

# PROCESSED WORLD 29



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# PROCESSED WORLD

Summer/Fall 1992 • Issue 29  
ISSN 0735-9381



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Polish Immigrants at Ellis Island. (Photo from the Terrace V. Powderly Collection)



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The material in *Processed World* reflects the ideas and fantasies of the specific authors and artists, and not necessarily those of other contributors, editors or BACAT. *Processed World* is a project of the Bay Area Center for Art & Technology (BACAT), a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation. BACAT can be contacted at 1095 Market Street, #209, San Francisco, CA 94103; PW or BACAT may be phoned at (415) 626-2979 or faxed at (415) 626-2685. *Processed World* is collectively edited and produced. Nobody gets paid (except the printer, the Post Office/UPS and the landlord). We welcome comments, letters, and submissions (no originals!). Write us at 41 Sutter St. #1829, San Francisco, CA 94104. *Processed World* is indexed in the Alternative Press Index.

# WALKING HEADS

The *Processed World* office is located on Market Street, near San Francisco's Civic Center. Down the hall is the world headquarters for the Wobblies (the Industrial Workers of the World—IWW). Across the street is the empty Odd Fellows' building. On United Nations Plaza, Food Not Bombs feeds the hungry and homeless, risking arrest and persecution from City Hall (since January, headed by an ex-police chief mayor) while an AIDS vigil enters its seventh year. We are surrounded by the ruins of Market Society: an abandoned Greyhound station, seedy bars and liquor stores, and an earthquake-damaged, apparently condemned U.S. Court of Appeals and Post Office building. Contemporary urban nomads—the homeless—strive to make a home in makeshift doorway shelters, shooting galleries and shopping cart/tent cities.

The physical world we inhabit was created by humans—not freely, but in the service of capital. Abandoned industrial rustbelt towns like Pullman, Illinois, or Gary, Indiana, are entirely the product of market relations, socially and spatially organized to meet industrialists' needs for labor and resources. When the factories close there is little to keep people there. Some people escape, either by luck or by education—but where can they escape to?

We live in an era of unprecedented economic globalism. Multinational capital can shift production (e.g. textiles) from Montreal to Mexico to Malaysia to Los Angeles. Technology makes faraway places more accessible: railroads, photographs, satellites, and computers collapse space and time. Decisions made in London or New York boardrooms have immediate consequences for people on the other side of the world. While entertainment technologies slowly homogenize world cultures into Disneyish Hollywood mediocrity, cheap transportation and tourism encourage long-distance dispersion and the widening reach of market relations into the most obscure and isolated

corners of the globe.

As we sojourn our way into the gray 90s, the solution favored by today's headline leaders to poverty and displacement is to create new homelands for the homeless. The Berlin Wall may have fallen, but a new fence has risen near San Diego, to stem the "human flood" from Latin America. Woe to those "outsiders"—the grubby homeless, the *swart gevaar* (black peril), yellow menace, wetbacks, and other bogeys—who demagogues attack as undesirable. In the posturing that passes for politics, politicians everywhere are scrambling to score points on this issue—this is, after all, an election year.

Today we see the largest population movements in history, within nations, continents and around the planet. Mobile, migrant, temporary, "precarious" work is becoming dominant with the collapse of welfare states and the rise of two-tiered societies. As the British band Gang of Four put it, "a force called hard cash moves my feet." We move from one job to another as employers "downsize" firms, cut production, transfer work elsewhere, demand "flexibility," or until we just can't stand the monotony of

work and social life and vote with our feet.

Racism and bigotry are bursting from beneath the surface as every society faces new stratifications and increasingly raw competition. "English Only" laws have been passed in state after state. In Southern California, yahoos organize Lights-Across-the-Border campaigns to intimidate Mexican immigrants, while around the country Black nationalists whip up hysteria against Koreans in scattered urban areas.

One Senate candidate from Orange County, Congressman William Danne-meyer, wants to put the National Guard and the military to work "securing" the U.S.'s exposed underbelly. In 1989 a group called The Coalition for Border Security issued a pamphlet, "An Open Letter to Congress," and subtitled "Our borders are out of control." It reads: "Hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants and billions of dollars of narcotics are being smuggled into the United States [through] an open border. . . we cannot continue to wink at wholesale violation of U.S. sovereignty." The diatribe goes on to call for the "repair, replacement and extension of fencing and other appropriate physical structures" along the Southwestern border plus increased funding for the Immigration and Naturalization "Service" (INS, aka *La Migra*). Signatories include Edward Abbey, Gerald Arenberg (National Association of Chiefs of Police), Richard Dockery (regional director of the Southwest NAACP), Edward Valencia (chairman of the Santa Ynez Band of Mission Indians), William Winpisinger (president of the Machinists International) and Albert Shanker (president of the American Federation of Teachers).

Organized labor's traditional xenophobia reflects longstanding anxieties about wage levels being undermined by migrant workers willing to work for less. Migrants are perceived as doing the dirty work of the bosses; in the U.S. the multitude of languages and cultures has been an effective deterrent to unified resistance. The INS exploited these insecurities in 1986 with its "Operation Jobs" program of sweeps against undocumented Latinos. "Progressives" help

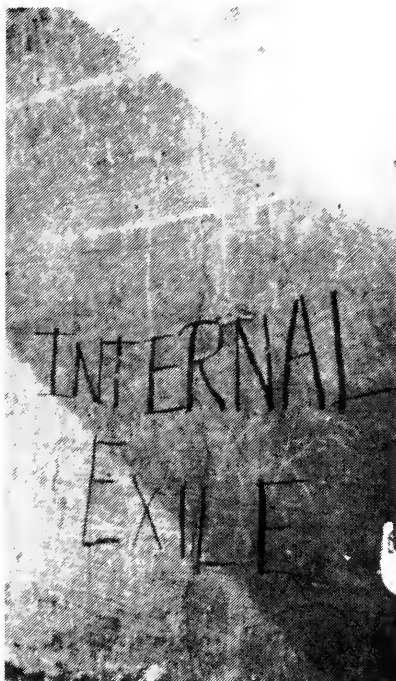


photo by D.S. Black

legitimize such campaigns when they too demand “jobs,” instead of income, or (heaven forbid) a drastic reduction of work and a radically different way of life. In doing so, they help perpetuate an obsolete relationship between work and life. Let’s be frank: most of what we do on our jobs is a complete waste of time and nobody should do it! Jobs are an artificial, wasteful and dehumanizing way of organizing useful human activities. Creative freedom and making a useful contribution to society are usually blocked by the 9-5 grind.

\* \* \*

Much immigration to the U.S. today is a direct result of its imperial history. A migrant workforce is useful to capital because the “social” costs of reproducing labor—costs of education, training and survival—are borne elsewhere. Today it is not only California’s agricultural sector which is dependent on an imported workforce (who live in serf-like conditions) but also the high-tech industries of Silicon Valley. Companies like Oracle deliberately hire educated Asians and Indians because of their vulnerability before the immigration court (the advantage of “working papers”). No matter which way the “brain drains,” U.S. universities are similarly dependent on curious outsiders coming to this country; in 1986, U.S. universities awarded more engineering Ph.D.s to foreigners than Americans. Why should U.S. companies concern themselves with the local education system, when the “foreign product” can do the job just as well? (Send *PW* your contributions to an upcoming issue on Education!)

Calls for protectionism and the jingoism of politicians, CEOs and union officials (“Buy American”) are all efforts to blame plummeting middle-class living standards on “lazy workers.” The elimination of the safety net and attacks on wage levels of the last decades have been propelled by an effort to make people work harder—to squeeze the most profit out of our “human resources.” The unwritten message of the recession is: Be Glad To Have A Job! Your Patriotic Duty in the Trade Wars of the New World Order is to Work-Work-Work!

In a society almost completely shaped by abstract market forces, what do people become attached to, and why? What does it mean to belong to a place or an environment, to be “at home”? Of course, home is not just a place, or even a shelter, but also a daily, unavoidable



From the upcoming See Sharp Press release, *The American Heretic's Dictionary*.  
Definitions by Chaz Bufe. Illustrations by J.R. Swanson. © 1992.

**UNEMPLOYMENT, n.** Escape from the shackles of a dull, soul-destroying job into the manacles of economic desperation.

embrace of consumption and investment, a relation to a bank or landlord. For the lucky ones who can scrape together a down payment, home becomes an entry into the rising (or—these days—falling) land values game. For the unlucky ones erecting cardboard shelters in abandoned lots, “home” is a temporary respite from the elements, or perhaps only a distant and confused memory. The same market forces that have hurled individuals across the planet in search of elusive dollars have also ripped apart families, homes and communities throughout the U.S.

Green politics based on “community,” “bioregion,” or “municipality” emphasize the importance of where you live over what you do. But is it likely, possible, or even desirable for people to stop moving around? In 1987 *Processed World* examined the problems of “or-

ganizing” among transient and atomized workers. The situation hasn’t changed much since then. Looking forward, transience and atomization are more likely to increase than diminish. Recognizing this, we embarked on this issue seeking contributions on the theme of Immigration. The articles and tales that appear, however, are less about Immigration than about Exile, both in the literal sense that results from leaving one’s original home and culture behind, and in the metaphorical sense that many of us drawn to radical politics and alternative cultures feel. Our theme this issue is “Exile on Market Street,” referring to our location in San Francisco, but more significantly, the exile we are all subject to in the world market.

A half dozen *Processed World* regulars check in with their own tales. Frog escapes a martial Paris in the post-’68



Metal Worker  
SEOL  
25 years old  
highly qualified  
Union Free  
Religion: Moon • Sober • Punctual  
Inexhaustible • Polite

Electronics Assembler  
48 years old • Origin:  
Malaysia • Union Free  
Comes with small dowry  
possibly marriageable  
Robust • Servile  
Completely Alcohol Free

era and tries a few lily pads out before leaving a bad green card marriage and landing in San Francisco in **Pond Hopping**. In **Where & Back Again**, D.S. Black checks his imperial baggage at the border with the U.S.'s neighbor to the north. . . but finds that Canada was a mere foreshadowing of the many fractured lines dotting the map, careening like rails across many faultzones, from the Balkans to the Pacific. Fellow Anti-Economy League traveler Med-o takes a look at Romanian exile poet Andrei Codrescu's *The Disappearance of the Outside* in our review section, and finds a deep resonance in his own life as a metaphorical exile, persistent traveler, and member of the alien nation. In **Exile in the Heartland**, Dr. Kwazee Wabbit, Ph.D. takes a witty look at the exile communities inadvertently thrown together in the bastion of American normalcy, Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Two British members of the *PW* collective contribute stories: Iguana Mente describes his accidental migration in **A Briton In Exile**, and Louis Michaelson relays a wild story of green card marriages from Marinus Horn in **Marriages of Inconvenience**. Salvador Ferret grew up in Puerto Rico, Argentina and Mexico. In **Commie To America** he tells how he came to the U.S. as a young teen. Revolted by the xenophobic, racist, plastic culture he encountered in Colorado Springs, he

became a "freak." Mickey D.'s **Koun Lok** is an account of his stint among newly arrived Cambodians in San Francisco's Tenderloin, finding their way through the bizarre rituals and artifacts of daily life in the U.S. **Alejandro Murgía**, **John Ross**, **Farouk Asvat**, **Clifton Ross** and **Ioanna-Veronika** all offer poetic contributions to our theme.

Of course we also have a number of pieces on *Processed World's* traditional turf: a local small press, *Pressure Drop*, is publishing this summer *Sabotage in the American Workplace*. Excerpts are presented in *Sabotage Stories*. In *Get The Message: Mercury Rising Has Risen!* Chris Carlsson interviews several San Francisco bike messengers—always a vibrant subculture—who have brought forth a new magazine, *Mercury Rising*. The current economic disaster besetting daily life in the U.S. gets a look from different angles in our tales of toil and fictional contributions: in Summer Brenner's **Same Old, Same Old** an office worker leaves one job only to find the next one virtually indistinguishable, ultimately finding a new answer to the pressures of her daily life. Faye Manning describes a harrowing descent into marginality, literally selling a part of herself (but not soul) to feed her family in **Blood Money**. **The Swineherd**, a tale of toil from Mark Henkes, is our token recognition of the election, politi-

cians, and representative democracy in this quadrennial Year of Empty Frenzy. Chris Carlsson contrasts a couple of books about that elusive category "technology" in **Ingenuity and Its Enemies** in the review section. Stella has advice for temps in *DOWNTIME's* "Paper-slutting." Brief looks at the recently overturned San Francisco VDT law and a bizarre conference of entrepreneurial eco-capitalists round out the section.

Two sets of running graphics throughout this issue are excerpted from forthcoming productions: The JR Swanson grafix with definitions by Chaz Bufe are from *The American Heretics Dictionary* (See Sharp Press: 1992), and the Hobo Graffiti images are from Bill Daniel's half-hour documentary "Who Is Bozo Texino?"

We were happy about the great letters we received since the last issue. As an unpaid, volunteer project, that's what keeps us going, along with interesting and relevant submissions. We especially need more punchy graphic art, cartoons, and fake advertisements. Future themes we're talking about are The Future, Education, and Sex/Drugs/Pleasure. All kinds of graphics, photos, stories, analyses, etc., are welcome—please send us copies only!

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# LETTERS

## Office Realities

Dear *Processed World*,

Thanks for such an excellent piece of journalism on the modern office. I'm fed up with it being glamorized in the media in films like *The Secret of My Success*, *Working Girl*, and dire TV shows like *LA Law* (I watch Manhattan Cable—maybe you guys should make *Processed World* a TV programme). You guys show office life as it really is, repetitive routines, demoralizing and unhealthy atmosphere, uncaring and unsympathetic employers, and sexist. I don't think anybody has or will write a more accurate account of office life than I found in your anthology *Bad Attitude*. Your humor is great and your articles are never over our (office workers') heads which is always a bonus. It's the first political manifesto for the service sector working class.

Keep up the good work and don't let the bastards grind you down.

Yours,

S.J.—Perth, Scotland, UK

P.S. Office anarchy is alive and well in Scotland!

## Kudos from an IBM worker

Dear Bay Cats and Chicks:

I haven't seen hide nor hair of *Processed World* for over a year now (your "vacation" issue was the last one I received). I hope it hasn't gone the way of *Working Papers*, *Place* or *Madness Network News*.

What sets *PW* apart from most "people's" newspapers and magazines is that you aren't out to flog any party line, though of late you've started to sound like mainstream anarchists (how's that for an oxymoron?). Still, you've represented all colors of collars, blue, pink and white, and you've discussed in great detail how "the job" affects the rest of one's existence. All we've had in the way of worker press for many years here in Broome County, NY is the *Community-Labor Reporter*, a throw-away newspaper published by a local "anti-poverty agency" that seems to be loosely modeled after the *Daily World* and month after month, endlessly regurgitates the same old whines and whimpers about callous corporations and unfair welfare agencies; it's very depressing to read, and in my opinion does terribly little to empow-

er its readers to deal with the very real wrongs it agonizes over (maybe somebody wants it that way). You on the other hand have dared stick your politically-incorrect noses into the restricted areas of management, engineering and finance to show us the bigger picture.

Like I said some years ago, what I'd really like to see from *PW* is an issue devoted entirely to people who've struggled for years with shit jobs and yahoo bosses, extricated themselves through luck and/or determination and who now have livelihoods which they enjoy and make a decent living at (please don't mistake me for a typical "success seeker"—I'm interested in survival stories; most self-help books make me retch). [Ed. note: Check out our 10th anniversary double issue, #26/27, on "The Good Job."] First of all though, I'd like to see *PW* back in my

mailbox.

Hasta la vista,  
P.G.—Johnson City, NY

## 1992—The Year of ??

Dear *PW*—

I'm proud to say that I have every single issue of *PW* and always look forward to the next one. FOOD FOR THOUGHT...

I haven't written to you folks in a long while. This year has not been kind to me. I lost my job in January due to the Recession. Lost the love of my life in February, followed closely by the only other man in my life whom I love and trust (both now live on Vancouver Island in beautiful British California). After a brief (too brief) spell of feeling good about myself, I was hit by the worst trauma of my life—the death of one of my devoted cats. This emotional up-



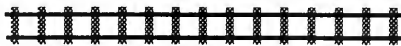
AMERICANISM, *n.* 1) The desire to purge America of all those qualities which make it a more or less tolerable place in which to live; 2) The ability to simultaneously kiss ass, follow your boss's orders, swallow a pay cut, piss in a bottle, cower in fear of job loss, and brag about your freedom.



Next time you're stuck at a railroad crossing, check out the sides of the boxcars.



### WHO IS BOZO TEXINO?



heaval was like losing my best friend, lover, and favorite child in one fell swoop. I'm still not over it!

As the year of 1991 wanes, I find myself with very little to look forward to in 1992. The thought occurs to me—how much worse can things get? And the answer? DON'T ASK! I am sure that things can get a lot worse than they are now, and not just for me but for everyone. Years of living beyond our means will finally catch up with us, on a global scale. I anticipate the worst, which is summed up in my present philosophy of life:

1. NOTHING MATTERS.
2. NO ONE CARES.
3. EXPECT NOTHING.

(Think about it...)

R.B.—Toronto, Canada

### Who Profits?

Dear Processed Individuals,

My life has made more sense since I found *Processed World*. I use a computer as a tool to create art work and teach computer graphics to college students to pay the bills. Your analysis of the effects of computers on the workplace is a welcome relief from the attitudes of students and colleagues alike who too often view the computer as a panacea to the world's and their own problems.

When things still don't work out perfectly after learning the hardware/software the solution is always "More hardware or software."

While the technological revolution is exciting and in many ways inevitable, only people with the courage to ask "Who profits and who gets manipulated by the new technology?" can expect to meaningfully shape the debate.

Keep up the good work!

P.B.—Cleveland, OH

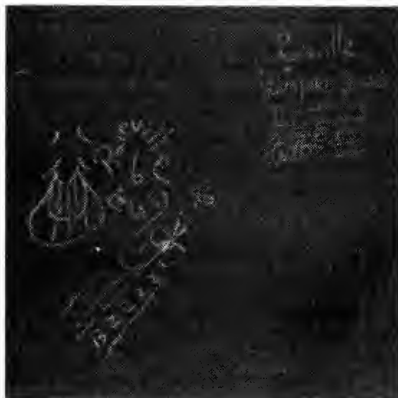
### Good Jobs and Other Oxymorons

Dear PW:

Although cutting and pasting do not normally fit into my "job description," I felt inspired after reading the double issue #26/27, "The Good Job." So, I spent most of my morning cutting and pasting, making copies for surreptitious company distribution. Doing it on company time made it all the more sweet. Now that I am back from a long relaxing lunch, I can begin to type my thoughts out.

In my mind the term "the good job" is an oxymoron. In capitalist economies there can never be anything except selling labor/time for money, always for the existing order, and for the god Commerce. Even if one has the "luxury" of being self-employed, that person always submits to the economic regime. The bottom line is ALWAYS money.

### Who's writing these pictures? Tramps? Railroad workers?



Much of our early life is spent preparing for the working world: learning how to consume from parents and television. Adjusting to the tedium of school work isn't any different than adjusting to the tedium of work-work: it's just a different cell. We even learn to accept that we can't change the existing order. In other words, just grin and bear it and hope that you have enough Valiums to last until the next round of pleasant unemployment.

The undeniable horrors of modern work make *Processed World* a Godsend. Like any decent commodity critic, I extoll your virtues with aplomb: I laughed, I cried, I despaired.

I am rather lucky, I think. I don't have to endure those frightening hierarchies, the confining straightjackets most people wear to work, or toil as much as I have had to in the past. Try legal researching for a living, or keying 12,000 numbers an hour for eight

hours...enough for you to resemble Munch's "Woman on the Bridge." I love wearing my thrift shop rags to the horror of my dressed for success co-worker, or openly talk about gay phone sex, or write pornography to/with my other co-worker. What I do have to endure is working the sleazy world of retail and am constantly exposed to its soul-less mechanizations. The game is easy: sell low quality merchandise for inflated prices to unsuspecting "consumers" who really believe that this or that product will somehow fill a need that does not exist in reality, but is fabricated by the mass medium, advertising. Just think what would happen if people stopped buying the bullshit! It would make the (inevitable) current recession look like a Gump's display. Keep up the good work!!

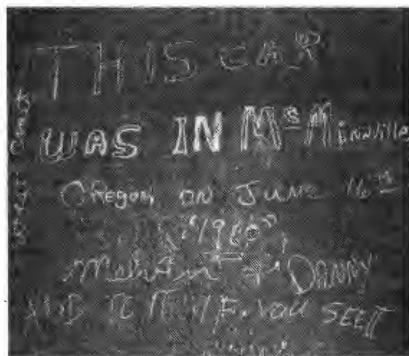
Widget—S.F.

### And About Art...

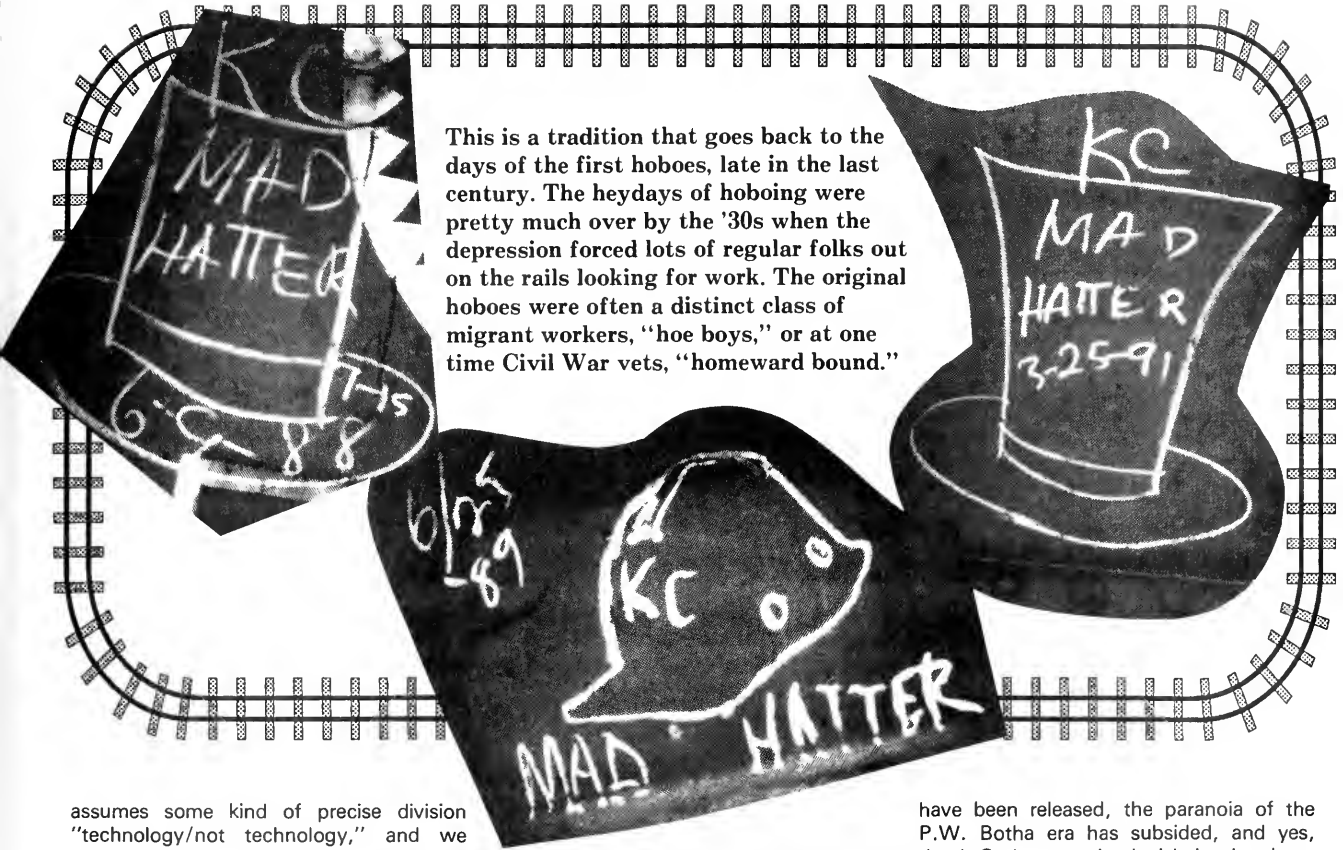
PW:

Just got issue 24. What a dilemma. Moving into art...definitely a sensible proposition. Moving into green-party-ism means ideology...that means starting to read on page 1, and taking it a page at a time. Art means starting anywhere and flitting about. We can only take so much of boring jobs, and perhaps only read so much of ranting about boring jobs. There's a bit of an upturn over here, some people writing about zero-work and possibilities (an anti-work stance is more often than not an anti-work POSE)—a care of putting theory into practice—and not practice into theory. Also there are a few people looking into "information age" and the current shifts toward fascination with information and meta-data. Adopting a stiff "anti-technology" stance is a problem as it

Some of the train pictures you'll see a bunch of times if you keep looking, some of them you may only see once.







This is a tradition that goes back to the days of the first hoboes, late in the last century. The heydays of hoboing were pretty much over by the '30s when the depression forced lots of regular folks out on the rails looking for work. The original hoboes were often a distinct class of migrant workers, "hoe boys," or at one time Civil War vets, "homeward bound."

assumes some kind of precise division "technology/not technology," and we need critical discussion around "technology" in its various formats (communications, information, silicon chips...). [Ed. note: See the review "Ingenuity and Its Enemies" in the review section of this issue for more on this very topic.] But plenty of artworks is a good thing. Cut down on rantings, it's depressing, drift a bit with your stories, open up channels of possibilities of what could be, why it isn't, and how to get there.

Till then,  
Barney Dog — Sheffield, U.K.

### A Warning from Central Europe

Dear Processed World!

I have read articles which you send me and which are telling more about your work. I think that it, what you are doing, is very interesting and important because in this time on the world are few people which don't want and don't find only money for every things.

Many articles are written about AIDS, terrorism, Northern Ireland, massacres in South Africa and war in Kuwait. This all is horrible. War in Kuwait is ended. But should she have ended if Kuwait hadn't money and oil? No! Why?

From May 1991 fight in Europe two nations: Serbia and Croatia. Serbia attack Croatians village and towns. They destroy there. They are killing not only soldiers but many civilians, women and children. This

is no war, this is massacres, exterminates Croatian fight for freedom but they are weaker than Serbia, they need help. But what is world doing? Nothing. Because they haven't money, gold. Money are freedom, money are happiness, money are the all. But I and certainly many other people think that this isn't truth. And one warning: In 1914, World War I started in Serbia. Thanks and keep up your good work.

Your sincerely,  
L.V. — Prievidza, Czechoslovakia

### News from South Africa

Dear Processed World,

Are you guys still hanging in there? The last issue I laid eyes on was No. 23 way back in 1988. I have about seven or eight copies of different issues, and cherish them like gold! I decided to write and hear whether you still exist. I hope I am not disappointed!

I don't know whether you have had someone come here and do a report on SA recently, but I'd like to give you a bird's eye view of local conditions anyway.

Since my last letter was published in #21, well, a couple of things have changed here locally, haven't they? Or have they? The old dictum: "The more things change, the more they stay the same" seems to be particularly true in the case of South Africa. Yes, imprisoned political leaders

have been released, the paranoia of the P.W. Botha era has subsided, and yes, thank God, repressive legislation has been repealed.

The free flow of information has been restored to a level unknown to my generation (I'm thirty years old)—one can hardly believe that three years ago one could go to prison for publishing pictures of Mandela and his mates! Yes, everyone can live where they want, work where they want, and equal opportunity, in theory, is afforded to everyone.

But all those privileges and rights are part of the scenery in any "democratic," free society. There is no need to applaud them, not in South Africa in any case.

The bottom line is the same as everywhere on the planet: A person with a roof, a reasonable dinner and kids in school makes a poor revolutionary. Some of you might think that this sounds like an oversimplification, but that is reality here. (I think many locals don't even realize it.) It really is a knife-edge between social stability and social degeneration a la Yugoslavia.

What really terrifies me is the potential for a typical African pseudo-dictatorship to come to power, complete with racing Presidential motorcade and trigger-happy comrades. And don't give me that bullshit about local cultural peculiarities.

Please send me a copy of anything you've published on South Africa since #23. I am kind of a media nut, and am always on the lookout for discussions regarding my beloved fatherland in the



foreign press, especially if that press is one worth pricking your ears for!

Take care,  
C.D. — Hillbrow, South Africa

**Dragging the Guardian into the 21st C.**

Dear Folks,

Well, barring a change of heart, it looks like your prediction of how long I'd last at the *Guardian* (3-4 months seemed to be the consensus) will be right on target. From my first staff meeting where we fired someone for "gross misconduct," to the discussion over whether new members can vote (decision: they can't, not for 4 months, and even then only if the Central Committee—excuse me, Coordinating Committee—approves them for Staff Membership), to the decision to hire a managing editor at nearly twice the salary regular staff make (because, as one person put it, it's only fair to pay "what the market will bear"—though there was also much class-baiting going on, whereby it was explained that some people weren't privileged enough to afford to live on a regular *Guardian* salary—this from someone who wants us to hire an ultra-professional white woman before we've even conducted an affirmative action search), to the lecture I got today to the effect that one shouldn't be rude to Black people because they have a history of oppression and might interpret it as racist, it has become ever clearer to me that these are a bunch of petty-management wannabes whose idea of progressive politics is making a laundry list of Oppressed Groups to pay lip service to, while their own political behavior goes unexamined!

I find I'm seeing more and more things in terms of the commodification of politics—the very people (activists) who protest against the system increasingly see politics as something you either produce or consume. So you have on the one hand career activists, who see politics essentially as a job that doesn't necessarily filter into their "real lives" (whether it really is their job or it's just what takes most of their time and energy), and on the other all the conscien-

tious consumers and Shopping-for-a-Better-World-heads, who treat politics as just an enlightened version of calorie-counting. Even demonstrations seem more like consumer events than genuine political acts. In organizations like the *Guardian*, politics isn't something you do or enact or live, but something you possess; and "good politics" can be used to increase your status in the hierarchy, and to get your way in power struggles. It's like a little protocapitalist economy, with politics playing the role of capital.

But I could gripe about the *Guardian* forever. Good luck with the magazine. Stay in touch.

Take care,  
N.M. — New York, NY

**Thanks for the Attitude**

Dear *Processed World*,

For the last eight years I have been reading *Processed World*. I am of the pre-World War II generation but belonged to a small group of people who would take to the *Processed World* idea.

I am grateful for The Good Job in issue #26/27. I agree, we shouldn't be fooled by our "good job." A while ago, some of the women's essays in *Processed World's Bad Attitude* made a difference. For days I was wounded by my work adversary and reached for *Bad Attitude*. These essays made something in my subconscious shift and relax. I felt a desirable warming of my brain cells. I got a perspective on my problem and felt better.

Thank you for the control you have on your subject matter.

Sincerely,  
J.K. — San Francisco, California

**News From Jacksonville**

Dear *P.W.* Creators and Promulgators,  
As you may already know, Jacksonville, although a port city, is mainly a town of huge insurance companies, regional bank headquarters, Navy Bases (three!) and

heavy industry, including Union Carbide, Kerr-McGee, and others of that ilk.

My vocation is writing fiction, poetry and playing guitar. Like all such misfits, I've had to take "straight" jobs from time to time so I could keep myself housed and fed. I've worked temps, general clerical, assembly/production lines, loading docks, UPS (2½ years there), washed dishes, flipped burgers...well, the list goes on, and so do the usual horror stories.

Reading *Processed World* helped me keep in mind that there are others out there with Certified Bad Attitudes, and that my small circle of cohorts and I aren't as alone as we sometimes seem.

Congratulations on producing a fine 'zine that will be a useful tool in my personal and continuing role as a

Process Resistor,  
C.R. — Jacksonville, FL

**A Helluva Decade**

Dear *PW*,

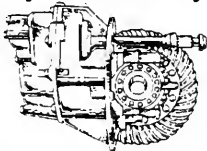
It has been one hell of a decade and a half working for "the man," people like Martin in *Generation X* and Rajiv in *Biohell*. (Rajiv's company was not doing well financially? Gee, I wonder why?)

I thought it was just me whose integrity was being sucked dry by the smarminess of *Time* magazine's cute characterizations of "twenty-somethings" ("Freshly minted grown-ups." Jesus Christ!) Now I realize that there are others who feel the same way I do.

Who is Tom Tomorrow? He (or she) is fantastic. I really can't tell you how funny I find his (her) material. On page 50 of *PW28*, the last frame of "How the News Works" is utterly true and therefore utterly terrifying and therefore utterly hilarious. The picture behind the G. Gordon Liddy-looking character is of an advertisement. Just look at that hamburger and fries SMILING. FUN MEAL. Look at the hat on top of the hamburger. IT IS SO TRUE.

Sincerely,  
E.L. — Bellingham, WA

## Good Taste is the Chief Enemy of Creativity



**EAT·N**  
Eat, Ash & Smoke Parts

- Go Go Go This is It This is It
- Improvisation is Better Than Planning
- Notice What You're Noticing
- Participate in the Creation of Ruins
- Operate Outside The Paradigm

# 1949

The Avant Garde is Obsolete

THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY  
YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN CENSORSHIP WORKS

graphic: The Stranger

### Workers of the World Support PW

*Processed World sent copies of PW 28 to the membership of the Industrial Workers of the World, along with a polemical cover letter from Chris Carlsson, arguing for a new approach to radical workplace organizing. Due to the Wobblies being a few doors away from PW in our San Francisco office, an ongoing dialogue has developed about work, workers, self-identity, and radical social change. We hope to continue this discussion in future issues and encourage readers to participate.*

### Use/Need On The Agenda

Hey PW,

I used to have a sub to *PW*. Then, I agitated for a sub at my workstation, a library. Since the curator there eventually did put in an order, I had been perusing your excellent 'zine, more or less, free of charge on the job.

