

# WING FLY



## THE2NDHAND

THE2NDHAND installment no. 16.5 \* spring 2005 \* *literate apes unite!*

FREE

Todd Dills is the editor of THE2NDHAND. This broadsheet was produced on the occasion of Dills's west-coast tour in support of ALL HANDS ON, the best-of-THE2NDHAND anthology released with much attendant cackling in June 2004. These pieces appeared in WING AND FLY (the2ndhand.com/wingandfly), Dills's biweekly "editor's corner" or "letter from the..." or column, of sorts. Enjoy.

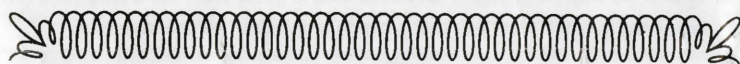
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*Spring, loaded.*

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### ZOO

Todd Dills

Very near the terminus of AD 2004, waking finally to the very unsettling realization that the done-up-and-come son of a Connecticut yankee was now headed into a season of repeat inauguration to the U.S. presidency, a season of yahoo screw you me me me hurrah and hooray and hoo-haing to his evermore false message of an economic ivory tower underpinned by a veritable caveman outlook, I wanted more than anything to do something dirty, something filthy that would serve the purpose of the most lowly of human instincts. I wanted to throw eggs at limousines on inauguration day as any upstanding Neanderthal would. That was the answer—I determined one sunny Christmas morning home in South Carolina for a brief two days—eggs that would crack and whose insides would dry on the black paint, and wo to he or she who attempted to scrape the remnants off, for a heinous fate would await him. Some kids hit my own Ford Taurus once, and two weeks later, when finally the snow that had buried the bottom half of the vehicle had sufficiently melted to grant access to the car's door, I realized the calamity, and with the heinously smelly sponge with which I commonly washed my dishes, along with a bucket of hot water, I proceeded to scour away the frozen egg remnants and ruin my car's paint job in a mere five minutes further even than the numerous long key scratches on its flank had ruined it already—which is to say, irreparably.

But when I came back to Chicago from South Carolina the concurrent and so

typically repeated culture shock of loudmouthed hot-dog vendors and coldhearted women was enough to blast all memory of my design on the president's limo from my soggy brain. Also, it was cold when I came back. Very cold. So cold as to render that soggiess into a hard freeze.

Time passed.

The W. Bush repeat ascendancy to the abstract imperial throne approached and at last my urbane coworkers were engaged in snarky conversation about trips to D.C., about their own plans, or lack thereof, for the inauguration upcoming and I remembered my own design, finally, but last-minute-ticket prices had soared if they existed at all, and more importantly I picked up the *Sun-Times* in a cafe the day before the celebration to find a picture of our President, predictably thin-lipped and looking quite like a particular chimpanzee I often visited in those days at the zoo in Lincoln Park, a beast whose name I still can't remember, but whom I like to think of as Gilbo, simply. Gilbo likes to stand on his perch and throw things at me when I'm there. Things like banana peels, which the zookeepers give him, I guess, preposterously, and which bounce very anticlimactically off the glass of the barrier between us. Among Gilbo's other eccentricities include a penchant for addressing visitors such as me as "My fellow citizens," and then he'll go on and say things like "for the last nine days, the entire world has seen for itself the state of our Union—and it is strong" and then he'll launch into diatribes in which he very clearly lies to me about everything he is saying. Like once he told me, even though his pen in the brand-new Ape House smelled like absolute shit—I'm talking literally, here, like a toilet with a large turd floating in it—he was insistent that things were going just as he expected they would, that the workers, you know, they may have missed a pile of his shit here or there, and maybe even failed to spray out some of the urine from the corner he used for pissing, normally, but you've got to expect these kinds of misapprehensivesions, yes?

That word, *misapprehensivesions*, I don't even think it exists, but it's definitely the kind of word Gilbo uses. It you didn't know better, you'd take him for a smart son of a bitch.

At the terminus of his dodging I usually point the fact out to him that he is lying, and that I know it, but he just says that it's hard work sitting there all day watching people like me come and go on the outside and making little baby faces at him when he's got so many grand plans for his followers. "It's hard work being President," says the big ape—using the self-appointed title, as it were. Yes, Gilbo claims dominion over the lot of the zoo's animals. I tell him to keep thinking, he's good at it.

