That First, Wound-Bearing Layer
B-Sides & Unreleased Singles (Volume I)
by Cliff Burns
for Sherron
(for showing me sunsets)
Side One
Greenhouse Effect

Gone Fishin’

I don’t think it’s right for you to call me those names. I am your husband and you are my wife. I think I will sew your lips shut with eight-pound test line. I think I will gut you and fillet you. I think I will eat you, head and all.
Suspicious Mind

I don’t want you to take this the wrong way but while you were out someone called and he wouldn’t leave his name or number he only said he’d call again sometime and though he never came right out and said it I could tell he was hoping that when he did it wouldn’t be me who answered sounding scared and lonely and hostile and betrayed.
5.4.U.

*The Last Indians*

He is sending out smoke signals, angry puffs that never seem to entirely dissipate.

I am trying to decipher an implicit message but it’s hard. Do they say leave me alone, I don’t want to talk about it? Or sit down, I have something to say to you. It’s not clear. So I stay away. That’s the way it’s been lately. I’ve stopped taking chances.

I pick up the newspaper and sit across the room from him. The smoke coils but refuses to coalesce into either a rebuke or a confession. He finishes the cigarette and another moment is lost.

And I think maybe I should start smoking again but decide I don’t have the strength to carry on a decent conversation anyway.

*Insomnia*

It’s a ritual we’re both too bored to dispense with entirely. I am going to bed and he is watching TV. I go over and press my lips to his cheek. He averts his face to let me. I take his cold hand in mine as I kiss him. We both say the words. The news is on. Someone has died. Somewhere. I walk down the hallway. I hear him turn the TV down. He pulls his chair closer to the set. I turn out the light, climb into bed. Pound my pillows. And, as usual, it takes me a long time to get to sleep.

*Alone*

I’m telling him this can’t go on. He is nodding his head. He says something about the past and I don’t remember. He is talking about now and I don’t care. Neither of us talks about the future because we’re both so terrified of being alone.
Wrong

Something tells me that today is the day. I am nervous and excited. I can barely get the key in the door. I am holding my breath as I come inside. It is very quiet. I hang up my coat, take off my shoes. I walk down the hallway, stepping on broken glass and pieces of shredded gut. I go into the living room and he is there. We don’t say anything. And then I remember that it’s Tuesday, my turn to fix dinner.

Baby Steps

The first ones are the hardest. You put one foot ahead of the other, hold your arms out for support, sway and bump along. You keep thinking you’re going to fall. The floor stretches away to infinity. You’ll never make it. You find yourself bracing against the furniture, pushing off, careering, out of control. There’s the door. You tell yourself it’s not so far. You curse your brittle feet. You’re scared out of your mind. One step and then another. Not so difficult now. You’re gaining confidence. And the floor, you decide, isn’t so hard after all.
Birth

All this blood amidst a miracle a bulging head splitting skin provoking low moans from mother secured to the gurney with leather straps father under sedation staring fixedly at a mirror revealing bloated vein-tracked head erupting into brightness slapped to life by a bespectacled sadist who will overbill for the procedure new furniture for his office an extension on his house his son a junkie hooked on pharmaceuticals smuggled home in a black bag engraved by adoring sycophants on the payroll groped at the Christmas party where profit-sharing checks are handed out to placate the indignity suffered this is life this is the real world kid cuff him with a bracelet stick him in an incubator prod him with hypodermics and feed him crib death if he cries.
School

Grandpa whittles his thumbs daydreaming about the Great War while Sis is in the basement working on her biological warfare experiments worth half her science mark in Mr. Oppenheimer’s class who’s on the payroll of the CIA and drinks himself to sleep at night to assuage his conscience knowing that he is the reason Mother is down with another one of her headaches and Father has taken to sniffing glue and Junior that’s me plays connect the dots with his polyps counting the days until he is sixteen and can run away and join the circus.
Work

In identical cubicles bristling with technological wonders really just serfs with nametags and personalized mugs incessantly toeing the company line photocopying their hemorrhoids during coffee breaks flirting with doe-eyed secretaries chastened by visigothic supervisors in wrinkled white Brooks Brothers shirts bobbing their heads during staff meetings X-ing out the days until retirement shuffling paper conference calling filling in Book of the Month forms stealing paper clips stapling their hairpieces into place unionized in name only drinking their lunches racing home to narcoticized reality slamdunking with Air Jordan trying to remember when dreaming didn’t hurt so much.
Death

A means to an end finally able to kick back and relax slip notes to the guy next to you without having to worry about teacher passing gas without apologizing except to the weevils who have other things on their minds listening to the grass grow smelling the roses catching a few rays hoping that if there is an afterlife it won’t come for a long long time.
Children

