



# Al Columbia

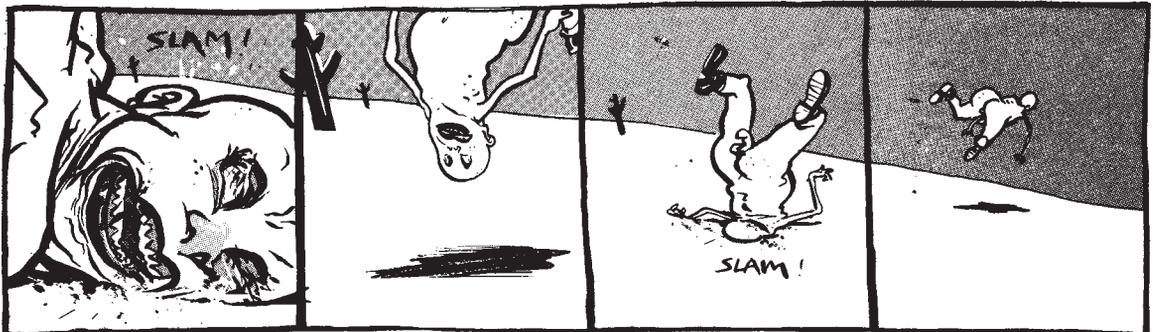
Bill Cotter

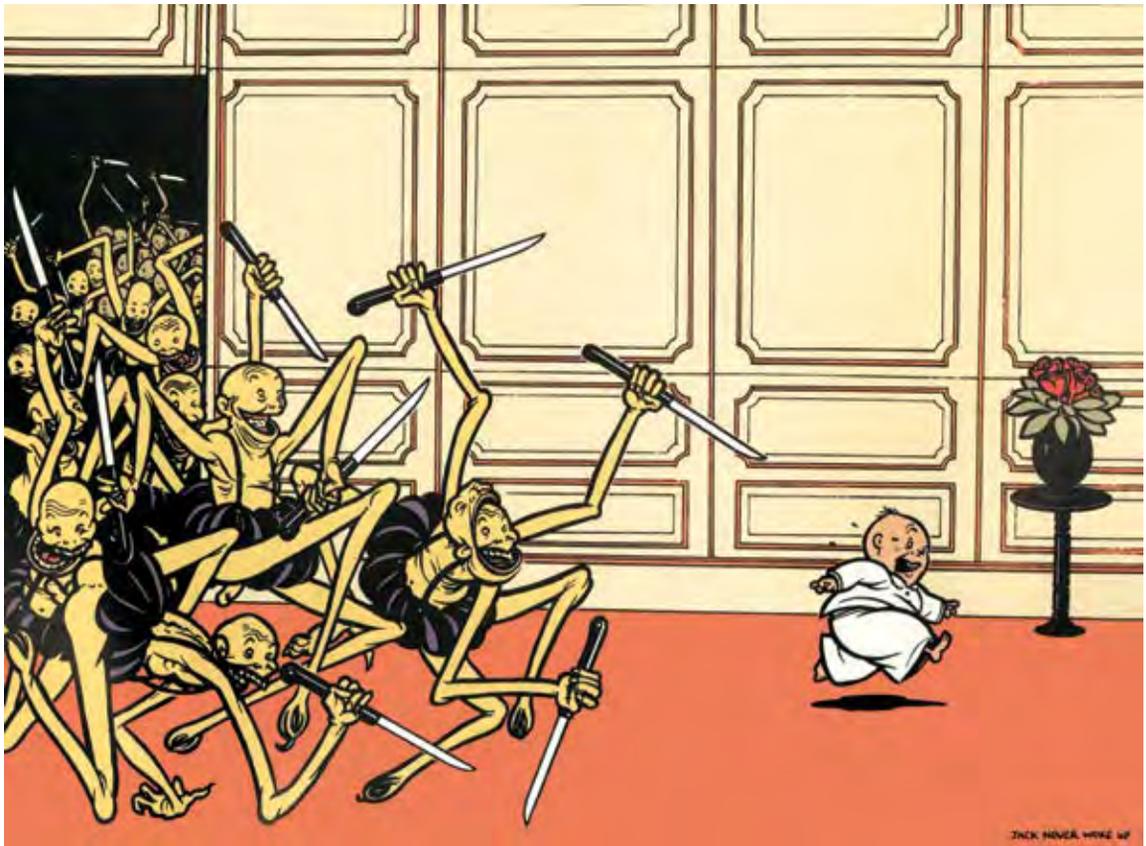
A YEAR OR SO BACK, when the idea of putting together a piece for *The Comics Journal* first came up, I knew immediately who I wanted to write about. *TCJ* co-managing editor RJ Casey approved the idea, and suggested I compose a couple thousand words for the column Reconsidering the Canon. At first, I was excited. But this feeling soon gave way to competing emotions: panic and relief. The panic came from my status as a comics dilettante — I am just a fan, no scholar. What could I really add to the cardinal body of knowledge? Does my amateur fanboy enthusiasm matter? *Que sais-je?* On the other hand, I also felt a kind of relief. Maybe deliverance is a better word. I had been presented with an opportunity to examine the steep and indelible psychological effects on my own life of the artist whose work I consider the most enigmatic, harrowing and dangerously inevitable in the trade today, and in fact for the last