Your project of putting the question of what constitutes use and need on the agenda of whatever social revolution eventually explodes the capitalist political economy is, I think, very worthwhile. The fact that very advanced commodity production, such as we now find ourselves immersed in, reveals an incredible possibility for eliminating material suffering, while at the same time shrouding that potential in millions of reified images, gives your project extra added weight on the scale of meaning. But more than that, the sense of joy, love and laughter that you bring to the readers of *PW* makes it worth subscribing to, if only to be a part of that process myself.

Yours for the works,  
M.B.—Palo Alto, CA

### Get Real, You Health Nazis!

Dear *Processed World* Collective:

As a smoker, I really didn't enjoy your

arrogant, preppy anti-smoking articles.

If you health-nazis would get some real issues instead of attacking the working class (who are most of the smokers), you might find organizing the workers as a class a lot more simpler. (sic)

Where I live, the death rate from cancer has doubled in the area surrounding Rocketdyne. None of the cancer deaths were related to smoking. What does our local government do? Outlaw smoking in government buildings.

My mother, who was very conservative (voted for Nixon) got radicalized through smokers' rights groups. At 72, she is active in the state of Nevada, where she took early retirement rather than go outside to smoke. Her awareness has grown to all areas of repression of workers throughout the world.

All this anti-smoking bullshit is just another way for the bosses to divide workers and get their focus off the real issues, and you have become pawns in their game.

I sure don't want to support anyone who wants to take away my rights. Many workers are battling for their right to smoke on the job. Do you support them or not?

D.—Colorado

### PWers putting up a smokescreen!



graphic: PW Collective

### We Are Workers First

Fellow Workers,

First of all I was pleased to receive the sample copy of *PW* you sent, although a few weeks later I received another copy along with a notice to renew my subscription. Thanks. I do like *Processed World* and have shown it to coworkers. They dig the graphics.

Anyway, I'm writing to briefly comment on some of the points you raised in your cover letter in order to clarify my views.

You say that, "The mass, interchangeable nature of office work, and the enormous transiency among white collar workers indicates, . . . , that we have a different relationship to Work than the one which gave rise to the theory of Industrial Unionism." I think that you are mistaken. It was precisely the "mass, interchangeable nature" of labor that accompanied the aggregation of large numbers of workers in mass production industries that gave rise to the theory of Industrial Unionism in the first place. Prior to this development, production was carried on by relatively small groups of skilled craftsmen in small shops. Craft, or trade, unionism was the form of organization worked out by these skilled workers to meet the needs within the prevailing organization of labor. Similarly, industrial unionism developed to meet the needs of the mass worker created by the new organization of labor. Indeed, the IWW had its greatest successes among the migratory agricultural, timber, construction and mining workers of the West, whose way of life and work were much more transient than that of the "white collar" worker of today. This was because the concept of revolutionary class unionism made no hard and fast distinction among industries, seeing each particular industry as an integral part of an overall industry; i.e., the production and distribution of goods and services to meet the needs and wants of human beings. So, it didn't matter if you were harvesting wheat in August, cutting timber in September, or working on a dam in October, you were still part of the working class. The same goes for the white collar worker who might change jobs every six months.

The relationship of white collar workers, including "information handlers," to the production process is not all that different from that of blue collar workers. I'm a programmer. I write and maintain software. The software I write and maintain is decided on by my employer. I do not own the means of production (i.e., the terminal I use or the CPU that it's attached to), nor the product (i.e., the program) of my toil. How is this different from the situation of, let's say, a millwright in a factory? None that I can see.

You may be right, self-identity may very well be found outside the workplace, and the worker identity, at least among the people you hang with, but to my mind this is not a good thing. I identify myself as a worker because it is the one thing that connects me, a moderately well-paid skilled worker, with the low paid key-puncher in order processing, the mail clerk, the guy who picks up my garbage, the woman who sews the soles on my sneakers AND that separates me from my, and their, bosses. If I were to identify myself as an artist, philosopher, or whatever, these other workers would be merely other "people" whose conditions of life and work would be



graphic: Doug Minkler

## NOT SO REMOTE CONTROL

of no interest to me except, perhaps, as objects of pity if their conditions were particularly harsh or as objects of envy if their conditions were appreciably better than my own. There would be no basis for solidarity. This would lead me to remain indifferent, or even hostile, to a particular group of workers who were engaged in a struggle with the employers. As a worker I see that, though our work and levels of compensation may be different, we are in the same position in relation to the work we do—powerless and expropriated—and that the way to put an end to this common wage-slavery is to organize ourselves in opposition to those who hold the power and rob us of the wealth we create.

*PW* emphasizes the voices of contemporary workers as writers, artists, poets, historians, philosophers, etc., and that's a good thing. *The Industrial Worker*, on the other hand, emphasized the voices of contemporary workers as workers, or it should to my mind. This is important so

that we can resist being sucked into the belief that we workers and our employers are all part of one human race with identical interests and that if we'll just try to cooperate, we'll all be better off.

The contemporary collapse of business unionism (both trade and industrial) is due, I think, primarily to the restructuring of the capitalist economies and the increased stratification of the working class that has been produced. In this situation, I think that the IWW's concept of revolutionary class unionism is most relevant. To realize this concept it will be necessary to create communities of resistance both within and without the workplace that aim at the abolition not of "Work," but of wage labor. It seems to me that before we can get rid of all the useless work we do, we have to get possession of the decision-making power to determine, collectively, what is and what is not useful and necessary work. This will take organization and struggle, an organization and struggle that will not happen if those who want to see the abolition of this society take the path of escape into marginal, self-managed businesses. As the saying goes, "If not us, who? If not now, when?"

Well, I think I've gone on long enough. I hope all this clarifies my views, for what they are worth. I'll sign off now and wish you well.

In solidarity,  
M.H. — Chicago, IL

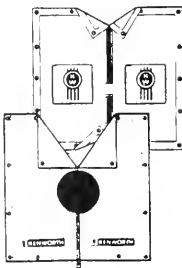
Dear M.H.,  
Thanks a lot for your thoughtful response. I had begun to despair of intelligent dialogue resulting from sending out my letter. I expected to receive a number of highly critical letters, but didn't.

*On this question of "mass interchangeability" and its relation to self-identity and work, I agree with your invocation of the historical experience of Wobblly organizing among far poorer, far more marginal workers in a broad range of occupations some 80 years ago. I was trying to find some discussion of how transience affected organizing in the IWW anthology or some other old literature but failed to find anything. It seems that the working class identity was so profound and clear at that time that it wasn't necessary to worry about highly transient workers failing to see their common predicament as workers. And of course, as I'm sure you know, the immigrant communities that largely sustained Wobblly organizing, were tightly knit and often had dynamic periodicals and frequent cultural gatherings which sometimes became integral to strikes and other Wobblly campaigns. So I would argue that while early twentieth century industry introduced the mass worker role, the late twentieth century is suffering the psychological harvest of decades of mass work and just as important, mass consumption. We no longer think of ourselves as workers. You say you are a programmer and do still see yourself in your proletarian status. I am a self-employed typesetter and graphic artist and also identify with workers and a working class movement. But I am painfully aware of how empty that sounds to others not already sharing such a perspective; in fact it sounds as distant and alien as the exhortation of Christians to get saved!*

*So that's what we're trying to do in PW, find a new language and new connections not dependent on (rightly or wrongly) discredited categories and language. I hope it's still clear that we are in favor of*

## Evolution is a Virus

- Everything Changes
- Eternal Yearning for Eternal Learning is what Keeps Me From Bumping
- Fortune Favors the Bold



Conventional Wisdom is a Lie  
#Destroy All Genres  
#Demolish Serious Culture

**3188**  
NOW

**autotron**

graphic: The Stranger

workers' self-organization and the abolition of wage-labor! You argue that the basis of solidarity is a shared self-identity as "worker." I really doubt it. Solidarity is born out of practical necessities more than any psychological self-conceptions. But if the practical links between different kinds of work remain opaque, and everyone is just "people," practical struggles remain remote. So how to proceed? Why should we spend our energies encouraging people to define themselves as their job, one of the worst pillars of the work ethic? I think almost all workers have something better to do than their jobs, and that's what a radical workers' movement should be emphasizing. Might there be some way to tap the reservoirs of creativity and community, to excite people based on their desires for a more fully human life (which is why so many think of themselves as musicians, historians, dancers, photographers, etc.)? Wobblies should advocate using the social power on the job to achieve this more complete life. I think this approach will resonate with people as they are living now, exploiting the widespread stifling of creative capacities by the capitalist system.

I think you make a real mistake when you identify my choice to make a living in an environment of my own creation (at least compared to a bank!), where I have much more control over the hours worked, the way the work is done, and even sometimes what kind of work I do, as an "escape." Sure, it is an escape from the worst kind of totalitarian nightmare, the sort which prevails in large corporations. But it is no escape from the basic logic of our lives, the incessant buying and selling. Finally, the escape of self-employment is also the acceptance of a much less mediated relationship with the marketplace, hardly an embrace of freedom.

I want to engage in resistance that's fun! I don't know if you think that's weak of me, or frivolous, or whatever, but I think pleasure is our best weapon, and we have to fight for it all the time, in every arena, especially political/social/industrial opposition.

I think the widespread rejection of the worker identity is extremely healthy, raising the interesting question of how do we organize and use our collective social power on a different basis with perhaps more far-reaching goals than merely, as the IWW Preamble has it, "organiz[ing] the army of production... to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown." A free future seems to me to preclude concepts such as an "army of production," irrespective of its goals. The demise of the worker identity and its replacement by a new individualism is at worst ambiguous. I see no hope in trying to convince people who have tried very hard to find a creative role in life (usually without any hope of making a living that way, e.g. photographers, writers, etc.) to

reconceptualize their lives on the basis of a meaningless job which they will only be at for a couple of years at most. When they are transient and move to a new place, it's usually an attempt to find work at their creative goals, not to resume whatever alienated office job they are leaving behind. But their engagement with the possibilities of their lives is more profound than the 40-hour-a-week worker at any kind of job. And we need people with the passion that gets them more involved with their lives and makes them unwilling to accept the tawdry choices left us by late capitalism. Individualism is a good beginning, and provides an opportunity for us to promote the kind of social responsibility and mutual aid that, combined with self-motivated, responsible individuals, can actually bring forth a different way of life.

Since you identify as a worker, and do computer programming, how do you relate to the purpose of your work now? I assume it's largely useless, but I'd be curious to know how you see it. And what is the role of millions of bank, insurance, and real

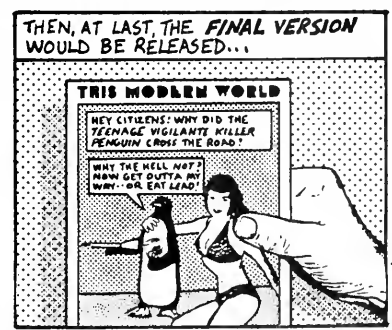
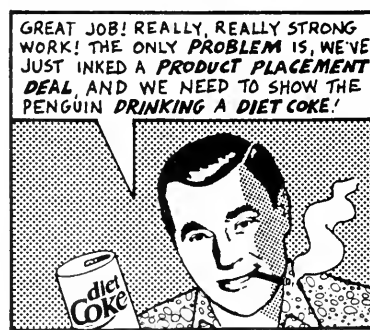
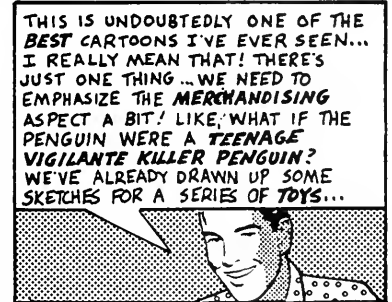
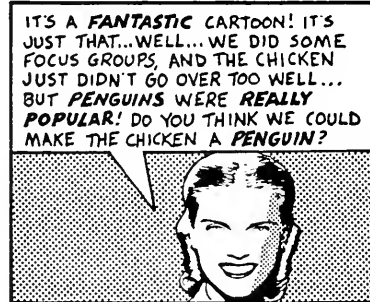
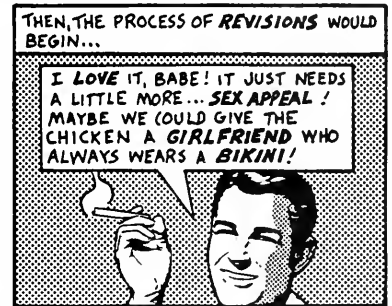
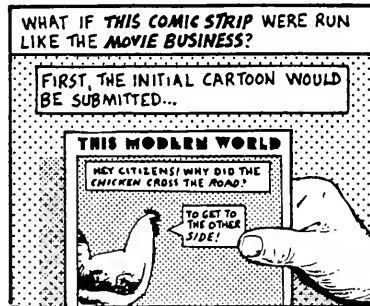
estate workers in a liberated division of labor? What is useful information? How should we go about organizing that? How will bank workers who (hypothetically) organize themselves and expropriate Bank of America, say, feel about the abolition of said institution and the elimination of all that information? Mightn't they feel they should fight to save their jobs? Don't we have to find a way out of that loop? By continuing to insist on embracing work and workers, as such, we reinforce people's dependence on this abstraction known as The Economy, when really it's high time to make a break with this totally obsolete organization of society.

I know it's all pretty embryonic and far from figured out. More dialogues are really important right now.

Thanks again for your intelligent response. It came as a great relief to me, and helps restore some of my (admittedly limited) faith in the IWW. I look forward to further exchanges.

Best wishes,  
Chris Carlsson

## THIS MODERN WORLD by TOM TOMORROW







**T**HE DOORBELL ON THE CAST-IRON gate doesn't work, so Chuahan is yelling up to an open window on the third floor: "Phouthoum! Bounthoum! Beck!" A small head appears and darts back in. Within seconds the gate is pushed open by a crowd of excited children and we leave the sun-drenched sidewalk for the murky hallway. Hands tug our clothes as we're led into the interior.

Kids are climbing my legs, jumping on my back, swinging from my arms. The stink of urine-fetid clothing is overwhelming. Chuahan chastises them in Lao while they compete for our attention. One performs kung fu motions with his feet; another jumps an entire length of staircase, easily five times his height. The only hostility comes from a runny-nose kid who persistently takes aim at my crotch with his tiny fist.

Trying to balance the squirming, giggling armload of kids while twisting my waist to avoid the punches, I follow Chuahan up the stairwell, past the used condoms, burnt crack pipes and piles of uncollected garbage. Pubescent homeboys in hooded San Francisco Giants jackets scowl as we pass.

When we get to the fourth floor, I notice that none of the apartment doors are closed to the hallway and the children pass freely from one apartment to another. With the fragrance of herbs, spices and cow brains in the air, it seems as if a remote village has suddenly been transplanted to a sleazy skidrow hotel.

Chuahan shows me into a small studio and—after quick, unspoken introductions with a group of women sitting cross-legged around bowls of food—I try to settle inconspicuously in the corner on a six-inch-high kneeling stool. The room is sparsely

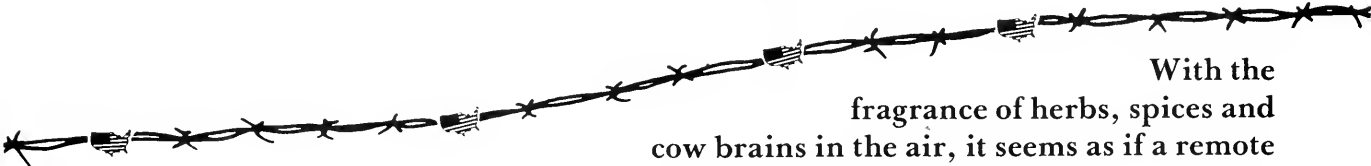
furnished. One entire wall is taken up by a huge TV-CD-stereo-VCR console showing some kind of Khmer Benny Hill video; opposite it, a Theravada Buddhist shrine with burning candles; below it, a bed protruding legs and arms that contains sleeping men and babies.

A new group of kids from inside the room approaches and quietly stands eye-level around me, sizing me up. The oldest woman's eyes are questioning even as she offers me soup. Her name is Sepanerath and she wears a beautifully colored dress and tinkling jewelry. The other women are heavily made-up teenagers with luxurious hairdos.

Looking at Souvanna, Sepanerath points at me with one finger and with another simulates—fellatio? The teenagers giggle. It takes me a moment to realize that she's asking Chuahan if I'm gay, i.e. a pedophile, and am I after her kids? As if in answer, I open my bookbag and give the kids the notebooks and packages of paper that I stole from work. They accept them blankly. Sepanerath says to the children in Khmer for them to say "thank you" in English.

Then I produce a handful of magic markers and colored pens (more loot). I draw a cartoon face. "Draw Donatello," requests Nancy, an eight-year-old girl with just-shampooed hair. Before I understand that she isn't talking about the 16th century Italian painter, her younger brother shows me a picture of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. To their delight, I duplicate it; then I draw Bart Simpson. More cheers. My popularity is assured, and we spend the rest of the afternoon drawing pictures.

On the way home I feel happy in a way I've never felt before.



With the fragrance of herbs, spices and cow brains in the air, it seems as if a remote village has suddenly been transplanted to a sleazy skidrow hotel.



Chuahan was born in eastern Thailand when Ubon could still be called a village, but his earliest memories are of the airfield and the earth-rumbling routine of U.S. planes en route to bombing sorties over nearby Laos. Ubon was forever transformed by the U.S. military personnel and AID officials, the inevitable economies of drugs and prostitution, and the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees from across the border. Traditionalists took it hard. Chuahan renounced his parent's religious fundamentalism and wholesale fabric business, shaved his head and made his way to an American university to study poetry.

When we met in San Francisco's financial district, we were both bearers of worthless degrees stuck in dead-end jobs. Desperate to escape our condition as servants to giant bureaucracies, we talked endlessly about ways of contributing meaningfully to the world while having fun. Chuahan seemed to have hit on the perfect combination when he landed a job at the Head Start program, tutoring Lao and Cambodian preschoolers in the Tenderloin. A combat zone of illicit pleasures populated by transvestites, strippers, hookers, addicts, drifters, thieves, lost tourists and newly arrived Southeast-Asian refugees, the Tenderloin is about as far from the spirit of the financial district as you can get—only a couple of blocks away, it exists in its shadow.

Witty, charming and compassionate, Chuahan was an immediate hit with the families in his program. An Indian subcontinental, his reputation is enhanced by a readiness to speak up on behalf of Laotians and Cambodians who resent the Vietnamese domination of the meager social services available to southeast Asians (the majority of the Vietnamese got here a decade earlier and are better established). Chuahan's ascent within the ranks of Tenderloin non-profits is rapid, and pays better than temping.

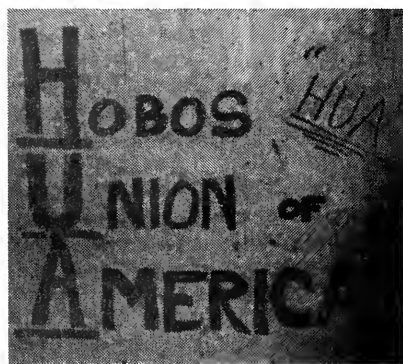
"It's not such a bad thing I do, helping poor women who can't speak English collect their welfare payments." Compared to what I do for a living, this sounds reasonable.

Recently adrift from an east coast suburb, my entire social horizons become enmeshed in the lives of people who less than five years ago were living in rural areas outside of Vientiane and Phnom Penh. Until now I have only thought of them in terms of emotional associations with concepts like "civil

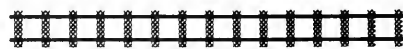
war," "imperialism" and "revolution" ("samsaravattam" is the closest word in Khmer to "revolution," though its meaning is closer to "transmigration").

For many Asian immigrants, children (who learn languages much more quickly) are indispensable to their parent's survival in the new country; they're interlocutors with the outside world: courts, landlords, immigration officials, etc. They become my translators as well.

Chuahan and I take the kids to places they've never been: the playground at Golden Gate Park, the Santa Cruz Boardwalk, Ocean Beach. On Halloween we take a taxi cab full of 3-4 year olds to a rich neighborhood. The idea of ringing the doorbell of an oak-doored mansion and receiving free candy is a happy novelty, but not nearly as exciting as the expanses of lawns: being able to run and fall on soft grass comes as a surprise.



In fact, not a union, but a bunch of thugs and "stamp tromps." Gangs like the H.U.A., the Goon Squad, and the FRA traverse the main lines from one foodstamp scam to the next, lootin' and killin' along the way, sometimes for only a bottle of cheap wine.



The kids seem oblivious to most urban hazards. When playing tag, they move with frightening speed in and out of traffic. Scrawny Phouthouloum (a.k.a. "Rambo") possesses an acrobatic grace that is truly incredible: he can mount a newspaper vending rack, shimmy up a sign post, swing from his legs, and always land on his feet. In his hands, anything can be transformed into a toy weapon; baseball cards become stars, rolled up newspapers become numchucks.

"Gangsters" (older kids and thieves who prey on the more vulnerable) with whom the kids indifferently share the

sidewalks during the day are ominous figures at night; several kids' families are routinely terrorized by break-ins. The cops are even greater objects of mistrust, a relation which fails to change despite innumerable "community relations" meetings.

Slang and style tastes are distinctively African-American. It takes me a while to realize that when these six-year-olds address one another as "nigga," it's learned from neighborhood blacks and as neutral a part of their vocabulary as anything in Lao or Khmer.

The kids show me a side of their neighborhood that was previously invisible: down a labyrinth of seedy alleys a rabbit sits in its cage, wedged between a dumpster and a pile of trash. In a remote attic corner some other kids show me a broken pigeon's egg, long abandoned in its nest. Anticipating its eventual birth, they've organized an extended family for it.

"Koun lok," announces Chanpheng, after a magpie-like bird known in Cambodia for its cry at sunset. In Khmer, it literally means "child of the world." According to legend, some young kids who were abandoned in the forest to be eaten by tigers transformed into these birds, achieving safety by being at home in the wilderness. Forever after, the cry "koun lok" serves as a reminder of the borders between the wild and the tamed, nature and human. Birthday parties for the children are community celebrations; every kid seems to have about twenty birthdays a year.

Sometimes more formal gatherings (particularly for the young and unattached) are arranged by Lao ethnic associations; gloomy warehouses like the Hungarian Hall (next to Sex Toys & Movies) are rented for an evening. These involve crystal-ball disco decor with a Lao rock band intermixing standard rock covers with more traditional numbers. They're fairly somber affairs, except for the appearance of three Lao transvestites, who are always a hit.

At one party I hear Mony reminiscing about the miserable, squalid conditions for the Cambodians in the U.N. refugee camps and the interminable waiting for visas in the Philippines. I ask Mony for more information about where he's from in Cambodia, how he ended up in the camps, what he thinks about what's going on there. Mony speaks with contempt of the arrogant Thais and the Filipinos, but turns the conversation to brighter subjects.



I heard the guy who draws this picture stole that moniker from the original Coaltrain and now the oldtimer's gonna kill him if he catches him.



"Once we were just poor Cambodians. Treated like shit! Now, when we go back to Cambodia, we get respect," he explains, cocking his biceps into a proud muscle. "Because we are Americans."

Nods of agreement among the men in the room.

I think: are you kidding? Your kids play in garbage, you work like a dog so you can live in the slums! Instead I say, "Look at what the U.S. did to Cambodia, though. They bombed it for years — they must have killed a quarter of a million people."

Silence. Then Mony says, "I heard about that. It was on TV. But they said they only killed the bad people."

The host produces a bottle of brandy and calls in the birthday girl, who models her crisp chiffon dress and pirouettes. A toast is made as shots are downed. Mony and his friends dismiss our talk as "politics," and the rest of the night is forgotten in alcohol.

Gambling is a way of life for the adults. It is pursued with unflagging fascination from early in the evening to late the next morning, several nights a week. Each night a different host's floor is crowded with sessions of poker, blackjack and an unfamiliar game played around a blanket with mysterious diagrams. The stakes are high: if you aren't willing to bet at least twenty dollars to get in, forget it. Sizeable fortunes can be made and lost, and nobody ever quits.

While playing poker with three old

women one night, Souvanna hands me what looks like a tobacco leaf and instructs me to dip it into some purple powder and chew it. I try not to lose my attention. Evidently, I'm supposed to chew the leaf and spit out the juice, not swallow it. When my head stops spinning, I realize that I'm a big loser at poker too.

Later Souvanna, recognizing my financial misfortune, lets me in on what he promises is a formula for making a fortune. Of a group of 12, everybody promises to contribute a hundred dollars a month; if you want to collect \$1200 some month for any particular reason, it's yours with the stipulation that you pay an extra \$100 that month. My math is bad, but Souvanna demonstrates to me that no matter what, since every month somebody collects, we all eventually come out \$100 richer. In what is obviously an act of bad faith, I skeptically decline the invitation.

Most of these people work at low-wage jobs: washing dishes in Thai restaurants, day-labor construction, fish cleaning; many are dependent on welfare. So where do the rolls of large bills everybody seems to have for gambling come from? Maybe the sub-economy which they've invented is a way of rotating the riches that they'll likely never possess as individuals; maybe gambling is a way of facing fortune, a metaphor for fate or the randomness of the market. In any event, the intensity they bring to gambling shows something

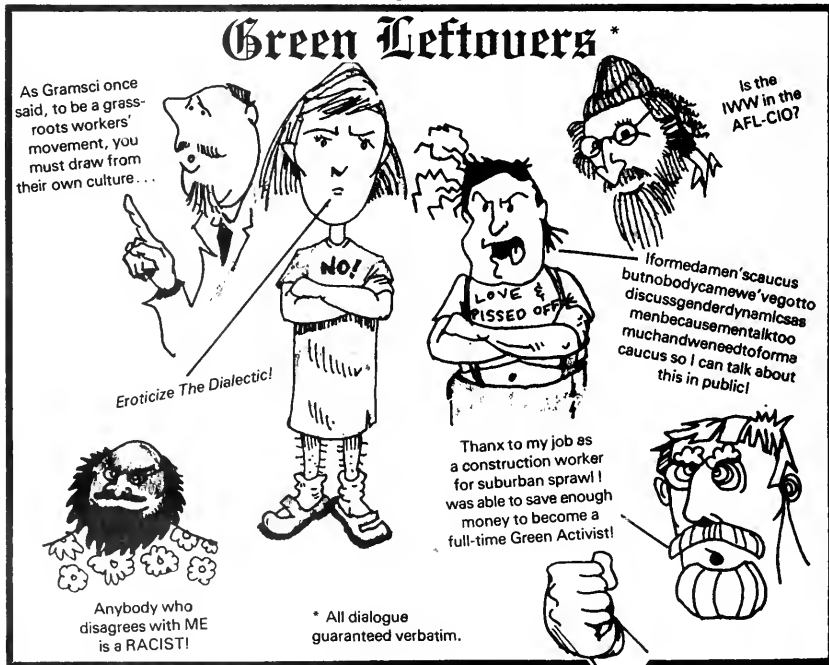
about luck and knowing when to make your move.

Chuahan and I are visiting Sepanerath and her children's new apartment in a new building behind the medical center. They only moved in a few days ago and most of their stuff is still in boxes. It's late, and the younger children are sleeping under a blanket on the carpet. It's more spacious and cleaner than their old place in the Tenderloin. Sepanerath's new boyfriend is paying for it; she doesn't want her oldest son, Bounari (already 11) to grow up to become a gangster like the other Cambodian kids. She tells us that this new environment (a mile or so away) will help keep him away from the influence of gangs.

Nancy, her only daughter, always wears new dresses and jewelry, and she's self-conscious of her looks as she serves us soup and fish balls. I notice Nancy's similarities to her mother by checking her against an enlarged photo framed on the wall of a younger Sepanerath smiling triumphantly, wearing a disco dress sparkling with gold.

Chuahan opens the bottle of wine we've brought as a house-warming present and pours everybody a glass, including five-year old Peter, who gulps it right away, defiantly.

Nancy and Bounari give me a tour of all (three) rooms. Sepanerath and her boyfriend (who's at work) have their own room now. Bounari turns on the jam-box I gave him ("Wild Thing"). For



a long time he kept asking me to get him batteries until he told me that his mother's boyfriend was using the electric cord to whip Peter. I feel guilty when I look at Peter, who's bouncing off the walls. They're excited because their mothers let them take the week off from school and they are up past their bed time.

While we draw pictures of monkeys, Buddhas, and race cars, I think about how Nancy can be particularly vicious to her friend, Bounthoum, who has a mouth full of jagged, mangled teeth and bad breath. "Bounthoum fucks her boyfriends! Bounthoum fucks—[every boy in earshot]." Bounthoum's clothes are always dirty and several sizes outgrown, not like Princess Nancy, who leads the other children in chants to upset a shaky Bounthoum.

Peter's bumping into me until he falls face-flat on the floor and begins snoring away. Nancy's telling me about her favorite teachers and classes. After a while it occurs to me that they haven't been to school because they don't know yet where their new school is; once again, they've ventured beyond the familiar and are waiting.

In all the months I've known Nancy, I've never once worried about her, even when she lived among rapists and murderers. She carries more adult responsibilities at eight years than most people do in a lifetime, and she seems to take it in stride. So I'm surprised that now, all of a sudden, seeing her in this safe, electrified condo, I detect something like a worried little girl in her voice.

Driving home in his new sports car, Chuahan tells me that Sepanerath's a "racist bitch" who just wants to be a white American. The social worker with the master's degree in English tells me that "they've turned their back on their culture!"

I don't see the kids anymore. Fun becomes work. Taking four rambunctious kids someplace on the bus can be entertaining; trying to keep twenty-five together can shave years off your life.

Chuahan got a job as director of a weekend activities program; I was his "assistant." Obnoxiously called "Super Saturday Plus," it was funded by a grant from the Embarcadero Corporation to St. Mark's Church—both large real-estate businesses in San Francisco. We were assured that we would have the freedom to let the kids do what they wanted—and there would be no religious proselytizing!

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The kids' participation was entirely voluntary—there was no point to it unless they had fun. I thought it would be cool to have a place outside the playground-less Tenderloin for the kids to paint, learn baseball, play blackjack, whatever. They spent all week being bussed to a school at the Treasure Island military base.

The main area that St. Mark's allotted for the kids was a stuffy basement with pictures of the last hundred years of the Lutheran hierarchy on the wall. The outside "play area" was a dismal concrete plaza of the type that condo developers throw in for "public space" tax rebates. I took great satisfaction in seeing the kids reduce the place to a mess.

All went well until various administrative busybodies insisted on playing a more "active" role. One was a hefty-buttocked old hen who the kids called "the Ghost" because of her dull grey complexion and cop mentality. She invited the St. Mark's minister to make a Thanksgiving speech to the kids about "how they should be thankful for all that they've been given." That was too much. When the day came for his speech he left in a huff because the kids refused to

settle down and listen to his bullshit. I remember the look he shot me as he headed for his car (I was in the parking lot with the basketball dissidents); in one hand he had his briefcase, in the other a plate full of turkey and mashed potatoes, but his eyes said it all. Subsequently, Chuahan informed me that I had been retroactively "not hired" and wouldn't receive the wages that had been promised me.

Chuahan, a true professional, couldn't quit as easily as me. He had a reputation to protect among wealthy patrons of social workers. When Christmas came around he had to gather the kids together and take them to the Embarcadero plaza for the annual holiday lighting of those hideous slabs of office building (where I worked as a temp, as a matter of fact). The whole thing was a photo-opportunity for city big-shots and the next day on the cover of the newspaper was a soft-lens picture of Bounthoum holding a candle. The kids, in the generous gratitude of the event's wealthy sponsors, were each given a single McDonald's hamburger—no fries, no apple pie, no coke. Not even a cheeseburger!

—Mickey D.

# GET THE MESSAGE: MERCURY RISING Has Risen!

photos by Glenn Caley Bachmann



**Interview with Markus, Amerigo, Pelona and Ramblin' de Kay—of the collective that publishes *Mercury Rising*, a new magazine by and for bike messengers. Interview conducted by Chris Carlsson on January 11, 1992, in San Francisco's Mission district.**

**Amerigo:** *Mercury Rising* was Markus's idea, really.

**Markus:** One of the major companies in town, Executive Courier, lowered commission rates from 50 percent to 48 percent, which is a 4 percent pay cut, on a couple of days notice. I was down the next morning with a flyer telling everybody to go out on a wildcat strike. It was clear that that wasn't going to be happening. The day after that I had a petition about why management was going to have to give something if they were going to take money out of people's pockets. I don't think anyone signed it

and it ended up being a big personal defeat, but it did end up getting a bunch of us thinking. We all talk about work after work.

**Amerigo:** Yeah, too much!

**Markus:** We realized that we need something that gives people the nerve, that makes them feel confident enough that they could have a wildcat strike if the time comes, or to do any kind of solidarity action. People have to communicate and in our business there's still quite a bit of turnover, and always a lot of new people on the street. At times it's very much of a community and one big family, but in another way it's pretty atomized, and we have a lot of getting-together to do before we can fight for the survival of our profession, which according to the front page of last Wednesday's *San Francisco Chronicle*, is threatened with extinction.

**PW:** It sounds like one of the main goals is the development of some kind of community?

**Amerigo:** No one is *just* a messenger. Everyone has outside trips: they're in bands, they do 'zines. This is a way to get all that in, print people's poetry, print people's artwork, you know, spread the word about other people's projects.

**Markus:** We give everyone a forum to print stuff that isn't directly related to our organizational goals for bike messengers. Still, it's really good for those long-term goals because we are getting together in different areas of people's lives.

**Amerigo:** *MR* is the first thing that I've ever dealt with on any level (I've worked at legitimate newspapers, too) where everyone is so enthusiastic. People keep pouring in their stuff, you don't

have to go and beg for contributions. People pay for it, they're excited and happy to see it.