Don’t make me come in there with a chainsaw I’d hate to have to sever your little arms and legs splattered with young blood doing it for your own good hurting me more than it’s hurting you teach you to respect authority honor thy father and mother sit up straight don’t play with your food you could put your eye out breaking your parents’ hearts running with the wrong crowd associating with the coloreds tracking dirt on the clean floor leaving your clothes in a pile forgetting to take out the garbage making your sister cry growing up moving away never calling never writing leaving us to rot in some nursing home going senile biting the nurses’ bedsore overmedicated cardiac arrest dying alone.
Divorce

You are perhaps laboring under the dangerous misconception that I love you or at least care for you such thinking only leading to disillusionment/despair the truth being that I was brought up in an environment of estrangement the idea of touching/being touched repugnant to me I recoil from overt emotion believing that sex is a disease waiting to happen intimacy cause for unmasking laughter barely veiled contempt you raise your voice and I shrink you leave and proportions return the table legs are not tree trunks the toilet bowl not a vast chemical-laced expanse I crawl up on the couch no longer worried about falling between the cushions suffocated by their weight devoured by micro-organisms.
Kafka Fuck

Once back at my place she plays it coy scuttling under the couch until I menace her with a can of Raid using it to steer her toward the bedroom antennae twitching in excitement crawling up the edge of my bedspread chittering as I run my fingers along her polished carapace rubbing her thorax while her withered ornamental wings flutter mandibles dug into my pillow in insectile ecstasy as I mount her probing for anything resembling a vagina wondering if she uses protection and if not if the pupa will look anything like me.
Irish Whiskey

My father’s drink was Old Bushmill’s no ice no water no sipping deep gulps like a polluted fish eyes closed cirrhosis angina only after work sometimes in the morning if it was going to be a tough day a few splashes in his thermos for lunch tucked in with baloney sandwiches Twinkies an apple if my mother wanted to start a fight a mellowing effect at first then banging fists drunken slurs creeping up to bed leaving her to deal with it coaxing him pleading with him talking soft and low ignoring his taunts lying in the warm glow of the TV afghan tucked around him whiskey breath hoarse emphysemic breathing the first thing you heard when you came down for breakfast.
Side Two
That First, Wound-Bearing Layer

Signaling for the waiter to bear the body away finishing your drink in silence sending Moet Chandon to the lesbians at the next table enduring their hate watching the door for someone you know feeling terribly vulnerable albeit well-armed the tailored faces sculpted bodices rife with paranoia the room spinning faces congealing into caricatures life ebbing out fumbling for the stungun hastily applying composure layering it on thick the accountants with binomial gazes blissfully unaware.
Action!

Imagine:

You’re stuck in an elevator with this Charles Manson whacked out on amphetamines groovy guru type watching as he reaches into his throat and pulls out this serious dagger twelve inches long dripping gastric juices you’re going whoa whoa whoa pressed up against the wall like you’re protecting your asshole even though it’s your multi-chambered adrenaline-injected heart he’s after jabbing all the buttons on the panel somewhere in a control room some zoned out security guard listening to his Walkman beating his meat to the new Rod Stewart offering not even minding as Charlie Manson whacked out on amphetamines groovy guru dude lurches toward you brandishing steel and nicotine-stained teeth and you’re remembering all those DePalma movies waiting for someone to yell cut print it’s a wrap closing your eyes against the sweltering bank of motion picture lights bustle of extras gofers production assistants thinking God this seems so real…
Poetic Justice

The men from maintenance come in to check around test the smoke detector fire extinguisher dripping taps make notes on a bulging clipboard tip their hats on the way out nearly tripping over the big black cat in contravention of the lease agreement moving on to the next apartment not having the heart to tell them about the lady down the hall who has a doberman for her personal protection after being attacked in an unlit stairwell by a man who once dusted her place for roaches.
Ugly Americans

Pissing against the Great Wall farting in the Louvre bitching about the locals the heat the food the filth berating tour guides the help never leaving tips kicking beggars lolling by the pool obvoluted guts simpering wives calling everyone boy hanging out in meat bars bartering with cold hard cash always worried about being ripped off Raybans and body odor pinching flight attendants guffawing cheap whiskey cheap cigars patriotism engraved on their features indelibly etched Stars and Stripes the South will rise nuke Iran fuck the poor the Grand Old Party dixie hearts beer bellies primordial brains USMC tattoos chewing baccy obese mutant teenage children oozing sanctimony two weeks of sun and fun a month in Betty Ford yeehaw made in the US of A love it or leave it I’m a proud member of NRA rather have my sister raped than drive a Jap bike burn my flag eat my bullets make my day God’s country from the mountains to the valleys don’t consort with nigras don’t take rides from strangers death penalty for drug trafficking castration for hummersekshuls AIDS is God’s punishment evolution a Commie plot guns don’t kill people do Ronnie Raygun Mount Rushmore Custer Memorial Diem Pol Pot Botha people juntas Yankee go home aw hell let’s have another round.
All the Pretty Things