quarter-century. Whether this artist is considered by the college of comics writers and critics to have a seat in the pantheon of the canon, I do not know. He should, I think, but I really only know what his art did for — and to — me.

I don't mean to tantalize. But if you can hang on for a few paragraphs, I will attempt to put everything in a sort of narrative perspective. To do this, I must briefly go back to the long, dark winter of 1992–93, when I was living in an apartment in the minor wasteland of Pittsfield, Massachusetts. I was in my late 20s. The only comics I knew back then were *Tintin*, *Asterix* and *The Incredible Hulk*, though this trinity I knew like the rhythm of my own breathing. I was living alone then, having been discharged some months before from a 32-month stay in a local psychiatric facility. I had somehow landed a job in a bookstore, \$5.15 an hour. At home I composed crossword puzzles, wrote terrible short fiction, obsessed over a coworker, listened to the Red Sox lose on the radio.

Panels from *The Biologic Show* Number : 0, 1994.





My upstairs neighbor, a compact hydrant of gristle and repine recently paroled from MCI Walpole, thought I played the Sox broadcasts at an immodest and disruptive volume, and spent a good deal of time stomping on the floor and screaming *Turn That Shit Down*. I did as he commanded, but the volume was never low enough. One day, while I was visiting my sister in Boston, this neighbor decided to burglarize my apartment — I guess to punish me for being loud. I had not accumulated much in my months of freedom, but my neighbor still took pretty much everything — a bunch of CDs, a margarita blender, two excellent frozen rib eyes, bedding, bed, clean laundry, dirty laundry, hamper, Red Sox radio. He also took a plastic contrivance that neatly sorted coins into tubes, a thrift store find. He took the nickels and quarters and dimes, but left the pennies. I came home to a shatter of glass on the floor, ice cube trays on the kitchen counter and the plastic tube of pennies standing on a little ledge over the radiator. This arcane gesture scared me more than anything. He was never arrested,

From *Zero Zero* #8, 1996.

never charged, even though his stupid, elfin Cheeto fingerprints were all over my busted kitchen window. His name was Bill, too. I imagine it still is.

Suddenly and entirely unencumbered, I fled Pittsfield, and Bill's demesne. After a period of Brownian indirection, I found myself in New Orleans. It was the spring of 1993. One afternoon, sitting in a Faubourg-Marigny bar, drinking a Rolling Rock and listening to Al Green on the jukebox, I realized I was one lucky motherfucker. I had somehow escaped Bill the Neighbor and the annihilating ramage of New England, and had been afforded a fresh start by the fickle hand of Providence. I felt good. It was a fine first year in the Crescent City — new friends, family, exciting weird jobs working in casinos and coffee shops, a lucrative seven-card-stud habit. Books and comics started piling up on the open surfaces of my apartment. I even found a girlfriend.

But New England demons are a persistent and dedicated force, and they soon located me. Not Bill himself — I have no idea what happened to him. But his animus, maybe, and the general malaise that produced him, somehow figured out where I was. They brought along dolor, blues, ill luck. Friends departed, jobs vanished, girlfriends cooled and receded. Got broke with quad sixes against a straight flush one night on some low-rent riverboat casino. By early 1995, a signal depression had taken root in the fallow amygdala; a steep, black hopelessness, not unlike ones that had landed me in hospitals more than a dozen times in the decade preceding. I felt alone, lost, helpless, in the murder capital of the world, and soon discovered I was seriously and obsessively considering which method of self-cancellation would least upset my parents and sisters. I bought a copy of Derek Humphry's *Final Exit*.