**Pelona:** People are asking, "Oh, when's the next *Mercury Rising* coming out?"

**Markus:** It's amazing how quickly it found its audience, it's like a big success. The first day, the first issue, I'll never forget. It came out late in the afternoon and it was on a Friday. We always try to release on a Friday cuz that's when people are flush. When I got home, my pockets bulging with money, I put it out on the kitchen table and it was eighty-some bucks.

**Amerigo:** In quarters!

**PW:** Does working on *Mercury Rising* make the prospect of being a messenger any easier?

**Amerigo:** It's like a total immersion in the culture, it's almost too much.

**Pelona:** I've met so many more people since I've been working on this. I feel more a part of the community now, so I guess I do have more reason to stay in it. I was going to leave San Francisco to go back to college. I couldn't stand my job! Bike messengering, I thought "How can I get out of this?" But I didn't think at all in terms of how can I make this a better situation. I just wanted to personally get out of it, but I see the situation differently now.

**Markus:** I've always had this romantic fixation on this particular job. It's also convenient for me to do the other things I want to do, like I was able to

work part-time and come back full-time in the summer and January so I could go to school for those five years. It's really a great job to have if you're playing music because there's a lot of other messengers who tend to be into music and in bands too.

**PW:** What makes it a lovable job?

**Amerigo:** The people involved, they're just the most hilarious, amazing or strange, bizarre people you'll ever meet. The most eclectic collection of individuals ranging across every interest, every intelligence. [laughter]

**Markus:** And age group, we're not all a bunch of young people. There are people raising families on this more and more.

**PW:** Is it a health choice for some?

**Amerigo:** Some people do it cause they're into biking, some people just like to stay in shape.

**Pelona:** I can't sit down for a long time every day. I really need to bike two or three hours a day or I don't feel right. I like being outside. I meet a lot of different people in elevators and I feel really free to make comments about what they're saying, since I'm not going to ever see them again. You're alone a lot of time, you can think about whatever you want, that's the greatest resource of this job. You're doing this thing physically, but your mind is totally free, you can be thinking whatever you want and no one is looking over you.

**Amerigo:** You get totally addicted to the adrenalin too, a physical addiction. I almost get killed a couple of times a day and get so wired, I'll be jumping up and down. The days when I work and the days I don't work are so different.

**Markus:** And when it's really happening, like in the last three hours of the day you make like \$30 an hour, it's just go go go, getting weird waiting time, having incredible luck and making all this money when you've had a shitty morning or something. It's really fantastic and you feel like you've just been through this incredible adventure, especially when you've done it on acid! [laughter].

**PW:** Bike messengering has that exhilaration that comes from exertion. You can exert yourself and do better as a result

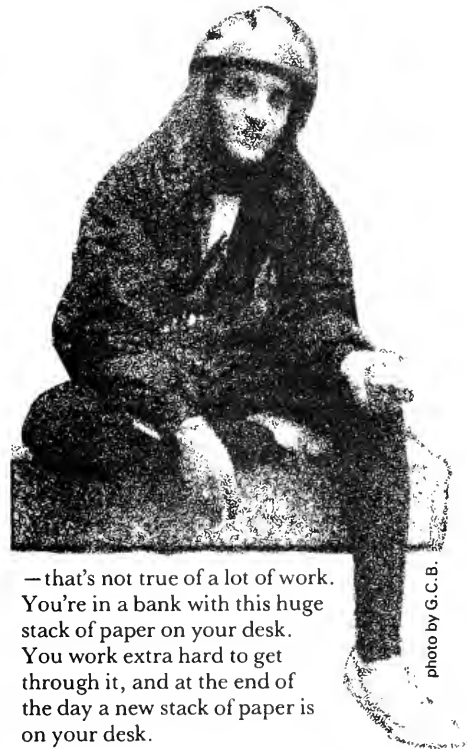


photo by G.C.B.

— that's not true of a lot of work. You're in a bank with this huge stack of paper on your desk. You work extra hard to get through it, and at the end of the day a new stack of paper is on your desk.

**Ramblin':** Going into so many buildings, it's so stagnant and antiseptic. You deliver your package and you just don't want to be a part of that—it's bad enough to deliver the package!

**Pelona:** It's true, many times a day you think "Oh god, if I quit I'll have to do something like this [office work]." People are all sitting around in these expensive clothes, looking so bored.

**Markus:** After going to so many offices for so many years you start seeing everyone else's work as "all those jobs," and bike messengers as "your job." You do learn where there are some groovy offices, where people have a good time, but mostly...

**Amerigo:** Then there's places like Bechtel, where you go in and people's bodies are weirdly shaped, sad faces like they're in jail or something, and you go into those rooms where all the computers are, and it's chilled to like 50 degrees, and you think "Oh I wish I could work like this." [laughter]

**PW:** Do you agree that bike messengering is a dying niche because of fax machines and rising workmen's compensation insurance rates?

**Amerigo:** No, there are more messengers here than ever.

**PW:** How many do you think there are?

**Amerigo:** I've heard anywhere from 200 to 600. I'd estimate around 400-450,



graphic by Dapper Dave



that's including scooters and walkers. You just see more than ever, and there are new businesses popping up all the time. Definitely the industry is changing. It's moving away from where you have your company bike. There's all sorts of different companies now, and lots of them don't have insurance and that's scary.

**PW:** So if you get hurt, it's just tough luck?

**Amerigo:** Yeah.

**Ramblin':** That's part of a trend among big companies to treat messengers as merely a commodity, and not as part of the company itself, merely a means of landing larger contracts.

**PW:** So what about the general profitability of bike messengering? Isn't it true that the real money is made from the longer-distance truck tags?

**Markus:** Our boss told us that it costs the same to administrate a \$40 vehicle tag as it does to administer a \$3 downtown regular.

**Amerigo:** So raise the rates!

**Markus:** Our company has far more drivers than bikers. Now Courier, maybe we're up to a dozen bikers now, but we have about 40 drivers, maybe a couple of big accounts like IBM in Foster City. We bike messengers exist

for the convenience of their downtown clients. Our company knows they need a certain number of bikes to keep things going, so they're supposedly committed to some people being able to make a living.

A company like Aero, on the other hand, is committed to not letting anybody except maybe a few make a living. Everyone else is just supposed to cycle through really fast before they find out that they're getting ripped off.

Anyway, about the "dying niche"—such bullshit, because it's been said as long as I've been in the business. In the local and national media the fax has been killing us off as our numbers grew year after year. I disagree with Amerigo in that I think there are finally a little bit less of us than there have been. We've kind of leveled off and the numbers have tapered a bit, and are likely to taper further, but that's not necessarily a bad thing for us. Those tapering numbers could indicate less rookie turnover and more stability and getting our business institutionalized. We can't make any progress as far as not being ripped off, as long as people are living under this useful illusion that we're on our way out.

One of the main things we have to accomplish is to show ourselves, and the rest of the people out there in the City and the rest of the Bay Area that they should think of us as permanent, because there's going to be hundreds of us

out here for a long time, and we should have the right to survive our jobs and not be killed.

In future issues we have to have some kind of broad exploration on "Is the Messenger Business Dying?" since the controversy has been newly brought up. I think messengers haven't analyzed stuff that much yet, and kind of believe it, so we need to go public with a basic "why messengering isn't dying out."

**PW:** And also *why* they're saying it is...

**Markus:** We're happy to make three bills a week.

**Amerigo:** I'd be ecstatic! I don't make that much.

**Pelona:** My last paycheck was for \$230 for seven days' work.

**Markus:** That's an interesting dichotomy because we're all involved in the same thing but because of the seniority system in our industry we're not really in the same boat economically.

**Pelona:** One thing I don't like about messengering is that it makes you competitive with your co-workers, because there's a certain amount of tags and some of them are good and some are shitty, and some people are going to get gravy and some will get shitty tags, and you want to get the gravy. If you're working somewhere and they hire some more people, you can hate this person for like 2 or 3 days who's causing your paycheck to go down (not really of course). Until you meet them and talk to them and then they're just like you.

**Markus:** I get to do this legal stuff, but I'm not the number one guy. They set up a pecking order and if we want our part in it we generally don't say anything. I got set up in a weird political situation because I'm in the "Inside Club," those who are trained—in other words, taken around by Joshua and shown how to get into the computers and the courts and stuff, introduced to docket clerks and shit like that. We get 40 percent for doing jobs for this legal subsidiary company. If I'm doing just that work I can do that and no other tags for the normal company, but the way it is being #2 I just get it sometimes. I make 40 percent but if it gets too busy and they have to spin some of this work off to the regular Now riders, they make 30 percent. I sounded off about this and threatened to forego my position, but I ended up capitulating, although I continue agitating for them to get a higher percentage. We get a lower percentage

photo by G.C.B.

Contact Mercury Rising at 564 Mission St., #152, San Francisco, CA 94105. Samples: \$2



for legal work because there's a lot more work in the office processing this stuff. I have no problem making 40 percent. I guess there's some logic for there being some "club" that does it, that is mostly just a few people. But it's all pretty uncomfortable. It puts a strain on solidarity, no question, because I need all the dollars I can get.

**PW:** Especially in this economic climate! It's like musical chairs, and I'm in a chair and I'm staying right here, I don't care if they start the fucking music! [laughter].

**Markus:** We're in a business where there's more sophisticated technology, the fax, which can ostensibly do what we do better and cheaper, if you're only doing one or two pages. And then there's cars, an inferior technology, that can also do our job, and they're saying it's a superior technology. I'm sure there are niches for us like big clients that will go on needing the kind of service we provide.

**Pelona:** Another person was telling me about public-key encryption that allows documents to be sent between computers with a code that is as good as a signature. He told me that when this takes over it will eliminate some messenger business, because things like court filings that would need a lawyer's signature that we currently hand-deliver will be able to be sent by modem. And as the recession gets worse, a lot of the stuff we deliver is sent by messenger for the prestige of a "hand-delivered" letter via messenger, and people are just going to fucking put a stamp on it when they're cutting costs.

## UNIONS AND INFORMAL ORGANIZING

**PW:** What do you think are the advantages of a more informal approach to organizing versus something more traditional and formal?

**Ramblin':** I think it's more enjoyable, so you spend more time on it, it's more sociable. The amount of effort you put into something is related to what is going to come out, and if you're working in these rigid, bureaucratic structures you're just half-assed about what you're doing.

**Pelona:** I belonged to the California State Education Association (CSEA) and the only thing I ever got out of it was a discount on ice skating.

**PW:** How old were you then?

**Pelona:** 18.

**PW:** So you were just out of high

school. Did you have any notions of the noble struggle of labor, or that you ought to belong to a union because that's what you do when you're a worker, or any of that kind of stuff?

**Pelona:** The reason I joined is cause I was working in a school and then I got a job as a secretary for the teacher's union, and I felt so bad, here I was working for the teacher's union and I wasn't even a member of my own union, so I joined.

**Markus:** We have a union shop in town, Express Messenger, a Teamsters shop. They're covered in issue 4 of *MR*. I worked there when they were one of the big companies in town with 30+ bikes, and was there for some of the struggle to get the Teamsters in. One of the reasons why bikers are a little reticent union-wise is that the Teamsters haven't particularly worked out for Express.

**Amerigo:** Wouldn't you say that Express, along with Aero, is about the worst-run, most inefficient company, and treats their messengers the worst of any company?

**Markus:** Yeah, except that I would disagree about Aero, because it's well-run for the evil purposes to which they are directed.

**Pelona:** Express is just incompetent.

**Markus:** It really is, and I think they blame unionization for some of it. I think with messengers it would have to be a brand new, independently started thing that would have to take the form that people wanted from it.

**Ramblin':** I didn't mean to hit too heavy on organized unions, I really do respect people who can work within that context.

**Markus:** Oh yeah, unions are really big in my family. My dad is an IBEW man, he works at the Nevada Test Site

on nuclear bombs, and my great-aunt was a big union organizer, too, on my mother's side. It's always been clear to me that workers should be organized.

*Mercury Rising* is an unofficial publication of the San Francisco Bike Messengers Association. There is no "official thing" of the SFBMA—

**Amerigo:** It's sort of an anarchist labor organization.

**Markus:** Yeah, It's a disorganization at this point. It's evolving... I think the S.F. Bike Messengers Association was started by Rich and Nosmo, the people from the other messenger magazine, *MessPress*, which you really must pick up. It's less political, but very cultural and joyful. About individualism, you were asking? Going independent is one of the big trends, and for a lot of people it may be the solution to our labor problems.

**Amerigo:** There's so many jobs, there's this big hype in America about this supposed work ethic, but it's so hypocritical. They're not working, they're just sitting there. That's why I'm proud to work commission. I only make

(Overheard at the Wall:)  
"Messenger companies are like underwear... If you don't change them often, they start to stink!"

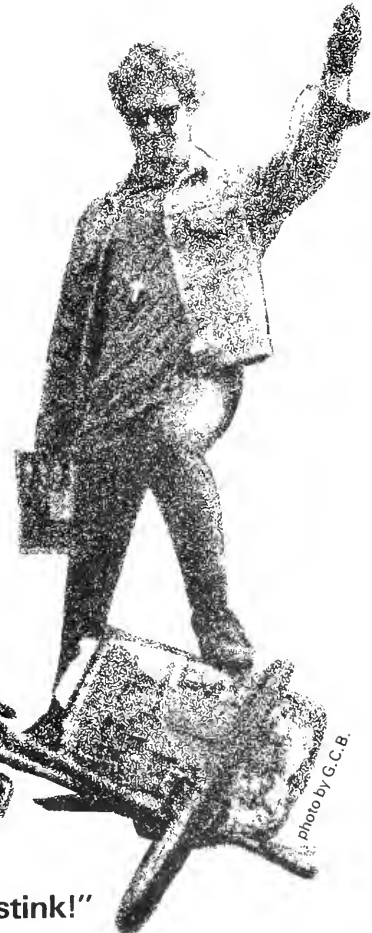
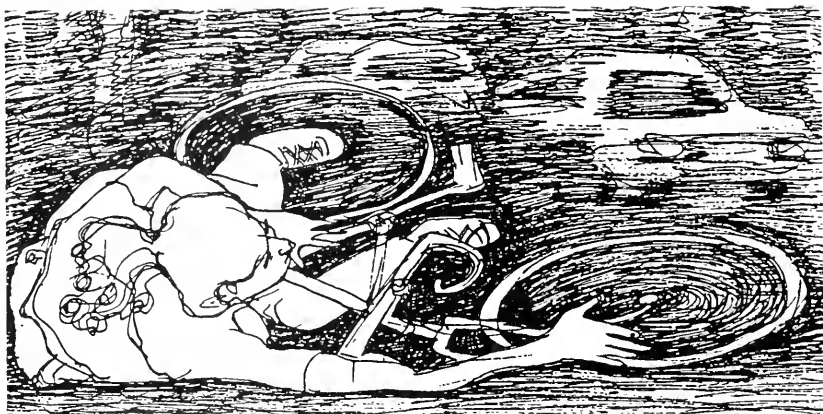


photo by G.C.B.



money when I *work*. I don't sit on my butt and get paid hourly.

**Pelona:** We work really hard. I don't know if we said this, but... When I worked at Sizzler I worked really hard, but this is the hardest job I've ever had, the hardest money I've ever earned.

**Markus:** Your labor is less alienated when you can feel how much you're making by how much you're working. Standing-by gets stressful if you do it too much, 'cause you go "Fuckinnotmakin'anymoney!!" But generally you don't have to feel guilty about standing by, lots of time you just wanna staaaand by [laughter].

**Pelona:** Once you start standing by you just want to keep on standing by.

**Markus:** Oh, when we're at the Wall, with friends and "proj," man the social life is just great!

**PW:** You talked earlier about wanting to make things more stable... how does the transiency among messengers affect you editorially? Does it cause you just to think to the next issue, or are you beginning to plan say, 12 issues down the road, what you will be publishing?

**Pelona:** I've been thinking about this because officially I'm on leave of absence from UC Santa Cruz and I told them I'd go back in the fall. Right now we're using Lydia's computer, which is at my house. But I'm sure something'll happen, it'll keep going.

**Amerigo:** You're asking about transient people?

**PW:** One of your goals is to establish some kind of community of consciousness amongst people employed in simi-

lar situations, and there's been sentiment expressed for making it more permanent, more regularized. So transience has a subversive impact on those kinds of goals, doesn't it?

**Amerigo:** Even though it's bad that we're so disorganized, there's still good things about it. As far as messengers goes, there are a lot of them who've been on the street, lots of people who get off the street by being a messenger, and also people who end up on the street after being a messenger. Even though this is anti our labor goals of getting more money, it's still a place where you can get a job, even if you just got out of jail, even if you've got weird drug habits, even if you drool all over yourself and don't make any sense. [laughter]

**Pelona:** People accept you.

**Markus:** I think that has already been sacrificed. On KPOO they asked me about messengering as a job for people just entering the market, and I realized that it's already gotten a lot more difficult to get in. Now veteran messengers who've left town, come back and have to wait around a while to get a job. There's just not as much transiency as there was, but still quite a bit, maybe 100 a month!

**Pelona:** This dispatcher who used to work at Express told me what happened when Express took over US Messenger. Apparently US had been a cool place to work, according to him; a lot of people who had been there for a while were making 55 percent or 56 percent commission, good money. But the messengers had a lot of say in how they would do what they would do. He told me they worked out a compromise between what needed to get done and how they wanted to do things, and the work got done, but everyone had fun and they got to be their own freaky personalities. When

Express took over the new management wanted it run like a regular business, and they got rid of all these older people who were troublemakers, and they didn't cut slack for messengers' personalities, they didn't like it when people called in sick. Well the reality is, you can't ride 8 or 9 hours a day really hard, every single day. You physically can't do it. You have to call in sometimes, you have to take breaks. They didn't understand that. He told me, the end of US was the end of what being a bike messenger was about being a freak and still getting the work done.

**PW:** I find this strong affirmation of subcultural identity, of being "freaky," and embrace of a classic work ethic, a curious combination. A lot of times subcultures, especially around the music scene like the outside life of some messengers, are really anti-work. Yet the people doing bike messengering, at least you guys, are asserting a commitment to hard work, that you really want to *earn* your pay.

**Markus:** I don't mind that. If I got paid decently, I could work 3½ or 4 days a week and do the same job. If I could survive on doing three good 10 hour days, the kind of days I normally work five of, like I would work harder because I would only be doing 3 of them. Boy, I would never look for another job, it would be great. Really, for those of us playing music, that's not anti-work either. It's another job. So's this publishing stuff. Lots of messengers are working incredibly hard on all kinds of things after those 10 hour days.

**Amerigo:** As work it's fun, it's like a sport.

**Ramblin':** We talked at the start about the attempt to create some kind of community. I felt that [sense of community] since I came over here [from England] and starting working as a messenger. I've met people who are so honest. They're interested in you if you want them to be. If you wanna bug off on your own and not talk to anyone, they're not going to hassle you.

**Pelona:** I never felt like I was a messenger. Then I deformed my bike with a basket, decided I was a messenger, and started going out more and getting involved.

**Markus:** She gave her bike a sex change. [laughter]... The fact of bike messenger subculture, I postulate, may be a key reason why they keep wanting us to be a disappearing occupation. Every other industry in this town whose



numbers are maybe off 10 percent from what they've been through the '80s, they're not talking about those occupations disappearing. Why are they talking about us that way?

**PW:** Solidarity in the face of bike theft is described in exciting detail in *Mercury Rising*. What other kinds of solidarity do you experience and can you foresee among bike messengers?

**Ramblin':** I think the benefits [concerts and parties].

**Amerigo:** Messengers came and donated money to get in, and bought beer and wine to help this guy out who got busted for some bogus drug charge.

**Markus:** About half the gigs my band (L. Sid) has played have been messenger benefits. We had another one at Brave New World where Ramblin' works as a DJ Sunday nights. He's having a monthly benefit, like for a couple of messengers who cracked up off the job and missed some work time as a result. Of course no one's got health insurance.

**Pelona:** There are so many people who get hurt, we could do a benefit every week easily.

**Amerigo:** Right now Harvey's [5th Street Market] is our Corporate Headquarters!

**PW:** You've spoken with distance, if not disdain, toward the average office worker with whom you interact on a daily basis. My impression is that there is a similar, de facto dissidence among temps, in spite of the fact that it is often invisible. There are a lot of temps with an "Attitude." I wonder if there are any practical links between messengers and temps?

**Ramblin':** I know a couple of messengers going out with secretaries. [laughter].

**Markus:** No, not much going on in that department yet.

**Pelona:** A temp is someone who says, "What, a package? Ana L.? I don't know her extension!" That's our take on temps.

**PW:** Zoe Noe, when he used to messenger for Special T, he gave out a lot of *Processed World* propaganda, like the Bad Attitude Certificates. . .

**Pelona:** [reading the bad attitude certificate] Oh, but stealing time, when we steal time we steal our own time, y'know?

**PW:** Do messengers discuss the purpose of the work they do and what kinds of thoughts prevail?

**Pelona:** We do a run for Citicorp.

Our dispatcher has nicknames for certain runs, it's called the ShameOn run—

**Markus:** SHAAAME ON CITICORP. That woman, I forget her name [she's been picketing a downtown Citicorp in SF for 2 years over some loan fraud she suffered—ed.] There's the Chickenbutt and the Bonehead, these are dailies, the American Dream Run.

**Pelona:** There's a woman named Lynn Breedlove who I interviewed in the second issue, who started her own company, Lickety Split Delivery, but won't go out for corporate clients because she doesn't want to work for Bechtel. The clients she pursues are tenants and legal aid groups, non-profit companies, and so on.

**Ramblin':** I think your day job, whatever you're doing for money, it might be useless, but you still have this job where it doesn't destroy your other energies, and you have space to do whatever your particular interest is.

**Markus:** It can destroy your physical energy sometimes, make you a little too exhausted to do as much as you want to do, but you don't have to compromise yourself too much to do it. Another thing, you get to learn a lot by being a messenger.

**Pelona:** I've been bothered by the meaninglessness of this and really wished I was doing something meaningful.

**PW:** What is utopia, or at least a society worth fighting for, for you?

**Pelona:** A society worth fighting for? In utopia, there's no cars. Down the middle of the street, we're gonna tear up all the asphalt and there's gonna be gardens and orchards and you can just grab a peach as you're riding by.

Everyone's gonna work 20 hours a week at a job they find meaningful, and they can change jobs throughout their lives if they want to. And everyone is gonna get taken care of, maybe no one will have a lot of stuff but everyone will have shelter, everyone will have food—

**Markus:** No one will have to worry about getting sick.

**Pelona:** Yeah, if they get sick they'll be taken care of.

**Amerigo:** People will care for each other, they'll understand.

**Pelona:** Yeah, we'll have a feeling of community. You'll be able to walk everywhere you need to go, you really don't even need a bicycle. There'll be like small stores. . .

**PW:** So a high level of self-sufficiency in local areas?

**Pelona:** Yeah, so you know people.

**PW:** Any ideas about how you'd relate to the larger world?

**Pelona:** No, the whole world's gonna be like that!

**Amerigo:** We'll all have separate worlds!

**Pelona:** Someone else was talking about this, they were saying "Let's drive all the big corporations out of downtown." I said "Oh no, there won't be any bike messengers," but they said "Yeah, but bike messengers are going to be planting gardens and tearing up the streets and stuff."

**Amerigo:** People need to be honest about their needs. You won't be repressed about things, and you won't deny things like death, you'll understand that there's a cycle and the whole of life will be accepted in balance.

**PW:** Yeah, yeah, sign me up!



photo by G.C.B.

# POND HOPPING



**I DREAMT OF ESCAPING PARIS** for five long years. While I finished “growing up,” I went daily from place to place between rows of heavily armed cops. May '68 had failed and martial law was in effect.

May '68 had been a month of wildcat strikes and student demonstrations turning into a general strike. Imagine a whole country (50 million inhabitants) immobilized where business was concerned, but effervescent in political and social activities. Parisians met daily in the streets for discussions on the theme of the “quality of life.” There was Viet-Nam, there were sit-ins, armed confrontations with the special national police trained for “riots” (Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité aka CRS.) The walls bloomed with graffiti: “Culture is like jam, the less you have, the more you stretch it;” “Culture is a carnivorous plant;” “Plus je fais l'amour, plus je veux faire l'amour; plus je fais la révolution et plus je veux faire la révolution.” Pardon my French: “The more I make love, the more I want to make love; The more I make revolution, the more...” Barricade building (thanks to abandoned street equipment) brought about the slogan: “Under the pavement you'll find the beach.” (Sous les pavés, la plage!) There were unauthorized street concerts, a piano was dragged from the dusty depths of La Sorbonne, there was spontaneous friendship, mutual support; generosity abounded. I was born to a larger reality after a sixteen-year sleep.

Then the *sacrosanct* Summer Vacation intervened. Paris exchanged its usual population every summer for tourists and a skeleton crew of miserably paid North Africans to keep the streets clean. Despite promises that “the summer would be hot” (L'été sera chaud!),

repression set in (I was thrown out of high school at the end of 1969 and spent my last high school year in a private school), people went back to work and the social scene got grim as the government tightened the screws.

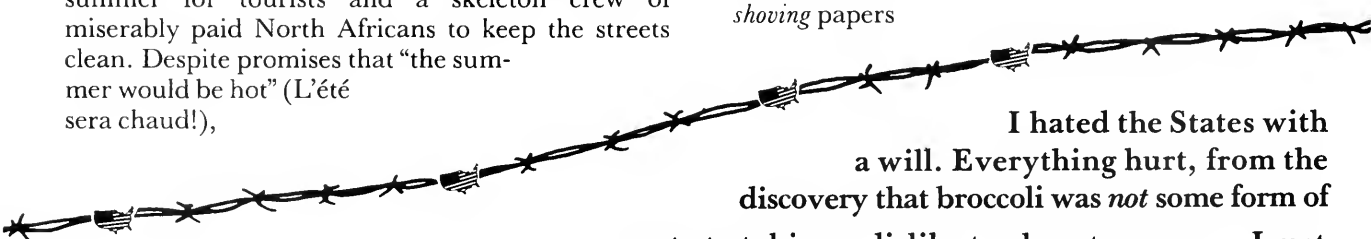
Freedom of the press is not a “right” in France so the government succeeded in running underground presses out of existence. “Charlie Hebdo,” my favorite weekly, was restricted when its front cover made fun of the then-recently dead De Gaulle. It could be sold at a magazine stand only if it was kept below the counter, shamefully out of sight. Meanwhile *Playboy* and its kin were blazing on center stage and people got 18 months jail-time for selling the ludicrous maoist rag *La Cause du Peuple*.

I left in 1971 at age 19, in pursuit of the dream of a sane society in which mutual aid was a reality. I had no concrete plan or methodology. I just hied out and struck north: aurora borealis, uncharted territories, wilderness à gogo...

That got me stuck in Germany for two years, tramping one year and the next as a foreign language teacher in a high school. Germany wasn't terribly different from France. I was at home despite an ornery attitude towards the German language and history (they *did* kill my grandfather).

I experienced German racism in one unforgettable scene in 1972. At that time, foreigners were required to check in with the authorities at regular intervals. My two American roomies and I showed up one cold winter day in Biberach-an-der-Riss to validate our papers.

A minor bureaucrat was *shoving* papers



**I hated the States with a will. Everything hurt, from the discovery that broccoli was *not* some form of pasta to taking a dislike to almost everyone I met.**

at a bewildered Turkish "Gastarbeiter": "Kannst du kein Deutsch verstehen?!?!?" ("Can't you understand German?")

I got angry and forgot the little German I thought I had, called the guy a Nazi (he looked like one, recycled) and more, in every language I could summon and demanded to see his "superior." The pathetic little man crumbled. He let go of the Turks, processed my American friends and me real fast and gentle, apologized to me personally and we left. I was shaken by the experience... but not enough to anticipate similar problems yet to come.

In 1973 I "emigrated" to the US of A. I put it in quotes marks because I didn't realize it at the time. I was just checking the place out. I had a lot of *informed* reservations about it.

My emigration problems started in Stuttgart, then in West Germany, where I naively told the bureaucrats that I was going to work in the States (one has to eat, ya know). Despite the fact that a friend had pretended to need my specific services, I was refused a work visa. So I asked for a tourist visa, sufficient to investigate the place for a while and decide on further action. This visa was immediately refused on the grounds that I had given away my real motives: possible immigration.

Not a whit daunted, I drove to Munich and applied for a tourist visa, answering "NO!" to the question: "Have you ever applied for a tourist visa to the U.S. before?" For several hours, I watched tourists get their passports stamped with no problem. When my turn came, a flurry of activity preceded the arrival of a prim female army security officer who bade me accompany her for a special interview. Of course I thought Stuttgart had communicated to Munich that I was an undesirable fake tourist. Then I thought about my political activities in high school and on the Nanterre campus since 1968. I was freaked but had to face up.

To my relief, the big deal was that I was a French citizen going to the U.S. from *Germany!* Apparently a highly suspicious move. Why didn't I go from France? Because I happened to live in Germany. This was long before the concept of a Euro-community had made much inroad on public consciousness.

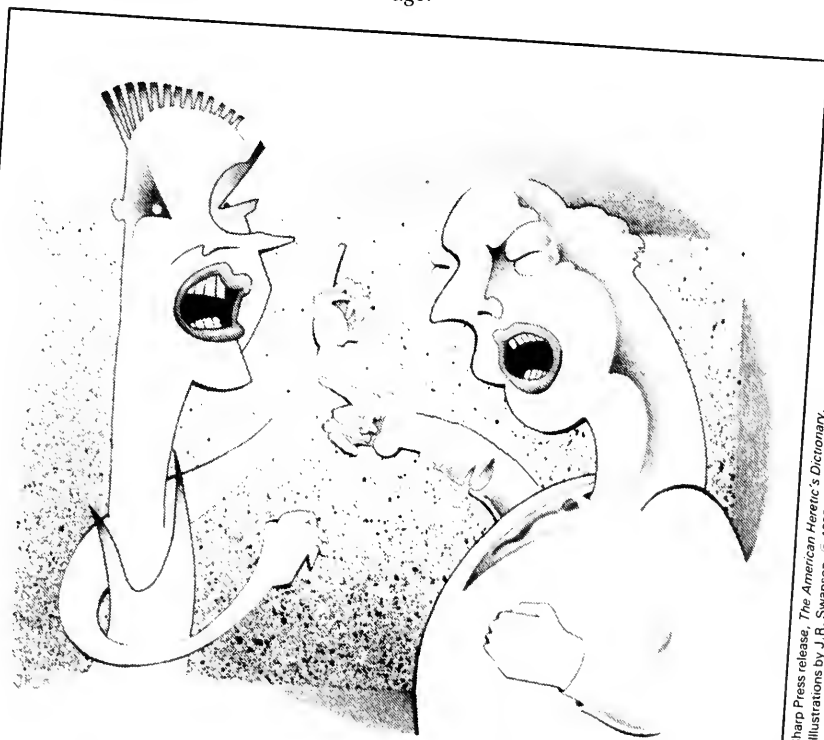
The next question was "why did I want to visit the States?" Naively I stated the truth. I had shared my digs with two Americans who had made visiting their country (the famed "bas-

tion de la réaction") sound like an interesting proposition. Then she asked: "Are you going back with *him*?" Startled about the concept of "going back," I blurted "which *him*?" It came out that my "American" accent was too perfect for this uniformed woman to believe that I had never been to the States before. I was most assuredly lying about previous visits indicating dark and possibly terroristic reasons for my "return." I managed to convince my interrogator that the only English-speaking country I had ever seen was Great Britain (several times) and that I had no hope of reproducing or even approximating their accent.

Relentlessly, she went on: "Do you plan to marry *him*?" The thought, at twenty-one, of being married at all, much less married to my current American lover was funny. I laughed... too hard. This displeased my interviewer who saw nothing funny about marriage. (She was right.) I assured her I was way too young to consider marriage seriously, especially to an American. This did

not amuse her much but she stamped my passport with a three month visa and released me to the July sunlight of Munich. What a relief! A month later, I was in Colorado, culture-shocked and bewildered about my decision.

While passing the New York border guards, my visa was cut down to one month on monetary grounds, despite my explanation that the cash I carried (\$300) was just pocket money. I was to live with a good Mormon family in Colorado and could wire home for more pocket money if needed. No go. "America is expensive" I was told as my French passport was inscribed with slashes and lots of red ink. That was OK though, since meanwhile my boyfriend had successfully smuggled some hashish past the whiskers of *his* border guard. We'd worry about my status later. The dope was safe! Also, he was the one who had suggested, after my failure to obtain a visa in Stuttgart, that Munich was the next option. So I believed he would come up with some solution. I was soon to taste the fruit of his solution: marriage.



**ASSHOLE**, *n.* The most commonly employed word in American English. Frequently used by both sides in an argument, more often than not accurately.

From the upcoming See Sharp Press release, *The American Heretic's Dictionary*.  
Definitions by Chat Bûle. Illustrations by J.R. Swanson. © 1992

One month passed in the blink of an eye. I hated the States with a will. Everything hurt, from the discovery that broccoli was *not* some form of pasta to taking a dislike to almost everyone I met. Were all Americans bigots, patriots and political dolts? One month was not enough time. The place was bewilderingly vast. You could drive nonstop for three days from Pennsylvania to California, yet the language, except for accents, did not change. And in America as in Germany aliens had to register once a year with *la migra* as to whereabouts and occupations. Every January, TV screens reminded whoever would listen that aliens were to be accounted for.

My "boifurendo" (boyfriend, for those who don't twig Japenglish) kept insisting that marriage would be painless, a mere formality that would solve my visa problems once and for all. My parents and almost all my friends' parents had divorced which made me very suspicious of the institution. A bit of research showed that it was a business contract designed to ensure that the woman's

property (where she had any or even rights to it) and children would hence become the property of the husband. Divorce voided the bit about "til Death do us part," except in the matter of property. There is no "parting" of the powerful from their property. Ask the world's impoverished female masses.

On September 10, 1973 I married the boyfriend. I wore jeans to the courthouse where I was handed a congratulatory "gift" for brides. Talk about poisoned apples: it contained mouthwash, douche packets, aspirin and many coupons for sanitary products to keep you fresh and sexy for your lawful hubby. No condoms, though.

