



For perhaps obvious reasons (read the story included herein), THE2NDHAND editor Todd Dills crossed the writer/editor line with this special edition of the broadsheet, featuring his tale of the short-lived Chicago Stupidists, faux/not-so degenerate literary renegades making short work of more staid troupes in turn-of-the-century Chi-town. Beyond the section of mostly Dills-initiated Pitchfork Battalion collaborative efforts, the story of the manifesto is his sole contribution as a writer to THE2NDHAND's 10th-anniversary anthology, available now for order via the2ndhand.com/THE2NDHANDTXT/books. Dills founded THE2NDHAND in 2000 and is the author of the novel *Sons of the Rapture* (2006). Find more from him via the2ndhand.com/THE2NDHANDTXT/category/wing-and-fly. (Scan the QR code here to download a pdf of this issue.)

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****WRITERS:** check into our newly redesigned online-only mag at the2ndhand.com/THE2NDHANDTXT. Send prose submissions (2,500 words or less Web, 5,000 print) to TODD@THE2NDHAND.com, c/o Todd Dills, 1430 Roberts Ave., Nashville, TN 37206 (todd@the2ndhand.com) or C.T. Ballentine (email only: ctballentine@gmail.com). THE2NDHAND is editors Todd Dills, C.T. Ballentine, Jacob Knabb, **FAQ editor** Mickey Hess, and **janitor** R. Beady, when Harold Ray's on another of his benders.



FOCUS ON THE APE AS metaphor for the devolution of man among the urban intellectual set had reached its apex in intensity, far as I could tell, and I think there are multitudes who would agree with me, during the Bush presidency—we're talking George W. here, though I know, I know, we may see another Bush yet, shoot me. I was a woman among men interested, you might say, far before all that, under Clinton and during Bush's first term, as for most of this time I lived with a couple guys in Chicago who thought they were real literary movementees, as if that was really even possible in the day and age. There were communities, sure, but those involved seemed to have their expectations in line with the reality of their potential. They knew what they were about, collections of like-minded folks who wanted to stand for something, the primary mode for artists throughout the millennia.

These guys were different. They wanted more than that, be certain, but what that might have been still isn't clear to me, if it was even clear to them. One of the guys, Carl Sealy, like the matress, could read Spanish and spent time in Mexico reading leftist Mexican literature and old surrealist-inspired poetry. Along the way he got hold of Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*—Bolaño's not all Mexican, rather Chilean, Spanish, but the book is set partly in Mexico City—long before Bolaño kicked it in 2003 and began to be translated in total. Carl translated parts of it himself for us, the other two in the basement apartment, me and Gervais, whose first name I'm not sure if I ever knew, but he went by his last, in any case. We were second and third command in the corps of something Carl called La Literatura del Estupidismo, which translates literally to The Literature of Stupidism.

We were the Stupidists.

The Spanish was Carl's little nod to Bolaño. The boy had drafted, even, a proper manifesto in the style of the Surrealists or some of the work of Russian futurist and expat Viktor Shklovsky, or Bolaño himself, who had his own famous manifesto—screed of the minor Infrarealist poetry sect in Mexico, early-twentysomethings who straddled the line between the Octavio Paz-and Efrain Huerta-devoted camps of Mexican poetry, populist and avant-garde, right and left or vice versa (though really I think Bolaño was much more interested in no camp whatsoever, which is close to what his manifesto says) in the 1970s. *The Savage Detectives* is about the time, partly.

Anyway, on my drive to work the other day—I live in the middle of nowhere east of Tuscaloosa, Ala.—I drove by an incidental convoy headed up a hill on Highway 7 led by a runner in the Guadalupe Torch Run. Carrying an Olympic-type torch in support of immigrants' rights through Cottondale outside of town, the runner led a line of long-haul truckers loaded with steel coils, who inched jerkily along, waiting for him to get the hell out of the way. It struck me as pregnant, the scene's image, perfectly pregnant as antecedent to the long slog of the Chicago Stupidists, less a march in the lead of progress as an unhappy accident that just slowed down other, more ultimately successful runs.

