Oh, and your TATTOO. He's going to kill you. Because I'm tired, Manolo. You're so irresponsible. This is the real world, and you're going to get used to it."

As she spoke Manni's eyes wandered, and he noticed two things: Lupita didn't mention the money Chucci accused him of stealing, and on her desk there was a stapler. Castrozzi would have wheeled over and swiped it, defiantly, but Manni knew he'd have to be sneaky, and so, with his shoulders sloped, he sulked over to the chair and sat down, scooting the chair closer to the desk to get in arm's reach of his target. The stapler.

Lupita snatched up the phone and dialed Manni's dad, and waiting for him to answer, she stood with one hand on her hip, staring down at her day planner. She made that clicking noise with her mouth. Manolo smelled in the office the same cheap potpourri as in Lupita's bedroom, as he thought, it's not the right moment to steal that stapler, but I'll wait, eager.

"Hello, Tio Frank?" She'd got hold of Manni's dad. "Yes, it's Lupita. How are you doing? I hope I'm not disturbing you. You're silly, Tio Frank. Yes, I remember when you gave me a tiara. Yes, I'm still your prissy little princess -- Tio Frank..."

Manolo's dad always made Lupita blush, embarrassing her. She turned from Manni to hide the fresh color in her cheeks, and Manolo, like a snake strikes, snatched the stapler off the desk. He stood up, focused on the back of Lupita's head, and he grinned feeling for the first time he wouldn't be bullied by her. Manni made that clicking noise with his mouth and walked to the door. Lupita turned back and her eyebrows shot up, eyes bulged, nostrils flared, and her mouth fell open as if she would scream, but Manni knew his dad loved to talk. Lupita would be lucky to get a full sentence in, and she'd never hang up on him. She tried to put him on hold, "Tio Frank -- please -- Tio Frank, please hold -- no, it's not that..."

Manolo left smiling, but he knew to get out of the building quick because he only had a few seconds head start on Lupita. Once outside he'd be safe with her too busy to run him down on

the avenue. He thought about the strike/boycott. It could have slowed down services and commerce and impacted the economy of Arizona so significantly that Mexicano immigrants across the nation would decide to follow lead, not only for one day but at least a week, and America, on the cusp of collapse because of the wide-spread strike, would finally see the blessing in the “Border breakdown.” But it didn’t happen like that. Tuesday turned out to be a normal, hot as hell day for AZ, and since he’d been scheduled off, Manolo couldn’t technically participate.

But high stepping down the avenue, in retreat from Lupita, not wasting any time with his reflection in shop windows, Manolo could not be more proud. He did not bash anyone over the head with it, but he’d grabbed the stapler, something to put in one of the crates when he went back to Metropolphobia.