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Erickson, Thomas J., 1960-
Madison, Wisconsin: Parallel Press, 2013

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A Parallel Press Chapbook



**The Lawyer Who
Died in the
Courthouse Bathroom**

BY

Thomas J. Erickson

A Parallel Press Chapbook

The Lawyer Who Died
in the Courthouse Bathroom

Poetry by
Thomas J. Erickson

Parallel Press

University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries
728 State Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706
<http://parallepress.library.wisc.edu>

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ISBN: 978-1-934795-48-4

Acknowledgments:

“Beloit, Wisconsin, February, 1983” appeared in *Arbor Vitae* and *Free Verse*.

“Berlin Sky” appeared in *Mad Poet’s Review* and *Mobius*.

“Chester’s Pants” appeared in *Wisconsin Academy Review*.

“Elegy for Drunk Mike” appeared in *The New Poet*.

“Go Brewers” appeared in *The Wisconsin Fellowship of Poet’s Museletter*.

“The Good Laugh” appeared in *Slipstream*.

“The Lawyer Who Died in the Courthouse Bathroom” appeared in *Poetry Midwest*.

“The Killers” appeared in *Verse Wisconsin*.

“The Mother” appeared in *The Quiddity Literary Journal*.

“New Year’s Eve, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 2011” appeared in *Verse Wisconsin On-Line* and *The 2012 Wisconsin Poet’s Calendar*.

“The Nuptial Flight” appeared in *SNR Review*.

“Speaking in Tongues” appeared in *Word Riot* and *Shakespeare’s Monkey Review*.

“Sweating the Bottle” appeared in *freefall* and *Slipstream*.

Special thanks to my poetry group, the Hartford Avenue Poets, who have critiqued several of these poems. I’m also grateful to Daphne for her support and encouragement.

The Lawyer Who Died in the Courthouse Bathroom

As a young man, he read Camus and resolved
that if God did exist it wouldn't make any difference.

He went to Spain and almost didn't come back.

Once, he snow-shoed eight miles. There wasn't
a sound in the woods that day, not even birdsong.
Just the snow shoes breaking through the icy
crust to the powder—and his misty breath in
and out. He walked across a frozen pond
where he hunted for turtles when he was a kid.
They were hibernating in the frosty ooze below.

The hundreds of people he represented;
their dramas not worth one whit.
The files waiting in his briefcase,
the combination set to open.

Berlin Sky

When daybreak surprised us that morning
in your hotel room, the Berlin sky was
the color of a healing bruise.

In my pocket were the chips of mortar I had
scratched out of the remnants of the Gestapo
headquarters. The mortar was turning
to sand by the hour—free at last
to disintegrate for all time.

I asked you to think of all the people
who had looked into that sky, awaiting
the knock of the Gestapo or the Stasi,
the concussions of the Allied bombs,
or the signal to escape from East to West.

We were too drunk and happy, though,
to confront the city and its past—safely
distanced, as we were, from divorce
or the second thoughts of the newly married.

It was easy to look at the sky and write
our histories on the window pane
before passing into our Lethean sleep.

Chester's Pants

Chester kidnapped a woman
outside of a Burger King.

Then he robbed her,
then he raped her,
then he beat her up,
or so they said.

Chester didn't have any
nice clothes for the trial.
When he was arrested,
he was wearing cut-off jeans
and a tank top.
I gave him a shirt and
a pair of pants.

My clothes looked good on him,
especially the pants.
He looked good
when I was sitting next to him
and the jury found him guilty.
He looked good
when I was sitting next to him
and the judge sentenced him to 180 years.

My wife told me
to throw the clothes away.
I did throw away the shirt.
I put the pants in a shopping bag
and put the bag in
a filing cabinet at work.

Years passed,
until today,
when I found the bag.
I put my pants on.
They still fit.
After all,
they are my pants.

The Mother

*Informers inform
Burglars burgle
Murderers murder
Lovers love.
~Jean-Paul Belmondo in *Breathless**

My court-appointed client has the scattered
bug-eyed look of a crackhead. Her matted
hair is flecked with platelets of dandruff. She is
wearing a light windbreaker on this cold winter day.

She clutches her keys with both hands
and tells me to help her get her kids back.
She admits she molested her four-year-old son.
Since starting therapy, her thoughts
of having sex with children
are not happening so much.

She shows me a picture of her son
and tells me he can already recite the alphabet.
I mention my sons and we chat about little things
that make us proud or make us laugh.

Hours later, I drive out of the parking lot.
There she is—hugging herself at the bus stop
in the falling snow.