The Stupidist boys were serious, in any case. The thing about Bolaño Carl claimed to admire was the hardcore both/and nature of the author's aesthetic, as he told it. In the throes of the man's narratives you got the sense he was sincerely behind the work, that there was always a lot of emotion in his approach, but also that he was *behind* the work in a more satirical sense, crafting at a great distance from the subject. Though I have my doubts about how good Carl's Spanish was, it surely helped that Bolaño was always writing about himself, too, a model to fuel the boys' narcissistic impulses.

I don't know why I hung around them.

No, I do know why, or rather I know how it started. Though I'd mostly quit writing poetry by the time I met them, I'd moved to Chicago for that very reason: I would write. I knew there had to be something there that wasn't in Birmingham, old Alabama, where I grew up. In Birmingham we had music, we had hordes of punks with chain wallets, but every writer I'd ever heard of there was a dude in his 50s with a

the stupidist manifesto

In the monkey economy...insults aimed at us can always be jotted down. —Viktor Shklovsky

by Todd Dills

lot of debt and a lonely professor's job. "Go anywhere you like," one of them told me. He was an intro English professor who'd published a novel when he was in his 30s, then languished in a community college I took a few classes at one summer. "Just get the hell out of here, quick as you can."

He hadn't elaborated, but I forever knew he didn't mean just Birmingham but the state, the region. The way he talked about the Old South Disneyland that is Oxford when we read Faulkner's "The Bear" was enough to clue you into how very much he hated the South. Bolaño says—and I know this because after he died his books were translated, he became an establishment smash, which you probably know, and I got to read them—"Life is a journey toward finding a place to live and work." Something of that nature. Most people lose drive and give up before they find their spot. Not me, I found mine, but that's another story. It wasn't Chicago, but the Chi was well worth the shot.

I didn't know at all what I was looking for there, much less what I would find when I left Alabama, but I was pleasantly surprised by the then-dwindling poetry slam scene and tangentially and surely more meaningfully, if that's beyond cliché, a network of more serious writers associated with a few different magazines in town. A couple years into my time there, one of the mags, *Cry*, put on a reading at a fourth-floor gallery space downtown, which I remember distinctly as being odd—Chicago's scene was centered in storefront bookshops, cafés and bars out in the neighborhoods, rough-and-tumble and consequently exciting places with high crime rates and extremely volatile property values, quite unlike the staid old high-dollar buildings downtown. All the same, the neighborhood scenesters were there, among them the Stupidists—it was the first time I saw them—though they weren't calling themselves that yet, in a knot by the windows hanging over Ontario, smoking cigarettes and blasting through the free wine and beer the place was offering, Carl whispering little snickering asides during the readings to Gervais and Kristina Wald, Gervais' Russo-German girlfriend, prompting, alternately, grunts and great peels of laughter at woefully inappropriate moments.

People were looking at them.

In fact, one of the later readers, egg-headed prose experimentalist Ben Marcus, "man without



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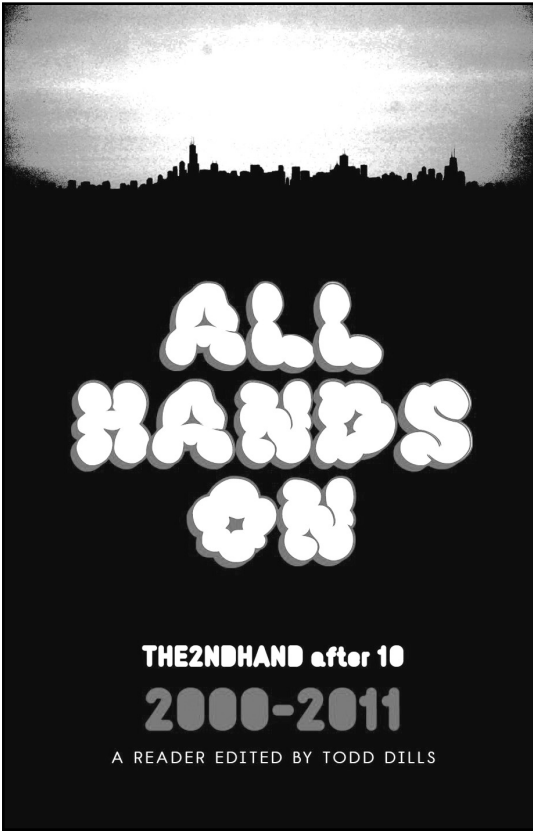
a movement," as Carl later called him, whose stuff I knew and whom I recognized from a reading I'd heard the one time I'd been to New York, turned his bald head and glared at them repeatedly. Carl and Kristina, at least, responded by making silly faces at him. Carl even stuck out his tongue.