Sometime in February or March of that year, on a frigid, rainy day, I found myself in a comic book store somewhere uptown. I'd been there before. I'd never seen much to get excited about, but always bought something so the seething proprietor, a guayabera-upholstered colossus with psycho peepers like Shel Silverstein, wouldn't think I had dropped by to shoplift. I remember being in a hurry that day (for what I can't imagine; I had no job, no commitments) and so quickly chose and paid for three comics I'd never heard of. On the streetcar ride home, the brown paper bag on my lap felt like it was shimmering, as though it were full of shrink-wrapped *Hustlers*, not comic books. When I got to my apartment in Central City, I tossed the vibrating bag on the kitchen table and forgot about it.

A friend from Boston came to visit. The timing was bad. I did not feel like hosting. I slept a lot while she talked on the phone with her boyfriend (who was named Guido, I recall), ate buttered toast and browsed the books and comics lying around the place. Eventually she came across the brown paper bag with the three comics. She read them all while I dozed on the couch, dreaming about not being around anymore, how I'd deal with my stuff, what kind of farewell note I'd compose, should I sign it, should I include indictments or apologies, exactly what tense should it be written in — past? Present? Some historic conditional like the French have?

My friend tapped me on the shoulder.

"Is there something wrong with you?" she said, holding up the comics.

"What?"

"These are awful."

She took two of them — an issue of Jim Woodring's *Jim*, and a copy of an early issue of Chris Ware's *Acme Novelty Library* — and tossed them over her shoulder.

"Huh?"

"But this," she said. "Is. Re. Volt. Ing."

It was something called *The Biologic Show*, by a certain Al Columbia. Issue Number : 0.

"You have to take me to the airport now," said my friend, giving me a terminal look.

All I remember about that drive out to Louis Armstrong International was nearly running over a grotesquely stained queen mattress straddling two lanes of the I-10, and thinking hard about the orange comic book that had so revulsed my friend. I don't think I ever saw or talked to her again, though some decades later I got an invitation to her wedding. (She had stuck with Guido.)



Pim and Francie as they appear on the cover of *The Biologic Show* Number : 0, 1994.

At home I picked the comics up off the floor. (I would like to write about Jim Woodring and Chris Ware here — their work affected me greatly, too, and I am still a helpless fan of both — but this is really about Al Columbia.) I studied the cover. In the center of the field of fundamental orange was a circular

emblematum, toothed at the perimeter like a main-spring gear, in which two mirthful, pigtailed children ride a lidless coffin through space. Cartoon stars in the background, an umber Planet Earth, a contrail indicating the children's magic coffin had taken off from somewhere near Kansas City. All right.

I lay down on my couch to read.



It only occurred to me years later that, after I had finished the comic, reread, reread again, that the notion of suicide was no longer a pot boiling over on the stove, but a little pan of water cooling on a back burner. Stretching across the front burners now was the cauldron of viscera that was the nine stories in *The Biologic Show Number : o*. An iron cauldron, glowing red, in need of cautious sentinel.

I needed to know more. I needed more, period. I rolled up Al Columbia<sup>1</sup>, stuck him in a pocket of my old dreadnought coat, got on the streetcar and rode back to the comic shop.

"What can you tell me about this?" I said to the Colossus of the Riverbend, handing him the comic-tube.

He looked at it a moment, reverse-rolled it so it was flat again and placed it squarely on the glass counter where he held court. He turned to the first page, crossed his lumberjack arms and looked at me. I wasn't afraid of him anymore. I was only afraid of one thing now. It wasn't getting murdered, it wasn't homelessness, it wasn't clogged drains. It was Al Columbia.

"Where'd you get this?" said the Colossus.

"Here," I said, gesturing at the shelves. "Is that his real name? 'Al Columbia?'"

"Don't know, doubt it, don't know though."

The Colossus looked at me. Years later, I watched *The Sopranos*. Richie. The Colossus and Richie Aprile were gazers in arms, terrifying to behold.

"Are there other issues?" I said, squinting, as at an eclipse.

"Hm. One, I think."

"Got it?"

1. Never been very careful with my comic books. They all look like garage-sale Archies, crimped, frayed, stapleless, smutched with grease and archival disregard.

2. San Francisco: Auerhahn, 1960.

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"What?"

"The other issue. You sell it here?"