I Had a Dream

I was in an airport. I saw a pretty young woman in her early twenties. I knew instinctively that she was a Danish actress. I also knew instinctively that I was from Denmark and an actor as well. We started chatting and she told me her name was Addie Mae Collins and we discovered, by coincidence, that we had gone to the same small Midwestern liberal arts college, years apart. I knew I had heard her name before. Then I was in a library looking up her name in old newspapers. (It is a thrill to read microfiche in a dream.) I was right. She was Addie Mae Collins, one of the four little girls who died in the church bombing in Birmingham in 1963.

I was back in the airport and I told her I knew who she was. She smiled at me and whispered in my ear, *You will never know.*

Home Visit

Oh, but it is buggy
in this upper flat.
The smell of grease,
grease permeating—
Stop cooking those burgers!

Grandmother is wearing a muumuu
of sorts. The holes for her arms
are the size of discuses and show black
muffs of armpit hair. Her grandson wanders in
all bug-eyed and cracked up. He looks
at me askance. He looks askance.

Do they ever turn off the big screen TV?
There is a parakeet or a canary or some such
bird in a white-trimmed cage with a little
sandy colored perch. She is mentally
fillipping me. Flick, flick, flick.

Some photos line the wall and provide
the only note of intimacy. How long has
it been since anyone looked into the eyes
of the young newly-weds in their boffo pastels
and bright smiles? There is a sepia one, too,
of a grand couple in formal wear
which must have been taken
before the diaspora north.

And a three-year-old girl here who is
my ward. Yes, I have wards who form
one of the precincts of my
gerrymandered mind.

She takes me by the hand and leads me
to her bedroom with her Lion King
bedspread and bare walls and silver
radiator blaring unreal warmth.

If not this family for her, who? Somebody
has to hang the pictures, somebody has to
pay the cable bill, somebody has to hear
the bird sing.

Speaking in Tongues

I smoked a blunt and drank too much bumpy face so I called a johnny cab to take me to my baby mama's crib. I saw a brother kickin' it. He said he got a couchy-coupon from my lady. I said do you know what time it is and he said it's time for some drama so I took out my strap and busted a cap on his ass.

These words—in their doomed vibrancy—literally mean: I smoked a marijuana and cocaine-laced cigar and drank too much Seagram's Gin. I called an anonymous phone number and told them where I was. A few minutes later, a car picked me up and I gave the driver five dollars. I told him to drive me to the mother of my child's house. I saw a guy on the corner who told me that my girlfriend had propositioned him for sex. I challenged him to a duel and he accepted. I pulled out my gun and I killed him.

Eventually, I will argue to the jury the following:
My client had a drink with friends. He called a taxi to take him home to his family. On the way home, he encountered a long-time enemy of his who spoke rudely about my client's girlfriend. The man pulled a gun on my client. My client killed him in self-defense.

I explicate, obfuscate, mitigate, equivocate—the translator of a story of death.

Word

Interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.

~Susan Sontag

I walk into a video store and ask the clerk if they have *I'm Not There*. The clerk checks his computer and says, "No, but we have *I'm Not Scared*." His tone is expectant and hopeful and it makes me feel bad to tell him that while it sounds close, it's not the movie I wanted.

I represent drug clients with the given first names of *Kilo* and *Easy Money*, who sell *teenagers* (one-eighth grams of heroin) to teenagers. I have two teenagers.

Until a few years ago, I thought the term *fitful sleep* meant a good night's sleep. Now that I know the true meaning, I'm not sleeping so well.

HIDTA (pronounced *high-da*) is an acronym for *High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas* which is an anti-crime task force. My client keeps complaining that Al Qaeda is after him. I think he means HIDTA.

When Kafka read *The Trial* to his friends for the first time, he laughed so hard that there were moments when he couldn't read further. I, for one, do not think the alienation of modern man is so funny.

Court Appearances

Where is the poetry in this
boxy room with sallow walls and
carpeting the color of sludge?

Have any of you—judge, DA, bailiff—
ever read the darkly lyrical Larkin while
a client was being deposed, or tried
to write a villanelle between appearances?

What if I told you to go
easy on the burglar because even
a flat screen HDTV doesn't have
the brilliant color of Sonnet #18
or the resolution of any poem
by Frederic Seidel?

Or that the only difference between
the serial arsonist and us is that
he cannot control the terrible freedom
of his thoughts. Isn't there beauty in fire?

The identity thief simply committed
the conceit of the probing author—
to be someone else in secret,
to create a doppelganger. The secret
sharer of Highsmith or Conrad or Twain.

If a line is a point set in motion
then how could the forger stop
once he entered the decimal point?
It is an unbroken line to obfuscation
and abnegation, larceny and lucre.