By November I knew I was pregnant. Decision making time. This kid felt real in more ways than one. . . Despite misgivings about the status of my relationship with my *husband*, it was now or never. I did it. I gave birth to this wondrous new being and never regretted it despite the adventures to come. Giving birth is the greatest high one can experience. Trust me.

The culture shock spread. Being



photo by D. S. Black

married to an American was a desperate experience. Exchanging Paris for Fort Collins, CO, USA, was a bad idea. Let me give an example of cultural un-ease. As a teenager I had a bout with hypoglycemic perturbations. I passed out if I didn't watch the blood sugars. I passed out in the weirdest places and times: Demonstrations, history classes, trains, etc. . . People had always helped; Many knew the simple solution to this coma: sugar cubes in their paper wrappers, lifted from restaurants.

I passed out in downtown Fort Collins on December 24, 1973. Everyone was

## A BRITON IN EXILE



**I'VE ALWAYS FELT AMBIVALENT** about living in the U.S. Why on earth would a non-American leftist choose to live in the "Great Satan?" If you're born American that's unfortunate and you have little choice, but to come of your own volition seems perverse. It wasn't as if I could claim to be fleeing desperate economic conditions or political repression (at least not in the Third World sense). I came just because I had nothing better to do, so I feel unworthy of the term "immigrant."

It happened six years ago when a woman I'd met in Europe the previous summer and corresponded with suggested I come live with her in New York. I jumped at the chance, not only because I was infatuated with her, but because it sounded like an exciting and irresponsibly impulsive thing to do. I gave little thought to how long I would stay, consumed by the idea that for the first time I had a chance to do something larger than life. This was a new frontier—New York, the quintessential urban experience, and beyond that the vast expanse of America. I read Kerouac's *On the Road* as preparation.

It was with little regret that I gave up my Brighton besit with burns in the carpet and gaps in the window sashes through which the wind whistled, and my place among the ranks of the unemployed. Leaving family and friends was harder. In

return I shared my American girlfriend's small one bedroom apartment in a dilapidated building that perpetually smelled of garbage and took a menial clerical job in an office where they were prepared to overlook my lack of working papers. Thatcher's Britain for Reagan's America. It was at best a sideways move.

My first sense of unease with my adopted country came in 1986 with the centennial celebrations of the Statue of Liberty which occurred shortly after my arrival. While the few Americans I knew—friends of my girlfriend—saw it as nothing more than good clean fun, I couldn't help but view it as an orgy of nationalism, militarism, and self-congratulatory backslapping—the like of which hadn't been seen since the Nuremburg rallies. Since I had yet to develop my own circle of friends, I didn't realize I was not alone with these opinions. I was unaware of the alternative "celebrations" and protests that were taking place. While my girlfriend shared some of my distaste, she thought I was taking things too far and being an incorrigible party-poopier. I was a minority of one. Had I come to America just to participate in a jingofest?

Feeling as I did, I was at a loss when asked—and I was asked frequently—the inevitable question, "So how do you like America?" I liked it, sure I did. Didn't I?

After all, broke as I was, I could still afford the airfare back to England. If I was straight with myself, I would say that it was without doubt an interesting experience, but I couldn't in all honesty say I really liked it. I liked Americans and things American, but it was a long time before I felt comfortable with confessing to liking America, before its good points (more subtle than its bad ones) became known to me, and, more importantly, before I realized that my fondness for and appreciation of it could be on my own terms: extremely qualified and very equivocal.

Whatever my initial reservations, it was exciting. For the first few months even my job—ferreting around in filing cabinets and repetitive data entry—seemed exotic. My coworkers had strange accents and an exuberance you scarcely find in England. While my new life in the New World was in many ways similar to my old life in the old one, the props were decidedly different. My senses were reawakened and I felt compelled to carry a notebook in which I would scribble my observations. Going to the store, riding the subway, walking down the street, everything was an adventure.

The fly in the ointment was, of course, money, or the lack of it. I had arrived with only \$200 and the job barely paid the rent. My girlfriend was a student and worked in a bar at night. The solution to our economic woes seemed to be a green card,



busy with last minute shopping for Xmas. No one stopped to offer help. I got looks which worried me: not at all the European looks I was used to but looks that threatened to be followed by cowboy boots grinding my face further into the snow.

Later, friends explained the “why” of this asocial behavior. I could have sued anyone who stopped to help, they said. I was horrified at the weirdness of the thought: In Europe, it is a crime not to assist persons in danger. Thus I was taught that survival in the USA has different parameters. This incident effected a cure. Hallelujah! (Or was it physical maturity?)

When my daughter was born I'd wanted to call her Solitude. My husband nixed the name. I became a wife. I lost my name. I was X's mother and Y's wife. It threatened my identity and I became deeply depressed, even suicidal. I divorced instead of dying, both messy propositions. I was isolated, penniless and naive. I got screwed. Hubby got custody. I took the pro bono lawyer



photo by D. S. Black

opening up (what seemed from the outside looking in) a world of opportunity thus far denied me. To this end we were married on the back lawn of a rather bemused-looking justice of the peace somewhere in upstate New York. An old school friend who was with us played chauffeur and drove us to Niagara Falls for the “honeymoon.”

I felt total indifference to marriage. I naively failed to see why it should change things. It was a practical solution to a logistical problem. It was “real” in the sense that we had every intention of continuing to live together (till difference, if not death, do us part), but “arranged” in the sense that marriage would—at the ages of 22 and 24—never have crossed our minds had the green card not been an issue.

In the end, the labels of “husband” and “wife,” and the changed expectations of others, who now saw us as a “responsible married couple” rather than happy-go-lucky single people, contributed to its demise two years later. By that time I'd built some kind of self-perpetuating life in the U.S. I also met my present partner, Frances (another American), so despite plans to return to England I remained in New York another two years.

In the spring of 1990, Fran and I left New York to travel throughout Central and South America. This was to be the final act of my American odyssey, after which we would “retire” to a more sedate and simple

way of life in semi-rural England. We returned ten months later to New York enriched by the experience, but not knowing where to go or what to do next. The plausibility of a return to the old world quickly evaporated. When it came time to return I got cold feet. I realized it was not England I missed, but the idea of England. A combination of being away too long and watching too much *Masterpiece Theatre*, I'd created a myth of England that it could never live up to in reality.

Every year I would go to England sometimes for a month, usually just for a week. I always had a great time and was sad to leave. But I knew that were I to move back, the euphoria could never be sustained. It's one thing to visit for a week and spend it drinking with old friends, another entirely to live there and have to worry about the mundanities of everyday life, like getting a job, a place to live, etc. In the end we decided against England—or at least deferred it for the time being—and came to San Francisco instead. Another new life, reassuringly like the old one with a similar cast of characters, but sufficiently different to feel challenging.

I used to feel that I had two lives, one in England, one in the States. The first could never be taken away from me—my birthright, if you like. The second existed as long as I lived in America. At first I was anxious not to lose touch with England, to keep this first life very much alive. I read the *Guardian Weekly*, wrote to friends

regularly, even listened to the BBC World Service. But in the last two years I've let things slip. England seems more and more like a distant memory, a foreign country to me. I have only a vague idea of what's going on there and have become painfully aware that I cannot expect the same level of intimacy from friends who, once an integral part of my life, I now see only once a year, and from whom I am a world apart. Parallel lives cannot be sustained indefinitely, ultimately I have to choose between one and the other.

I can always go back, there'll always be enough to build on. But were I to go back, I don't think I'd feel like that option were reversed. By staying here, not only do I preserve the idea of England which I have become so attached to and avoid the inevitable shattering of illusions, but I also keep my options open.

Today America is no longer a travel adventure, just everyday life, the “general drama of pain.” I am as assimilated as I'll ever be, speak fluent American and though I retain an accent, people rarely ask me any more how I like America, since I no longer look like a tourist. What keeps me here is what keeps anyone anywhere: inertia, the idea that it's harder to leave, for whatever reasons, than to stay. When I visit England I still call it “home,” but I have come to terms with the fact that this is probably more out of nostalgia than anything else.

—Iguana Mente



assigned to my case by Legal Services (later killed by Reagan's funding starvation of social services) all the way to the Supreme Court of Colorado for misrepresentation of the laws. His pudgy be-ringed little hand was slapped: He had been "ill-advised" to take money from the wrong party. Illegal? Maybe but I did not regain custody and am still in debt to boot.

### From Mudhole to Lily Pad

I was divorced on my twenty-fifth birthday. March 10 has been a strange double celebration ever since. At last I could unfold my own wings again and resume my quest for the foreign grail.

I moved to Berkeley because the university had a better language program, especially Oriental languages, than Boulder U. could ever hope to develop. I wanted to go to China, armed with a smattering of mandarin and historical understanding.

Since '68, I had held the belief that the Chinese model might be a pointer to future societies: Share and Care, bro! I had great admiration for the accomplishments of the Maoist revolution; it ain't easy to take a huge, backwards agricultural country into the age of information at a single bound. I believed the propaganda.

When "normalization" occurred in 1979 (keep in mind that France "recognized" China in 1958). I thought I should obtain an American passport to avoid a repeat of my Munich adventure on a larger scale. I filed for U.S. citizenship in '80.

Due to changing immigration laws and the impending "pardon" granted to illegal aliens and their employers, it took

a couple of years before I was notified by mail that I was to take a proficiency exam at the Immigration and Naturalization Office (INS where S is for Service—don't sneer) in San Francisco. No problem. I was getting to be less naive by then, but not enough. At the appointed time and place, I seemed to be the only white person fluent in the language and basic political organization which we all were to be quizzed on. I coached a couple of panicked South American women, was called to the "bench" and promptly forgot you had two senators per state or whatever. Still I passed. A couple more years' wait ensued.

In 1984 a phone call woke me from slumber. A directive had been received at one of my old addresses which warranted the intervention of yet another lawyer. The pal sounding the warning was in the know: as a law student, he had a teacher specializing in immigration. I quickly visited her. She was as puzzled by the strange notice from INS as I was. We decided to go and see.

So on July 14, 1984, my daughter, lawyer and I dressed in unlikely skirts and headed for our rendezvous. That's where and when the shit hit the fan. First the INS lawyer ejected the kid from this meeting on the grounds of "hardship to the child." Then "my" lawyer declared that it was a *public meeting*: he'd better state his reasons for ousting the kid. The guy explained that tough sex questions were to be asked. I laughed... Hard. The INS lawyer-flunky did not think it funny. He was right. The kid came back in and grabbed my hand, which she played

with throughout my interrogation.

It was a humorless interlude. After two hours of questioning, it was obvious that a private letter of "denunciation" was at the root of my troubles. The INS lawyer flunky declined to state the identity of his informant but it was not necessary: Only my daughter's father could have done such a thing. I was accused of being "to the left of the French Communist Party" and of being a lesbian.

The U.S. of A. barred "known" leftists and homos from visiting this country until recently (The McCarran-Walter Act was repealed in 1990), and certainly would not grant them citizenship. You don't want more commie gays voting, do you? There was no appeal to the INS decision. The truth is no defense. One private letter of denunciation was enough to bar me from citizenship. I am not inclined to try again.

The lawyer, my daughter and I shared a "celebratory" toast after the INS session. Eight years old at the time, my daughter was upset and asked many questions. How to explain inequity to the innocent? We had an interesting discussion on the subject of "lying," its origins (authority), its uses (self-defense) and the possible neurosis, hypocrisy ascendant, which reliance on lies could bring.

In return she delighted us with the following story: "Mom, do you know what I was doing with your hand?" I did not know the meaning of her magical manipulations. So she demonstrated: folding four fingers of my hand against the palm, she left the middle finger upright and pointing at authority "avec emphase."

Talking with numerous exiles from different parts of the globe brought me to the conclusion that exporting oneself is hard work. You'll never fit snugly in any one culture again. The grass is never greener on the other side. Society's problems are global. One's interaction is perforce local. The locale is less important than the will to achieve the improbable: quality of life!

It is doubtful that I'll ever get to immerse myself in China. I could barely do it in the US. The effort to jump across one more pond and sever all ties to the known cultural universe is too much for me. I have accepted my limitations. Even though American friends will tell you that I *have become* an American, I am in fact just a Frog at Odds.

—Frog

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graphic: PW Collective

# WHERE AND BACK AGAIN



## CALL ME FRISKO

*Philosophy is really homesickness,  
it is the urge to be at home everywhere.*

—Novalis

WE WANT YOU BACK implore the signs over the front fenders of MUNI buses. HAVE YOU COME...YET? demand the bus shelters. Guilt trip, courtesy AT & T, which wants us to reach ever farther out, and touch *everyone* (fiber optically).

For the émigré in autumn, these pleas reach deep; as a green-card-carrying (though the card is predominantly pink), bona fide “resident alien,” I worry about the atomized spirit spinning round in circles of infinite regression, the elusiveness of *home*, the marketing and manipulation of migration.

Gertrude Stein once belittled her native Oakland, saying “There is no there there.” San Francisco Bay Areans today find that among the East Bay (Berkeley-Oakland-Emeryville), the technopolitan villages of Silicon Valley, the lucid but fuzzy, well-heeled dreamers of the north counties (Marin and Sonoma), the scattered but emerging virtual communities, and the City (San Francisco), there are a multipliCity of heres and nows with an especially rich yield—high-grade either ore.

Like most in the Bay Area, I was drawn here from afar. It may be the fog, or living on the edge of a continent—the playing-with-fire mode of existence we take for granted—or the exquisitely varied cultural soup that draws us from all over, in preference to the thin gruel we’ve found elsewhere. Northern Californians are justifiably accused of superiority; when we look to L.A., it’s easy to feel detached (different faultzones) from the rest of the state, to say nothing of these disUnited States.

## EXIT WOUND

*Though I look right at home  
I still feel like an exile*  
—Elvis Costello

Remaining an *alien* thousands of miles from “home” has given me a finer appreciation for things Canadian than my first two decades there ever did. Since coming to America (the Ewe Ass of Eh)—the bellum of the beast, as it were—I feel the clarity of detachment in viewing the varied strangenesses of both my distant and adopted homes.

Yet however great my disdain for the state of things here, I am still humbled and saddened by the sense of identity-confusion which is a fundamental part of the Canadian condition. Caught in the shadow of two empires—British and American—Canada is saddled with a world-class inferiority complex.

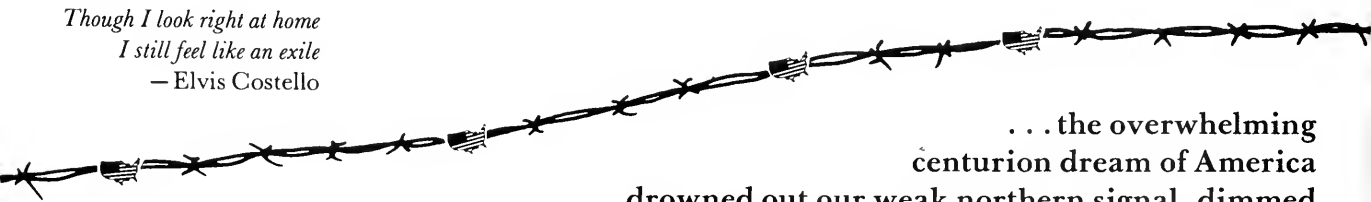
## INNER ZONE

*The city is born, in my opinion,  
when each of us for himself is insufficient  
and has need of others.*

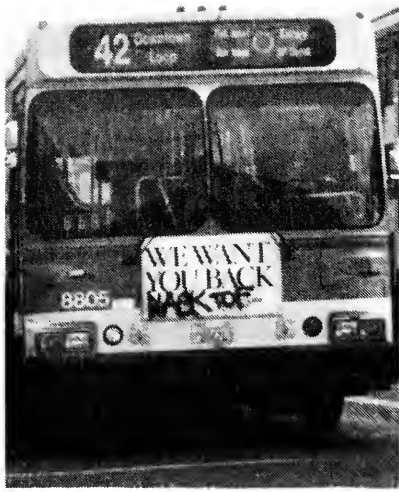
—Plato

During the 1988 economic summit conference held in Toronto, the ABC news anchor Peter Jennings (himself a one-time Tronnan) called it “the city that plays anyplace, but is still waiting to play itself.” That horror filmmaker David Cronenberg makes his films there, and recently used it as the site for both New York and Interzone in his adaptation of *Naked Lunch* strikes me as grimly appropriate.

Douglas Coupland in *Generation X* (see PW 28) describes it as “[giving] the efficient, ordered feel of the Yellow Pages sprung to life in three dimensions, peppered with trees and veined with cold water.”



... the overwhelming  
centurion dream of America  
drowned out our weak northern signal, dimmed  
the aurora borealis in a torrent of acid rain.



Kafka spoke of his Prague as “that mother that has claws and won’t let go.” Toronto let *me* go; in maudlin moments, I might even say it drove me away—and for that, I can neither forgive nor forget.

Toronto is in some ways a laboratory for the future city. It is one of North America’s test marketing hubs—where such questionable commodities as cherry-flavored potato chips made their debut. Its indoor shopping mall environments (e.g., Yorkdale and the Eaton Centre) are more grandiose than Frank R. Paul’s visions of the 25th century splashed across the covers of 20s pulp magazines.

And though it boasts one of the most varied, cosmopolitan populations in the world—close to half its population was born *outside* the country—it has also been home to a very stodgy, mannered people. I like to visit them, love some of them to distraction—but still, I cannot live there. Alas.

### SUCH, SUCH WERE THE JOYS

*It seemed natural that a little boy of eight or ten should be a miserable, snotty-nosed creature, his face almost permanently dirty, his hands chapped, his nails bitten, his handkerchief a sodden horror, his bottom frequently blue with bruises.*

—George Orwell

An English teacher named Pierce once told me in prep school, “You’re a stranger in a strange land.”

“Have you read the book?” I asked, hopefully.

He had not. I gave him a copy of Heinlein’s famous hippie-prophetic novel that Christmas. We were friends, as far and as briefly as that went between pupil and master (yes, they called themselves that) at Upper Canada College.

Pierce later banned my review of *Flowers For Algernon*, citing my fondness for science fiction as the pretext. To emphasize his disdain, he told me to prepare another one, and deducted 10% from my grade because it was instantly late. In revenge, I dwelled on the bloodier passages in *Something of Value*, Robert Ruark’s pungent fifties bestseller about Mau Mau atrocities in Kenya. As I read aloud to the rapt class of castration and other dismemberments—with veiled references to our own enforced impotence—I glimpsed Pierce’s face turning green.

(Unfortunately, this was a game I couldn’t win. Next year he made me stand unprotected in a freezing November rain, from which I nearly caught my death.)

In a related war of words, my French teacher said to me knowingly, “Oh, so you’re one of those.” He was referring to the fact that I was actually *reading* in the school library (as opposed to “studying”). His disdain deepened when he saw the book I held was *The Hugo Winners*, a collection of award-winning science fiction. Apparently my interest in “sci-fi” branded me a cultural barbarian. I knew in fact I was ahead of my time, and I could either wait...or, to find my stride, I could go to the source of the attractive signal from the south.

As a Canadian—first generation mother; father an immigrant; more saxon than anglo—I was no happy camper. My early years were spent in the siberian wastelands of Manitoba. If you’ve never heard of The Pas, don’t worry; you won’t be required to find it on a map. From those outer limits north of the 53rd, my family moved south to the narrow band straddling the border with the U.S., where 90 percent of all

Canadians live.

In 1970, we left Winnipeg for Toronto, the city of my birth. It was there that I enrolled at Upper Canada College. It was supposed to groom the brood of business and the old aristocracy (what the stuffy 19th-century Canadians of British stock called “the Family Compact”). Most of my schooling occurred at private schools like UCC—world-class, presumably, for their emulation of Eton.

One of our rallying cries was “The Blue Machine is Supreme!” As consummate snobs, we thought we were destined to control the financial world centred on Bay Street, the provincial government at Queen’s Park, and ultimately, with all due modesty, accession to the halls of power in Ottawa. Beyond that was the terror incognita.

It’s easy to see where I developed my revulsion for authority: the macho inferno of boys’ school, the petty elitism reflected in our “house” ties, the Scottish brogue of the endless stream of pipe-smoking masters dictating the brutal and capricious terms for our existence.

My training included BASIC, which I pursued as an optional subject through ninth grade. As a student programmer, I toured more than one computer-whirring office in the mid-seventies, half-suspecting that this was my future. I narrowly missed (by a year) being forced to march in the “battalion,” wearing ridiculous military uniforms, toting replica firearms, doing maneuvers around the school grounds. Another decade would pass before computer science replaced Latin as a core subject.

It would be an oversimplification to say that science fiction led to my leaving Canada. As a genre representing a pulp, sophisticated, fast-forward impulse, it and the overwhelming centurion dream

### Basic Training





of America drowned out our weak northern signal, dimmed the aurora borealis in a torrent of acid rain. SF provided the means (a social network that transcended borders) and certainly the mindset for a restless young cosmopolitan that were infinitely more appealing than the pallid imperial baggage of Britain, whose most dour representatives seemed to end up teaching at Canadian private schools.

I had to escape—as a budding writer, poet, stifled student of the world, eager to shuck the fetters of tradition, to unquelch my lacquered tongue—I followed the siren call south.

## RESENTMENT ALIEN

*Nowhere is everywhere  
and first of all in the country  
where one happens to be.*

—Alfred Jarry

I have to admit I've been lucky. To get here—

I didn't have to pay a *coyote* to sneak me in a dusty suffocating drive out of Tijuana in the trunk of a monoxidized automobile. I didn't cross the Rio Grande, blinking in a late night march through a desert of scorpions and infrared sensors, watching for the strobelit rotors of *la Migra*.

I did not have to "vote with my feet" to avoid having my skull added to a pyramid of eggheads in Indochina.

I never had to sail in a listing, overcrowded boat, drinking seawater, braving pirates, turned away from one port to another, as if on a deathship, only to while away the indignity of years languishing in detention centers, fearing repatriation, waiting to live.

No linguistic barrier came between me and where I now stand, except for increasingly infrequent ribbing about my accent. With the passing of time, I am a less obvious stranger.

Nobody ever dropped any bombs on a country I've lived in, except in weapons "tests." (Although periodically bits of space junk have rained flaming across the skies. And power plants have been known to overreact. . .)

Since I can be in only one place at a time, and am not content to remain a virtual traveler, I grapple daily with the problems of displacement. . . and engagement. I may not be able to vote in America, but I pay taxes. And until my wife fired me, I was counted on all the various forms she faithfully completed, a model minion of bureaucracy. (I shouldn't knock it; those very forms eased me through the pearly gates of

immigration.) What more can I do to resist the abhorrent machinery when I have put myself in its maw by choosing to live here?

James Joyce gives good tactical advice for survival in exile:

*I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning.*

—Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

Silence and cunning are limited if one does not find an effective balance in social action. Self-expression, if successful, or at least away from the margins, means collaboration. It may be with an audience of strangers, or one's peers; at best, it resonates and may disturb the universe.

In this City of exotic smiles, one's first question is often "Where are you from?" The Soviet epithet "rootless cosmopolitan" has always struck close to. . . well. . . home, wherever that is. Having lived in California since 1983, I've now been in San Francisco longer than any other place. I feel myself at last a San Franciscan.

But however comfortable and inspiring it may be here, I'm always going to be dreaming about somewhere else; where I've been, where I come from, and ultimately, where I may be headed.

## THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE CENTER

*Imagine having nothing on your hands  
but your destiny.*

*You sit on the doorstep of your  
mother's womb and you kill time  
—or time kills you.*

*You sit there chanting the doxology of  
things beyond your grasp.*

*Outside.*

*Forever outside.*

—Henry Miller, *Black Spring*

People born after WWII have lived their lives in the shadow of the Bomb. *We will all go together when we go*, gibed Tom Lehrer in one of his satirical songs of the sixties. Now that the specter of communism has obligingly imploded across the once monolithic Eastern Bloc, history—rather than ending—has spun ever faster in increasingly uncertain directions.

June 1990 was a time of tumult. Boris Yeltsin was the newly elected Chairman of the Russian Federation parliament;

as such, his openly sympathetic view towards Baltic independence was just one area where he was at odds with the Soviet center of power.

I was traveling through Eastern Europe as part of the Anti-Economy League mission to undermine blind faith in the false idol of the West and its cathode-radiant future. Walking down the Unter den Linden in East Berlin, I drifted into a "Unitopia" conference at the Alexander von Humboldt University. In one of the classrooms students from the Baltic states showed videos documenting their struggle, provided narration and answered questions in English. They were an affable group of guys in their young twenties, active at the universities in Tallinn and Vilnius.

One powerful image they brought with them was the story of the human chain across all the states from Lithuania through Latvia and Estonia which was organized to protest lingering Soviet domination in 1988. As an artistic and cultural statement on a massive scale, it went far beyond anything I've seen from the jaded émigré artist Christo, with his menacing, homicidal umbrellas, or Man Ray-run-amok visions of wrapping the Reichstag.

As I traveled, news of further atomization abounded: Yugoslav republics Slovenia and Croatia were advancing in their drive for independence. The only drift in the other direction, towards unity, was in reunifying Germany, and on the dim horizon in South Africa, as the Group Areas Act was reformed out of apartheid, laying the groundwork for the eventual dismantling of the "homeland" system of "separate development."

In the meantime, my own native realm—Canada—was itself in the throes of new waves of separatism, as the constitutional fabric of confederation once again appeared fated to bitter dissolution. Once again, I felt the despair of a country that is paralyzed by chronic uncertainty, plagued by doubts and self-flagellation, two solitudes that have multiplied into a terminal alienation.



Toronto, 1991. Photo by D.S.B.



## FROM THE UNDERGROUND

*In another country, with another name  
Maybe things are different.  
Maybe they're the same.*

— Brian Eno

I can always tell the weekend riders: their hesitation at the turnstiles, their uncertainty over ticketing. Or sometimes late at night, on the last lonely trains before the subway system shuts down, they're the ones too nervous to read or catch up on their sleep. They blink in amazement at every little thing. They never know till the last moment on which side of the train the doors will open. If there's something to see outside the window, they watch it whiz past in drop-jawed stupefaction, waiting for a moronic boom.

I was a precocious commuter. I started going by subway to school before I was ten. Now I find I've spent the last twentysome years riding the rails; time to take stock. It has not always been the most pleasant experience, but it opened passages for me that in many ways seem to define my existence.

Heinlein wrote "The Roads Must Roll." Asimov called them *The Caves of Steel*. Dostoevsky had his *Notes From a Hole in the Floor* (better known as *Notes From Underground*), in which he ventilated the violent interiority of the subterranean dweller lashing out, excoriating the sickness of the status quo.

Fortunately or not, most who ride do not show their loco side when on the train. The train is an engine of genes and experience in a brownian stream of motion.

It is a quality of indoor life; from sitting in one's garret, the outside fades in a haze of distant memories. I close my eyes to follow the slipstream of the everflowing street, from the Polk Street of Frank Norris to Edvard Munch's silhouette edging against the current of Sunday promenaders on Karl Johannstrasse. Joyce strolls along his river Liffey, Dublin's fetid Alexanderplatz assails the nostrils, while Nevsky Prospekt continues to beckon from the work of Pushkin to the futurist Biely. Saint Petersburg lives! Still, memory wanes.

There are many *heres* now—here, here, and yes even *heres*—however cyclical history or our memories of amnesia may be—in terms of the beat that echoes in my chest, maybe a muffled explosion, enough that I somehow continue to rise and think: *maybe I won't pass this way again.*

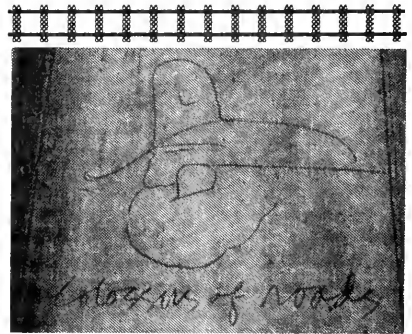
How many thousands of miles have I circled the square on this hamster wheel of life? In the movie *2001*, an astronaut bound for Jupiter jogs around an endless track, a centrifuge, on an express-line beyond the infinite.

The force that points his feet to the floor has another side: a centripetal pull, which governs the fate of nations. As we have seen recently, it doesn't take much, once the process is started, for these curious social constructs to fly apart.

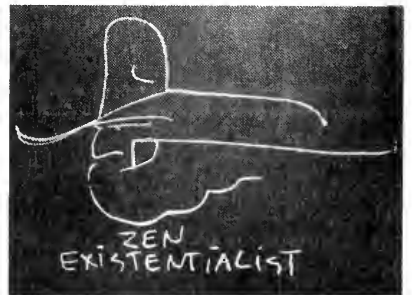
With the vanquishing of the *Challenger* shuttle, and the Soviet disUnion, manned spaceflight to any of our distant neighbors appears to be increasingly remote in the short term—ask that poor cosmonaut, still stranded in orbit, the country that launched him no longer in existence. Perhaps, as in *Alphaville*, we'll just have to drive our cars from city to city, pretending they're different star systems for that same (almost *quaint*) thrill of discovery.

If we are to escape, it may only be from one room to another in the burning house we all live in.

— D.S. Black



A.K.A. Buz Blurr, one of your more prolific and poetic writers, he signs his self-portrait with a different title every day.



## LUCHA LOST IN THE METRO

*"Lucía Valenzuela: last seen in San Lázaro Station  
She answers to the name of Lucha  
Not in full possession of her mental capacities  
Her native language is Nahuatl"*

—note on bulletin board, Isabel la Católica Metro stop

Lucha lost in the Metro  
the rubber doors  
slide behind her  
like they are kissing.  
Why are all these eyes  
going for a ride  
down under the streets  
where the dead people  
are planted, she wonders,  
Will she see  
her mother?

### INFORMETRO:

Fact: Our Metro  
is one of the few  
in the whole wide world  
that uses pneumatic tires  
designed with  
mathematical precision.

Lucha lost in the Metro  
searching out her dead mother  
between the fluorescent stations,  
they have given her  
these little dolls to sell,  
dead children with sewn smiles,  
they keep giggling  
under her blue rebozo,  
shhh, don't tell  
the conductor.

### INFORMETRO:

Fact: Our Metro  
was constructed  
at a cost per user  
lower than any transportation system  
anywhere else  
under the world.

Lucha lost in the Metro,  
she tries to count  
the stations between  
the darkness but  
there are more of them  
than all her fingers put together,  
her children are crying now,  
shhh they must not know—

How much for this one  
the tall woman pulls her arm  
as if she were deaf and dumb,  
she is not her mother,  
she doesn't have to tell her  
how much her own children cost.

### INFORMETRO:

Fact: The integrity  
of our users  
is the absolute bedrock  
of our high standard  
of technological innovation.

Lucha lost in the Metro,  
she arrives at Observatorio,  
the tall woman tells her  
it is the end of the line,  
she must leave now,  
the conductor shoos her out,  
the dolls are sleeping at last,  
her mother is waiting for her,  
she sells sunflower seeds  
against the subway wall,  
Lucha squats down next to her,  
relieved that she has found  
her own at last,  
she cries hard  
into her mother's lap  
in Nahuatl.

### INFORMETRO:

Fact: More people  
are found  
in our Metro  
each year  
because each year  
more and more people  
are lost.



photo by D. S. Black

—John Ross  
Mexico City 3/88

## MOJE SERCE

You ask me to say  
some love words in Polish  
I hesitate  
afraid you might not like  
the hard *h* in the verb for love  
but you lie still and trusting  
as if expecting an unknown  
caress  
*mój miły*  
*mój złoty*  
*mój aniele*  
my angel  
my own  
my golden one

it's California  
January the unstoppable sun  
beats on the pillow  
I whisper the eternal  
banalities of love

it's Los Angeles I take you  
to another country  
streets muted with snow  
early in the morning  
before footprints

protected by a language  
you cannot enter  
I coo the extravagant  
catalogue

especially  
*moje serce*  
my heart

that's what I want you to be  
before falling asleep I repeat  
the brief  
syllable of your name  
like a heartbeat

it's hard  
giving you up  
the room  
snowy with light  
I whisper *moje serce*:  
and you  
whisper back  
*it sounds wonderful*  
go on

—Ioanna-Veronika



## IHI!

Text P?  
T[*bang*]!

Overhead? I got all the head I can handle.  
Heading for a crash, no kidding.  
A real bagbiter when you're interrupt-driven. Thrashing.  
All information is assigned on a Need-To-Know basis.  
Of course it can be embarrassing,  
Some fourteen-year-old phone phreak whose handle is *Headhook*  
Flashing your credit history on screen,  
Some tidbit he found hacking the TRW mainframe.  
But whatcha gonna do, it's the Information Age:  
You can't incent them suckers to stonewall.  
We're not looking for excessive functionality here,  
Just a hook to start with,  
Something to inspire song.  
Or compel it.  
I think I'd like to non-concur with you there, sir—  
Ride Public Transit:  
Smell the armpits of your fellow man—  
Unless you'd prefer that I went into emulation mode:  
Another yes-man. Another soft luck story. A man waits  
His way to the top and stays there. So true and so boring  
We won't empathize when his son Skipper gets skin cancer in Chapter 6.  
How many man-months in that oeuvre? Just asking.  
And as for you, love,  
How will we know if it's  
hi res until we've seen it all?  
We'll have to be each other's scratch monkeys  
Until we get some answers.  
As far as we know we're just liveware  
Beta testing for the real human race  
Rumored to be released real soon now.

—David Fox

## THERE IS TOO MUCH TO LEAVE

There is too much to leave:  
The blood of growing up  
The calling of the ancestors  
The longing for your hardened tones  
The feel of cinnamon loam

But the sea whispers  
Banjos keep dancing  
And the heart keeps forming words  
Trapped by the hardened lips.