Gilbo doesn't much like it when I come by.

So George W. Bush, on the front page of the *Sun-Times* reminding me of my "friend" Gilbo the chimp: newspaper photo editors seemed to love running pictures of Bush in mid-bark, right in the midst of delivering some backhanded threat to one of those exotic Middle Eastern countries, his tiny lips pooched out in the middle of a word, his mouth a little open. I was filled with rage, fear, and hilarity at once and fled the café to Kinko's, where I had the head enlarged to much-bigger-than-life size. The result, a roughly 5' by 5' portrait, I took home and hung above my fake fireplace. I picked up five dozen eggs and stacked the cartons along the mantel, where they would have rested until the morrow, just at the inception of his taking the oath of office when I would commence hurling egg after egg after egg right into the nose of his enlarged image—but, you see, the temptation of the imperial head in half-



scowl proved too much to resist.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

This was my girlfriend, as she walked in at the end of the second dozen, and admittedly the effect of the large head was considerably lessened, what with the now smeared toner, the mess of egg whites and yolks running down the President's chin and oozing slowly off the edge of the mantel, down onto the fern in our fake fireplace.

My girlfriend's next words: "Get the fuck out of here, you asshole."

Which was unfortunate, to say the least, as I was in the midst of a cathartic release of energy that when cut short left me feeling quite glum. I made my way of course to the zoo, where I found Gilbo in a similar state. He was sitting on a perch picking at his nose and idly muttering to himself when I walked up to the glass—when he saw me, though, he affected a stately bearing, pushing out his chest like a soldier at attention, and intoned, "After the shipwreck of communism came years of relative quiet, years of repose, years of sabbatical."

"Tell me about it," I said. "I just got kicked out of my fucking house."

Gilbo nodded, "We have seen our vulnerability and we have seen its deepest source. For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder, violence will gather and multiply."

"And what of your keepers?" I heckled. I pulled a banana from my pocket and teased him with it from this side of the glass. "Do you propose an insurrection, an insurgency?" And Gilbo let fly a terrific scream, jumped from his perch and banged a fist hard against the glass, then beating his chest once, and yelling, "We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world."

I grinned. He was a sly motherfucker, he was. "Freedom." Sure, I thought, "freedom" for all. But still I could not discount his implicit specific message, his desire to rid himself of his keepers, which marked the first time his talk had rung out anything close to truth. Maybe his grand time was near, the precipice of his flourishing. Maybe he really was a leader. He banged on the glass again, harder this time, then going down on all fours and menacingly pacing back and forth in front of the slowly rising crowd of onlookers. "The great objective of ending tyranny," said Gilbo, "is the concentrated work of generations. The difficulty of the task is no excuse for avoiding it."

And the ape went on for over a quarter hour. It was an astounding outpouring. One man, also accustomed to Gilbo's rants, remarked that it wasn't like the chimp to be so eloquent, to make so very much sense. I remarked that that was partly true, but this was a great gale of wind as well. Gilbo spoke of lofty things, of vagaries and "core values" not only of his oppressed zoo clan but of all living things, a surely preposterous notion. "We go forward with complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom. Not because history runs on the wheels of inevitability; it is choices that move events. We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of all beings, the hunger in dark places, the longing of the soul." And then he stopped his lurching back and forth and leveled a great stare, solely at myself—yes he picked me from the crowd of gawkers with his eyes, isolating me with that intensity, the hair on his back and arms beginning to rise until it would stand fully extended from his body. "And," he finished, "we will never, ever, underestimate our enemies." With one fist forward he came crashing through the glass and right for my throat, for the world, for us all.