In your gilt jewelry box a silver spoon crusted with snot pecker tracks on your Corinthian leather seats your silk camisole shredded Kennedy-style date rape thin men with corduroy stomachs swimming Olympic-sized laps your perfect skin salon hair collagen-injected lips puffy pouting daddy’s girl private schools piano tutor deep pile seductions behind electric eye gates reflected in crystal baubles Rembrandt brooding in corner the deb ball Gucci designs upper class spirochete devouring fallopian tubes decadent disease low birth rates you eat your own secret handshakes token charity a child crushed beneath your wheels a scattering of silver the mob outside clamoring armed response teams there goes the neighbourhood.
Pretty Fascists

See the pretty fascists all in a row disavowing their previously held positions presenting a moderate platform of jobs jobs jobs offering a helping hand to the disadvantaged white voter with the per capita income of a Third World wog grade six education throwing open their arms to the poor huddled beer guzzling fast food quaffing masses trying to give their kids a decent Christian upbringing chafing at the strident liberal bullshit that passes for education nowadays clogging phone-in lines with their invective Hitler listening in head bowed nodding sympathetically swaddling himself in Tory blue striking Aryan features perfect for television his handlers sawing off his Chaplinesque moustache leaving a small white scar not the sign of the beast but rather a stigmatic blemish and the face of Christ turns away we know not what we do.
Moriarty

It takes a sick mind to concoct a plot so nefarious that not even Sherlock Holmes junkie that he was could have unraveled the many strands that make up this most singular case Houdini couldn’t have dislocated his shoulders and extricated himself in time to die on Hallowe’en much to the relief of the charlatans he exposed the wizened Charlie Chan would have twirled his moustache impotently Columbo chain-smoked himself into an iron lung Kojak sucked his lollipops down to the quick but still the culprit would have slipped away unpunished unmasked because in the end perfect evil cannot be apprehended it is diaphanous and without form or mass unstoppable immortal residing in the deep dark Marianas Trench of the soul where it spins its webs ensnaring the weak and foolish even the most remarkable fictions capturing only a few floating wisps while we in the real world hardpacked reality pretend it doesn’t exist until we look up one morning and behind our abashed adulterous gaze see something lurking but when we look again it’s gone back into the vast depths that reside within each of us saint and sinner child and man.
Star Spangled Ecstasy Machine

My Danish distributor has no idea the dildos were shipped he has the invoice the date they should have been here by now maybe Customs held them up so I call down there and tell them I am a businessman just trying to make a buck a fine upstanding citizen that may seem ridiculous or even perverse to you fellas and maybe you’re uptight Republicans or something but hey let’s be reasonable about this and the guy checks and says no I don’t show anything at all and we’re computerized now maybe you should check back with your supplier and I start to say something cutting but then I stop and listen in the background I can hear a low mechanical hum and I can’t believe this the guy I’m talking to is panting so I just say forget it hang up go over to my desk and start writing another letter to my member of Congress.
In the Name of Violent Love

I tie her arms and legs tightening her bonds when she makes a small sound of complaint muffled by adhesive tape her eyes glittering maniacal behind half closed lids whispering to her stroking her thighs and calves delaying the inevitable tickling her feet she snorts beseeching get on with it cupping her breast squeezing until it bruises showing her the knife nod of assent nicking her here here and here just scratches but my heart is thumping sweat beetling down my forehead holding the blade over the candle until it blackens pressing it to her stomach hiss groan writhing assailed by a charnel stench backing off shaking my head no no I can’t do this her eyes imperious now brooking no nonsense yes you can yes you must yes you will I slip on the sheath she made buckle it kneel between her legs tear into her soft and warm and yielding sobbing shrieking but her eyes have rolled back in her head I do not think she can hear me any more.
The loneliest man I know lives in a big house at the end of my street. Sometimes I see him walking, head down, shuffling like a psychiatric patient. People passing by have heard him talking to himself but can never make out what he’s saying. Once I saw him bend down and pet a cat, stroking its fur, rubbing its belly. When he started to walk away, the cat got up and followed, slinking along dutifully beside him. The man stopped and looked at it for a few seconds. Suddenly he let out a bellow, kicked at the cat and chased it until it ducked out of sight into a yard. Then he turned around and continued on up the street, hands in pocket, head bowed.
Twas the Night

The rain finally falls on Christmas Eve and everyone stands at the window, holding strong drinks and smiling, not saying much, just watching. The streets get slick and shiny. Puddles form. Drinks are refreshed, cheeks flushed. The winking tree is reflected, refracted in the wet glass. Someone starts singing a carol, softly. No one else joins in and the voice trails off. The rain becomes sleet and everyone sucks in their breath. Let it snow, let it snow, let is snow. But the puddles just widen. One by one, they drift away from the window leaving a small boy to continue the vigil. The lights are turned on, making it hard for him to see. He cups his hands against the glass. Harsh laughter behind him. The sound of something breaking. He doesn’t look. If he waits long enough he’s sure he’ll see Santa, trailing after seven or maybe eight reindeer, soaked and shivering, laden with presents, falling like a stone.