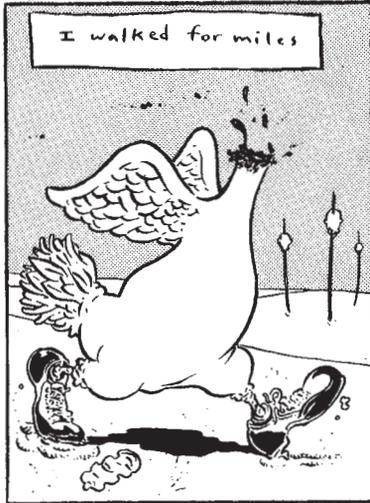
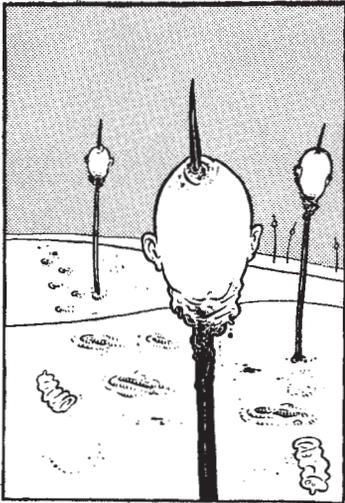
"No."

I had this feeling that the Colossus was being disingenuous. He had discovered Al Columbia, too, and didn't really want anyone to know about him. Al Columbia was his. But he wasn't; Al Columbia was mine now. Mine to loathe, fear, abhor, love.

I snatched *Number : o* away, rolled it up and stuck it in my pocket with an old *Daily Racing Form*, shot the Colossus my best malocchio, turned and left.



The title, *The Biologic Show*, evidently comes from a line in a piece called "Short Trip Home," by William Burroughs, published in *Exterminator!*<sup>2</sup>, a collection



*The Biologic Show*

by  
AL COLUMBIA  
Jan. © 1993

of flash-and-filigree cutup writings that Burroughs collaborated on with Brion Gysin. Inspired by F. Scott Fitzgerald's story, "A Short Trip Home,"<sup>3</sup> Burroughs expands on Fitzgerald's character of the "hard, thin-faced man," giving him a voice:

*Step right up for the greatest show on earth. The biologic show. Any being you ever imagined in your wildest and dirtiest dreams is here and yours for a price. The biologic price you understand money has no value here...*

And a couple of lines on in the story, we find a tidy expression of Columbia's entire aesthetic:

*A room with rose wallpaper smoky red sunset two red-haired boys looking at each other turn redder cocks sway and stiffen a musky odor fills the room and drifts out on the still hot air... (Scattered coughs from the audience)... The nipples of one boy disappear in swirls of nitrous vapor leaving two pearly vibrating disks... (The audience stirs buttoning jackets shoving hands in pockets)... The boy's face gathers a reptilian concentration... a loud snap crackling sounds and broken bottles set in the wall. Glad tidings in my ear spoke of his silent dogs stained with blood and wind of this lonely city a schoolboy screaming for asylum. Are you willing and able to pay the price? Not that way. Transistor radio giving that pass. Shine Boy telling you go back to the big market...<sup>4</sup>*

Were Burroughs' two red-haired boys the inspiration for Columbia's sibling antiheroes, Pim and Francie, first introduced in "Tar Frogs," the last story in the premier issue? I don't know. Why not? They are incestuous, reptilian, mutually murderous. Pim and Francie, the coffin-riding children on the cover of the comic, are the very embodiment of the idea of *lust-mord*<sup>5</sup>, a German term that conveniently explains and defines itself, even to non-Teutons. I remember thinking at the time that the world needed more of Pim and Francie. Apparently, so did Al Columbia.

OPPOSITE: Page from *The Biologic Show* Number : 0, 1994.

3. *Saturday Evening Post*, 17 December 1927.

4. I read all of *Exterminator!*, and as dirty and wrong as it is, Al Columbia is darker, filthier, a rung further down on the ladder to Hell than Burroughs could have ever hoped to descend.

5. A word first introduced into the German discourse in 1880, according to *Deutsche-Worterbuch*, and later adopted by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his 1898 discussion of sexual murder. The inelegant English equivalent, erotophonophilia, has thus far been avoided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*.



From "Tar Frogs," the first Pim and Francie adventure, 1994.

I don't recall how I got a copy of *The Biologic Show* Number : 1 (the second and, as it turned out, last issue), but I did. Number : 0 had been written and drawn as though Columbia had just spent four days drinking kerosene naked on a highway median, gesturing obscenely at rubbernecks and hacking at his jugular with a dull box cutter before a violent arrest and committal to a state-funded mental hospital. Rough, frantic lines; impossible, straightjacketed black gestures accomplished with an overloaded sumi-e brush held in a mouth of broken teeth; wandering, busted narratives that only start to make sense in the latter stories, when the Prolixin suppositories finally kick in. Number : 1 is not a saner production, but it is soberer. The lines are cleaner, dialogue tighter and more legible, the black-and-white volumes balanced. But it is



Columbia's cover for *Dirty Stories* #3, 2002.

still sinister business, especially the 16-page, second installment of the adventures of Pim and Francie. The pair are being pursued by a two-headed, razor-toting virago; Francie, after biting her brother's lip during a kiss, runs off and is picked up by a chicken hawk while Pim makes the acquaintance of Knishkeibble the Monkey-Boy ("Shit in a sugarskull!" says he) and his boneless, lobotomized girlfriend, Lizzy. The two plotlines alternate, and the story ends in darkness, with the line "To be continued ..."