By then, in thrall to Marcus, amazingly no one in the hall but me seemed to be noticing the exchange. But as the night broke up and guests started talking, everybody passed the word on and got pissed-off and the Stupidists were kicked out, which is I'm sure what they wanted. But not before I got my chance to laugh with them—I'd been dreadfully bored with the scene up until the moment, it was true, and to see Marcus clearly flustered by the shenanigans, worthy as they were of not much more than a sort of high-school admiration or notice, was titillating, or tintinnabulating little bells in the grim night, however you like.

I have the notes I took now ten years later, a horror of lost perspective, to say the least. They chronicle my boredom, if nothing else. The first reader, Joe Wenderoth, who came out with a guitar and read something slurred and slipped through with an utterly pretentious growly thing he did with his voice... Actually, I remember his entire performance much better than all that and, though the entire showing suffered from the guttural quality of the delivery, he well could have been purposefully pushing the audience toward cognizance, apprehension of the then vanguard chimp/ape metaphor, his voice the primary cue to the simian nature of his aesthetic, as the critics are still saying. The Stupidists, I recall—and forgive me for referring to them so abstractly or as a unit, they do have identities, after all, and I was one of them, but to remember Carl and Gervais and Kristina and my time with them is to be launched back into the east-side/west-side gang battle of any old American high school or inner city neigh-

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borhood—they were really into Wenderoth at the end of the night, which makes sense in the context of the ape.

In my notes Carl is described as “studly,” believe it or not. Skinny rangy dirty longhair Carl is *Studly spindly becker throws his blue-and-white beer can out the grimy fourth-floor window*. Note the overabundance of adjectives, of detail. For the first time I’d been playing a little with narrative, something I would never master, as you can see. As I was scribbling this, smiling to myself as the local prof, who followed Marcus, droned on a horrible little exercise in poetic futility—the next note immediately following my description of Carl’s antics is a terrible line from the poem the prof was reading, *“the crotch of the other is a withered sun,” or son?*—I looked up at last and the principle Stupidist caught my eye. He was not smiling at first, but as I bashfully looked away, then back, smiling, a cute grin came to Carl’s lips and he mouthed what I took for “This is fucking awful, isn’t it?” He was talking to me. My heart fluttered like a little bird in my chest, I am ashamed to admit (I’m usually rather brash, I hadn’t had sex for a while, I guess). And though I hadn’t been exactly thinking his sentiment, I knew for certain then how very terrible the lot of it all was, the “scene,” if this was what passed for it. I looked back to the relatively young prof behind the microphone, both hands clutching the little chapbook he was reading from, his nose aimed down directly into it like we weren’t even there, and I stood up and very carefully stepped around and over the seated bodies listening obediently to the prof, on my way across the room to the guys.

