

**Confluence:**

**Spring 2004**

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## **The Breadline Disciple**



**Photo by: Amy Kline**

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**The Breadline Disciple**

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**Letter from the Editor...**

I like driving past the same apartment complex every Friday evening, just when the sun is going down. I wonder what it would be like to live there.

We all search for home in one form or another, and that's what this collection of writing is partly about. The other part is religion, and finding something within it. This is all I'm going to say about this collection. I would rather have the reader find the meaning behind all of the written work presented here.

I chose these particular pieces based upon how well they were working together. Those poems, stories, or memoirs that unfortunately did not receive a position in this particular issue of Confluence, I encourage you to keep submitting.

I chose the particular artwork that I did because I felt something when I saw them that I normally didn't feel when I looked at a photograph or a small drawing. Many of them also reinforced the themes and concepts behind the written work within the magazine. I encourage visual artists to continue submitting to Confluence and Arts Group as well.

Read on.

J. Thomas Swihart, Editor

## Acknowledgements...

I first wanted to thank all of those that submitted, it's difficult letting go of something so personal, and to those who are buying this collection and supporting the arts, we at Confluence and Arts Group greatly appreciate it.

Next I want to thank Dr. Richard N. Ramsey for advising, support, ideas, and everything else. This publication wouldn't exist without you or your help, which you gave even when it wasn't asked for.

To the staff of Confluence and Arts Group, Elaine Collingsworth, Adam Golden, and Jamie Yoakum, again this magazine wouldn't have existed without your support or encouragement.

Thanks also to my colleagues of the Nutrition, who have worked hard before this publication and shared their knowledge of being the Editor of Confluence, and also to my friends and family who are always behind me in everything I do.

Also to the English and Linguistics department of IPFW, specifically Janine Moore and Deborah Hoile, for helping out whenever they could, and to the distributors of this publication for showing support to the local community of the arts as well.

Finally, to the professors and staff at IPFW, especially Mary Ann Cain, George Kalamaras, and Beth Simon, for encouraging the students to submit to this publication and for hanging up posters and flyers on your office doors and just plain spreading the word.

And thanks to Annie Heiliger at Borders for giving Arts Group, Confluence, and the Nutrition a venue to reach out to those in the local community. To those I may have forgotten to mention here, I have not forgotten what you may have done either for this publication or me.

J. Thomas Swihart, Editor

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Confluence invites submissions of photography, artwork, and manuscripts from students, alumni, faculty, and others in the general community outside of IPFW. Submissions should be taken or sent to Confluence, Department of English and Linguistics, Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne, 2101 Coliseum Boulevard East, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46805.

All submissions must include the name and contact information of the photographer, artist, or author. Photography, artwork, and manuscripts will be returned only if the sender includes a self-addressed stamped envelope, or may be picked up at the Department of English and Linguistics.

For additional information, contact Richard Ramsey, Department Chair of English and Linguistics.

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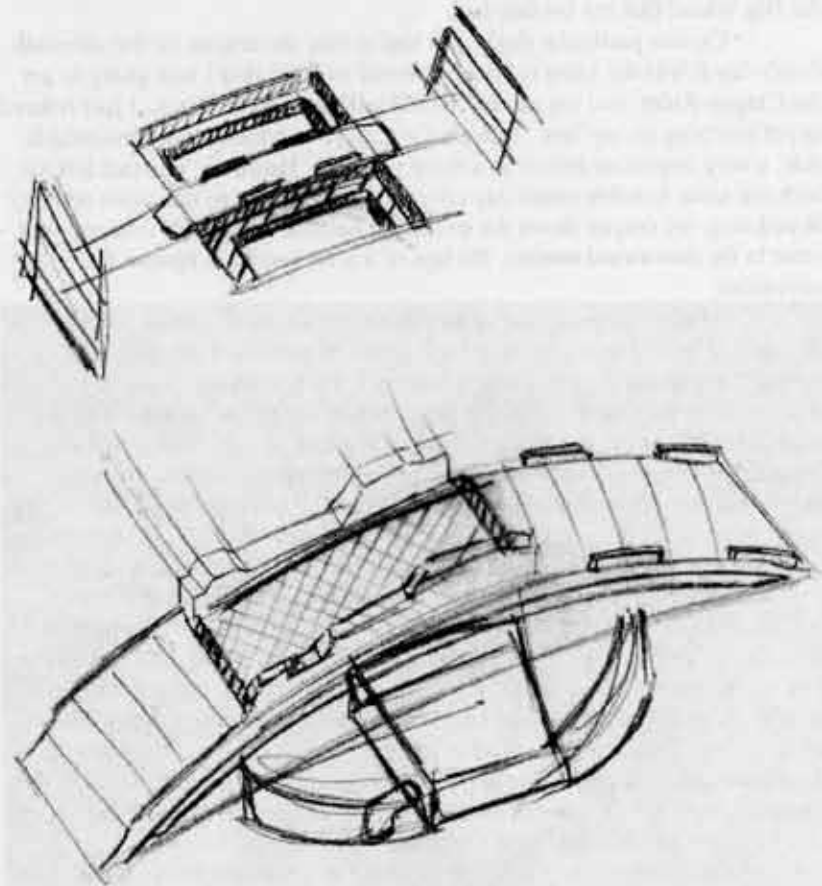
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con•flu•ence (kän'flōō ens) *n.* 1. a flowing together, esp. of two or more streams 2. the place where they join or a stream formed in this way 3. a coming together as of people; crowd; throng 4. a publication of Arts Group, Department of English and Linguistics, IPFW