The heart,  
Cloaked in onionpeels of steel  
Caught in the inertia of ideologies  
Between swollen bellies smiling for the camera  
And children disappearing into the rescue of graves,  
Keeps waiting for the delicate kiss  
To unveil the sorrow of doves imprisoned there.

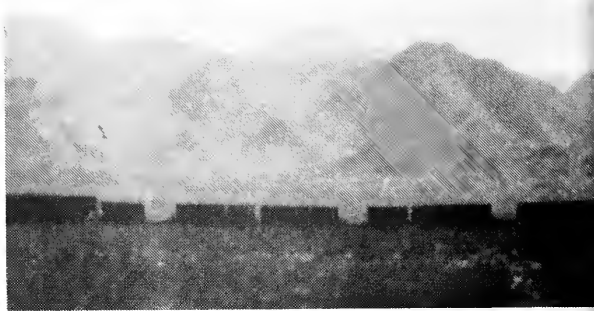
—Farouk Asvat

## 19 MEN

19 men running in the moonlight  
19 men waiting in a railroad yard  
19 men heard a coyote's howl  
19 men sneaking in a freight yard  
19 men dreaming of a big dream  
19 men going for a hard ride  
19 men trying to get a tough job  
19 men blurring an illegal border  
19 men with nothing to lose  
19 men stepped down into an aluminum Missouri Pacific boxcar  
and the doors were sealed (Where's the light in this rolling  
coffin? Let's strike a match, let's see your faces—There's  
Manuel & Jorge & his compadre Isidro from Zacatecas, que no?  
& Juan & Jose y los cuatitos Miguel & Mateo, there's Adrian &  
Martin, Tomas, Pablo, and that other Pablo, too, & Joaquin,  
Ramon, Arturo, Ernesto el poeta, and Mario who said this was  
his last time, and Miguel Rodriguez)  
19 men headed for Dachau  
19 men with a ticket to Auschwitz  
19 men riding through El Paso  
19 men in the West Texas heat  
19 men without air to breathe  
19 men sealed in a death car  
19 men and they can't go far  
19 men on the road of no return  
19 men got burned  
19 men sealed alive in an aluminum nightmare  
crazy with heat convulsions / tearing their hair out in  
asphyxiations / blood & skin & hair smeared on the walls of the  
refrigerated freight car  
19 men only one survived  
19 men

—Alejandro Murguía

Photo by La Czarina



## SEVEN A.M., ENSENADA

Seven a.m., Ensenada,  
Baja California,  
Hotel Las Palmas

What saddens me today  
isn't that the ozone  
disappears inch by inch  
like cards up a gambler's sleeve  
nor that poisons fill the earth  
and spill boiling into the sea  
nor famines nor wars that ravage  
paradise-to-be.

But today there was a middle-aged  
Mexican campesino who passed  
by in the parking lot  
and neither he nor I  
had the courage to look the other  
in the eye and say "good morning."

—Clifton Ross



If you know any whereabouts or who's abouts of  
Bozo Texino, please write:  
Clickety Claxton, Box 77325, SF CA 94107



# EXILES IN THE HEARTLAND



**T**O ME, MAIN STREET WAS NEVER more than a pathetic imitation of a gay bar, a fractured parody of the demimonde. The outdated disco music and the *de rigueur* mirrored ball that spun wearily over the dance floor tried but failed to create an atmosphere of big city sophistication in that heart of southern, rural darkness. To others, however, Main Street was a glittering Oz, a fabled land of dreams come true, a taste of paradise.

The only gay bar for a radius of a hundred miles, it was the far flung outpost of Queer culture. Back home in Chicago, 350 miles north of the Ozarks, gay bars—there were over a hundred in the city—specialized and had highly specific clienteles: leather bars, preppy bars (aka “S & M” or “Stand and Model” bars), “Gentlemen’s” bars (i.e., for rich old daddies and young hustlers), cruise bars, etc. Not so in Carbondale, where it was one size fits all. Main Street hosted men and women, students from the University and locals, drag queens and frat boys, hicks and Internationals.

Khan Chang could usually be found on what I sometimes called the Flight Deck, because it was so often host to the Royal Malaysian Air Force. It was a raised wooden platform to the right of the bar; opposite it was another platform containing the pool table. (This was, obviously, the center of lesbian activity in the bar and was known as the “Dyke Deck.”) It was only natural that Southern Illinois University, with its well-developed outreach to Moslem Asia and its world-class aviation and aviatronics departments, should train the entire Royal Malaysian Air Force. What was less natural—or at least less obvious—was that so many of the RMAF cadre should be queer.

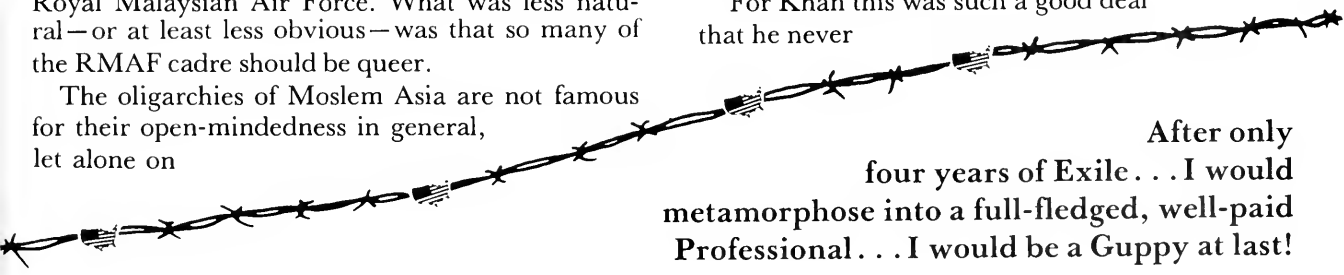
The oligarchies of Moslem Asia are not famous for their open-mindedness in general, let alone on

matters of sexuality. Indeed, part of the reason they sent their sons (daughters were kept at home) to bucolic Carbondale was its (relative) remoteness from corrupt, decadent, irreligious Western culture. On the one hand they needed the intellectual products of that dangerously secular civilization; on the other, they feared their offspring would be seduced by its siren call. This fear was well-founded, and they took what measures they could to contain this threat.

Khan’s family, like most others, had signed a contract with the Malaysian government to cover the cost of his degree. Big Brother would pay for the bulk of Khan’s education as a mechanical engineer, tuition and some living expenses (generously supplemented by his obscenely wealthy family); in return, Khan would serve the government at the ratio of four years of work for each year of school. Thus, the average four year degree would commit him to 16 years of government service.

Alas, Khan had discovered: a) that he was queer; b) that he hated mechanical engineering, Islam, Malaysia, and his family (not necessarily in that order); and c) that his True Calling was to move to New York City and become a Famous Fashion Designer. These were not unrelated discoveries, but the bottom line was that if he welshed on the deal his parents had cut they would be stuck with the tab for his years at SIU and he would be *persona non grata* with his family and the Malaysian Government, both orthodox Moslem outfits with impressive grudge-holding skills.

For Khan this was such a good deal that he never



After only  
four years of Exile . . . I would  
metamorphose into a full-fledged, well-paid  
Professional . . . I would be a Guppy at last!

looked back. "There's no 'gay life' in Malaysia," he explained to me. "Some dirty old men hanging out in parks. Yuck!" It wasn't just gay sex he wanted (though he wanted plenty of that, from all reports), it was a "Lifestyle."

"In Malaysia you have to have a family, a wife and kids. Your life is supposed to center around them. Family is everything." He shrugged. To him, family was nothing, now, not compared to the glamor of Main Street and the rumored grandness of fabled New York. But he was atypical in that regard. Most of his gay Malaysian friends were too well bound up with moral and financial obligations, and by family ties, to consider defecting. They were content with camping it up on Main Street for a few years, and then holding out for occasional business trips to the U.S. and its gay scene.

### The Lure of the West

Carbondale's gay community was clearly a foreign element, an obvious import of urban perversity into the Heartland (as the local TV stations like to call it). It was grudgingly tolerated as an unpleasant but unavoidable byproduct of the University, like toxic waste from a job-producing heavy industry.

What the locals disliked most about this queer colonial enclave was its remarkable ability to encourage defection and conversion, no less from among the local, conservative Christian population than from the conservative Moslem Asian temporary residents. These converts usually soon departed C-dale for one of the Gay Urban Meccas (which by regional standards included Memphis and St. Louis, southern backwaters in my jaded opinion). Their families far preferred it that way; nothing could be more humiliating than an openly gay relative lacking the shame to either hide or flee.

The stridently militant, anti-closet proselytizing, nationalist attitude of big city Queers, which flavored the campus gay group, was considered derangedly political by the indigenous Queers who dominated Main Street and tended more towards a pre-Stonewall, Southern drag-queen culture. There was a feminist-separatist community, held over from the seventies, which avoided the campus group as sexist and the bar as promoting addiction. A local Metropolitan Community Church (a national gay ministry) advocated a fusion of fundamentalism and homosexuality—a fusion vociferously denounced from

both sides—but, naturally, denounced the bar as sinful, the campus group as irreligious, and the separatists as pagans.

The Pit was an example of the crazy contradictions governing the very limited queer and queer-safe space in Southern Illinois. It was a pit mine a dozen miles north of the campus, which had been abandoned when it struck a spring and flooded with water. Now it was the best swimming hole of the region, and all on private land owned by Nick, a prosperous fireworks salesman. Nick liked having nekkid women hanging around at his swimmin' hole, and gave highly coveted keys to selected gatekeepers of the local lesbian community. On a hot summer weekend the secluded park would overflow with dozens of nude lesbians, a few of their fag friends, and Nick himself, naked except for a big .38 strapped to his waist.

Nick was a blatant sexist, and often ran around taking pictures of the women's bare tits and asses. They didn't chastise him for objectifying them; they howled with glee and demanded copies. Besides, it was his pool and one of the few safe places for queers to gather. The bar was a target for fag-bashers, the local rest-stop cruisy area the prey of local cops, thugs, and occasional murderers (including a husband-and-wife team that chainsawed their victim into pieces, and only got caught because they used his credit cards at a local furniture store). If you wanted to be picky about the Political Correctness of your host, you'd be better off returning to your Gay Urban Mecca.

### How I Got There

I wanted nothing more than to return to Civilization, but like Khan Chang and most other students I'd accepted Exile as the price of an affordable education. It was my determination to avoid working for a living that led me, naturally enough, to consider a career in academics, and ultimately to C-dale. I'd finished up my long-neglected bachelor's degree and finagled a slot in SIU's graduate program in Counseling Psychology. I gleefully gave short notice to my boss (see "Progressive Pretensions," *PW* 26), tucked the "Dr. K. Wabbit, Ph.D." plaque (a going away gift from my co-workers) under my arm, and set off for the South.

It was no small accomplishment to be accepted for such a cushy spot at all, and I was fully aware of how marginal a candidate I was for it, what with my

long and checkered undergraduate career. I had the lowest grade point average of anyone ever accepted in the program, squeaking in despite my original ranking as "eighth alternate." In return for working 20 hours a week, at an hourly rate comparable to what I'd generally earned in the Real World, I got a tuition waiver (otherwise \$4K per year), and training as both an academic and a shrink. Such a deal!

There was bound to be an "Ivory Tower" effect, I figured, to offset the otherwise bucolic nature of the region. After only four years of Exile, living cheap in the sultry south, I would metamorphose into a full-fledged, well-paid Professional doing Meaningful Work. I would be a Guppy (Gay Urban Professional) at last!

It didn't work out quite that way. But I still say school beats working for a living, nine times out of ten.

### Social Geography

Everyone was an outcast in Carbondale; it was a place of universal exile. The majority of its population were aliens, isolated in a strange land, and even the natives seemed dislocated by the cultural-imperialist intrusion of The University. For most of us the Ivory Tower was in fact a tiny ghetto surrounded by a vast and hostile wilderness (and for most of the rest it was an invading, colonial enclave).

The student body was an interesting mix. SIU was at the bottom of the state's educational hierarchy. All the really top-notch students (who couldn't afford private schools, that is) went to the world-famous University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana (or Shampoo-Banana, as we called it). Middle class whites with less obvious academic talent and the better-off blacks went to Northern Illinois University at DeKalb, just a couple hours outside the city; the frat boys could drive in for the weekends. Distant C-dale, 350 miles South of Chicago, got the leftovers; party animals (we had an outdated rep as a "party-hearty" school held over from the '60s), poor blacks from Chicago's South Side and from East St. Louis, where there was a branch campus, and assorted semi-rural low-brow Aggies and Techies from mid-state.

Like so many American schools, SIU got its big boost after World War II, when any degree-granting institution could expand ten-fold on the glut of veteran's benefited students. Right after that came the "Sputnik" scare of the '50s,

the fear that the Russkies were going to win the “race for the stars” because they got their rockets off the ground before we did (having snagged the better German rocket scientists, while we got Werner von Braun). Huge bucks were poured into the education system to offset this (imaginary) deficit; besides, they figured—correctly—it’ll keep kids off the streets and out of the job market.

Then there were the upheavals of the ‘60s, when many public schools adopted virtual open admissions standards. The tab, in those days not very steep, would be picked up by generous Federal financial aid, rounded out with low-interest, government guaranteed loans.

This lovely gravy train, despite 35 years of momentum, was abruptly derailed with the advent of the Reagan-Bush regime. State schools all over the country felt the crunch, but SIU had hedged its bets cleverly. Led by a visionary president, the school had created and promoted special outreach programs to both foreign (officially “International”) students and to disabled people.

Both groups paid premium tuition, about four times the standard for residents of Illinois. They flooded special programs, and required all sorts of expert services and tutoring, for which they paid top dollar (incidentally providing employment—usually subsidized by Federal money—for other students). They were also more vulnerable to gouging by the locals than ordinary students, so the private sector got its share of the goodies. Unlike state residents, who stayed away from school in bad times, these lucrative constituencies held stable and even increased. C-dale’s well-developed programs in agriculture and technology, sneered at by the more academically inclined upstate schools, were quite attractive to students from Third World countries.

The initial outlay wasn’t too bad. The entire campus had to be made handicapped accessible, but there were lots of federal dollars for stuff like that, and it’s great PR. We had a mobile wheelchair repair unit that could get anywhere on campus in 15 minutes. Catering to foreign students was even easier. The registrar developed a muscular and experienced visa department that specialized in pushing through the passport paperwork. SIU was often the only, or at least the easiest, place for foreign students to study in the U.S.

When I went there, C-dale had the second largest number of “international”



**SHEEP**, *n.* A large, abysmally stupid quadruped bearing a striking resemblance to another common animal, the average American voter.

students of any campus in the country. They were mostly from the less developed countries, but particularly from Moslem Asia, e.g., Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore and Indonesia. There were also lots of students from Africa. For them the only other choice, most of the time, was China, where African students live fifteen to a room in hovels without plumbing—and end up with cheesy degrees in obsolete technology. Attending SIU was the chance of a lifetime for them, an interesting contrast to the average lackadaisical frat boys, who drifted on a haze of beer for four years at SIU for lack of anything better to do.

The various exile communities lived peaceably side by side, mostly ignoring each other entirely. We didn’t come there to socialize, after all, but rather in pursuit of some higher cause: Truth, or a lucrative career, or training in how to transform the world, or a few years of subsidized leisure away from nagging parents, or all of the above.

After four years my term expired and classwork, thesis, and major exams completed, I departed to do my year-long, paid clinical internship at the University of California at Irvine in Orange County. This is another tale of toil and Exile by itself. If I ever actually bother to do my dissertation—which is what I *should* be doing instead of writing subversive trash like this—I will officially be Dr. K. Wabbit, Ph.D.

Was it worth it, that long, painful and costly exile? Most of my cohorts feel so now, as they climb their way up out of the ranks of the junior faculty at various

minor midwestern state schools. Rapid advancement depends largely upon a willingness to accept further exile in the form of “good” positions at out-of-the-way institutions. I myself turned down a position in the Counseling Center at Northern Illinois University at DeKalb, because by that time I’d been diagnosed with AIDS and felt myself to be exiled to San Francisco by virtue of medical necessity. I can’t think of any place I’d rather be exiled to, and anyway, my diagnosis rapidly eroded my lingering urge to merge with the mainstream via a “good” job.

The premise of graduate work is that it’s a good deal in the long run, albeit merciless exploitation in the beginning. I found it a tolerable deal in the short run, by virtue of my superior skills at shirking, coasting, and ad-libbing, but clearly most others did not. They endured exile plus unreasonable work loads because it was one of very few paths upward.

As to how Khan ended up, I don’t know, not having much information on the New York fashion design scene. I’ll bet he’s much happier than he would be back home working for the government, and it was obvious that his prospects as a Designer were far brighter than any he’d had as a mechanical engineer. Once again the lure of decadent Western culture and the unrestrained freedom of the Capitalist Market triumphed over traditional values and a Planned Economy. For Khan, as for me now, what started as Exile ended as finding Home.

—Kwazee Wabbit

# DOWNTIME!

## PAPERSLUTTING

Skill sharing is the way of the future. This is probably not what Kropotkin envisioned when he wrote *Mutual Aid*, but I'm going to go ahead and share with you some of what I've learned on the job. I work as a temp, a word processor, a secretary, part of what the communists call the "paper proletariat," doing what this anarchy-feminist prefers to call "paperslutting."

My agency (read: pimp) arranges the trick, and I meet the client. I dress and act appropriately, and I do whatever they tell me for the time specified. (If they are overly cruel, my agency/pimp will ostensibly protect me. The one time I did report a client for cruelty I found the agency very sympathetic, but they haven't gotten me a single assignment since then.)

For as long as I work the job, I get approximately 40% of what the client pays me hourly. The state gets something like 20%, and the agency takes the rest. On the training video, they showed me a pie chart detailing what they do with my earnings. According to the chart, my earnings go to pay their "rent, office supplies, salaries, profits, and other costs." Funny the way they order their words to make profit sound like an unavoidable expense.

So here's some advice from the vast stores of my desperate creativity. If work is a prison of measured time, it is only logical to begin with time. What do you do with time at work (other than watch it)? WASTE IT! I'm sure you can figure out how to do this on your own,

but here are some of my favorite ways.

Be 5 minutes late for work. Get lost on your way there the first day (even if you don't, they can't expect you to find your way around their zoo very easily, at any rate). Get coffee or tea or water. One trick is to get half-cups, on the ostensible basis that you like it very hot; that doubles your coffee-getting time. Ask for a small tour of the worksite, if you think your genuine interest in their operations could be plausible. Write down everything they tell you. Ask several people to recommend places for lunch. Be 5 minutes late getting back from lunch.

Whenever possible, don't use your best judgement. Wait until someone's off the phone to ask them how they want their letter typed if you have a question. If you're typing it in the computer, sure you could always change it later, but my motto on the job for the hourly wage is, "Why waste work when you can waste time?"

The most famous way to waste time at work is an old radical union trick, from the military too. It's referred to as working by the book. Literally, the rule book. They write the damn things, but if work actually were done by all the regulations, nothing would get done. Working by the book means doing exactly what procedure dictates and more but never less, no short-cuts, no rushing, check everything twice, get approval at every step, cut no corners, and, whatever you do, don't use your intelligence to streamline their processes.

At work, people break rules for two

reasons: to benefit the goals of the corporation (for example, evading EPA regulations) or to work against the goals of the corporation. Which side are you on, after all?!?

Go to the bathroom a lot. (One temping friend tells me he takes small naps on the toilet, waking up when someone opens the door. I'm impressed but not that adept.) While you're in the bathroom, try out new hairdos. Wash your face. Pull up your stockings (as the case may be). Masturbate. Plan your evening. Do graffiti if it's possible not to have it linked to you.

Leave work five minutes early.

This list is by no means exhaustive. Be creative. Your creativity in this respect is only rivaled by the creativity of those who devise the thousands of stupid regulations set up to keep you passive in their workplace. Lest you feel frustrated with this approach—it may seem petty—bear in mind (and they have told me so in so many words) that your time is their money.

Be careful, but always keep alert for opportunities. You'd be surprised at how many apartments can be furnished with the seldom-missed surplus of the corporate world. If you have particular skills, you may be able to do large-scale damage to office machines that will be interpreted as due to breakdown rather than sabotage.

Maybe I've read too much Foucault, but in any case, I think the most damage you can do in an office setting is organizational. The whole idea of bureaucracy (rule by desks or offices) is to centralize information, to have at the fingertips of those who make decisions all the available facts about those they control, affect, observe, monitor, select, disregard, ignore, and forget, and about those by whom they are affected and limited and on whom they depend.

Thus they rely on computers, on elaborate filing systems, on steep but extensive hierarchies, and on principles of secrecy and mystification. Organization and structure are the backbone of the internal aspect of the corporation which I think is most interesting to the infiltrator: Bureaucracy.

Misfiling even a few documents can do a lot of damage. On the IBM, you can name files inscrutably and fail to label the floppies, so when you're gone

graphic by Angela Bocage





they can't really derive the name of the file from the subject of the document. On the Mac, files can be stored in inappropriate folders and can likewise be labeled unintelligibly. When you leave, don't explain what you've done with things unless you have to.

Address labels can be riddled with misspellings and typos (no one has to approve them before they go out). You can answer the phone in a confusing way. Just do it the way you learned how; pick it up and say hello. Almost without fail, the person calling will think they have a wrong number.

I think it's good to do these things even when they have only a marginal effect in countering and undermining the evil and power of these companies because it keeps you critical. This kind of dual consciousness at work prevents slippage toward the conservative careerism that is what is so insidious about office work.

Without a critical consciousness at work, it's too easy to mingle your ego gratification with their corporate goals. They have it set up that way. You do a good job for them, and they pat you on your soft little head. Sabotage is resistance. And resistance is sabotage because their work order depends on the association of your personal fulfillment with their processes. When you resist, you fuck that up.

So go ahead, fuck shit up. I did. I do.

I am. And you're reading it. It's fun, but it's not just a game, not just heroically pitting your mind against the enemy.

Sometimes way up on the 57th floor of their corporate headquarters, you find a wide-open window, and if you stick your head out, you might just see the sky. And if it makes you feel deadened or sick or frustrated or lonely or crazy or helpless or angry or just sad, remember, it doesn't have to be like this at all.

— by Stella

## VDT LAW FAILS

A San Francisco judge recently overturned the controversial VDT ordinance after it had been in effect for only three weeks. According to Michael Rubin, attorney for Service Employees International Union (SEIU—which helped draft the law): "Judge Lucy McCabe said CAL-OSHA expressly pre-empted San Francisco's VDT ordinance, and that no other entity has the power to regulate the workplace. She relied on language of the CAL-OSHA Act for her decision." The ruling essentially bans occupational legislation at the municipal level.

Supporters of the ordinance intend to appeal quickly, but expect that it will be at least another year before the issue is resolved.

"I'm confident it will be back in effect, unless we're able to get state legislation

first," said Rubin. "It's part of a coordinated effort involving collective bargaining and attempts to pass statewide legislation."

The lawsuit overturning the ordinance was secretly subsidized by IBM, and looks to have been a good investment for the giant computer company. IBM, along with several other companies, financed two tiny plaintiffs in their quest to outlaw the few concessions granted VDT workers. Neither the plaintiffs nor IBM would name other corporate backers, but did confirm their existence.

An IBM spokesman said that the company's backing does not mean it is opposing SF's law. "What we're interested in is having federal standards instead of local ones," he said, revealing a typical strategy of multinationals. In another recent case, not directly related to this one but similar in that it relies on an argument that a higher jurisdiction takes precedence over local efforts to regulate public policy, an arbitration panel of GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) ruled that U.S. attempts to require dolphin-safe tuna fishing violated international free trade agreements. SF's VDT ordinance would have required, over the next four years, that employers in SF provide VDT workers with adjustable chairs, desks and computers in order to reduce the incidence of repetitive strain injuries,



and the installation of non-glare lighting to avoid vision problems. However, measures to reduce potential health injuries from the electromagnetic fields emanating from computers were thrown out in the negotiating process.

In exchange for accepting such a negotiating process, which included representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, the City and SEIU, the ordinance was supposed to be lawsuit-proof.

"We always knew there was a possibility that a renegade employer group might challenge it, but we were disappointed and upset that litigation was conducted in such a secretive manner," said Rubin of SEIU. "I don't know why corporations are hiding behind the screen of two tiny companies set up as a front." While the amount IBM spends on lawyers' fees pales next to the company's \$2.8 billion loss last year, siding with the forces of regression shows the company has little acumen for the current technology industry. VDT industry watchers, such as Louis Slesin, editor of the New York-based *VDT News*, say they find IBM's position baffling when IBM could easily be making its products more ergonomically safe for users and marketing its low electromagnetic emission VDTs—resulting in more sales.

Although this is the first major lawsuit over a protective ordinance, at least 19 lawsuits representing hundreds of millions of dollars have been filed against computer companies over repetitive strain injuries in the past few years, according to Slesin. Apparently, IBM and others fail to see the logic in supporting protective legislation so workers don't get hurt and sue the hell out of them in the future.

"One wonders why IBM is going against what must be the recommendations of their own ergonomists," said Slesin.

Slesin and others supporting protective legislation make the economic argument that *Processed World* readers love to hate: a protected VDT worker is a productive VDT worker.

"Major employers know there's no doubt that they get an investment in ergonomic equipment back in productivity gains," Slesin said.

Employees, on the other hand, are mostly interested in avoiding debilitating and disabling injuries. Some VDT workers have taken the stormy and faltering path of the protective legisla-

tion as a sign of things to come. "First they say the city can't regulate it; then they'll say the state can't regulate it, and we'll have to wait for the Fed to regulate it—and look at their record on worker protection," said a disgruntled office worker. "Maybe we need some direct action. A substandard VDT, once disabled, can't be reinstated by a mere lawsuit."



graphic by Angela Bocage

## THIS IS NOW

Ecotech, a three-day conference recently held in Monterey was intended as a coming out party for "corporate environmentalism." The organizers were somewhat disappointed, as only about 20% of the attendees—including Chevron, PG&E, Apple, Arthur D. Little and Esprit—were corporados, and blamed the low turnout on the "recession." Others weren't so sure. Jay Harris, the publisher of *Mother Jones*, noted that General Dynamics was nowhere to be found.

In the other corner were a flock of the usual suspects—Amory Lovins, nerd and techno-pragmatist par excellence, Stewart Brand, post-political green extraordinaire, Fritjof 'I am a philosopher' Capra, Denis "Earth Day" Hayes, Chellis "Technology is the problem" Glendinning and a variety of other green luminaries of local and national fame. The middle ground was held by a *mélange* of environmental consultants and wannabes, politicians, green-fund managers, entrepreneurs, middle-managers, journalists and multi-media

artists. It was a strange brew. Knocking around in it, I learned that even though "most of these corporations are green the way an apple is green, on the outside where you can see it," in the silver words of Joel Hirshhorn, author of *Prosperity Without Pollution*, there was something going on here that could not be reduced to the public-relations bullshit recently named greenwashing.

Corporate environmentalism is—just maybe—a real social movement. It's small, and far less important than its adherents believe. The bulk of them are painfully naive, and they spend hours bemoaning their lack of access to the "guys at the top" and the "real decision makers." But for all that, there they are—sincere, pragmatic and more than a little worried. They believe, as a woman from PG&E put it at one of the late-night "break out" sessions, that "the corporations have the talent, the resources, the R&D and the ability to make a difference," and that if they can't be brought "on board" there's no hope of reversing the environmental crisis in time.

On day two a nice lady from Hallmark Cards (a corporate feminist, by the way) took the stage to assure us that even in Hallmark there were a few sincere and determined people working hard to make a difference.

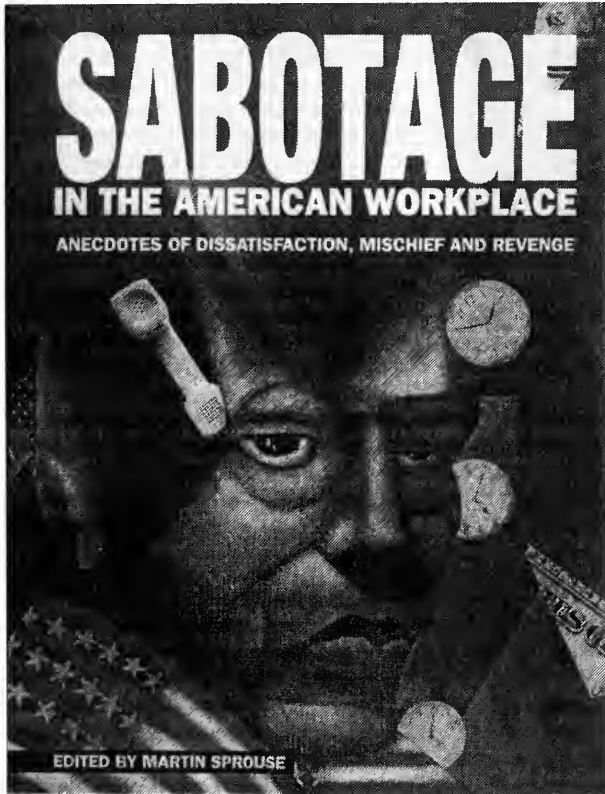
Again and again, the message came down from the stage. Peter Schwartz, bigtime corporate consultant and author of *The Art of the Long View*, summed it up well when he said that "corporate environmentalism can be a successful partnership between private initiative and social good" and that greens who are fixated on "blocking" corporations and pushing their "kneejerk views" of environmental problems do more harm than good by "delegitimizing environmental regulation over time." Corporate environmentalism, on the other hand, "provides multiple payoffs" because "efficient and high-quality products reduce cost and environmental impact" and environmental regulation forces companies to take the long view.

A few hours later I cornered Schwartz by the buffet and asked him why, if environmentalism and efficiency and profitability all go hand in hand, the world was going to hell? He smiled, chewed and pronounced — "incompetence. It scares the hell out of me."

It scares the hell out of me too, but then again, so does competence.

— Tom Athanasiou

# SABOTAGE STORIES



**WE ARE PUBLISHING THE FOLLOWING** excerpts from the new book **SABOTAGE IN THE AMERICAN WORKPLACE** (Edited by Martin Sprouse with Lydia Ely, ISBN 0-9627091-3-1, \$12.00 postpaid from Pressure Drop Press, P.O. Box 460954 San Francisco 94146). Processed World gained a certain notoriety in the early 1980s with a number of articles and letters on the subject of sabotage. The excerpts presented here excellently illustrate the sometimes contradictory nature of sabotage. It's the most available recourse for disgruntled or enraged wage-slaves to exact some revenge on their workplace and/or bosses. It is a vital weapon in the class struggle. But it is a difficult weapon to use constructively, that is, as an individual act of revolt it is often not only isolated, but by bringing down the authorities it makes worklife for those who remain even more controlled and atomized. On the other hand, acts of sabotage committed with the complicity of coworkers can strengthen solidarity, unnerve authorities,

and lead to greater space and power for the workers. And of course the well-placed individual act, even without the complicity of others can produce interesting results, too. It all depends. The following stories offer examples from the mundane to the dramatic, individual to collective, and provide much food for thought. We are also excerpting editor Martin Sprouse's introduction.

Processed World would love to have your sabotage stories, but especially your reflections on how sabotage helps or hurts efforts to make worklife better, different, or at least more bearable. This discussion has already gone on for more than a century. Sabotage and how we understand it remains a vital component of any work-based movement for social liberation.

— Chris Carlsson

The basic idea behind this book [is] to document reactions to the day-to-day frustrations and conflicts of earning a living in America. Anyone who has worked knows that dissatisfaction is a part of a great number of American jobs.

Because I wanted the book to include a wide range of anecdotes—encompassing different types of sabotage, people and jobs—I chose to define “sabotage” loosely, as anything that you do at work that you're not supposed to do. I was just as intrigued by the straight-laced data processor who always added extra hours to her time card, or the graphic designer who regularly came down to the mailroom and talked when he should have been behind his desk. Then there was the quiet, middle-aged accountant who had me send his Christmas gifts at company expense. Did he do it because he knew he could get away with it, or because he felt the company owed him something?

These aren't the kinds of people that come to mind when sabotage is mentioned, but these are the people who were yelled at when the boss was in a bad mood. Considered expendable by the managers, they were the first to have their salaries cut. I wanted to listen to their stories, find out where they drew their personal line of tolerance, and hear how they defined sabotage. . . .

The people I interviewed have backgrounds as varied as their stories. Some could barely survive, living paycheck to paycheck; others made \$60,000 a year. Their ages range from twelve to sixty-five. Their stories are set all over America, from Los Angeles to remote Alaskan coastal towns, from Wall Street to the North Dakota wheat fields. . . . Each person's choice of sabotage and reasons for using it are as much a reflection of their character as of their jobs. The motives behind the acts cover the spectrum between altruism and revenge. . . . As long as people feel cheated, bored, harassed, endangered, or betrayed at work, sabotage will be used as a direct method of achieving job satisfaction—the kind that never has to get the bosses' approval.

— Martin Sprouse, Feb. 1992

## PROGRAMMER — LAZLO

I worked on their payroll program, interfacing a clumsy old in-house system. It was one of the worst designed systems that I had ever seen. It was using a wasteful amount of computer time and had a very bad user interface. It made me ashamed to be a programmer. I thought, "Look at this piece of shit." It insulted me that I was supposed to make the system work better, but I wasn't allowed to make any fundamental changes. I could only patch things up.

Because I was restricted in the amount of work I was allowed to do, I was having a lot of problems implementing the system. It was a real pain in the ass. Bank of America started being pushy because I wasn't getting the work done as fast as they wanted me to. When the higher-ups in the bank wanted to know what was going on, the computer supervisors said I was incapable of doing the job. They put all of the blame on me because they didn't want the bosses to know how shitty their computer system really was. They made me look really bad, then went a step further and stopped paying me. I got so pissed off at them that I planted a logic bomb in the system, a kind of electronic "Fuck you!"