Carl and Gervais, he of the single name, formed a perfect Yin and Yang, Carl with shoulder-length curls and a doofus way of exaggerating his points and facial expressions, Gervais looking like a cracked-up version of Morrissey—faux hawk, horn-rimmed spectacles, smugly serious look on his face when he wasn’t har-rumphing at his friend’s jokes, but he had way too much facial hair; more than stubbly, the man almost had a spiky beard. He was scary, really, but initially I was most attracted to him. Carl just seemed such a mess—and he was, the both of them were, Carl outwardly and unabashedly. Gervais was all sneak attack. He nonchalantly told me that night of his trips to the Cabrini-Green neighborhood, the particular project sky-scraper he entered through a hole in the side of the building, a veritable cave in the structure inside which masked dealers plied their trade, after charming the pants off of me with a long bantering back-and-forth about Heidegger and Kierkegaard and etc., etc., the stock-in-trade sensitive boys typically ply, which was somehow refreshing to me at the time. But yes, Gervais was a recreational crackhead and didn’t try to hide it. We all had some sort of vice: Kristina was a veritable insomniac who ate shrooms with a mighty passion, Carl drank voluminous amounts of whiskey, and I smoked, I guess. When I was around them I did, anyway.

Long before, and after, I moved into the basement apartment, before and after Carl and I took to regularly rolling around in his little cave of a room, we wrote seated in a circle on the carpet. The sessions were strange. I have most of my notebooks. Carl thought it was destiny that I came along, a poet with a similar sensibility, Bolaño was a poet at heart, La Literatura del Estupidismo needed a poet. We’d brainstorm words for hours—subject-verb or vice versa, adjective upon adjective in a modifier list so long it could quickly cover six pages of a legal pad.

Obsequious, lucid, red, burnt-orange, long, slender, charismatic...

And coming out the end of it we’d write a poem or a story or—something, anyway, sometimes little more than fragment. It felt right, productive, like going to school and coming home with something to show for it—I’ve been re-reading the un-/finished products lately; they get increasingly angry with time, but at once they’re lushly detailed like any overwritten narrative: Stupidist literature.

You’d be surprised, though. Some of them are good. Most are bad. *Such is the nature of literature*—Carl would say something like that. He did say things like that, forever proposing whatever it was we ended up doing and merely dismissing the failures with pithy remarks about the enduring valor of failure that made him sound smart and vulnerable at once. He was a great politician in that regard.

He’s the one, for instance, who proposed staging readings in public parks, which is what the city’s denizens probably remember us for if they remember us at all. I doubt they do.

Carl also proposed and mostly carried out the few broadsheets we published, including the manifestoes. La Manifiesto Estupidas, the most important of the ten or

T H E M A N I F E S T O S

We live in a time of intelligence. Everything—from

bombs and insurance policies to mood medications and the interfaces that guide our communications devices, which is to say nothing of the communications devices themselves, to the multiplicity of the choices available to us (make it the *smart choice*, goes a commercial local to someplace in the anonymous American wilds, for a particular brand of soap)—yes, everything, is smart. Everything, except for ourselves, and by extension our literature. Where we might achieve success, ever defined by money and happiness, our literature can only be a good read, a page turner, a titillating memoir of a CEO come from the brink of financial ruin to a truer self-understanding. *Malarky*, we say, a word with a rich history that we well know. And this: if we are being excluded from the panoply of intelligence amassing in veritable constellations or massive, very real military ranks around us, what can we be but stupid? It sounds like an insult, but let us embrace it. Philosophs and litterateurs the eons over have played games of definition, after all. Let us be stupid like the fox, that trickster of folklore, stupid like the fools of Shakespeare, like the Invisible Man of the modern American canon, he who once warned us to beware of those who talk of the spiral of history, for they are preparing a boomerang. We hold our helmets at the ready. The messengers of the new intelligence amass at the gates to the halls of the literature. The Stupidists meet them, remanufactured typewriters and pens stolen from office garbage bins our weaponry, cast-off printouts from PowerPoint presentations our ammunition. We fill the empty backs of the prints with exquisite stupidity. We need not laaves and fishes—we feed the armada with words.

