

## Alan Catlin

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### Last Reading of a Poet in the Park

The chosen, outdoor reading venue, was picked to recall former outrageous acts of civil disobedience, social protest, not so childish pranks.

When he was young, his readings, on street corners, in public parks, were loud, strident, fierce, so much so, we expected the drunks who lived in the parks, might storm the reader, commandeer the mike.

Decades of protest, commitment to the homeless, the indigent, the disaffected, against the Man dwindled as he aged.

Until he stood in the largest park of all, by the statue of Robert Burns, typed poems in hand, riffled by late Summer breeze, recalling wild and crazy days: chased by the cops, drunk and disorderly in stolen bus...

his family and fans recalling, with him, laughing at antics that seemed so much like ancient history now, as he read the same poem twice, back to back.

Told he had just read that one, he looked puzzled, said, "How could that have happened?"

Began reading the poem again,  
for a third time, stopping half way  
through, removing his reading glasses  
and said, "I guess that's it."

And it was.

## **Friends and Neighbors**

After the birth of their  
second child, a son, they  
decided it was time to  
move to the country.

“The city is no place  
to bring up a child.  
You can’t even play  
in the street.”

They didn’t have to say why:  
the ignoring-all-speed-limits  
hot cars up and down the  
hill, all hours of the day,  
and night.

The drug deals gone bad:  
drive-bys, and Okay Corral  
shoot outs, the caravans  
of blacked out windows Escalades,  
the warning shots fired,  
the Fast and Furious road rally  
chase scenes in real life.

When they moved, we  
swore we’d all keep in touch.  
Phone calls dwindled to  
occasional e-mails, cards  
at Christmas. Where they  
were living was only on  
the other side of the river but  
it might as well have been on Mars.

When the Fox Action News,  
so-tight-to-the-face close-ups,  
you wouldn’t recognize the person  
but you knew every acne scar,  
chicken pock scratched, bike  
accident blemish, the news  
item seemed incidental.

Incidental until you heard  
the news reader’s final word:  
their son’s name, killed by a

hit and run drunk driver,  
who would never be caught,  
on a country road, just the other  
side of the river. All you could  
do was wish they'd never left,  
as you never had before.

**“James sleeping under the freeway” 1983**  
after Mary Ellen Mark

Homeless for years in his teens,  
absent, plural parolee, father,  
mother on a 24-hour drunk since  
before he was born, Fetal Alcohol  
Syndrome his legacy that lasts a  
lifetime of sleeping raw, under  
bridges, as the police and the weather  
allow. Hanging with all the teenaged  
hookers wearing the faces of someone  
else’s depression. Sharing stashes,  
needles, whatever life on the street  
provides. Turning tricks for steady  
ready as rent boy or gigolo, it’s all  
the same to him in the end; protection  
is what you pay the beat cop not to  
notice whatever it is you are currently  
doing. Has no idea what tomorrow will  
bring. Barely knows what tomorrow is.

## After Watching the Documentary, “Streetwise”

by Martin Ball, Cheryl McCall and Mary Ellen Mark

“When you think about often it all goes wrong....”

Bukowski

The elders, the ones they look up to,  
the ones not currently in jail, are all  
about eighteen with the reading skills  
of a badly educated seven-year-old.  
Up-and-coming street kids are all  
working a grift: begging for change,  
picking the pockets of the unwary and  
the unwise, the ones too clueless  
to know they are being had or are  
about to be. Or rolling queers  
outside of seedy nightclubs or  
after rent-boy tricks. All of them  
aspiring to be like the self-styled  
playboy running a string of way  
underage girlfriends, young in years  
but way beyond experienced.  
Girls with back stories, moms on  
the needle or drunk 24/ 7, no time  
for needy kids or with backup dads:  
“My first step-dad was okay.  
I actually kind of liked him.  
The second one stuck it in before  
I knew what it was.  
The third one was worse.  
Who can live in a home like that?”  
They are American version of Brazilian  
Los Olvidados, the forgotten street kids,  
too young to be tried as adults, too old  
to be thought of as children.  
They are all living a kind of Requiem for  
a Dream,” one that ends with a rusty-  
needled arm turning black, or, dead  
in custody, by their own hand,  
all of them permanently scarred  
or about to be. All these middle teen  
crazies, hanging out, dressed like their  
younger sister with reindeer sweaters or  
Tweety Bird T-shirts. Any number of them  
marked: “To Go”, by the Green River Killer.  
Which one will it be? Tiny or Denise or  
Cheryl? Only time will tell.

## Wild Beauty in the Mind of the Living

"Language is how ghosts enter the world"  
Anne Michaels

How could the artist stare at  
himself in the mirror? The one  
missing ear covered by bandages  
soiled by oil paints, tintured  
alcohol, visions distilled from absinthe  
flavored sugar cubes extracted from  
glass fragments, burnt umbers for blood  
and pallid pastes for bone making  
potato eaters out of magistrates,  
judges defenseless before the law,  
everyone guilty as charged, equally  
damaged by each slashing strike,  
vital fire withdrawn from each furtive,  
expressive eye, a canvas colored  
gastric green amid the yellowing fever,  
a murder of crows foretold, the ones  
that carry plague rat ticks instead  
of well ripened cherries from a midnight  
garden of earthly delights.

**Alan Catlin** has been publishing for five decades from the mimeos to the Internet. His latest full length book of poetry is *American Odyssey* from Future Cycle Press. He is the poetry editor of the online journal [misfitmagazine.net](http://misfitmagazine.net).