WESTERN AVENUE

Todd Dills

Essie Mae Washington-Williams was on the radio the other day promoting her memoir, *Dear Senator*, about her life as the illegitimate African-American daughter of the U.S.'s most notorious "former," as the words go, segregationist. A picture of

myself and said segregationist—he must've been in his 70s at the time, I was perhaps three—sits atop the mantle above the fake fireplace in my Chicago apartment. The old man looks happy enough, I guess, seemingly without a thought in his mind about the justification for his past (which interpretation I would assume again and again, in my teenage years, meeting him repeatedly at various functions and being presented with the unfortunate opportunity to shake his limp, liver-spotted hand), but in the old picture I am engaged in a habit that would follow me into adulthood, a nervous fidgeting of my hands. Strom Thurmond holds my little three-year-old body high, blank-faced, as it were, and I'm doing my best, goddamnit, just to avert my eyes, I think, my little baby hands poised in front of me, fingers half interlocked in nervousness with nothing to hold onto but the old man's face, but God help me if I reached out for that.

I leave the picture on the mantle to remind me of the bigoted enemy out there. Visitors to my apartment get a kick out of it, too.

Today I smoke. A lot. I like having something in my hands. If happen they're empty, and I find myself in a situation where things are expected of me—say I'm on a job, and editors are asking questions about something I was supposed to do (and maybe I did, maybe I didn't)—my first instinct (thankfully I don't always follow said instinct) is to roll and light a cigarette and blow the smoke into the interlocutor's face. Essie Mae's much more deferential personality manifested itself on the radio program, and I'm assuming in the book, through a reflex action to apologize for the formerly segregationist senator. Again, I wouldn't have been so charitable. I walked out to work that day fuming a little, laughing all the while, at the preposterous history of the dead man, to happen upon every window in my car shattered and a note scrawled on the back of a Spanish leaflet for a local grocery, whose edges fluttered in the slight winter breeze and which read, "motherfucker my chair bitch I know u."

Chickens coming home to roost, I guess. Karma. I'd been on something of a crusade in my free time. It had snowed recently—it had snowed an avalanche on the city's streets and buildings and homeless people—and in the time-honored American tradition of the citizens' total lack of participation in anything resembling a community or society, the denizens of my neighborhood were using old lawn chairs and bits of board and other urban detritus to reserve "their" parking spaces in the public way. If you were a hypocritical president of a nation, you might call the reflex action evidence of the denizens' willingness to participate in an "ownership society." Even more frustrating, as ever this practice was being accepted, even respected, by fellow motorists. I refused to engage such bigotry. At first, at least. The public way is, above all, yes, the public way. I would do my part—lead by upright example, if you will—but after digging out four or five different spots and then seeing two of said spots now quite presumptively claimed by a set of someone's ragged chairs, I began to take corrective action. For three nights, I went out at 3AM and angrily, however methodically, moved every chair or old bucket or even ironing board, depositing each in the alley off my side of the street. I sat in my apartment in the dark and watched the street further into the wee hours in hopes of catching the looks on the faces of men and women, seeing their parking spaces taken and their chairs suddenly disappeared. My real hope in this, you see, was that they'd beam happy faces into the cosmos, seeing the ultimate error of their ways, and chalk their losses up to experience. Such, though, was not the case. I never actually caught anyone. And each following day, miraculously, different chairs would be pulled out and used on different parking spaces and the cycle would repeat itself, like I said, three nights on.

On the fourth night, I came home extremely late, after a small get-together with a fellow South Carolinian friend who brought up the subject of our late senator's daughter. My friend thought it all quite laughable, really, and he convinced me for the moment. My spirits were thus extremely high upon arrival home, let us say, so high that a measly wooden chair was not about to get in the way of my path toward the glee of destruction.



There was nowhere to park, you see, excepting a space six inches deep in snow and in the middle of which was placed, absurdly, its legs deep in the unshoveled snowdrift, a red wooden chair. I wasted no time in backing in, tipping and then shattering the chair into a myriad pieces. I panicked a bit—the cracking of the wood had been extremely loud—and pulled out and down the street to find another space (luckily only a half block from my apartment). So I'm assuming the chair's owner saw me, plus there's a big red splotch on my bumper from the contact, prime evidence, I guess.