## War of the Worlds

Two army men are searching for a satellite that was dropped from outer space. The men track it down to a small town where there seems to be dead people everywhere. The men see a man in a white robe and then they quickly lose radio contact with their base. The men at the base are very puzzled because this was just supposed to be another routine pick-up of a satellite in the middle of the desert. The book includes a lot of details and...



Curtis Swihart

## Free-toes

As I ran through the house, I tried to ignore the voice of my mother calling after me. She was telling me to wear shoes, of course. It made no difference that we lived right on South Anthony, which wasn't one of Fort Wayne's safest streets. I was set on riding my Crayon Rider down the sidewalk. To hell with Strawberry Shortcake and My Little Pony. The Crayon Rider was all that I needed. It still happened to be the most unoriginal name ever, because the Crayon Rider was just that, a crayon on wheels. It was a big, fat, yellow crayon with a steering wheel and pedals. It was a gift from my grandmother on my third Christmas. I preferred it over the Big Wheel that my brother had.

On one particular day, I just had to ride the crayon on the sidewalk. Every day it was the same routine. I would exclaim that I was going to get the Crayon Rider, and my mother would tell me to wear shoes. I just refused to put anything on my feet. It made for a more restricted, less comfortable ride, a very important matter to a three year old. However, this fact left me with the same horrible result day after day. I would try to use some strategy in pedaling my crayon down the street, but nonetheless, every time my foot went in the downward motion, the tips of my toes scraped against the pavement.

After a complete trip up and down the street, my mood quickly changed. I started to realize that I was again in pain from the daily trip. I ran up to the house crying, hopping on my heels and trying to rest my bloody stumps like a woman trying not to smudge her wet toenail polish. My mother bandaged me up after giving me an 'I told you so,' and I swore to myself that I would never ride the crayon again without shoes. But that didn't last more than a day. Every day it was like having a blank slate. I had already brushed off the events of the day before, and had decided that having some scrapes wasn't too bad. Besides, I had come up with a new idea.

I was still wearing the same Snoopy Band-Aids from the day before, and I figured that it would provide some type of buffer between my toes and the ground. That would eliminate a need for shoes, and I would be free to roam again! So I set off for a trip down the street, but it didn't go as well as planned. After the first couple of scrapes, the Snoopy Band-Aids were ripped off and I received an even larger thrashing from the sidewalk. This followed by the subsequent pedicure hop up to the house, in tears of course. I would receive more Snoopy Band-Aids, another 'I told you so,' and a promise from myself that I would never do it again.

Every time I went out, I knew that I would come back crying, but it was worth it. Going down the street alone (with a close observer of course, I was only 3), I had such a feeling of freedom. Making the trip back home

was always disappointing. I didn't want to lose the unusual breeze and the freedom, so I would quickly turn away from the house and go back out again. I didn't want to compromise that special freedom by restricting my feet. All of me had to be free. I loved to feel the sand and dirt on my soles, and having those big shoes on my feet truly prevented that.

The following days brought more trips down the road, and more boxes of Snoopy Band-Aids. This was just another day, and just another trip. I did my usual as I excitedly ran down the steps to get the Crayon Rider and heard the usual cries for me to wear shoes. I pretended not to hear and picked up the speed in order to avoid getting caught, and began my usual shoeless journey to freedom.