—Todd Dills

so, was a flat piece of paper that could be a poster or could be read like a newspaper on the backside, on the front of which was the mantra of the Stupidists, “WE ARE OUT HERE,” borrowed from a local street-theater artist Carl was involved with, followed by a Carl-penned statement of purpose remarkable only for its personal nature, I think, and followed by parodic-serious alternate versions of the manifesto from Gervais, Kristina and me.

But it was Carl’s that came closest to sounding genuine, I guess. It was all about him—all self-assertion, assertiveness—in the end. He invoked the ape straight away: *We are the lesser primates among humanity—we require digital extension with pens—but we wear the label proudly, hope-fully, forcefully. Apes unite!* He went on to conjure the Bolaño-esque image of the wanderer, the poet-vagabond Carl wanted to be, it’s obvious to me now. I guess he was, in a sense, considering his many trips south of the border before we met, though his hometown was out in Berwyn, scarcely ten miles from where we lived, and last word I heard from him he was back there, imaginatively parsing the local population into warring camps on either side of the abortion question in a Stupidist excuse for a novel, I guess.

The Stupidist needs not the comforts of home, she draws sustenance from the road, the experience of the new. He then borrowed the Russian Shklovsky’s own simian metaphor: *And when in Rome, when immersed in the culture of the humans, the apes live on the rooftops, ever roving, well above the umbrella. The Stupidist is a litterateur for the unsuspecting. We are in the business of the creation of new things.*

The last line was Shklovsky’s, almost directly, a trenchant modernist’s screed, isn’t it. We shouted it at a reading given by an old Chicago confessional poet. We included it in surrealist or, rather, Stupidistic missives to Mayor Daley we stamped and mailed at the rate of three a week. Not that we ever received a reply. We wheat-pasted our posters all over the neighborhoods.

It never came to a head for me, never blew up or exploded, as I fully expected it would. We got kicked out of plenty of readings, sure, but I waited expectantly for some bedroom argument or a birth, even, a real live birth of a Stupidist baby, no midwife or hospital, just plopped all viscera and sound out onto the sheets of Carl’s bed to grow up a monster of American culture. I moved out. I don’t remember much. I’d taken a job at a Wicker Park café and could afford my own place. I quit writing entirely. The Stupidists took it out of me, I guess; I lost the energy to withstand the long faces, the frowns of the unsuspecting.

Carl kept me in the fold via e-mail—I rarely actually saw him around. Then my dad died and, back in Birmingham at the funeral, I ran into a lit professor, a different one from my former teacher. This was a guy about my age who’d gone to my college, a very low-level lit professor—in fact he may have been a comp teacher—who in any case knew a lot more about Bolaño than Carl did, and at the same time surprised me after I told him where I was living by bringing up



the Stupidists of Chicago. My first thought was that he was a doofus plant, laid there by Carl in a sad self-aggrandizing reach. I’d mostly stopped even thinking about our “movement” by then, it was true. “We are in the business of the creation of new things,” the professor quoted, smiling wryly. “That’s their ripped-off slogan.”

“I know,” I said, but he didn’t believe me. I didn’t elaborate, because, truth is, I wanted it dead, Stupidism dead. It was, I guess, but I wanted the definitive end, the blow-up, because to live and contribute to the decadence at the heart of our culture is one thing, but to grow old within that heart, or to grow old as the heart grows arteries that branch out to supply oxygen to foreign bodies, is quite another. Without the end, where was I? What was I a contributor to? Where could I remain, safe, free of responsibility?

But I went out with the professor and some others and got drunk and my cell phone buzzed four or five times throughout the night—it was Carl, lending credence to my paranoia. When I called him back three nights later, drunk and mourning at a bar on a Saturday night alone, he gave me a long-winded love letter, essentially. “You don’t know what sadness is,” I told him—neither of us did. I’d been struck recently by the divergent male/female notions of love and sexuality present in the post-existentialist modernist novel while reading John Fowles’ *The Magus*. The men in these novels, inevitably the narrators, want us to think they know better while their women anguish more readily over their lack of commitment. The story was typically their realization that they didn’t know anything for certain, and their women were probably smarter than they were. That story is utterly stupid today. Such distinctions are out the window—if anything the reverse might make a great film. *Modern* was just a euphemism for *dumb*, maybe. Dumb women and dumb men at cross-purposes. Today, I like to think we are united in stupidity, not necessarily dumb or incapable of love but senseless with self-love, stupid like the fox.