Maybe the murderer should be set free because we are all possibly dead already. I will recite, Judge, to the hereafter, and if no one comes, let him go.

The Nuptial Flight

Ninety-nine percent of all the billions of ants in the world are female. All the ants you see on the sidewalk or in your garden or in your kitchen are female. You may never ever see a male ant in your entire life (unless you dig up an ant colony—which I have done, by the way). The female ants do all the work. They collect the food, build the nest, defend the colony, tend to the larvae. The sole task of the male ant is to inseminate the queen. When she arrives from her nuptial flight, the queen chooses a few of the six-legged bags of sperm. After making their deposit, they die. When winter comes, the remaining virgin boys are eaten by their industrious sisters. These things happen because it is their nature.

On the steps of the courthouse, I
congratulate my client on her divorce
and refer to her by her new last name.
While she asks me out for a celebratory
drink, underfoot, the female ants scurry
about the sidewalk, the indolent males
await their queen in languid repose, and
the queen begins her nuptial flight.

Go Brewers

I am in a gay bar in London thinking
about the Milwaukee Brewers.

Ian, a wiry and pale little id, wants
to get laid, and while he feverishly works
the room, I sit at the bar alone
with my thoughts of rotations, missed
double plays, line drives in the gap.

There is a collective consciousness
in the air, a cloud that brushes the shore
of my small island in the Antipodes. I
am an interloper wearing Chuck Taylors
and an invisible sign.

There was a kid from my class who died
of AIDS. I wasn't mean to him,
but I couldn't say I was nice
either. I guess I just ignored him.
Better to pretend he wasn't
even in the room.

The Floating Man

Tonight I am in a mist. I barely know what's what.
~John Keats

It started during a trial. I was sitting there listening to the DA's opening statement when I started floating about the courtroom, over the judge, the jurors, the bailiffs, my client, the victim's family wearing matching shirts with his super-imposed photo.

I could even see me—whispering to my client, taking notes, staring into space. I looked tired and I needed a haircut.

The next time I floated, I was at a baseball game with my two sons. They were still pretty little. I let them climb

to the top row of the upper deck. I drifted way up to keep an eye on them.

Far above the stadium, I could see the arc of the fly ball that fell to the glove of the outfielder with such regret,

I would have kept going if they hadn't pulled me down.

Sweating the Bottle

Even a lawyer carries in him the debris of a poet.

~Flaubert

I love to push down the brown
paper bag to get to the mouth
of my forty and I love to screw
the cap back on after every swig.

It is the morning after a crackling
trial. I'm thinking about my gnome
of a client with his beady-black eyes
and salt-and-pepper beard—the kind
of beard that comes right up to the eyes
like a mask.

The morning dew has covered my car
windows like a gauzy cocoon. I
hear a dog howling with the conviction
reserved for strangers.

While we waited for the verdict, my client told
me he had molested the boys for years.
He told me this because he knew
he was going to walk and it was time
to let me in on the joke.

I take the empty bottle and knead
the moist sides until the glass is warm
and the tiny droplets fall and pool
together and now I have enough
left for one more drink.

The Tree

Early one morning,
an Amsterdam city worker
will drive his truck
to 263 Prinsengracht Street.
He'll take his chain saw
and cut a wedge-shaped
piece of wood from the base
of the chestnut tree
that is now over
a hundred years old
and blighted (the tree may
creak in the wind).

He may not even notice
the attic window
where Anne Frank gazed
down on the tree.

He'll tie a rope around
the trunk and pull
it down. The whole operation
won't take more than
half an hour
not counting the wood-chipping.

The Good Laugh

Are you ready for some drama?

That's what the shooter said right before he shot the man dead at point blank range.

Six young black males are led into the line-up room. Once unshackled, they relax and murmur to each other. The suspect is sixth of six in line. He doesn't make a peep.

They put on the white jumpsuits that are puffy and ill-fitting and ride up at the neck. Once the prisoners notice how they look they start giggling.

The witness joins the detectives behind the one-way window. Number One takes his mark, steps forward and flatly says, *Are you ready for some drama?* Number Two utters the line with mild defiance. Number Three, with no prompting lurches toward the glass and commands, *You ready for some drama, bitch!* The boys start laughing uncontrollably. Once order is restored, Four and Five proceed without incident. Then, it's Number Six's turn, his voice barely audible.

The witness marks the card.

The boys are led out of the room.

The chains scuff the tile floor.

Omaha

They are trying to start over. It's a rambling ride with stops and starts. When she feels like she can't do it again, she thinks of killing herself, but death is too busy for her right now.

Her friends all meet in a group and say things like, *Only talk to him four times a week*, and tell her to depend on a higher power. She talks to her dog, who feels worn out.