Cindy Minh

## Sunday Morning, Six a.m.

Sitting on the subway, last nights  
 kisses in my back pocket  
 Reminders of rolling in grandmothers  
 silk scarves  
 during secret sleepovers

At age nine, she drove, while I cried in the car  
 all the way home  
 from my Valentine's Day Party  
 Now, for fun, I draw rainbows  
 on packs of Camel cigarettes  
 and leave them in public restrooms

Grandmother never told me that red crayons  
 would turn my eyelids black  
 Upon this discovery, I had already kissed  
 too many boys

"Happiness," she said, "is never content in the light  
 of fluorescent toothpaste"  
 Trying to smile at a sunrise now,  
 is like eating asparagus  
 on a cold day in July

These days, rain falls inside  
 when I turn on the lights  
 And I always well up at the sight  
 of old thermometers

Sometimes I look out my window  
 at night  
 and think of a Greyhound bus  
 Trying to remember lemonade days  
 bell pepper smiles  
 and silk scarves

## Peach

I'm not bitter and hard, pitted inside like the pit of the peach. I  
 aspire to sweetness.

When I went to the public swimming pool daily, religiously, during  
 the uncomfortable summer of my puberty, I noticed myself tanning and  
 ripening like a peach in the brilliant heat. I grew meat on my body and fuzz  
 on my skin. I sweated the sugary juice of innocence.

I was a showoff.

"How'd you do that?" they asked me time and again. Only I had  
 dared to do a double gainer from the short one-meter diving board. I was a  
 hero with the older boys—and some girls, who admired the daredevil flip-  
 and-twist artists and water bombers.

Bravery consisted of flying upward and throwing my head  
 backward toward the diving board, world end over end, hoping for a landing  
 in the water on my butt, rather than on my back or belly. Bravery *did not*  
 consist of speaking to attractive girls with new curves and mysterious smiles.  
 To me, that was terror. Until I softened under the summer sun.

Katrina said my lips tasted sweet and juicy, like two slices of warm  
 fruit. I couldn't answer. I was casually looking at the front of my wet  
 clinging swim trunks to see if you could see the growing discomfort. My  
 ears burned as bright as apples.

I hurried into the cool water.

I ripened.

Chlorine, daily, does an amazing thing to the skin. I began to flake  
 when I was dry, like a diseased beggar. If Katrina saw me like that, she'd  
 disregard me like rotten fruit.

My mother said to use moisturizing lotion.

My father drove me to the pool one day. I had already greased up  
 my arms, face, and shoulders before we left. In the car with my father, I  
 rubbed lotion on my legs, which weren't hairy yet, but fuzzy, and much  
 browner and smoother after the lotion. Nice legs, I thought.

The bottle of lotion was slapped out of my hands. My father called  
 me a sissy, asked if he had a son or a daughter.

He said, "Never let me see you do that again."

My ripening identity was squashed like a peach under a thick, black  
 boot heel. He crushed and smeared.

What would Katrina think of the mess of me?

## Distance

As of January 21, 2004, Mitchell Henry was 29 years old. Mitchell was never a good looking man, nor was he terribly unattractive. He stood 5'7", weighed one hundred and fifty-five pounds, and had narrow shoulders that made his head look much larger than it actually was. Mitchell's eyes were dark brown and his hair was a dusty shade of light brown. He parted his hair on the right side—always. Mitchell smelled vaguely of a rock quarry, but he would go his entire life without knowing it. Mitchell was one of those guys that you know, and you know you know, but you can never remember his name.

People called Mitchell "Mitch". He hated it but had never told anyone of the dislike for the nickname. In truth, it reminded him of a boy he knew from grade school who would try to kiss the other boys on the playground. Mitch Menendez. Whenever anyone called Mitchell Mitch, he always thought of that boy.

Mitchell got into the habit of tying his left shoe first when he was a child. As an adult, he now feels that if he doesn't tie his left shoe first, he will have a bad day. He also still repeats the jargon about the bunny and the hole as ties his shoes. He isn't aware that he does it, but he never says it loud enough that anyone else will ever be aware either.

Mitchell graduated with a degree in library sciences on May 5, 1998. He still works as a front desk librarian at the library two blocks from his parent's house on Rose Avenue. Truth be told, it's the only job that he's ever had, and really, he only got that job because he started as an unpaid intern. Mitchell has never tried for a better position at this library or elsewhere.

Mitchell's IQ is exactly 120. Mitchell, being aware that this is the average IQ for a college graduate, took the test a second time in order to be anything but exactly average. The second test yielded the same results—as did the third and the fourth.