Retribution is sweet release, I thought, standing on the street looking through the empty space where my windshield once was, the dashboard littered with small shards of glass. I wondered if the culprit might be watching me now from the upper window of any of the three-flats lining the block. I looked around and pondered what to do, deciding ultimately to call off work, after which I visited an auto glass shop out on Western Avenue (driving the few blocks with no windshield in the fifteen-degree cold), and I spent a heinous amount of money for the replacements.

So we pay for our actions, dearly. Most of us do, anyway. Strom Thurmond, with respect to his illegitimate daughter, may have gotten off the hook entirely. Essie Mae Washington-Williams tells stories to the press of traveling yearly to Atlanta from her various northern and/or west-coast homes to meet a representative of the senator, who would hand off envelopes of cash meant, it can only be assumed, to keep her quiet. She doesn't see it that way. She interprets this as "his way" of caring for his estranged daughter, though Thurmond never actually made the delivery himself, nor did he ever come clean about his siring Essie Mae (who, it must be noted, was now in her 70s and no longer any kind of "child" you could imagine). In the senator's last days—you remember those times, full of mocking news reports of his exploits in the U.S. Senate, the man clearly around adolescence on the path to reverting back to infancy as he flirted with young Capitol interns, even going so far as to grab an ass or two, also using the old epithet for the African-American men and women around him—he saw fit to send only a single birthday card personally to Essie Mae, which was signed, "Affectionately, Strom Thurmond..." on Senate office letterhead, maybe. I can't remember—the newscaster interviewing Essie really wanted to make a big deal of this, though I couldn't see that it was, considering the old man couldn't hardly even put a sentence together during the entirety of his last term, much less a pen to paper. The interviewer must have asked the same question of Essie Mae four or five times in slightly different phrasing, trying to get a rise out of her, get her to lay all the hate out on the table. She wasn't going for it—the old lady was just promoting a memoir, I was then again aware: her personal investment in the ordeal was little at this point; she'd take the money and get out, as she'd done all her life. This was somehow admirable.

My car fixed, I wrote my own note on a piece of hefty cardboard—"Happy, mother-fucker?" it read—"we live in a society here." I even signed it "Affectionately, Strom Thurmond," just for kicks, and camped in my apartment to await the curious window breaker, the inevitable "return to the scene of the crime" of urban lore and television cop shows. I sat all afternoon and into the night in my third-floor front window behind thinly cracked blinds, right above my strategically placed car. Lots of people walked by—lots of people read the very large piece of cardboard stuck under the windshield wipers—but none of them had the look of a window smasher, and none lingered very long. I fell asleep at an uncertain point propped in the window. This was to be a short, surgical war, but more importantly, a war of shadows, a murky war of words. Western

Avenue contains mysteries. The road, purportedly the longest straight one of its kind in the nation, bisects my small street perhaps a block and three quarters to the east of my apartment. Coming home late from parts south, from a joint where I occasionally work the door, I have become acquainted for instance with the wonder of an old gentleman who stands at the red light I always catch at Lake Street, who washes the windows of passersby—a gentle wave of the hand is all it takes to call him off, no need to get angry.



But it's what follows that is the ultimate discovery. Try it sometime. When the Lake Street red light turns green and your vehicle lurches forward down the nearly empty Avenue, Western ceases her normally teasing ways and opens wide, each traffic light you come upon springing from red to green just in time for your arrival, so that it's possible to end the mile or two north to your apartment at speeds in excess of 100 miles per hour, if you like, while breaking only one traffic law. I rarely take it much above 50, though, and even that's beyond the limit. I figure Chicago cops at 3AM have more important things on their minds. Donuts. Drug dealers.

I wonder if Strom Thurmond ever had the pleasure of a drive north on Western at 3AM. Certainly my nemesis has never heard of the old man. That next morning, I woke still propped in the front window, my gaze instinctively drawn down to the specter of my car, whose windows had been spray-painted over in black. Again,



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there was a note. "hey storm fuck u," it read. I shelled out more cash to have the windows stripped of the paint, filed a police report with the Chicago PD (who never called back), and left my own note then in further retaliation, scrawled on a piece of cardboard and secured under the painted-over and nearly destroyed windshield wipers—by then they weren't even needed, though, as the weather had improved to the point that the street was almost completely devoid of snow. The note read, "What do you look like? Sincerely, Strom Thurmond."