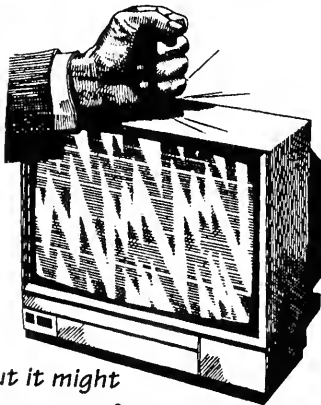
I had all the passwords that I needed to do it just right. I got into the payroll program and wrote a new program that would delete it. The next time the payroll program started running, it slowly started disappearing. Once it started failing, all the other programs started deleting themselves. The logic bomb had a chain reaction effect. It started out small, but then all of a sudden the entire system was corrupted.

On payday, nobody got paid in Northern California's PayNet system. Granted, I fucked with the workers, but I really ruined Bank of America's credibility. A couple of the supervisors got fired. Heads rolled and that's all that mattered to me. They knew I did it; I even admitted it, but this was before there were laws against these types of things. Technically, I didn't commit a crime. All I did was destroy data. I didn't steal anything.

## TECHNICAL WRITER — DEXTER

I'm at my place of employment right now as I type this into my Macintosh. I could be working. At least it looks like I'm working. Since I'm a technical

# Hitting It Can't Fix It,



but it might  
fix you an afternoon off!

graphic by Solly Malulu

writer, it's only natural that I'd be filling up my screen with words. However, for the last four years, I have spent only one third of my time at work filling the screen with work-related words.

I'm a generalist, a person with diverse interests which multiply daily. Left alone and well-financed, I would produce voluminous amounts of creative stuff in a variety of media. But alas, society doesn't cater to such capricious and irresponsible thinkers. So I circumvent society's shortcomings, and still pay the bills, by doing my techno-artistic projects at work, on company time. In the last four years, I have written a novella, a workbook for a major publishing company's science textbook, two travel narratives, and countless smaller things. I have explored computer music, art, and animation at work and have even written a computer game. I have spent at least a couple thousand hours of company time on my projects, and at a pretty good salary.

Most of my company work involves text and graphics, but so do my projects. Most of the time, my co-workers think I am working for the company. I'm never too cautious. Over-caution leads to paranoia, and paranoia dampens the hedonistic spirit. The co-workers who catch me have mixed reactions. Some of them subscribe to the old ethic and think you should devote all your time to work. Others wish they could find the time at work to do non-work related stuff like I do. My various bosses have never caught on. So my co-workers tolerate or admire me. They are usually too caught up in their own activities to pay direct

attention to mine. And my bosses are content that my productivity is up to or beyond par.

My situation is a by-product of the company environment. I will try to get away with whatever I can for the sake of creativity.

## SYSTEMS DESIGNER — STAN

I beat "the system" by helping to foul up a computer system for the largest bank in the United States. I did it, well, sort of accidentally. I've always felt ill-at-ease with the intentional stuff.

I started working for a savings and loan several years back, in the systems department. Frank, the resident computer expert there, was six feet tall and impeccably groomed—the very image of conservatism. He was the one who taught me the art of corporate sabotage.

Whenever there was a bug in the system, he took me to the computer room on the fourth floor. Most big corporations have their computer rooms protected by guards, pass-keys and special ID devices. Not this place. We just asked the old, revered receptionist to give us the key. She kept it in the unlocked top drawer of her desk. Once in the computer room, Frank and I would find five huge consoles blinking and whirring. When we—or rather, he—figured out which console had the problem, we would switch it off and on really fast. This erased loan data from all over California. But at least the computer system was working again.

Ironically, Frank left the company to become a consultant. Now it was my job to take care of the company's computer hardware. It wasn't too long before the system went down again. I trudged to the fourth floor and asked the old, revered receptionist for the keys, which she surrendered gleefully. But I had a problem. I'd long since forgotten the procedure for figuring out which computers worked and which didn't. I could think of only one solution. I turned them all off and on really fast. I reminded myself to take a look at the list of company job offerings on the way to my desk.

A few minutes later, a co-worker told me that everything was now working fine. He congratulated me for having absorbed so much during my short tenure in the systems department.

One of the things I learned from all this is that the less you care about your job, the easier it is to indulge in

sabotage. But there's a paradox to it. If you're doing something you really hate, why in the hell are you doing it?

## BUS DRIVER — LOUIE

It's a city-owned bus utility, so it's heavily financed by the government. It's in a college town so drugs are considered part of the lifestyle. Marijuana use is a common thing among the people who live here.

A group of drivers and mechanics got concerned after we got federal orders that all bus utility workers employed by a company getting Urban Mass Transit Administration money would have to be drug tested. People were just saying, "This sucks! The government doesn't have any right to tell us what to do." We wanted to know why we had to jeopardize our jobs for having a joint on the weekend.

First, someone xeroxed a brochure on how to flush your system out. So I started copying that and giving it out. Then a couple of people got information from the American Civil Liberties Union on what our rights were. And interestingly enough, our union, which wasn't a very active union, started getting involved.

When something really hits home, people start to get more involved. We started gathering information which spread around the shop. The level of interest increased as we got closer to the date the random tests were supposed to begin. Some people stopped using their drug of choice until they could figure out what was going on.

The weekend before the drug testing was to begin, we had an "After-Holidays Party." Somebody — nobody knows who it was, though someone in management thought they knew — brought in a pan of brownies laced with marijuana. Obviously, the purpose was so innocent people would test positive in the drug test, and the results would have to be thrown out.

Once people heard about it they crossed their fingers. The brownies became the hit of the party. The tension grew every time an unsuspecting dispatcher or supervisor ate one of the brownies. Unfortunately, the general manager didn't eat any. Nobody realized what had happened until it was too late. All they knew was that the pan of brownies had been eaten. Management was completely flustered. They had absolutely no idea of what to do.

A couple of weeks later a federal court

graphic by Tracy Cox



ruling came down that knocked down the testing requirement because of some technicality. The Urban Mass Transit Administration had to rewrite the rule, so we have a year reprieve. In the meantime, we're trying to get new language in our contract. The federal government can tell you to have random drug testing but it can't mandate discipline. If we don't succeed, I know at next year's party, people are going to look at the brownies and ask themselves, "Do I want to eat these?"

## MAILROOM CLERK — REGGIE

I worked at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank on Cap-

itol Hill. It's a group of attorneys, columnists, whatever, who crank out — daily or weekly or whatever — information. It's printed downstairs, in the xerox room, and distributed to senators, congressmen, and other influential people. In a couple of cases I delivered packages addressed to Ed Meese. That gives you an idea of what kind of people work there. My basic duties were to collect mail in the mornings from the post office, sort it, distribute it, and so on. I pretty much did everything myself and I had a lot of responsibility.

I got the job right after high school. I had never heard of the organization, and just found the job through the

newspaper. When I was working there, I would occasionally glance at what they were putting out; the more I read, the more I thought about it and realized that they were doing fucked-up things, like defending business practices in South Africa and U.S. investments there.

They have a big fundraising deal, and when they send out fundraising requests, people would mail in checks. Sometimes they'd be huge amounts, and sometimes they were piddling. Checks came in from individuals as well as companies. So I'd randomly take an envelope, open it, see how much it was for, and throw it in the shredder. I started doing it more and more. I could tell if it was a check by holding it to the light. If so, I'd toss it, dump it or shred it.

graphic by Tracy Cox



## BICYCLE MESSENGER—KENNY

Being a bike messenger in Seattle is hellish, but we had it kind of cush. We had to work our butts off, but at least we got paid by the hour.

The company always let us wear shorts, but since we had to wear company T-shirts, we cut off the sleeves. All of a sudden the company decided to clean up its image because they were dealing with big businesses. They started making us wear long pants and shirts made of heavy material, which is insane. Try biking ten miles up hills, up massive hills with heavy packages as fast as you can, in long pants!

All of the messengers agreed there was no way this could continue. We all decided that we wouldn't wash our clothes at all and that we'd wear the

same thing every day. We also realized that the intense heat you build up when you bike, mixed with the right food, means you're farting all the time. So we found the right type of food that caused the worst type of explosions, and whenever we were in a big office building, we farted. You can imagine what it was like when one of us was in an elevator with ten businesspeople in suits. Our clothes were stinking, our bodies were stinking and within a month the company had enough complaints to let us wear shorts again.

## BANK TELLER—JASON

I was sick of starving so I needed a job. I walked into the California Employment Development Department and this was posted on the wall: "Be a bank teller. We'll train you." I didn't have any experience at all. I just went in and took an aptitude and math test and aced them both. Then I went to a week of teller school that was run by Bank of America. They taught me how to count money, handle irate people, and what to do if someone pulled a gun on me.

The job was okay. It was just a job but I was getting paid more money than I had ever been paid before. I ended up working there for a little more than a year. There wasn't that much job pressure at first, but then there was this weird reorganization. I started out working part time, but then they had me doing other work and paid me at a lower rate for these extra hours. I was working full time but classified as part time so I wound up making less but working more. I got kind of tired of working full time but I was told that if I wanted to keep my job I would have to keep working those hours—they refused to hire me full time.

This is when I put the word out to my friends that I would cash any check, just come on down. So over the course of a couple of days, there was a stream of people who had forged checks, or had scammed them somehow and I cashed them. The next day was the busiest day of the year for that particular branch; a Friday, the first of October, payday for welfare, Social Security, San Francisco General, MUNI, the City, and private business. The line was out the door and I just didn't show up. My soon-to-be-wife, who also worked there with me, didn't show up either. We were the two best tellers at the bank and we were also the only ones who spoke English as our first language. It just wrecked that

branch. I think that did more damage than all of the bad checks that I'd cashed. I never went back. They tried to call but we didn't answer the phone for a week.

Eventually all those checks came back as bad. I knew that if you steal from a bank from the inside, you'll never be prosecuted because it hurts the bank's reputation. So I didn't think twice about doing what I did. I did it to get even, which I don't think really happened, but it did make me feel better.

## SENIOR OFFICER—BRUCE

Federal employees are subjected to a wide range of management styles. The agencies and bureaus have widely different missions and very little training and development for their "professional" supervisors and managers. As a result, there is a widely divergent set of standards among even adjoining offices.

The Federal Executive Board is a loose internal organization which establishes certain policies and procedures for federal agencies in a particular section of the U.S.—the "somebodies" who determine snow days and administrative leave. "Snow days" are reserved for worsening snow conditions, while "administrative leaves" are arbitrary employee leaves given around the Christmas holidays.

On a particularly slow Christmas Eve workday, I called the Regional Manager of all Northeast federal operations. I introduced myself to his secretary as "Steve Watkins" of the Federal Executive Board. The name was entirely fictitious, but the affiliation wasn't lost on the secretary. In a flash, she patched me through to the man who managed the entire Northeast.

Although I was a bit panicked, I plunged ahead and breezily introduced myself.

"Hello Ralph," I boomed. "This is Steve Watkins with the Federal Executive Board. How are you?"

This was the moment of truth. If he realized that he'd never heard of Steve Watkins, or had taken a similar phone call minutes earlier, the game would be up.

"Oh, hi Steve, how are you?"

This was fantastic! The Northeast Regional Manager was schmoozing away on the phone with a non-existent peer, at taxpayer expense.

"Ralph," I continued, "I thought I'd better call. We've decided that as of 3:00



pm you can let the chickens out of the coop.”

“Great!” said Ralph. He thanked me for the call and we exchanged hearty Christmas wishes.

It was a done deal and I was weak with relief. True to his word, Ralph called all his agency heads and, probably struggling into his own winter boots, passed on the good news. Within twenty minutes, all of the tiniest sub-offices across hundreds of miles in six different states had received the word. If news travels fast, good news goes out like a rocket.

I take pride in single-handedly affording hundreds of federal employees a crack at some last-minute Christmas shopping.

## PROSTITUTE—JANE

I slept with men for money. I worked in a brothel that was advertised as a massage parlor with five other women on an eight-hour shift. The majority of customers were just married, middle class men. Some guys were disabled and had a hard time finding someone to be with, so it was easier for them to pay for it.

The owner got tired of the business so he took on this new partner. This new guy couldn't handle things and stopped coming into the parlor except to pick up the money at the end of each night. So, we got to manage ourselves. We were in charge of all the money, but our rent, bills and the cops were all still paid by the owner, which was the best part.

The men would come in and pick the girl they wanted. When we got them in the room alone, we would find out what they wanted. We were making pretty good money—but then we decided to up our rates. It was supposed to be \$60 dollars for a hand job, \$70 for a blow job and \$80 for a full service, which is what we called sex. We started charging \$80, \$90 and \$100. The customers couldn't really argue with us because we could do practically whatever we wanted. Sometimes we kept the place open later or opened up earlier than we were supposed to. Everybody was supposed to do three customers a day; that was the average. The owners didn't know how many customers came in on a night or how much was charged.

Each night we picked a woman to run the books. She would keep track of the money that came in, the room fees, and if a customer used a credit card. The woman doing the books would docu-

Yes. It's true. I am disappointed in the outcome of the Persian Gulf War.



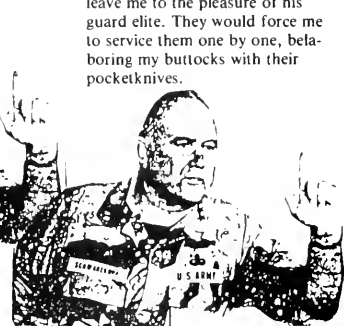
Days later, I would be strapped into a harness and suspended above a large vat of the collected syphilitic urine of hundreds of male prostitutes. A lowly peasant would be invited to toss a baseball at a target which would release my bound form into the vat.



You see, I have always had a fantasy that one day a war would come. I would put the best of my abilities to work and yet I would be crushed and defeated. The enemy would burst into my headquarters and take me prisoner.

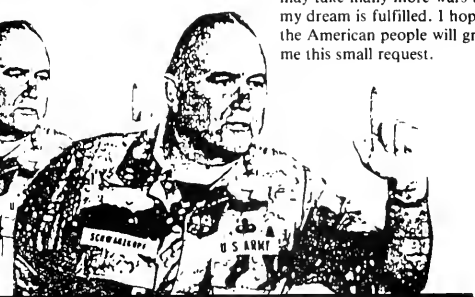


The national press would be unable to resist publicizing the image of my tightly bound fat bulging from the bindings as I gargle helplessly in the pustulant pool. Our nation would hold its breath in shame and horror!



Blindfolded, I would be brought before their leader. He would violate my body repeatedly with his personal firearm, and then leave me to the pleasure of his guard elite. They would force me to service them one by one, belaboring my buttocks with their pocketknives.

This is not too much to ask. That I may find one day an enemy which I can submit to. It may take many more wars before my dream is fulfilled. I hope that the American people will grant me this small request.



ment most of the customers but leave out three a night, which would total about \$60 that she got to keep. Each night we took our turn doing the books. We all agreed to it and it worked out great. We worked really well with each other and all became friends.

This gave us the feeling of being more than just prostitutes, because we had control over our bodies and what we were doing.

## PLUMBER—PEDRO

Like my father, I've been doing plumbing pretty much my whole life. Our family was kind of poor, so I worked through high school.

A friend and I had a job where we were doing the plumbing for a house under construction. It was a side job, working directly for the owner. We had done all of the copper pipes that go underneath the concrete floor of the house. The concrete had been poured over the pipes, which had been looped up through the floor to hook up to the fixtures. It was at this stage when the owner started going back on his word. He said, after the job had been done,

that the quote we agreed on was too much. He said, "I can't pay you for this and I'll only pay you for that." Then he said something like, "You're not even licensed, so I might not pay you at all." The guy thought he could save money and finish it himself.

We immediately got bad attitudes. We packed the water pipes full of nails. We didn't do all of the pipes, but we put enough nails in there so he would have a problem. We could have used a high pressure hose to blow the nails out if we knew we were going to finish the job, but it never happened, so we left them in there.

He came back to us later because every time he turned on the faucets in his brand new house he heard all of this rattling. What he didn't know was that not only was he going to have the noises, but in time the nails would rust up, wrecking the washers in the faucets.

We definitely got more satisfaction than guilt from what we did. We didn't have anything to lose. I still think we got fucked because we didn't get paid, but he got fucked too. You gotta cover your ass any way that you can.

# SAME OLD SAME OLD

**A**T THE OLD JOB SISSY hadn't been paid much, but it was close to where she lived. If one of the kids was sick, she could put him on a pallet on the floor of her office. Or run out on Thursdays to take her daughter to gymnastics class. No one complained if Sissy took extra time getting in or left a little early. The job was convenient, and that in itself made it an unusual and desirable situation.

When Sissy first came to her old job, her boss was vice-president in charge of production. Short and tidy with cropped hair, she wore rumpled tweed jackets and boy's trousers, and always made a point of telling Sissy how great her legs were—something men never said. This woman had lived with a female companion for over ten years, and they had had one child by artificial insemination.

At the old job Sissy managed to survive the tidal waves of cut-backs and lay-offs, even though she was officially laid off twice. The first time she stayed in her office tidying up, thinking that what was happening to everyone else wasn't really happening to her. The delusion worked because by closing time, they had found another position to offer her. She went from technical editor to telemarketer, or as Sissy put it, TEL-MAR-KETEER, sung to the Mouseketeer theme.

However, the vice-president in charge of production went bye-bye in this first round of lay-offs. The date happened to coincide with her fortieth birthday, and on the spot she told Sissy that she had made the final decision to have a sex change. All the way with hormones and surgery. She said she had always been a man trapped in a woman's body. When Sissy saw her a year later, she had a rough complexion, a deep voice, plentiful growths of hair on her arms, and a new executive job.

Also, she was in the middle of a nasty divorce since her girlfriend didn't want to live with a man. Sissy realized she hadn't really been a lesbian after all. The former vice-pres in charge of production told Sissy that the greatest thing about her new life was going into the men's room and not having anyone look at you funny. It was always hard for Sissy to remember to call her "him."

The marketing manager was Sissy's new boss, and he decided that she should take the Southeast territory, meaning the last and worst choice. As far as everyone else was concerned, the South was the garbage can of sales, but Sissy was from Georgia and with her accent she left the other telemarketers with New York and Los Angeles accents in the dust. In fact, in the first month Sissy sold \$25,000 worth of software on a cold call to Chattanooga.

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**All around her, Sissy saw variations of the same people she had already met and worked with in another town at another place.**

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The second time Sissy was laid off, she stuck around again. By closing, it turned out that someone in publications had upped and quit in disgust so she automatically got his job.

No one in the company wanted to lay Sissy off because of her kids. She needed the money and the health plan. But Sissy discovered that in the business world no matter how much anyone said they liked and wanted you, or how many times they told you what a good job you were doing, when it came to cuts, the word was always that it was out of their hands. Being a corporation meant you could always pass along the blame, and at lay-off time, it was the board of directors' decision, whom nobody had ever met. Sissy learned in her first experience with lay-offs that corporate life fundamentally depended on secrecy at the top.

When Sissy asked her co-workers if that was really how they wanted their world run, they always shook their heads, no, no, no. But when you came right down to it, everyone was scared in the pants about losing their job. In other words, no matter what you thought about the world or how unselfishly you tried to live your life, you were always relieved when the other guy got it and you did not. That was how the system worked.

Basically Sissy continued to survive because everyone at the company thought she was smart. That was how she had gotten along at school too. Although she never did the best work, teachers assumed she could and rewarded her with A's.

Sissy's cousin, Ada Lynn, insisted their cross in life wasn't only looks but brains, too. Ada Lynn said that beauty plus intelligence was too much of a package for most men. And that's why they had the problems they did.

But Ada Lynn was being kind. She was definitely the one with the looks and was the cheerleader, homecoming queen, Miss Georgia Chick, etc. Since the seventh grade, Sissy had watched while boys and men responded to Ada Lynn, observing that if you were beautiful, it only served as an asset up to a point. After that point it was definitely a liability. If you were ugly, the process worked in reverse—first rejection, and then a lifetime of trust.

Part of what Ada Lynn said was true. Back then Sissy had been very smart. Now she wasn't so sure. She asked Ada Lynn how come if she were such a genius, she found herself supporting a couple kids from fathers who did nothing to help her pay the bills? That probably required the intelligence quotient of a turtle. Stupidier than a turtle, she corrected. At least, a turtle left her eggs to fend for themselves.

She also wondered how, with her good looks and beauty trophies, Ada Lynn had ended up a young widow with three kids and bottomless debts.

One day the president of Sissy's

company (and there were five in the last eighteen months of its existence) announced to Sissy that he had saved her job at the last board meeting. He had told them what great work she was doing, how many kids she had, what good grades they made in school, and how smart she was. Blah blah blah. Although Sissy was grateful, she understood that now she owed him something and it was a smarmy feeling at best.

A few days later, the president asked Sissy if she could possibly find time to help him pick out a pair of new dress shoes. He explained that he never made the right decisions when it came to clothes, and since his wife had left him, he needed a W-O-M-A-N to come along.

It only took Sissy a moment to recall a piece of her genetic inheritance—stone coldness, straight from her grandmother Olivia—and very effectively Sissy icily explained that surely the president must understand that as a single mother, blah, blah, her responsibilities outside the job were overwhelming. In other words, she could never in a million years and not if he were the last man on the planet.

This president prided himself on the efforts he made to be open and clear to his employees, with the expectation that each of them should tell him everything. This was the result of management training courses in sensitivity at Harvard Business school. "My door is always open," "don't think you can't come to me with anything," blah, blah, blah. "If you're having problems" or "if you see someone else having problems," etc.

Honestly, he did try to be communicative, and it was true that his door was always open. But it mostly served to let everyone hear the arguments he had with his ex-wife's lawyer. As president, this man functioned under the illusion that the company was a tribe planting the same seeds, reaping the same harvest. The difference was that he was making an annual \$100,000 to dig for roots, while Sissy was making a crummy twenty-two.

A week after he asked Sissy to help him find a new pair of shoes, he must have noticed that she had stopped speaking to him. One morning as she slithered past his gaping door, he called out, "Sissy, could you come in here for a moment? I'd like to speak to you." After asking her to sit down and shutting the two exterior doors, he invited her to

express her feelings. Unless you've been asked to go shopping by your boss, it would be impossible for you to know how disgusting a request this was.

"Has something I've said offended you?" He inquired. "Has it anything to do with suggesting you go with me on an innocent trip to the mall?"

Sissy told him she hated to shop for other people's shoes and then she got frank. She said that she resented his friendliness and his assumptions. She probably would have lost her job on the next go-round, but he got canned a week later. She felt bad when she heard he didn't even know about it until he arrived at the board meeting.

At this company it was the joke that you couldn't get hired unless you were handicapped or aberrant. Sissy's claim to being strange was her mysterious past. Anyone could look in her face and see that. One of her incisors was gold and she had a crescent moon tattooed on the inside of her left forearm. She had lived in Guatemala and almost died when her appendix burst on a bus in Afghanistan. She had walked across Borneo and followed the sacred elephant with the Buddha's tooth through the mountains of Sri Lanka on the second full moon in August. Sissy's face showed stories which she never told anyone. Who would believe them after seeing the kind of ordinary problems she had now?

The last aberration to come on board before the company went under was a man whose voice was so high that it was reasonable to assume he had had a terrible accident in the vicinity of his private parts. However, once the company really started to roll downhill, his voice lowered two octaves, and he officially took over as comptroller.

Towards the end, Sissy unofficially

changed her job title to Czarina of Sales because her territory in two years had expanded from the pitiful Southeast to the Eastern division of the entire United States and Canada. From educational and textbook distribution to international markets. In other words, she had the whole world, and it was all her vast but crumbling empire.

Sissy's greatest friend at the old company was a world renowned chef who had fallen on hard times. He came to fill in as a receptionist and stayed on. Not only was he a master cook, but he knew everything about opera. He explained to Sissy the difference between a Mozart and Verdi soprano and told her that Callas' greatness was her mortality. "When she sings," he said, "you can hear her burning up."

After the company closed down, he stayed on to help sort files, discovering that every company transaction had been documented dozens of times. He said the nightmare of the entire century lay by the ton in the dumpster out back, and in these times the only reason people had jobs was to create files that no one looked at or needed.

Although it wasn't loyalty that made Sissy stay, after so many internal troubles, financial vicissitudes, and a vicious lawsuit, loyalty was how it appeared. Sissy had stayed as the company declined from its original robust sixty to its pathetic finale of seven employees. When it was over, the last president commended her and the others for their doggedness over a bottle of expensive champagne.

Now Sissy had a new job. The duties were the same as the old job, but the new company was in Lafayette where she didn't have her own office, where she had to commute, where there wasn't

graphic by Hugh d'Andrade



a pool to swim in at lunch.

At the new job Sissy noticed right away that the place was full of weirdos, and it was nearly an identical set to the old place. There was a transsexual, man to woman, in customer service. And the technician who set up Sissy's computer was a soft spoken guy like her anti-macho friend Roberto at the old company. Besides gentle manners and the same first name they both wore baggy purple pants and two tiny gold hoop earrings in the same ear.

In the cubicle next to Sissy's was another familiar face, a robust Irishman with a Dolby stereo voice. He brought in donuts, organized frisbee tag at Friday lunch, and obsessed about Women. He was a version of her fellow cheerleader and rival in the old telemarketing department.

On her second day at the new job, the Irishman cornered Sissy by the xerox machine and asked what kind of music she liked, where she went on weekends, if she liked to go out dancing, etc. A series of enthusiastic questions from him was followed by a round of listless responses from Sissy. Finally, after a few weeks he asked her what she thought a man should do who had a crush on a girl who never noticed. "Nothing," Sissy said. "Absolutely nothing at all."

The two women who ran the art department at the new company were exactly like the two who had run it at the old. Thin, cheerful gals nearing forty, with neatly combed pony-tails, oversized glasses, and lipstick that never cracked. They wore outfits, meaning they shopped in department stores, and never cut or dyed their hair themselves.

The young man who supervised shipping at the new company was a version of the one who had run it at the old. Both were skinny shag blonds whose calf muscles bulged like rolled socks. They typically wore cut-off jeans, cropped Van Halen T-shirts, and drove four-wheel-drive trucks plastered with mylar decals.

At the new job there were two clerical gals who Sissy could have been friends with, but it would have taken five years. They were good looking black women whose large plastic earrings always matched their blouses. They did their job fine but they made relentless fun of the place. Something Sissy totally approved of. After all, they weren't being paid not to.

On the other hand, Sissy's new boss was being paid plenty to take everything very seriously, and he had the car to prove

it. Sissy, however, liked him a lot. He was handsome, tall, foreign with an elegant wardrobe. Most of all, he was smart. He ran the company like the province that his family owned in the third world country of his origin. Nothing went out without his approval.

At the old job, coincidentally, the company's founder had also been tall, foreign, suave, and wore custom-made clothes from Hong Kong. And at both companies this sign hung by the coffee machine:

### **Nine World Religions In A Nutshell**

**Taoism:** Shit happens.

**Confucianism:**

Confucius say, "Shit happens."

**Buddhism:**

If shit happens, it isn't really shit.

**Zen:** What is the sound of shit happening?

**Hinduism:** This shit happened before.

**Islam:** If shit happens,  
it is the will of Allah.

**Protestantism:**

Let shit happen to someone else.

**Catholicism:**

If shit happened, you deserved it.

**Judaism:**

Why does shit always happen to us?

They were all pretty good but Sissy liked the Protestant one best. It fit in with the feeling everyone had at lay-off time.

It didn't take long before the similarities between the old company and the new company had Sissy spooked. Multiplying coincidence times probability, she came up with a few slight variations and a bunch of uncanny resemblances. Something greater than weird.

Sissy tried to reason, tried to joke, but the more she pushed the similarities out of her mind the more the new job appeared like a phantom clone of the old. Soon it wasn't funny. Maybe she had died one night on the freeway coming home from work and was instantly reincarnated as an office worker. That's why things were a little off. A classic case of bad karma.

Sissy had watched enough episodes of the *Twilight Zone* with her kids, especially the 24-hour marathon when they all curled up in front of the television and ate popcorn for dinner, to know that people did get lost in time or space and did end up in places that seemed like somewhere else.

Sissy, in fact, went through the list of psychological maladies, family curses, and various religious beliefs, to try to figure out explanations for her circum-

stance. All around her, Sissy saw variations of the same people she had already met and worked with in another town at another place.

She called her cousin Ada Lynn to ask if she had ever considered her to be crazy.

"You know, like a nut," Sissy asked. "Like the kind of person that grows on trees in our family."

Ada Lynn told Sissy that the only time she ever thought she might be a little off was when she took up with the sax player who didn't have a real house and camped out in the woods. Ada Lynn said she thought that with all the troubles Sissy had keeping the kids together, she might have hooked up with someone a little more substantial. But it hadn't lasted long, and Ada Lynn assured her that except for that one little incident of romantic misguidance, she considered Sissy the sanest person she knew.

Sissy said that even though she might not be crazy, maybe she was having a nervous breakdown. Maybe the strings that had held her together while she made the money to go to the store to buy the things the kids needed were starting to wear out. Maybe she was losing it. Ada Lynn told her if she were having a nervous breakdown, she probably wouldn't know it. Her kids would know it, her boss would know it, but she wouldn't be calling up with an inquiry. That just didn't make sense.

Okay, so Sissy wasn't crazy, wasn't cracking up, then why did everything that was different look the same? Ada Lynn said she had had times when the world looked the same way to her, too. Ever since she was a teenager, Ada Lynn had always had more than one boyfriend. Even when she was married, she had someone on the side. Ada Lynn swore that from time to time something would happen where she couldn't tell the men in her life apart.

"Talk about horrible," she said. "I would go into a panic. I could not tell which was which, who was who and got so scared that I was going to get their names mixed up, I stopped seeing all of them. I moved out of the master bedroom and in with one of the kids for a week. Don't you think I thought I had some kind of disease?" Ada Lynn asked. "Sure as hell I did. Don't you think I drove myself to the neurologist in Atlanta as fast as I could. They took tests and gave me tranquilizers, but they always told me there was absolutely nothing wrong with my brain, Sissy,



graphic by Angela Bocage

and that is what I am telling you.”

“Then what is wrong?” Sissy cried.

Ada Lynn suggested that maybe there was another explanation. Maybe Sissy had already seen too much in her lifetime, traveling to Borneo and Sikkim like she had, having all those different colored lovers, living in a tepee in New Mexico, eating peyote and psychedelic mushrooms, etc. Ada Lynn said all that had soaked up Sissy’s capacity, “saturated” was the word she used, to see the differences in things like office work. At that level it probably did look alike. Ada Lynn said maybe everything was starting to blend.

“But don’t you think blending sufficient cause for alarm?” Sissy asked.

Sure, she did. “That’s why you have got to quit your job,” Ada Lynn told her.

Sissy knew that was the truth, but she didn’t know how she could. She’d been working in an office and taking care of kids and doing laundry and washing dishes and paying bills for a long, long time. Bad habits are always harder to break than good ones.

“Quit,” Ada Lynn said. “And do what you want for a while. See what happens. Things will work out.”

Do what you want. Do what you want. Do what you want. For a week those words rolled around in Sissy’s head like a sackful of marbles.

Then Sissy called Ada Lynn and told her that she had decided she didn’t care if the kids ate popcorn for dinner. “It won’t kill them. In fact, it’s good for them. Good to see that motherhood isn’t a crucifixion.” Sissy said that she was turning in her resignation the next day.

In the morning Sissy shouted into the hall of the two-bedroom apartment. When the kids arrived at the dinette table, Sissy was standing at the stove flipping Swedish pancakes, a dish usually reserved for Sunday.

“Mama, how come you’re making pancakes on Tuesday?”

“Mama, how come you’re not dressed?”

“Mama, aren’t you going to work today?”

“Mama, will you take me shopping?”

“Mama, are you sick?”

“Mama, why aren’t you going to work today?”

Why, why, why? The word bounced off the walls of the apartment a hundred times, as expressions of alarm passed along her children’s faces.

“Because I want to do what I want to do for a while,” Sissy said, low, slow and trembling.

That sounded good enough to the kids, for after all, they tried to do what they wanted to whenever they could get away with it. But as the sentence tumbled out of Sissy’s mouth, it was terrible. Childish, unmotherly, irresponsible. Yet she made herself repeat it, until the words got louder and more cheerful and she was singing, “I Ain’t Gonna Work on Maggie’s Farm No More” like a crazy woman. Singing and flipping Swedish pancakes.

After the kids left for school, Sissy called her best friend and sang to her. Called her ex-husband and sang to him. Her cousin Ada Lynn and sang to her. Then she went to her boss, stopped into the unemployment agency. And all the time she was singing. And you could hear mortality in her voice. You could hear Sissy burning up. She sang she didn’t want to work on Maggie’s farm no more. Sang she wasn’t going to work on Maggie’s farm no more. Said she had had enough of working on Maggie’s farm. And thanks to Bob Dylan, everybody knew what she meant.

— Summer Brenner

# MARRIAGES OF INCONVENIENCE



In the anxious gasoline-rationed summer of 1974, I was awarded my Master's degree from a California State University. I awoke from thesis-and-orphans trance to realize that my student visa was about to expire. I had come to the U.S. five years earlier as an undergraduate and had moved straight from my B.A. at the University of California into grad school. Now I was going to have to go "home" — that is, back to the country of my birth, which I had been trying so hard to forget about. Like most Northern European nations, mine was in those days a pretty comfortable place, with a cradle-to-grave welfare state, a low rate of violent crime, and the prospect of subsidized further education if I wanted it. It was also repressed, conformist, rainy in summer and icy in winter, and very dull. I decided to stay on in California — forget the rest of the country — by hook or by crook.

Hook was out: I had not been trained as an aerospace engineer or a portfolio management specialist, so no company was going to write an affidavit claiming the irreplaceable uniqueness of my potential contribution to the American GNP. In fact, I had virtually no saleable skills other than fluent English, a knowledge of my chosen field of scholarship sufficient to get me a low-paid job in a junior technical college, and a certain talent for oral sex. I decided to try Crook: that is, find someone to marry.