He takes the long view because his hands have been burned by all the re-ignitions. It's funny, he thinks, how the clock has stopped between the two ticks that separate one day from the next, how time is just a series of perpetual presents.

To his surprise, she has turned the knife toward him. Should he disarm her? No. Better to be stabbed and stabbed—she can't kill him now anyhow.

Elegy for Drunk Mike

She had a face like an awl that poked
through the leather around his heart.

When he was with her, he was all
negative capability—no irritable reaching
after fact or reason.

I have struggled my whole life
just trying to figure out what to think about
much less who to love.

After she left Mike, he drank himself to death
and all that remained
was the misty maw of the bottle.

Beloit, Wisconsin, February, 1983

Past the iced cyclone fence,
the glass encased trees,
the wrapped up little boys with their sleds,
we walk to the town,

a lonely town with going-out-of business
sales and candy cane light poles
and dark factories by the river.

In the livid twilight, you hold
my arm while crossing the icy street.
We crush berries in the snow—
red on white.

Warm for awhile.
Coffee and eggs are a comfort.
You, across the table,
turn away
to watch the snow fall

and the snow falls
so silently

New Year's Eve, Milwaukee, 2011

I only go out to get a fresh appetite
for being alone. That was Byron.
I only go out to get the bag
on. That was me.

Down to the dingy bar I go. Say goodbye,
Catullus, to the shores of Asia Minor. Say
Goodbye, Tom, to the curbs of Whitefish Bay.

My favorite color is Glenlivet brown and tonight
I'm going to prove it. It's only twelve years old
but I'm going to make it my bitch.

I hope I see Jimmy, but he's probably making
popcorn for the crowd at the Globetrotters' game.
I'd like to play cribbage with Mike, but he's dead.
At least Ted the heroin-addict-bartender is
Here, but so is that shrew whose husband
I represented in the divorce. Good God.

The sound of the bar dice is an anodyne.
Shots all around. All of us in this musty boat
must imagine Sisyphus happy. If not,
how could we cut the deal, how could we
bring 'em back, how could we avoid
the skunk?

This is New Year's Eve in Milwaukee
for fuck's sake.

Light

Your check engine light is on
again. Just ignore it, it will go
away. The pilot light is dying
and we are freezing.

The soft light on your face
in the breaking dawn reminds me
of the light in your eyes years ago.

When I'm in an airplane at night
I like to see the lights next
to the dark outline of a river—
a bar, a bait shop, a house.

The Killers

The killers come and go.
The victims (the alleged victims)
blend together. Almost always
black males either into or on
the periphery of drug dealing.

I write my client's name
on the file in black marker,
read the complaint, go to the jail,
look over the police reports, try
to get him out on bail,
plea bargain or go to trial.
At a sentencing,
the victim's family crying
the same things over and over—
He is missed. He was loved. He loved.

The killers come and go.
So do the rapists,
the armed robbers, and the burglars.
But the child molesters.
I remember them all.
How they look
into my eyes out of some dark
animal terror; how the creepy
fidgeting accompanies every lie;
how the reverie of their terrible
pleasures turns a scowl
into a smile on a dime.

How the steel doors, the electric
locks, the barbed wire
hold us,
bind us.

Two Crows, the Hawk, and a Snow Shovel

Above the scrape of the shovel, I hear
two crows. I can't bring myself to buy
a snow blower even though I live
on a corner lot. Truth be told, I like
to shovel these miles of concrete.
"Offer it up," my mother would have said.

When I was a server I fainted on the altar—
overcome either by the smell of incense or my head
cold. I couldn't light the waxy wicked candles
and Father O'Connor was saying, "Erickson, light
those damn candles," under his breath and then I fell.

My confirmation name was Mathias
because I liked the character in *The Omega Man*
who wanted to kill Charlton Heston.
He was the last man on Earth.
When the Archbishop said my name
I could feel his spittle on my forehead.

I pulled the rope that rang the bells
before mass, the heels of my black shoes
flush on the knot. Up I went.
There was a pause at the top
and it felt like I was never coming down.

The crows are wedging a hawk through
the noon sky away from the direction of their lives
or whatever secret they keep in the trees.



Thomas J. Erickson was born in 1960 and grew up in Kohler, Wisconsin. He received a BA from Beloit College in English Composition and a law degree from Marquette University. His poems have appeared in numerous publications including *The Los Angeles Review*, *Quiddity*, *International Literary Review*, *Mad Poet's Review*, *The New Poet*, and *Slant*. He is an attorney in Milwaukee, where he is a member of the Hartford Avenue Poets. Last but not least, he is the proud father of Charles and John.

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ISBN 978-1-934795-48-4