

the root of that nerve that never
hurt another living thing
and she most certainly lied
because this time the pain
achieves a kaleidoscope of bursting
colors right behind my eyeballs
and she whispers the way a lover
does after a bad night, "Next time
last time, not so much pain,"
and I love her for the lie
and pay off the kid whose smile
is free of dental worry
and whose belly could eat the world.

But this time she told me true
and after some average pain
of super human intensity
she makes the mold and one week later
I am in the chair with my fingers
pressed into their individual dents
and the only pain is the dry, cold
air blowing out the canyon
that used to be my tooth
and the beautiful gold crown
gets hammered in place.
She steps back from the strapado,
smiles at her work and me and says, "Fini.
You brave man, Mr. Michael,"
and for that moment we know we are
bonded forever, like lovers,
in the web of pain that sews us all
into the same quilt
and I pry up my fingers
and I smile back as I pay her in green dollars.
It's the least I can do
for that guy in the tunnels.
I give up Coca-Cola for iced tea
and the kid takes home his final payment.

BUYING BALLOONS — November 27, 1970

It's Flo's birthday and the afternoon monsoon
has blown past. It leaves a bit of cool
and treacherous mud puddles on Hoang Dieu.
I am walking to Hasty Tasty,
across Cach Mang to get us dinner,
the best elephant hamburgers made
in this dandy little war.
I round the corner by the Saigon Milk Bar
where the whores are singing
along with 'Hey Jude'
and a half block from #14, home sweet villa,

a brother-sister team are walking away
from the sunset, hustling balloons
tied up on a five-foot stick
like two trolls going to repair a rainbow.
The balloons have tails tied
out of top-secret printouts,
hot off the printers at MAVC
with secrets that were printed in Newsweek
two editions ago and the whole
balloon tree is only fifty cents PMC.
I take their picture walking in the mud
with the fading day at their backs
and the rainbow on their shoulders.

It's Flo's birthday so I buy the whole bunch.
Fifty cents — they screwed me and they knew it.
They screwed me and I didn't care.
After all, I got the picture.
I bring them home to Flo and I get Flo's smile.
I take another picture of Flo in the back
yard, under the banana tree and the cistern,
making the peace sign with a rainbow on her shoulder.
Not a bad night in hell —
the kids made their fortune,
Flo is all smiles and balloons,
I'll get lucky in bed —
rainbows out of mud.

— Michael Andrews

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STAMPED OBJECTS

My father's letters come on old scraps
Of paper. He cuts them neatly so they're squared.
They're fragments of everydayness. From dog-eared
Paperbacks he recycles end sheets and clips
The edges. A place mat gets a second life.
Or a wrapper is folded over, slit with knife,
Carefully smoothed out, and once more wraps

Up something. These homemade letters arrive about
Once every two months. My father says that writing
Is soporific, and I can see him fidgeting,
Moving his pen in spirals to get the ideas out
(Where there's pen and ink there must be words)
And finally getting his thoughts to flow towards
What will be this or that paternal point.