I waited for the continuation of Pim and Francie, throbbing heart climbing my esophagus. I *waited*. Who knew it would be fourteen years?

Sometime in 1995, I bought a suitcase in a junk shop. In it I stuffed a few articles of clothing, a couple dozen books about poker, a saucepan and both issues of *The Biologic Show*. Everything else I owned I hauled out to the curb in front of my apartment at the corner of Sixth and Baronne. It was all gone in an hour. I

went to the airport that afternoon with \$6,000 in cash stuffed in my front pockets. Another escape, another fleeing. This time to Las Vegas to play poker.

A couple years later I fled Vegas, lonesome, down, sick of poker, choked from secondhand casino smoke, undiagnosed acid reflux and a helpless, hopeless crush on my roommate's sister. As I crossed the Austin city limits, the news came on the radio that Princess Diana died. I had a lot of cash in my Toyota, including six shoeboxes full of 50-cent pieces. The saucepan was gone, but I still had the poker books. And the two comics. I stayed in Austin. Still here.

Over the few next years, Al Columbia stayed busy. Short pieces occurred in issues of *Zero Zero* during the late '90s, a website came online for while in the early aughts (my computer came down with a virus after a visit there), and I remember my surprise and delight at seeing an Al Columbia drawing in *The New York Times* shortly after 9/11. There were appearances in various Fantagraphics publications, and elsewhere. Columbia's line sharpened further, (sometimes with computer assistance), his short narratives usually

meeting at the essential nexus of sadism and glee. But no substantive reprises of Pim and Francie.

In Austin I started a business as a bookseller, focusing on manuscripts and printed books produced before 1600. I played poker at local house games, the kind where they escort you out to your car with a shotgun if you leave winner. I fought depression, which accelerated through those years, and though it approached critical mass more than once, I managed to avoid hospitalization. I wrote more bad fiction. Al Columbia himself sat crouched in my bathtub, but disappeared whenever I turned the bathroom light on.

By 2009, the depression had regained a hold like I hadn't felt since my 20s. It was beginning to feel like the time to say *adios* had truly arrived.



In September of that year, three things happened. My first book was published, a semiautobiographical novel that my nephews, now mostly in their teens and 20s, are still forbidden to read. I also went bankrupt that September, and was forced to sell most of my belongings, including my collection of comics, as part of the bankruptcy trustees' settlement. Every appearance of Al Columbia I had ever found I auctioned on eBay for pennies. Maybe you have my copy of *Dirty Stories*, or my ruined issues of *The Biologic Show*. I have tried in a half-assed way to reassemble the collection in recent years, but Al Columbia today principally bears witness as a mental slideshow of indelible snapshots flashing against the inside of my forehead when I least want them to. Toddlers investigating loaded revolvers, a creek alive with leaping, carnivorous fish, landscapes of tortured souls that might appall even Vlad Țepeș.

One other thing happened in September 2009.

I was at BookPeople, Austin's premier indie bookshop, where my book signing had been held a week or so before. (I had worked there for a couple years after moving to Austin, but left the day after my boss tried to murder her lover's husband.)<sup>6</sup> I wandered around the store, trying to gauge from the available stock whether anyone had bought a copy of my book.

I skulked for a while around the graphic novel section. And there it was.

*Pim and Francie: The Golden Bear Days*. By Al Columbia.

The continuation had arrived.  
Things would be all right.



There is a (relatively) new Al Columbia comic out, called *Amnesia: The Lost Films of Francis D. Longellow*. I haven't read it yet, or even opened the cardstock envelope it was shipped in. It sits, on a shelf of books about incunabula, shimmering, a fresh talisman for when the noonday demon comes visiting again. \*

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Page from *Pim & Francie: The Golden Bear Days*, 2009.



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<sup>6</sup> My boss actually succeeded in the end, the injuries from the shotgun blast taking three months to kill the man. Tracey, my boss, was paroled in 2011. There is much on the internet about this. Searching "Tracey Tarlton" will bring it all to light.