I won’t fall for the romantic bullshit, I told Carl. We are apes at heart, I said, and I think I may have hung up on him.

My sadness was complete as it might be, if it was in fact sadness, mind scattered with my father’s ashes, concentration fractured, nonexistent. When I went back to Chicago it was only for a month of packing up and leaving, saying half-hearted goodbyes to my

In a world we judge to be stupid, unintelligible, we generate cultures of surpassing unintelligibility, trumping stupidity with stupidity, rejecting the irrationality that we see and know in favor of belief in more preposterous irrationalities.

Literature, for instance, strives stupidly for the impossible, the inexpressible, offering a chronicle of almos

ts and not-quite-like-but-similar-tos, a patchwork of visceral resemblances, its greatest successes tinged with lament, a taste you can just nearly imagine.

Stupider, writers persist in the belief that—despite its continual failure to do so—literature can affect change, stop war, achieve love, communicate authentic encounter, or rise above fear-based hatred.

A particularly stupid poet, Kenneth Patchen, writes, “It is the artist’s duty to be alive,” stupidly conflating existence with deliberate experience and stupidly feeling an obligation to truthfully testify to a way of being human that will—he recognizes—sooner or later be wiped out.

In a world of rampant, random disregard for justice, recompense or human values, a world incapable of reason, pity or compassion, what possible meaning or value can literature have?

Patchen continues this rant of art’s duty: “To drag people into glittering occupations / To cry out nervously at every knock / To overflow the volcano in semen and phlegm / To reel in an exquisite sobriety / To blush perpetually in gaping innocence”

“A feeling of passionate mercy,” he writes, “the rest doesn’t matter a damn!” which is surely the most bald restatement of the stupid.

We know that passionate mercy doesn’t matter, nor holding a mirror to music, nor yawping from rooftops, nor chanting over candles in the rain...

The very idea of ideals: stupid through and through. To live for them, striving, passionate, frustrated and inspired, is to willfully embrace stupidity after stupidity, like the snake that, seeing that the tail it is swallowing is its own, chokes on, nonetheless, its appetite whetted, swallowing more and more. There can be no satisfaction, only death.

—Spencer Dew



half-hearted friends. They didn’t know sadness, either. I moved to Nowhere, Alabama, outside Cottrondale. I study the cultural rippling of the metaphor of the ape’s ascendancy in America’s perception of itself, the devolution of the population, of the state itself, the slow burn of American exceptionalism and empire alongside the ever-quicken

ing incineration of the world’s fossil fuels, the prophetic chimp-mask of George W. Bush’s face at the bygone incendiary apex like a paper specter forever glued on the television screen, aggressively sarcastic, nonplussed, full of fabricated wonder, wailing, stupid.

END

TWO BY QUINCY
RHOADS

the pills | He could not remember if he already took his pills. So, for fear of overdosing, he abstained. This process repeated itself until he never took a pill because he was afraid that he had already taken it and this is how his life ended, confused and fearful of both over- and under-indulging.

the splatterpunks | The splatterpunks caught us completely off-guard. First, they cut off Emily’s legs with a chainsaw. The walls of the apartment were crimson within the hour. After the punks got Emily, they went for the building manager. She was easy to dispatch. Her frailties were even more emphasized without her eyeballs.

I played in the back of theatres throughout my childhood. When I was a boy, my mother took me to see a play. I don’t remember the title. I just remember a monologue where this man stood on a black stage. He told a story of flying razor beach balls that chased him and cut his limbs one by one.

Upstairs, the kids cornered me; the sword made a satisfying chok as it met with my neck.

END