

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, "Finì.  
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.