Alison, my girlfriend of four years, was off the list. She was plausible enough, with an Ivy League B.A. and WASP credentials, but she was allergic to marriage after a messy divorce a few years back. Also, what if they found out she was a part-time dominatrix, or checked her criminal record and discovered the speeding tickets, the two prostitution busts, and the arrests for demonstrating in support of the Black Panthers? Then there was my ex-lover Naomi. She too was a somewhat shell-shocked veteran of the late 'sixties counterculture — a surrealist poet, on-and-off spiritual seeker, and anarchist-feminist — but had managed to stay out of the official spotlight. Better yet, she was currently my housemate, living on welfare with a

big old North Oakland Victorian. We would even legitimately have the same address; and if Immigration gave us one of those notorious third-degree interviews about our personal habits, she would know just what I ate for breakfast and which side of the bed I slept on.

I'm not sure what combination of substances Naomi had ingested that day — she had a formidable appetite for all sorts of psychotropic agents — but rather to my surprise she agreed to become my official spouse. What a pal, I thought. Sure enough, a week or two and a blood test later Naomi came with me in a thrift-shop dress and her one pair of nylons to the Alameda County Courthouse. We got hitched by a grey little Republican judge whose indifference to us was so complete that his face has smudged in my memory like a greasy thumbprint. Then we went home and drank tequila.

Next we had to go to the dismal chamber at the Immigration and Naturalization Service offices on Sansome Street where aspirants to the Promised Land filed Petitions for Permanent Resident Status. In those days one had to stand for four or five hours in a serpentine line defined by blue vinyl ropes, with no place to sit down, in order to reach a bored clerk who took the fee and stamped the papers. The long counter was adorned with eagle-sealed official threats about falsifying information and with one of those posters showing a kitten dangling by its front claws from a bar and captioned "Hang in there, baby."

Alas, Naomi felt unable to heed this patronizing advice any further. Ten months later, one week before the interview at the INS, she got a Real Job with a Financial District company. Unmoved by all my pleading, she refused to come with me to Migra Central because the absence would look bad to her boss. Needless to say, despite my short haircut and new tweed jacket, my solo appearance before the crisp, Mormonoid young INS official lacked a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Further detracting from my attractiveness as a Good Alien was a fat, dog-eared dossier on the agent's desk, whose title I read upside-down with a ghastly feeling of sudden free fall. It was a copy of

my FBI file, packed with fun facts from my days as a campus radical during the Let's-Crater-Cambodia Era, not to mention my more recent media-guerrilla hijinx. The Mormonoid smirked a bit as he said he would have to take my case under consideration.

Another long wait — about twenty-two months, actually. By this time I had moved in with Alison, while Naomi and her writer boyfriend Kevin were living downstairs from us in another apartment. During the interim I had gone to great lengths to make it appear that I was living with Naomi in their flat, in preparation for the inevitable visit from the INS investigator. I left my books in her shelves, my clothes (improbably labeled with my name) in the chest of drawers, and actually sat with ever-increasing awkwardness in a corner of her living room every evening from 5:30 to 7:00, prime time for La Migra. Kevin dis-coursed amiably enough between chugs of Bud about the bit players in the Six-o'clock Movie, but Naomi stepped around me as if I were a cat-turd she hadn't yet had the stomach to scrape off the floor. Finally neither of us could stand it any more. So when the INS foreigner-finder showed up, I wasn't there. Naomi told him I was just upstairs visiting the neighbors — which in a sense was true. (What he made of Kevin, who had hair to his waist and smelled like the bottom of a keg-tub after a frat party, I'll never know.) He didn't stick around to find out if she was telling the truth, but left his card and said he'd be back. After I climbed down off the ceiling with the aid of half a pint of schnapps, visions of deportation jangling in my brain (ohdeargodthey'llmarchmeouttotheplaneinlegirons! I'llnevergetbackherever) I decided it was time to get an expensive lawyer.

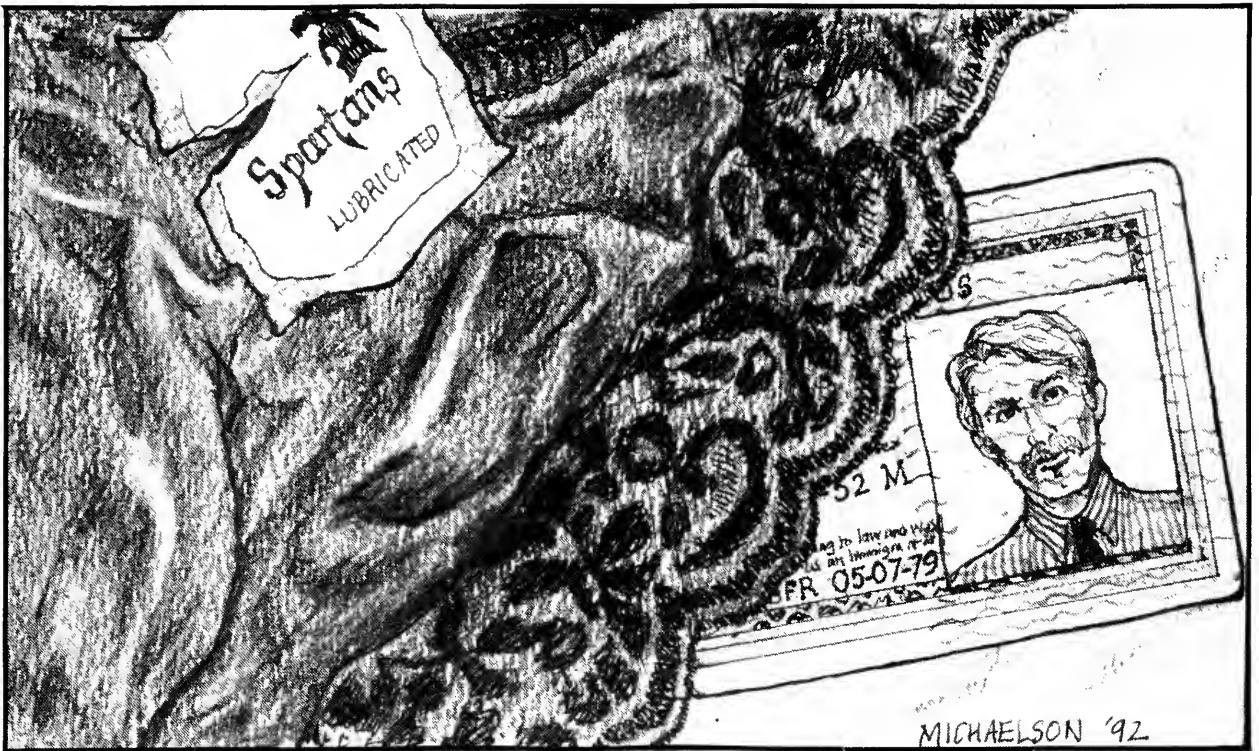
I say expensive because I had already tried cheap Leftist lawyers and found them unsatisfactory. The first, a referral from the Lawyer's Guild, was a weedy, earnestly liberal fellow with a preppy manner that was about two sizes too large for him. He made sympathetic noises and advised me to fly home and start over. The next two I visited worked for Legal Assistance offices in Latino neighborhoods. They were brusque,

cold, and utterly unhelpful. After all, they intimated, I was a gringo — an Aryan in fact — and middle-class, so my problems were trivial. But my new attorney was the goods, an immigration specialist for over thirty years. A large, rotund, owl-faced man in his early seventies with cigar ash down his vest, he pressed the tips of his fingers together and remarked in an undiluted Bronx accent that this was indeed "a matta of some deli-cussy." Calmly, he advised me to divorce Naomi and marry Alison. Then, he said, we could "draw a veil" over the previous marriage.

Luckily I had gotten a straight and quite lucrative job while waiting for the Sword of the State to drop, while Naomi was unemployed once more. I was able to ship her off to friends in Reno, where she established residency after two weeks and was able to run our marriage through the Nevada Divorce-o-Mat. Over the phone she complained bitterly of how bored she was with no Kevin, no drugs, and not even enough pocket money to go gambling, but she did it.

That was the easy part. Getting Alison to marry me was quite another matter. Her marriage allergy was intensified by the fact that our relationship was, as you Americans say, circling the drain. We had long since parted ways ideologically, she having turned into a New Age Joy-Junkie while I stuck to my anarcho-marxist guns. More important, she had been seeing another man, a charming if somewhat dissipated actor, two nights a week for about a year. From this fellow she had acquired herpes, the gift that keeps on giving. Of course, she vehemently asserted when we both got those nasty little blisters that I had given it to her. This was because, some three months earlier, I had finally, in exhausted retaliation, fallen in love with a wonderful Rebel Girl named Morgan — smart, sweet, and honorable. And (suitably rubbered) I was passionately entwined with Morgan whenever I got the chance, alternating love-making with pillow talk about Hegel and the Labor Theory of





graphic by Louis Michaelson

Value. But despite Morgan's unhesitating offer to marry me, and precisely because I adored her, I couldn't take her up on it. The whole thing was too new, and she was only twenty-one to my twenty-eight. Not only that, but I had almost finished paying for Alison's graduate training as—what else?—a Marriage, Family and Child Counselor, which made me imminently dispensable to her. To call our relationship "troubled" would be like describing Mike Tyson as "touchy."

Never one to let logic or equity stand in her way, moreover, Alison had become frantically jealous of Morgan. For some reason this green-eyed fury intensified when I, ironically equipped with a dozen red roses, popped the question. Finally, after cursing me almost continuously for three days, Alison sullenly agreed to tie the knot. We were married on her lunch hour.

The next day I had my lawyer file the petitions with the INS. He swept through Sansome's Inferno in a genial cigar-scented breeze, brushing aside bureaucrats like dry leaves: you could almost see them diving under the desks when he appeared.

Alison and I passed the ten months or so between petition and interview in alternate crockery-smashing Armageddon and fake-cheery mutual tolerance, humping our respective extramarital honeys

on the agreed nights (though Alison, losing what shreds of cool she had left, took to calling me at Morgan's place at two in the morning and whining about being lonely). Still, we found out once again what had always held our seven-year struggle together: lust. Under these bizarre conditions we had sex that, while not involving sheep, rubber masks, baguettes, or Boy Scout uniforms, was *emotionally* kinky and lurid in quite indescribable ways. This may be why on the day of the interview, Alison put on her protoyuppiest outfit (over black lace Frederick's of Hollywood underwear; she couldn't do it completely straight), I slipped on my new Italian suit and red silk tie, and we sailed into the drab little office hand in hand in true ruling-class style.

I noticed right away that my file on the desk was slim as a televangelist's alibi and brand new. The examiner caught my glance and announced sheepishly that my original file had been "misplaced." (I've always like to think that Old Deli-Cussy had called in a favor and had had the file shredded accidentally-on-purpose). Under these conditions, with both of us so clearly articulate, well-scrubbed, and gainfully employed members of the Master Race, the interview was scarcely more than a formality. The examiner shook my hand and welcomed me to the United States.

Not too long after that I came home unexpectedly early one afternoon to find Alison being buggered in our bed by one of the actor's buddies. This solidified my resolve to extricate myself as soon as possible and give myself over to Morgan and True Love. But I didn't dare pack my toothbrush, Goethe's *Selected Works*, and leather jockstrap until I got my Green Card. For all I knew they had found my old dossier again and determined to come get me at the earliest opportunity. I *had* to stay put with my lawfully wedded wife. Understandably, Morgan got tired of waiting and went off to Labor History grad school in Boston. Even more ominous, before she left she had met a handsome and charismatic young revolutionary, closer to her age than mine, and had taken quite a shine to him—while he had, with the painful obviousness of youth, fallen as hard for her as I did. We detested each other: if looks could kill, we would both have been shrink-wrapped in styrofoam trays.

At last the little plastic-coated, computer-coded card arrived in the mail. Terminally exasperated with Alison and frantic that I would lose Morgan, I moved out within a month. At this point, naturally, Alison decided that I was her One True Love. With my Smith & Wesson .38 she staged tearful suicide vigils which I was summoned to interrupt at all hours

of the day and night. Then she threatened to turn me in to the INS and demanded hush money. In between these outbursts she radiated pheromones of such potency that (against what I laughingly call my better judgement) I more than once succumbed to her undoubted if neurotic charms. But I didn't move back in: and one morning I came over to find her voluptuously damp and disheveled and the editor of a local up-market glossy scurrying around in the Pendleton bathrobe she had shoplifted for me last birthday. My services, it seemed, were no longer required.

Then the roof fell in. Back in Boston, Morgan had yielded to her ardent young admirer, who had moved out there to be with her. I tried everything I could to detach her from him—impassioned declarations by phone, sheafs of love poems, broken pleading—but after much agonizing back-and-forth she decided to stay with him. I was heartbroken. But I had my little green Ticket to Opportunity. I was a Legal Permanent Resident of the United States, at liberty, equipped with a Master's degree, a suit, and a functioning set of glands and erogenous zones. Now let me tell you about my next two marriages...

—Marius Horn, as told to Louis Michaelson

# BLOOD MONEY

**I** AWOKE JUST AFTER sunrise in order to present myself to J-Mar Biologicals the minute their doors opened at 7:30. By 8:45 I walked out with \$10.00 in my wallet and a hole in my arm inside my elbow. Having done my duty to my family, I stopped to have \$3.00 of gas put in the car. I stared at the ten-dollar bill in my hand, as if my gaze could somehow penetrate its mysteries. The bill was soft, velvety and limp. I wanted to fathom its depths and capture some elusive meaning from its inscrutable surface, since I had so blatantly exchanged something of myself for it; so soon to be handed over and lesser change to replace its meager measure.

So here we are. Within the first day, Lindsay dubbed this town "Spring-a-leak-field, Oregon" and I am not only inclined to agree, I have championed the name. Springfield is the poor, shirt-tail relation to its hip and educated older cousin, Eugene, just minutes away across the (what rhymes with dammit? Willamette!) river. Eugene is a college town full of lushly shaded streets lined with sleepy little woodframe houses. Springfield is an industrial bedroom, full of unemployed loggers on welfare; the dumping ground for those who couldn't cut higher education.

Your eyes and nose cannot help but notice the Weyerhaeuser factory as you pass directly by it on the road to our rented duplex. (Try to imagine what it would smell like if pine trees could fart.) Not to worry, this olfactory nuisance is only bothersome when the wind is blowing south, which so far seems to be a very equitable 25 percent of the time, or less. Sadly, I have to admit that I've become accustomed to it, to the point that I simply "notice" the smell, and then tune it out.

In spite of having been here for over a month, I seem to have a last, inner resistance to settling in this exact place.

In spite of the 22-foot truck and its two-ton overweight load of our Accumulated Things being emptied completely at our doorstep (make no mistake: we and Our Stuff aren't going anyplace else anytime soon), I've been plagued by a feeling—a nagging, irrational, unnamed, quasi-anxiety—that our life here is somehow "temporary." In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, I have held out inside my innermost heart that this duplex (with its avocado appliances, matted carpet, pitted linoleum, bathroom door hung backwards, huge though harmless two and a half spiders. . . . I could go on), that this job of Lindsay's (my intelligent, witty, talented husband pumping gas), that this financial wreck is really our life. We are still living suitcase-style three months after abandoning our tenuous toe-hold on normality in Los Angeles.

"WE DON'T WANT YOU BACK." They didn't say this, exactly, but that's what they meant, and I don't stick around where I'm not wanted. They'd have one helluva lawsuit on their hands were it not for one very fatal mistake I made just before leaving to give birth. Thus am I repaid for all my dedication,

a hole in my soul; a cavernous maw opening wider and wider; an expanding, terrifying emptiness. I turned the TV and VCR off, unable to continue watching.

Today, after living in this duplex for six weeks, I promised Lindsay that while he is gone doing laundry and donating plasma on his day off that I would put all the clothes away, so that when he returns home with the piles of clean clothes we can put those away too. I promised, but it feels empty, like I'm trying to force myself into admitting something I haven't conceptually grasped, even now.

At first, I found I was reluctant to admit that Lindsay and I are donating plasma to put food on the table. This is something winos do to buy their next bottle, not middle-class Mormon princesses who grew up with a washer and dryer in the basement and shoes from J.C. Penney. Still, my mother didn't sound surprised or shocked at all when I mentioned this to her, although this could have been studied nonchalance on her part.

I expect I would feel insufferably noble about my bi-weekly donations,



**"[Selling plasma] is something winos do to buy their next bottle, not middle-class Mormon princesses who grew up with a washer and dryer in the basement and shoes from J.C. Penney."**



(for example, staying on the phone long distance for two hours while enduring first stage labor up to just before transition).

"THEY DID ME A FAVOR." I didn't honestly have the guts to leave a colicky 8-week old infant with Lindsay and try to keep up my supply of breast milk while working ten-hour days and attempting to do the work of two or three people and failing dismally. Still, when I turned on PBS that evening to watch "The Computer, the KGB, and Me" and saw all those ten-inch magnetic tape reels and printers and CRTs, I felt

were they not dictated by sheer financial necessity. My first year in college I participated in a Red Cross blood drive. The nurse had to wiggle this HUGE needle around in my arm for a couple YEARS before my blood would flow. NO FUN. In spite of many opportunities over the years, particularly at science fiction conventions, I have never offered myself up for that sort of experience again. (Can anyone blame me?) Until now, that is. When I was pregnant with my firstborn, the obstetrician's nurse could not get any sort of blood sample, let alone the three and a half

vials they wanted. She stuck me at least five times with NO RESULTS before she gave up and called in the doctor, who stuck the side of my wrist, over my thumb. It was so sore that no one could take even the slightest hold of that wrist for three weeks. (I have never felt so completely manhandled and mistreated by the medical establishment as I felt from that office visit. There's just nothing to equal the experience of meeting for the first time the person in whose hands you will place your life and life of our baby after freezing your butt off for twenty minutes completely naked under nothing but a crummy sheet.)

Since that time my experience has given me cause to believe those technicians were simply somewhat inept and doubtless inexperienced. Lab technicians who stick people all day long for a living generally know what they're doing.

Notwithstanding, on my first visit to J-Mar the guy next to me had a very bad experience (complete with several exclamations of pain and blood on the armrest) and the technician had to call over the (obvious) expert of their group. She had gone too far and had punctured his muscle tissue. I kept my eyes on her the first time she stuck me, but it was prest-bingo and she said "Good Flow." So far I've had no repeat of my college freshman experience. Luckily, on my first visit I had the "expert," and the man next to me went through this trauma after I was already hooked and going (not that even what I saw and heard would have deterred me that first time). Just yesterday Lindsay had a painful experience similar to my unfortunate first-time neighbor. He really earned that bonus, as I suppose I will take my lumps too, at some point.

Let no one mistake: there is not the slightest thing generous about this. It is a purely selfish act and my conscience is assuaged only by the knowledge that J-Mar is obviously making money off my body's ability to reproduce plasma, and the plasma I "donate" is clean and untainted by HIV or other infections. I'm sure they lose a lot of money from first-time donors who are dishonest and subsequently rejected, not to mention those donors who are initially false-negative and who are—eventually (we hope!)—caught through random testing. So at the very least I do get to be unabashedly honest as I respond to the same old questions every time, again and again. And it's not such a god-awful



graphic by I.B. Nelson

way to spend an hour or so. The technicians are very friendly and I get to read without interruption.

I must confess the first several visits I found the sight of multiple reclining bodies hooked up to machines somewhat comical, reminding me of the movie *A Boy and His Dog* ("What God has joined let no man put asunder"). But just like the acrid stench from the local paper factory, I've become accustomed to the sight and now I don't find anything particularly odd, ironical, or otherwise notable about it, though I keep looking for the hidden meaning, as if it has only temporarily gone under-cover and will re-emerge if I just stare long enough without blinking.

So here we are. We are surviving (just barely) and my self-esteem is slowly on the mend. I still have mixed feelings about being a plasma donor. There's a sense of helplessness that flows out from my soul like water when I look at a pile of laundry in the corner. At \$1.50 a load, it piles up faster than J-Mar can pay for it. Spend an hour or so hooked up to a machine, put a few dollars of gas in the car, buy a couple cans of tuna, a couple gallons of milk, do a load of diapers, a load of jeans, and then you're broke again. Lindsay got paid, and I have a wish list that includes baby powder, light-bulbs, and shoelaces. . . .

NEVERTHELESS: in spite of everything. . . or maybe because of everything. . . oh what the hell. I think I will put those clothes away into drawers today, after all.

## POST SCRIPTUM

It started off badly. A painful stick and not a very good flow. Blood clots in the tubes. High pressure on the return cycle. Bruising of surrounding tissues. Burning sensation at the lightest touch. Bleeding under the skin: Hematoma. Give up on that one. Switch to other arm. More comfortable but needle clotted in short order. Try again a half-inch lower down on the vein. More bruising. Poor flow. Hematoma. If the red blood cells are not returned, donation is halted for eight weeks. I submit to one last stick, to get the red blood cells back. Manager uses smaller size vein on first arm. We mutually agree to a slow return due to the size of the vein. It works, with no damage to vein or surrounding tissues.

Units donated equals 500 of 850.

I get paid, but I can't donate again until the bruise is three inches from the "venal puncture site." Both my arms are screwed up. Lindsay still has one good arm. Tough times are ahead unless the computer support position from A-1 Employment Service comes through.

I can't wait to get home and put ice on my wounds and generally fall apart. Both arms are VERY SORE. I am shaken by the experience. I feel small, vulnerable, fragile, and injured; betrayed by my own body. My confidence is quivering in the corner. I have curled up inside myself, and I long to curl up on my bed and close my eyes and sleep.

— Faye Manning

# COMMIE TO AMERICA

EXILE  
ON MARKET ST.

## MY FATHER WAS BORN IN TUPELO,

Mississippi, Elvis's hometown, and, like Elvis, he was tired of being poor. He became an ordained Baptist preacher, not because his faith was deep, but because he had the gift of gab and evangelism was one of the few ways poor white southern boys could win friends, or at least influence people. But after a scandal involving a teenage girl, my father, now married to my mother, cast about for far-away places in which to test his fortune.

### No Es Mi Culpa

First stop in my parents' neocolonial adventure was San Juan, Puerto Rico. My father soon found that he despised Puerto Ricans, who, he maintained, were feckless, irresponsible and undignified. He used one phrase to ridicule the Puerto Rican "mentality": "*No es mi culpa*," it's not my fault. He would say it in a whiny voice, with a supposedly Puerto Rican look of cowering defiance in his eye. He grudgingly allowed that this "mentality" might be connected with Puerto Rico's slavish political status as a "possession" of the United States; but whatever the cause, he wanted to get away from the effect.

He looked for a proud and independent Latin American country, and came up with Argentina, a prosperous, big country of rugged gauchos run by the unconventional dictator Perón, who had taunted the U.S. by flirting with European fascism. Never mind that Argentina was virtually owned by the Swift-Armour meat packing company; it was more its own country than Puerto Rico.

My dad got a job with, surprise, Swift-Armour, and for two years he oversaw stunnings, eviscerations, splittings, shroudings, curings and other aspects of the meat business. The political situation

went from weird to brutal. An Argentine colleague on the train to Rosario dropped a disparaging remark about Perón, and was invited to another car by a couple of eavesdropping thugs and beaten half to death with rubber truncheons. No one came to the man's defense. Most Argentines, said my father, just want to eat their red meat, savor their red wine, and ignore the red blood flowing in their streets.

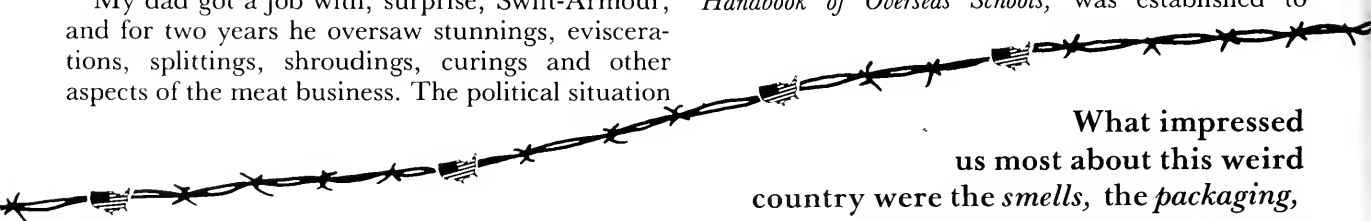
Perón was eventually overthrown in a bloody coup and fled to a gunboat anchored in the La Plata. My brother was born in this nervous week, and the hair-raising, curfew-defying trip to the hospital gave my parents second thoughts about raising a family in this volatile land.

After a brief return to Puerto Rico, where I was born and my father discovered that the Puerto Ricans hadn't changed, we were off to a country whose government was stable—and no longer as anti-American as it once had been—and whose economic growth was phenomenal: Mexico.

### Host Country

Mexico City, then as now, was the center of the country, so it was natural that we should settle there. (In 1957 it was not yet the overpopulated, polluted miasma it is today.) We lived on a tiny ranch south of the city, and we four children were enrolled in the American School.

The American School was presided over by a mysterious, never-seen superintendent named Dr. Patterson. Our school, he wrote in the *First Handbook of Overseas Schools*, was established to



What impressed us most about this weird country were the *smells*, the *packaging*, and the vast numbers of *police*.

provide "broad, bilingual educational programs which may lead the students into business and commercial activities meaningful to U.S. interests, both in the host country and in the U.S." In 1958, the school began to receive subsidies from the U.S. Department of State.

The campus was incongruously located in the midst of the dusty slums of Tacubaya. At 2:30 in the afternoon, the huge iron gates would creak open and our schoolbus, one of 23 lined up in martial formation, would roll down the steep concrete ramp between fortress walls and into the vast, poor city.

That urban Third World landscape became familiar over the years, yet remained hopelessly alien. The dramas without took place as if in slow-motion: two vehicles crumpled at an intersection, hugging each other like a pair of prehistoric crustaceans in mid-battle, their occupants limping from the scene to avoid the police and the shakedown; the slum dweller on the high-tension pole, who in his illegal attempt to tap electricity, falls in a ball of flame. Even the jeering, cudgel-toting students on the prowl for schoolbuses defying the general student strike (like ours) seemed unreal.

The American School boasted about 2,000 students, evenly divided between middle-class or bourgeois Mexicans and North Americans. In elementary school the two nationalities mixed happily, playing soccer together and trading Sputnik and Gemini cards (these cards appeared in loaves of Bimbo bread, the Mexican equivalent of Wonder, which middle-class Mexicans trained themselves to prefer over the lowly tortilla).

By high school, however, Mexicans and Americans became hopelessly divided along national lines. Many American boys, offspring of CIA agents and of the technocrats sent by U.S. corporations, were keen on technology and gadgetry, whereas most Mexican boys, looking forward to careers as idle bureaucrats and having an aristocratic disdain for practical knowledge, traded in their interest in such matters with their last Sputnik card. American girls, daughters of bold mothers in a foreign land, became tomboys, whereas their Mexican counterparts strove to become dainty señoritas with a view to motherhood—"walking wombs" in the American girls' contemptuous words.

Though we weren't yet in high school, my brother and I sensed our shortcomings in the area of technical expertise,

and therefore as Americans. Our father was anything but practical; he could rarely remember the direction in which a screw tightens. Fearing we would get him involved in some frustrating mechanical project, he did not encourage our interest in such things. Whereas our gringo friends had chemistry sets, sophisticated toy weaponry and go-carts, we had pet chickens and a couple of pigs. Our gringo friends built bombs (sometimes with unfortunate results), tinkered with engines, and knew things like exactly how many grams of botulin



SENATOR, *n.* A millionaire or, if newly elected, about to become one.

it would take to wipe out everybody on earth. Even our Mexican friends were sometimes amazed at our lack of familiarity with things modern, such as television and movies. Television reception was poor on our ranch, and our parents hardly ever took us to movies; so when our Mexican friends took us there, they laughed at how we kept our unblinking eyes riveted to the screen throughout the whole show.

Our big technological break came when we were eleven and twelve years old, when our father finally relented and we were given a couple of Daisy BB guns for Christmas. By this time, our family had fled the big city for the more livable one of Cuernavaca, where my brother and I were enrolled in a tiny, very liberal "tutoring section." We prowled the outskirts of the town trying to slay small game and telling whomever would listen that those shiny BBs were

made of solid gold. We were gringos with guns and golden bullets.

Our father was making good money shipping fertile eggs from Arkansas, hatching them in his hatchery and growing them into broilers. Our lifestyle was one of servants, heated swimming pools and trips to coastal resorts, but dad, meanwhile, was going loopy under the pressure and the success: boozing heavily, brawling, taking my brother and me on wild car trips through Mexico, getting the maids pregnant. Finally, in the dead of night in January, 1968, our mother put herself and her brood on a secret flight to California.

Suddenly we were strangers in a strange land, and poor to boot.

### Gringolandia

On the lam from the raging patriarch, we hid out in motels throughout the southwest U.S. Motels were our somehow fitting introduction to American culture. (We had only been to the U.S. once, for a very brief visit to Mississippi, many years earlier.) What impressed us most about this weird country were the *smells*, the *packaging*, and the vast numbers of *police*.

The smell, the smell of Gringolandia, was what I can best describe as an odor of refined toxicity, a subtle chemical scent that permeated everything. Mexico had its share of toxic odors, to be sure, but these were coarse and blatant compared to the gringo ones, and specific to that factory or this canal. There were very few smells in the U.S. attributable to organic causes: you didn't find folks roasting corn in empty lots, filling the air with wood smoke and the fragrance of caramelizing sugars, or encounter the stink of roadkill. Just that incessant chemical smell, which seemed to reach its greatest intensity at those all-American sites, motels and malls.

Packaging was truly fascinating. Demonstrating the gringos' neurotic fear of contamination, foods were packaged and repackaged down to their smallest single doses. It was amazing to behold those little aluminum jelly trays with their fancy lettering and their smidgeon of jelly inside. The food itself was generally pale and bland; Americans, we learned, had an aversion to spice, and to dark foods.

The ubiquitous police, especially the California Highway Patrol, were incredible robot-like creatures, very different from the wretched Mexican traffic cops and, it would seem, eminently

Definition by C. B., illustration by J. R. S. © 1992

unbribeable. We were sure these monsters would, as soon as they discovered our situation, deliver us back to our father, who would surely beat us all black and blue for having escaped.

That is how we spent our first months in the U.S.A.: picking at the pale, chemical-smelling food in motel restaurants, examining the tiny packages of jellies and sugar, watching for the police, and waiting for our dad to chill out so our mother could get back in touch with him and get us some money.

Meanwhile, my father had blown his businesses in Mexico by stealing a large shipment of fertilized eggs and re-selling them back in the U.S. His Mexican partners put out a bulletin in the newspapers for his capture, but he absconded to the Caribbean to booze and whore it up. Eventually he would go to San Jose, Costa Rica, to try to become a leg-man for financier-crook Robert Vesco, who wouldn't have him, and then to Nicaragua, where he tried to drum up some beef export business with Anastasio Somoza, who liked to call Nicaragua "his ranch"; but there my dad witnessed a gunfight between the then-tiny Sandinistas and the Somocistas, and this scared him off.

When my mother's funds ran out, she felt compelled to get in touch with him—she didn't know AFDC or other welfare existed, and heaven forbid anyone would tell her, so "shameful" was the dole held to be. He agreed to send money, as long as we moved to a suitably conservative town. It was 1968, and he was sure the hippies and the commies were taking over the country. California was out of the question. Finally he decided that Colorado Springs, with its heavy military influence, would be all right.

### We Become Freaks

By this time, the U.S. was beginning

to freak us out. The totalitarian scale of things—the highways, the shopping centers, the miracle miles—was bizarre, as was the relentless homogeneity and uniformity of it all. (It seemed laughable that the American press criticized the communist countries for making everything "the same" when one medium-sized U.S. city could scarcely be differentiated from any other). The social atomism and the lack of solidarity in all that didn't involve commerce—the paranoid individuals holed up in their little houses were also disturbing. Here an angry man could be raging in the streets, and nobody would respond, just turn away. In Mexico he would always get a response: perhaps not always a kind one, maybe just a jeer, but at least a human reaction. Mexico had poverty and corruption, to be sure, but there was something organically human about it. You could get stabbed, but at least you knew it was an enemy who did it.

Colorado Springs boasted the Air Force Academy, a huge army base, and a principal center for NORAD (North American Air Defense Command), a Strangelovian command post deep in the heart of Cheyenne Mountain.

My brother and I were enrolled in Cheyenne Mountain Junior High, a bunker-like public school with thick concrete walls and a few suspicious slits for windows. Of the 500 students there was one black and one Hispanic. It made the American School, not to mention the little school we had attended in Cuernavaca, seem like Summerhill.

It was one thing to have had a few gringo friends, as my brother and I had in Mexico, whose fathers were U.S. spies; it was quite another to be thrown among 500 offspring of the most paranoid and xenophobic military personnel this country is capable of producing.

The spy progeny had been necessarily cosmopolitan; but the Cheyenne Mountain brats were racists and xenophobes. We were immediately targeted as some kind of exotic spics, very strange, very un-American.