The reply came promptly the next morning. "i have brown hair," without this



time any retaliatory damage or invective. A dialogue ensued, then, myself the interrogator, my nemesis, the detainee. "Are you fat? Sincerely, Strom Thurmond."

And the answer, in the trademark all lower-case: "yes very."

"Do you enjoy breaking chairs over your knee like, say, Hulk Hogan or the Nature Boy Ric Flair?"

"very much"

"How often?"

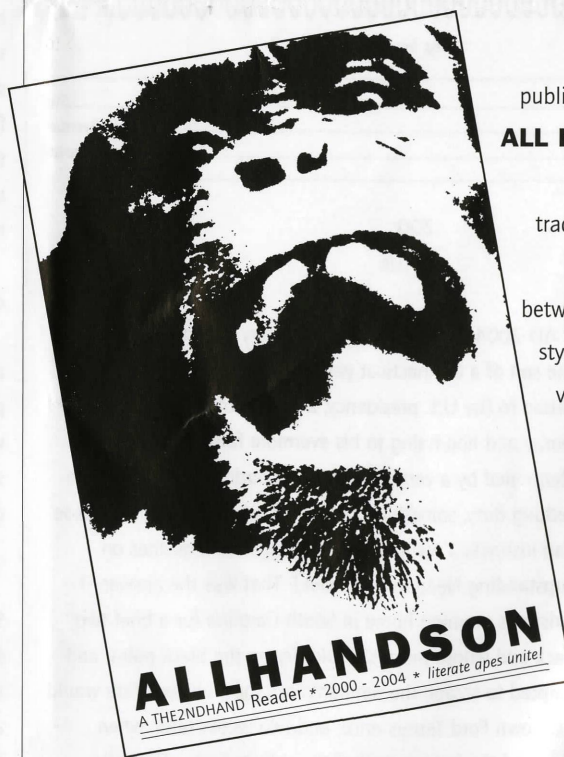
etc...

How quickly simple communication renders warring parties curiously reconciled. I spent my spare time now on the streets of my neighborhood, looking for a pro-wrestling, fat, brown-haired man or woman, even, all the while leaving messages and receiving answers, he/she Essie Mae to my Strom Thurmond, for the following two weeks until the final reply came, with an attendant blow to the body of the car. The hood was dented in, and the note, in answer to my question, "Why do you continue to live? Affectionately, Strom Thurmond," was "i love motherfucker." And that was it. Every further question went unanswered, and the tide had turned. The Thurmond identity I could no longer claim with any wit or confidence, maybe? I don't know, I got down a little and took a walk south down Western all the way to the freeway, by the projects where boys threw rocks at me—I thought all the while of mystery, of the quality of mystery we can expect to engage in these piddling little lives we lead. I smoked a pack's worth of hand-rolled cigarettes on that walk, my fingers freezing in the cold wind where I rolled the last one, on the bridge over the freeway, the cars streaming by below, wind blowing in great gusts to the west. The cigarette smoked, I tossed it finally into the traffic. I wrung my hands in the loud silence.

## HEY HAIRY, CHEGGIT OUT!

"Like placing your ear beside some kind of magical, future radio and listening to the shocking world of the strange and new.... ALL HANDS ON, an anthology of new work and old, features the best of the magazine and a look at what may stand as the underground lit world's most interesting contemporary writing." —*Punk Planet*

"THE2NDHAND has been the most exciting literary vessel in Chicago, opening a comfortably padded room for the anecdotal fiction writers and the experimental tale-spinners to play together where no one will get hurt. Read through this collection of four years worth of stories, and you'll see the line between the two isn't as clear as all that. And in the way the strongest species survive, it would seem the cross-pollination that happened over the years has strengthened both sides." —*PopMatters.com*



An anthology of works published in THE2NDHAND, **ALL HANDS ON** straddles the line separating the traditional and the new, its pages a mini tug-of-war between beautiful, campfire-style storytelling and high-voltage experimentation.

Think like a mountain, rock 'n' roll, draw up the itinerary, live, and try it out.

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DO NOT SEE THE MOVIE until you've read the book.