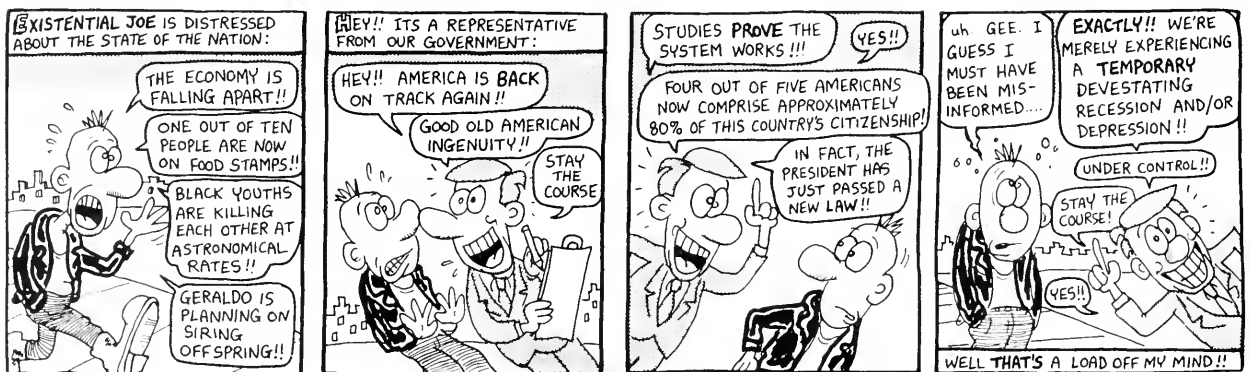
Perhaps I put too much of the blame on our peers. Most loathesome about the place was the fascistic atmosphere created by the administrators and some teachers, who attempted to regulate their prisoners' every move. Our "history" teacher, perhaps the most reactionary, spent most of the time showing us anti-Chinese propaganda films and reading Ayn Rand. When Nixon asked his "silent majority" to turn on their headlights by day to show support for his bombing of Vietnam, the cars entering the school parking lot looked like they were going to a goddamned funeral.

We had to fight back. Weary of the principal's creepy scrutiny of his hair length (the hair could only touch the collar, not go below it), my brother shaved his head, which only caused more commotion. I grew marijuana and distributed it among our small group of malcontents. We wore black arm bands after the shootings at Kent State, and were suspended. We read such luminaries as Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman and Eldridge Cleaver.

Ironically, by driving us off to the intolerant, bigoted, jingoistic heartland of America our father turned us into the hippie-freak-commies he so abhorred. Had we stayed in Mexico, we may have become bourgeois "juniors" with inherited business interests in Latin America, always thinking of the U.S. as the seat of world civilization. Instead, being so rudely exposed to the reality of American society, we came to recognize the United States as a seat of world barbarism.

—Salvador Ferret

## TWISTED IMAGE by Ace Backwards ©1991





# REVIEWS

## I'M UPROOTED, NOW I'M HOME

**THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE OUTSIDE: A Manifesto For Escape** by Andrei Codrescu. Addison-Wesley, 1990.

*The metaphysic of exile views the human condition as a series of tragic events. There was a Fall, and people were in exile. This Fall, repeated by every religion and mythology on earth, proves that we began our existence on earth as an exile. Leaving the womb compounds the original Fall with a new sense of estrangement. Life consists, it seems, in a variety of ways of not being at home. Consciousness itself is in exile from biology. History is an exile from paradise. A "home" as such can exist only in a temporal perspective, which is illusory and limited to the indulgence of history. History is rarely indulgent. It ruthlessly displaces people and will continue to do so.*

— Andrei Codrescu

I...

Why?

The shortest poem and longest story is the cartographer of my identity and its shifting "homeland." Here lies my native identity, ripe with spaces, silences, and meaning inside that quixotic anti-identity I most identify with. Eternal emigré, born an Outsider. Now I've arrived as a permanent refugee in a dense global resettlement city of myths realized: San Francisco, California, 1992.

Here, in infancy, are the beginnings of post-nationalistic, urban tribes. They include *Processed World* and several other political/artistic/intellectual/social clans I'm part of. Together we constitute an anti-state. A state of psychogeographical inversion unique to modern alienation: a "nation" of aliens.

Many of us (and some of my worldly inner selves) are "true aliens." Like most Americans, my ancestral cuisinart mixes a number of alien blood-nations: Welsh, Scottish, Irish, and Polish with Cherokee and Choctaw native American. Most of my friends (and identities) are, more powerfully, metaphorical aliens. We forge our identity and homeland in a poetic furnace which draws

heat less from ethnicity or geography and more from free will, imagination, and resistance. Whether metaphorically or literally foreign, we are the black sheep born with teeth and tearing at the urban fray. I am the bundle of contradictions who is both an independent cuss and inextricably bound together with a considerable herd of cultural desperados who have flocked to San Francisco.

One ally is Andrei Codrescu, a 1960s transplanted Romanian poet-in-exile, who now lives in New Orleans. His book *The Disappearance of the Outside* spurred me to consider my own story as an exile.

After spending the first 18 years of my life near an isolated timber town in the hinterlands of Washington state, my initiation into adulthood was to fly away. Since then I've never stopped, living and travelling for extended periods all across America, Africa, New Zealand & Australia, and Eastern Europe.

### ODDITY AS ODYSSEY

Like most Americans my adult life has been a series of moves. In each place I've quickly felt stuck, psychically violated by the prevailing attitudes and concerns, and then felt compelled to move on. Unlike most Americans I've never thought this nation was the best the world could offer. I love its freedoms and forwardness, but despise its devouring of planetary resources and all culture alien to the commodity, television, and western "progress." It is strange fruit to be born American, live in a family that believes in America, but always identify yourself as outside the American way. Even as a young boy I never understood the big deal: all the rah rahs, We're #1, Let's Kick Butt! It seems so stupid, even pitiful. America's greatness through individual liberties, cultural diversity, and material affluence is, at the very best, counterbalanced by its loss of tradition and community, psychic and spiritual poverty, and preeminence in global exploitation. Yet I always feel compelled to return even though I could choose not to.

My interest here is why I and so many like me have heeded the call of the western wanderer. How has my identity as outcast (and being "cast out" largely by my own desires) served me? And

how has it hindered me?

*The Disappearance of the Outside* illuminates these questions and more: here is the peculiar situation of the exiled writer, and the poet's role in creating social disruption; the domination of machines and mechanical processes over people, and the concomitant loss of the organic; as well as the replacement of the word (meaning) by the mass mediated electronic image (simulation) as the dominant representation of social reality. The focus of this review is the issue of exile and social identity.

Codrescu opens *Disappearance* with his return to the ruins of his Romanian hometown, Sibiu, just after the fall of the vicious Ceausescu regime. It is New Year's Eve—before the onslaught of the 1990s—amidst an atmosphere of widespread optimism. He expresses his foreboding that even as the people of Eastern Europe "have come Outside at long last after painful dark decades in the repressive interiors of police states" joining the glittery new (old) world odor will very quickly leave an empty, rotten aftertaste. The book revolves around such Inside vs. Outside tensions. Codrescu integrates cultural/political forces with personal/existential concerns. Together, through the imagination they inform our ability, as aliens, to stay vital



Definition by C.B.; Illustration by J.R.S. © 1992

**STUPIDITY, n.** An invaluable commodity. The grease which lubricates the wheels of American commerce, politics and religion

inside an Insane Outer Reality east and west.

Although the east/west distinction is rapidly becoming obsolete, such division shaped Codrescu's adult life from the time he fled Romania in 1966 at age 19. He landed in America during perhaps its most intoxicating period of freedom. Swept up by its libertarian spirit he failed to notice "at the time that exile was a temporary religion in America." A religion rather more constant than transient. America is a nation state founded by the excluded. It "modernized" through a Civil War whose moral base sought to include the excluded. Despite great efforts to revive the nation god, it is today's metaphorical exiles that may push the absurdly gigantic United States to emulate the rapid collapse of the Soviet empire. A disintegration that may well be sooner and quicker than we now imagine.

### IF YOU'RE NOT A MYTH, THEN WHOSE REALITY ARE YOU?

Codrescu experienced little of the inner pain and nostalgia that most have when cut off from their native land. Instead he identifies with a larger, global community while realizing: "I was in love with the myth of exile and I was disappointed with its sudden recession in the 1970s. About history I did not feel one way or another and this put me, I guess, in exile from my fellow exiles." This changed considerably when later, "My exile appeared to me, for the first time, in a historical light. *Times of great freedom breed metaphorical exiles while times of repression breed literal exiles.* I had been granted a temporary reprieve from the reality of my exile by the ascendance of the myth. This contact with reality did not change my belief in the therapeutic value of my

wandering. Metaphorical exiles who shed their allegiance to the myth of exile also forfeit their claim to poetry. This is a tragic position because they will never be natives again either: the prodigal son is always an oddity." (emphasis added)

Codrescu stresses the need to claim myths and "metaphors that matter." An example is Milan Kundera's use of "laughter and forgetting" which he sees as "a phenomenal critique of memory." He notes that Kundera "pointed to the exact place in his memory where the generative, creative urge is located, thus freeing himself (and us)..." This, Codrescu claims, is crucial particularly for those in exile. When he went into literal exile, "Kundera had to remake himself in order to continue. In order to write he had to remember, but in order to be he had to forget. What to forget and what to remember? It is a tension peculiar to exile but it has vast importance beyond it. In the West we are faced with the catastrophic loss of memory brought about by industry. We are compelled to forget even the immediate past by the collage style of the mass media. Living in a continual forgetting (an active act), we can only face forward, in a kind of parody of the Communist goal which always bids the masses to step "forward." "Progress is the act of forgetting."

Codrescu maintains a simultaneous belief in and critical distance from the mythic/metaphorical mode of truth. He understands western culture's conscious attachment to the god of objective facts results in an even more powerful unconscious appropriation of myth. Common myths congealing our culture of "objectivity" are faith in "progress," salvation through technology, belief in national, racial, or ethnic superiority, the military/macho salute of the Rambo identity, and the social necessity of strong authority figures. They feed a common misuse of myth (one which applies to desirable myths as well): the abdication of personal responsibility to "larger forces" beyond us. Today the political and artistic imperative is to reverse this process by making new myths (that matter) collectively conscious.

To that end, Codrescu advocates a monkey wrenching of the dominant stories shaping us today. "We must sabotage both the sentimental story that ends in God and the machine story that ends in the tool. In order to do that, we all of us have to become poets. But we must become poets quickly, while it is

still possible to speak. Before the vacuum of the mass sucks in the words forever."

We need to become saboteurs of history by re-ordering the very atoms of public thought and discourse to illuminate the facts in myth, and myths in fact. This requires turning language itself inside out. Such a juggling act involves more than simply being a poet. It also means dancing on and over the edges of today's global high wire. We are encouraged to become "saboteur, fool for health, and schizo-activist all at once."

Codrescu locates the proper "home" for the "schizo-activist" at the interplay of myth and fact in the arena of politics and art. It's not just a matter of sanity within an insane world or survival amidst war and pollution, but simply making life worth living.

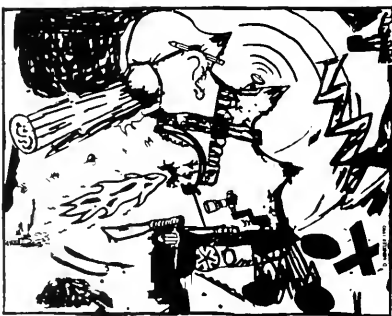
Schizo-activism is one of those word-roles which is both specific and ambiguous. It fits me like a glove. I'm often sanest when the world around me is craziest; most insane when swaddled by the entropy of normalcy. Schizo-activism is the one word job description for me and my tribe of post-national exiles.

We urban love warriors work overtime to eliminate our jobs. We don't believe in missionary work. Indeed, other than military huns, missionaries have been the most prolific mass murderers in human history. The urban love warrior's calling is the education of desire. We want excesses of personal indulgence and global justice. The politics of change must drink deeply from the well of eros and art, not the other way around.

Our friend and fellow schizo-activist Andrei Codrescu has a unique and comic view of the use (and abuse) of artists from the Outside. When interviewed by D.S. Black by telephone in January on a radio call-in show, Codrescu shared his recent impressions of the U.S., having driven across the country in a Cadillac.

*"I just see a tremendous amount of experiment and craziness. Most Americans that I talked to on this trip are something I call zawats, a word I hope to put in circulation very soon, which is that they're simply crazy. Under the exterior of a normal person—if you scratch the surface just a little bit, the strangest ideas come out.*

*"They are ideas that have and will have an effect on the practical world, whether they are stockbrokers in Chicago working in the pit using their mystical notions to buy and sell, or whether they're part of a religious community*



# U S A

Keeping Democracy in the Right Hands.

in upstate NY, they believe in things which would not seem reasonable to anyone who has experienced a conversion to the Enlightenment, I think. There are currents in American life that are here that have escaped the Enlightenment, and they've continued a life that is quite apart from a reasonable understanding of things."

In *The Disappearance of the Outside* Codrescu wrote that "Western artists are not taking kindly to this invasion by exiles. As peripheral people in charge of shoveling art into the maw of the center, they demand of these exiles who are (clearly) the peripherals of the periphery to make sense of their freedom. The cultural slum raises defenses against the culturally homeless because it is asked to provide a creative space that it does not possess and has no idea how to take back from the electronic media. The exiles do know how, and know how through their exile, which is a fundamental loss of all centers, private and public."

The loss of center...oh, do I know this place. We urban love warriors possess intimate knowledge of loss. But what makes us different, what fundamentally exiles us, is our meditation on taking back. Taking back meaning while subverting the power of simulated image. Taking back direct contact and sabotaging spectating entertainments. Taking back community and overcoming our isolation. Most significantly, overturning the "objectivity" of this constructed society by taking back our own living imagination. Today that is the definition of exile and the practice of the urban love warrior.

—Med-O



Ray Beldner's dehumanizing office scenario literalizes, with live pigeons, the timeless "dumped on" position of the employee. (Glen Helfand, *SF Weekly*)

## INGENUITY AND ITS ENEMIES

*Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* by Andrew Ross (Verso: London 1991)

*Questioning Technology: Tool, Toy or Tyrant?*, edited by John Zerzan and Alice Carnes (New Society Publishers: Philadelphia 1991, originally published in England by Freedom Press)

*Processed World* has been labeled both "anti-technology" and "pro-technology" by ideologues on either end of that so-called debate. But the magazine, per se, has never taken a stand either way. *Processed World's* contributors have al-

ways been deeply critical of the social processes in which specific technologies evolve, but haven't espoused a general position on Technology, largely because it's such an impossible category to adequately define.

Over the past two decades a broad range of critical technology texts has emerged, many of which have been reviewed in earlier issues of *Processed World*. Two books published in the past year offer opposite approaches.

In *Strange Weather* Andrew Ross details both contemporary and historic subcultures which formed in response to the promise and the inadequacy of Science. In his pursuit of a "green cultural criticism and politics" he finds encouraging elements in expressions as divergent as cyberpunk and New Age-

ism. He appreciates the "powerful desire for self-respect, self-determination and utopian experimentalism that lies behind the... New Age...inspired by a deep hunger for community." But he also subverts the New Age's reactionary embrace of austerity by usefully pointing to the "difference between saying that limits *ought* to exist, and saying that we ought to recognize the existence of limits." Ross excels in showing how marginal, oppositional, and outlawed scientific subcultures have, by promoting their own counter-science and alternative rationality, helped legitimize Big Science's more subtle claims to authority. The sweeping scope of his survey encapsulates futurology, global warming, computer hacking, science fiction, environmental decay, Technocracy,

virtual reality, and utopianism/dystopianism. Though he is surgically precise in his dissection of myths and underlying meanings, his attitude remains dialectical and hopeful. He wants:

*“... a hacker’s knowledge capable of generating new popular romances around the alternative uses of human ingenuity... we cannot afford to give up what techno-literacy we have in deference to the vulgar faith that tells us it is always acquired in complicity and is thus contaminated by the toxin of instrumental rationality; or because we hear, often from the same quarters, that acquired technological competence simply glorifies the inhuman work ethic. Technoliteracy, for us, is the challenge to make a historical opportunity out of a historical necessity.”*

The “vulgar faith” he anonymously attacks here is found inserted among nearly three dozen excerpts of varying quality, assembled by John Zerzan and Alice Carnes under the title *Questioning Technology: Tool, Toy or Tyrant?* Zerzan, of course, has been flogging technology since the late 1970s, mostly in *Fifth Estate*, the Detroit tabloid dedicated increasingly over the years to the advocacy of neo-primitivism as the only way out. *FE*’s George Bradford contributes an excerpt from his “We All Live in Bhopal” wherein he concludes:

*“The empire is collapsing. We must find our way back to the village, or as the North American natives said, ‘back to the blanket,’ and we must do this not by trying to save an industrial civilization which is doomed, but in that renewal of life which must take place in its ruin. By throwing off this Modern Way of Life, we won’t be ‘giving things up’ or sacrificing, but throwing off a terrible burden. Let us do so soon before we are crushed by it.”*

The structure of *Questioning Technology* is built around chapters headed by rhetorical questions such as “Was there a point in history when technology came to dominate the individual? How could this have happened?” and followed by a page or two of editorial introduction to the essays excerpted in response.

The editors’ basic contempt for the potential reader leads them to sarcastically berate us already in the opening introduction: “You can close the book now... and go right on for the next 40 years, smoking your way into the cancer ward. Or you can turn the page...” And by turning the pages we will learn to “wonder how our cultural experience has... deformed our human nature.”

This framing of the issue reveals the Jesuitical roots of Zerzan’s anti-technologism. What is this unspoiled human nature, distinguished from our

actual life on the planet (cultural experience)? And, unfortunately, the snide tone of the introduction doesn’t read as witty, but as transparently condescending, which has been one of Zerzan’s major tendencies for years. (He has always had really awful things to say about *Processed World*, of course.)

Two pages later technology is unambiguously defined for us: “[Technology] is an impulse, a thought form, before it has anything to do with tools. It grows from the desire to rival the awesome, unfathomable creativity of the earth. This is where domination of nature begins.” Defining the birth of technology as a neo-Promethean desire to rival Mother Earth gives prehistoric gadgeteers and contemporary engineers too much philosophical credit! They present human creativity in all its myriad forms (good and bad) as essentially untrustworthy. Finally this approach leads to “know-nothingism,” a refusal of knowledge which is thought to be morally impure, a state of mind which defends itself by wielding as an enchanted talisman a completely desocialized, abstract concept of “nature.”

In *Strange Weather*, Andrew Ross addresses this directly:

*“The construction of nature as a social vacuum distances us from any direct engagement with the actual social forces that command vast power in our everyday lives through their organization of technology and bureaucracy. One of the inevitable effects of this retreat is to entertain Arcadian fantasies of preindustrialist life resourcefully embellished with many of the philosophical contents of a postindustrialist wardrobe.”*

*Questioning Technology* is philosophical based on just such Arcadian fantasies. In the terribly irritating, “hand-written” introduction, New Society Publishers’ TL Hill explains why s/he decided to go through the entire book with his/her pen and insert brackets everytime words like “man” or “his” came up:

*“By adding a bit of hand work to this mass-produced item, we hope to humanize it just a little, and to enhance its challenge to rethink—and remake—our relationships with technology and with you, our community.”*

Of course this “hand work,” like all the typeset bulk of the book, was done on the original and then printed in thousands of copies. Perhaps if TL Hill had actually written the introduction by hand into each copy the message would have had a bit more resonance.

The impoverished imagination implied by this book’s basic approach is laid out in the same opening comments:

*“Questioning Technology challenges us to re-engage our hearts and minds in the search for truly appropriate and accountable technologies... sadly there are precious few models to guide us... Native, traditional and organic farmers may have the most to teach in the ongoing work of reconstituting technology in harmony with local communities and the earth... [which] demands an attentive awareness of the natural world, patience, a large dose of humility and a stringent accountability to the land, to natural cycles, and to the larger human community. To be sure, there’s plenty of room for ingenuity, but always within an explicitly cultural, human and natural—not merely an economic or technological—context.”*

This bucolic advice to learn from traditional and organic farmers may be sound for those in basically rural settings now, but it completely ignores the question that our collective relationship with technology really hinges on: what will happen to city life, where the vast majority of us live and work? Clearly a thorough-going decentralization and greenification of urban areas is in order, but I am not interested in being held “stringently accountable to the land or natural cycles.” I like the idea of surviving as well as we humanly can storms, droughts and earthquakes.

Moreover, what is this idea of “natural, human, cultural context” within which ingenuity must be kept, which is so separate from the “technological context?” Where is the line drawn exactly? Which side is the mouth harp on? Which side are you on?

Zerzan’s (and, presumably Carnes’) proto-religious absolutism is starkly revealed in the essays selected to answer “What is the future of human culture with respect to technology? Is there a solution to the reality of being diminished by high tech?” Sally Gearhart calls for the Jonestown solution taken to the planetary level in “An End to Technology”:

*“I find... an integrity... in... [human] species suicide... If some still ask ‘Why?’ I suggest that the burden of proof has shifted, that in terms of our biosphere the question is, ‘Why not?’”*

Boy, if this catches on, buy Kool-Aid stock!

The editors declare “the instrumental or utilitarian character of science and technology is a false notion; domination itself is found there. If this indictment is vast, so are the measures we must take to remove its application from a world we would like to save and savour.”

Then T. Fulano in an excerpt from

*Fifth Estate* contentedly predicts that “Jetliners fall, civilizations fall, this civilization will fall. . . and we will be inside, each one of us at our specially assigned porthole, going down for the last time, like dolls’ heads encased in plexiglass.”

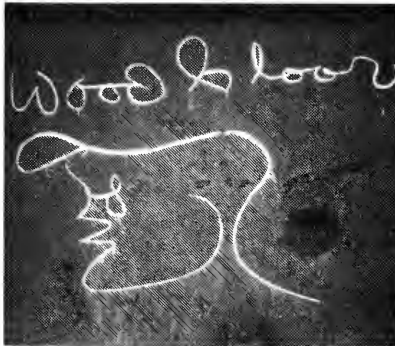
The final section asks “Is technology “neutral?” and offers a plethora of historical and documentary information to answer “no, of course not.” John and Paula Zerzan look at the imposition of the factory system and the widespread violent working-class resistance. Jerry Mander argues for the elimination of television. Ian Reinecke looks cogently at the reality of contemporary workplace automation, and finally Jacques Ellul claims that technique has become truly autonomous and is *itself* the new arbiter of morality. The Zerzans’ and Reinecke’s pieces are both straight ahead descriptions, of historic resistance to proletarianization and the totalitarian nature of the modern workplace, respectively.

Jerry Mander makes one of the underlying points of the collection when he glibly asserts that “the basic form of the institution and the technology determines its interaction with the world, the way it will be used, the kind of people who use it, and to what ends.” (emphasis added) I don’t share, say, cyberpunk’s enthusiasm for the liberatory possibilities of new technology as employed by outlaw subcultures, but I really object to such an overly deterministic view of human ingenuity. Considering the complex relationships between media and consumers, the always contested construction of meaning and shared cultural norms, there’s always the possibility of creative appropriation and subversion by human intervention in any “dominant” process, industrial or cultural. If we don’t believe in that, at least, then there’s really no hope, and the suicidal views of our future cultural life may be a logical choice.

*Questioning Technology* provides a valuable service in assembling a large number of excerpts from many texts, some welcome for their insight and facts, others as examples of various ideological stances, both pro- and con-. Writings by Lewis Mumford, Daniel Burnham, Langdon Winner and Herb Schiller all offer critiques similar to *Processed World’s* own. In fact, in spite of attempts to stack the deck in favor of the Humans-as-Plague point of view, the editors do graciously admit in the last sentence that the works they have excerpted do not “necessarily embody fundamentally



The “superstar” of boxcar art, Herby was outed by the press in 1981 after his creator, Herbert Mayer, had anonymously drawn over 70,000 “sleeping Mexican” pictures over a span of 30 years. This popular logo was once used to identify a railroad safety program, and inspired a line of “Herby” sportswear.



negative assessments of technology.”

Andrew Ross addresses the abstract nature-ists, too, in his fascinating and witty discussion of the weather and global warming:

*“The crusade to claim the whole world as “free” for liberal capitalism is currently locked in step with the campaign to “free” the climate from human influence. . . Now that science has shown the clear impact of the “human fingerprint” on a global system so vast as atmospheric behavior, such a logic demands the more stable, guiding influence of the whole hand. . . Greater powers of regulatory control are thus claimed in the name of allowing the system to revert to its “natural” self-regulating economy. This is the contradictory form in which laissez-faire economics have been advanced throughout modern capitalist history.*

*“The Gaian thesis simply inverts the logic of human domination over the natural world: planetary management is seen not as an extension of human control, but as a process to which the fate of human is utterly subjugated. Under cover of the rhetoric of “biocentric equality” and the “balance of nature,” the logic of domination is held intact, and the social*

*specificity of human life drops out of the picture.*

*“Like global models of corporate planetary management, which take the planet as an economic unit, Gaian philosophy demonstrates the danger of taking the planet as a zoological unit. In either case, humanity appears as a mythical species, stripped of all the rich specificity that differentiates human societies and communities, and oblivious to all the differences in race, gender, class, and nationality that serve to justify and police structures of human domination within and between these societies. In both instances, the questions raised by ecology can no longer be explained or answered by social theory or social action; they are resolved at the level of “resource management” by the logic of the multinational corporate state, or by the independent diktat of the “tough” planetary organism. The problem of global warming is no longer an arena for exposing the barbarism of social institutions.”*

Ross’s final chapter on the weather, “The Drought This Time,” is reason enough to read this book. He examines how weather reportage provides a metaphorical language which “naturalizes” social relations. He ironically enthuses about the reassurance he gets as a weather addict to know that “the responsible weather citizen’s rights are only threatened with natural and not social erosion.”

If we accept the demonization of Technology as presented by Zerzan and Carnes, suicide is the way to go, since all attempts to redirect or reclaim technological processes are already so contaminated that they can only reproduce the same logic with the same dehumanizing results. Technologies are far from neutral but that does not make inanimate objects the new subjects of history!

Andrew Ross goes the opposite way. By insisting on situating specific technologies within the specific social webs that have given rise to them, with their own contradictory and multifaceted histories, we are encouraged to see the ways in which individual and collective choices both produce and are produced by various technological choices. Widespread barbarism and hopeless despair does not change the fact that human ingenuity is in the driver’s seat. The society in which our ingenuity functions today restrains, distorts, and usually defeats our creative capacities. But the machinery itself makes no decisions and only enforces certain human relations if we go on allowing that to be the case. The choices are, in fact, in our collective hands.

— Chris Carlsson

# THE SWINEHERD

**P**IGS GRUNT WHEN they get excited, plunge their curious snouts into mounds of muddy slop, and run with the grace of an obese ex-athlete. I am not a pig. I wish I had the power to appear before a nationwide television audience and tell the nation, the world: I am not a pig. It is true that some of my co-workers whisper that I am a pig, yet I do not grunt. It is also true that I thrust my snout into mounds of slop, but it is never muddy slop. I work for the "people," and, in a sense, the people work for me. I make \$60,000 a year, and the people pay every dollar, dime and nickel of it. Note that I said I make \$60,000 a year; I did not say I earn that much.

The taxpayers who give me a paycheck think politicians write their own letters. They think the legislators they elect actually have the ability to use sesquipedalian words, conduct their own research, investigate a problem. Legislators are incapable of all of these things. I am the letter writer.

I obtain the information. I make the phone calls. I am the mask legislators wear so they can get re-elected. It is my task to retain the almighty incumbents, so I must make them appear personable but at the same time unreachable. If a constituent wants an answer to a question and the answer to that question is simply "no," I could easily write them a clearly-stated three-sentence response and give them an honest answer. But this is not the essence of politics.

The politician must not only appear informed and at least somewhat educated, but also possibly omniscient, even omnipotent, so I compose two full pages of meaningless history, phrases of sympathy or empathy, hope-filled scenarios and godly ideals employing occasional adjectives, powerful verbs, and a variegated array of other writing tricks until

finally—finally—I gently inform them that the answer to their question is "no." If the answer to their inquiry is "yes," only one full page of the prescribed fluff is required. Many times I wonder if politicians read my letters before they sign them.

If a woman who failed her LVN exam complains to us that she was fired from her nursing position because she failed the test, I write to her that I feel the pain she feels, I understand her anguish and her frustration and even a little anger, and I wish she could continue her nursing career. In reality, she will have to re-take the exam when it is offered six months from now. In the meantime, she is unemployed.

Of course, the legislator who signs this letter is officially the one who feels the pain, who knows the anguish and even a little anger so that this sorry woman might be soothed enough to vote for him in November. Personally, I don't give a damn about her pain.

One day I received a well-written letter from a prisoner who was an unfortunate bystander during a prison riot and suffered a fractured vertebra, a fractured nose and a concussion. I endured a fractured vertebra when I was young and it annoyed me when I felt his pain. I thought I had grown immune to the pain. I cannot comprehend how this prisoner had the strength to stand upright in a food line with these injuries, waiting minute after minute for his meal, while others jostled him from side to side. There was nothing I could do for the guy except urge him to visit the prison doctor. Pitiful aching bonepile.

I place on our legislators the most erudite mask our office can offer. I don't need the skills of Locke, Rousseau, Aristotle, Plato or Montesquieu except when I quote them in one of my letters. All I need to support some patriotic political premise is a poignant quotation from Patton, Kennedy, Eisenhower, Churchill or one of the Roosevelts. People respect words they don't quite understand and quotations from famous individuals whose faces appear in their minds when they read the words.

"You calm people down, make them

feel certain you will be able to help them," a young employee said to me. "I wish I could write like that."

"You will learn," I replied. "As the years go by you will learn that in almost all cases the best thing to say in your letter is absolutely nothing. You can hint that anything is possible; you can tell them that the most respected constituents are those who are mature enough to be patient; you can assure them that their opinions will be taken into account when committee meetings begin; you can graciously thank them for offering their opinion, because without it proper representation would not be possible and democracy would not flourish; you can assert that their views are quite interesting, and such an intriguing, fresh approach that they may be related to the chairman of a certain committee who may even discuss the matter with the Majority Leader, the Speaker of the House or the President of the Senate. You can say all of these things, but you must say nothing."

What this new employee doesn't know is that I don't actually write letters anymore. Today I merely re-use the letters I wrote 10 to 20 years ago. I can write to constituents that their ideas are unique and fresh, but the truth is that their opinions are old and tedious. So I keep in my files thousands of letters I have written and merely place the appropriate floppy disc in my personal computer and produce a letter on my laser printer.

I have two major files, one for those who call themselves right-to-lifers and another for those who call themselves freedom-of-choicers. I consider all of these activists fabulously boring. They seem to thrive on tedium, so within each of these files I have developed sub-files. If a freedom-of-chooser wants to discuss the importance of certain court decisions and each of the trimesters, I pull out an appropriate trimester letter and print it in an instant. If I am bothered by a chooser who wants to dionysiastically discuss the humiliating methods men have used to manipulate women from the time of Cicero to Ivanhoe and Ludwig van to Peter Pan, I retrieve the appro-



priate women-who-have-been-ruled-by-men screed. If a woman wants to discuss her personal life with me and generally feels sorry for herself, I pull from my file the suitable feeling-sorry-for-herself response.

I wrote one letter which I send to energize outraged right-to-lifers—I describe the crushed baby skulls of mainland China. If one of these easily-excited lifers wants to discuss Biblical passages, I retain various missives which quote this entertaining book—Old or New Testament—you want it,

you got it. I have letters already prepared for socialists, gays, members of the KKK, members of gun clubs, neo-Nazis, constituents who suffer from triskaidekaphobia, any flotsam that wants to jaundice itself with some over-discussed topic.

“I don’t think you give yourself enough credit,” this new employee said to me. “Those letters you showed me on the abortion issue, how can you tell me you said nothing?”

“I said absolutely nothing.”

“But you described the history of the problem in great detail.”

“That I did.”

“And you sympathized with them, gave them all kinds of examples.”

“I did that.”

“And you informed them how the legislature is involved in this issue.”

“But I said nothing because I committed myself to nothing. I remained mute. My neutrality did not waver. I never attempt to guess how the legislature or even one legislator will treat an issue; I only tell them how the legislator COULD or MIGHT treat an issue because nobody can predict how the legislature will vote. In this way I cannot



graphic by Joven

be accused of lying to or misleading a constituent. A legislator can be convinced he will vote against legislation on one day, but that vote can be changed with a hastily scribbled memo from the Governor, a phone call from the Speaker of the House, a snap of the finger of the Majority Leader, a look of disgust on the face of a committee chairman who needs one more vote in his favor. I am not in a position to explain the complexities of the legislative process to constituents because they would not understand, they would lose their enthusiasm, and they could possibly lose their respect for all of us. Consequently, I describe the situation in the simplest terms so that there remains a vibrant connection between my explanation and their needs. If there has been legislation introduced that would address their complaint, I imply that by the stroke of someone's magic signature their problem could be solved in a very, very short time—even by the following day—if I am clever enough to sufficiently excite them. I exclude the possibility of their problem never being solved; to achieve this, I do not mention this particular possibility."

"And this is why you are the best

letter writer in our office. You understand how the legislature works and you know how to convey this in simple terms for constituents."

"Of course."

Because I live only two blocks from the Capitol Building, I occasionally go home for lunch and sleep for two hours; most of the other writers in my office cannot afford the leisure of a two-hour lunch, but the fault is their own. They spend too much time with each assignment. They waste their time trying to find specific answers to some ridiculous questions asked by constituents who have nothing better to do than bother their legislator. These writers are still foolish and idealistic like I once was. They still feel the pain of the persons they attempt to soothe. When they learn the reality of politics, they will realize we do not write letters to help anyone; we write letters to keep constituents at least a snout's length away from the legislator. We comfort nosy taxpayers so they never again threaten the sanctity of the incumbent. We offer hopeless persons hope so they never again write a letter to the politician we are trying to re-elect. Of course, the hope we offer is mostly false hope. Very often there is little hope

at all, but where there is little hope I magnify that hope until it is only hope the constituent experiences. I inflict incremental braindeath on the constituent.

I consider myself a swineherd and the public my swine. I call them my public piglets; my cute, roundbellied, enthusiastically grunting piglets. I inflict a Nembutal haze on them and they give me a paycheck. I soothe them so their lives are less painful. Sometimes I wish there existed one constituent who would not give up, someone who would write one letter and then augment that with another and then another and another, refusing my injection of braindeath, refusing to be pacified, then become so outraged they would march to the Capitol and find my obscure office and follow the labyrinthine path to my obscure cubicle and take me by the hair of my head and shake me until I publicly promised to sit at my desk and write them a personal response to their questions.

Sometimes I watch the door of my office and wait for this person to burst in. Then I laugh. It could never, ever happen.

—Mark Henkes



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reading  
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