All this said, Mitchell's most peculiar trait is that he is often mistaken for people he doesn't know. This used to be a bother to him. It would cause distractions at work or whenever he went out. Now, Mitchell takes advantage of it. When people approach him and say "Bob...Bob Jenkins. Is it really you?" or "Well if it isn't Harvey McDaniel" Mitchell simply continues the conversation as though he knows the person. He never lies. He never actually pretends to be Bob Jenkins or Harvey McDaniel, but he no longer tells these people that he's *not* them either. This is how Mitchell has met most of his friends: they either continued to talk after realizing he wasn't Harvey and were too ashamed to say no when he asked

them to get coffee sometime, or they actually believe that he is Harvey. It is not at all unusual to hear Mitchell referred to as a name other than his own.

Only two days later, on January 23, 2004, Jayne turned 34 years old. Jayne was never what anyone would call pretty, but she wasn't so unattractive as to be mocked. She would be 5'2" if she didn't slouch, and she had no idea that she weighed nearly 150 pounds. Jayne had scoliosis, which made her right shoulder slightly higher than her left one. Jayne had brown eyes, but no one had ever noticed. Her hair was nearly black and hung past her waist when it was wet. No one, however, had seen her hair outside of a bun in over 15 years. While not noticeable at a glance, a hard look would show that Jayne's skin is not quite opaque. If you were to look long enough and really focus in, you could see the network of her veins—and maybe even muscle. If you were to stare longer, you might think that you've seen bone—but, in reality, that's just an optical illusion caused by the fact that she's so pale.

Few people spell Jayne's name correctly. In fact, many people at the office where she works think that her name is Jan. She never corrects them because Jayne grew up in Georgia, where the two names are pronounced very similarly. Jayne thinks that the people around her office simply have a different way of pronouncing her name, but do actually know that her name is J-a-y-n-e, or at least J-a-n-e. Since her career rarely has chance for her name to be put into print, nothing has ever caused Jayne not to believe this.

Jayne has had several low paying jobs over the years, but at the age of 24 she decided that she wanted to be an executive at the company where, at the time, she was working in the mailroom. Nothing stood in her way aside from the fact that she never even made it past her freshman year of college. Still, Jayne persevered, and in the last ten years, has moved from the mailroom to front desk receptionist to administrative assistant for the vice president in charge of marketing. Jayne considers this quite an achievement, as do her parents, who often tell strangers of their daughter's advancement. These strangers normally nod and say, "Oh. You've got quite a girl there."

Jayne likes to sing to herself under her breath. She does this nearly the entire day. While the song varies occasionally, it is usually "Walking on Sunshine"—a song that Jayne has never particularly liked.

Jayne would never care to acknowledge it, but her most defining attribute is her extreme gift for solving mathematical problems. She can carry out lengthy algebraic and geometric equations in her head in a very short time. She does, however, hate to use this skill as she was once made fun of for getting every word problem correct during class in fourth grade. A boy sang out "Jayne-y the Brain-y" as Jayne answered her twelfth question in a row correctly. Jayne blushed and refused to answer any math questions from that day on. Even for simple math, she now uses a

calculator. She tries not to think of the actual problem, but usually gets the answer before it appears on the tiny screen.

Until January 25, 2004, Jayne and Mitchell had never spoken to one another.

On January 25, 2004, at 10:23 a.m., Mitchell sat on his parent's couch watching cartoons. The cartoons were on a recently purchased DVD and were originally aired in Japan. Mitchell refused to watch the cartoons in anything other than their original Japanese because he thought English detracted from the true meaning of the writer. Mitchell, however, didn't know Japanese and still had to watch them with English subtitles.

Mitchell did not live with his parents, but there was no real way to tell that was the case. At the age of 26, he finally rented a place of his own. It was the bottom half of a duplex on Tulip Avenue, about a block away from his parents' house. Mitchell didn't spend much time in the apartment on Tulip Avenue, instead preferring to take most of his meals and spend most of his free time at his parents' house. He had, in fact, kept a bedroom at his parent's house and often chose to sleep there "for convenience sake" as it was slightly closer to his place of employment.

The library had scheduled Mitchell this Sunday, as usual. While the time was getting close for him to be at work, he knew that he didn't have to actually leave his parent's house until 10:56 in order to make it to the library on time at 11:00. He could, if need be, leave at 10:58 if he decided to run to work instead of walk.

At 10:44, Mitchell decided to pack himself a lunch. He took with him a small bag of cheese-flavored corn crisps, an individual-size applesauce cup, and a sandwich he pieced together from leftover fish sticks and half a package of deli ham.

Just as Mitchell was arriving at work, Jayne too decided to make a trip to the library. This is where she read comic books. Jayne had been a comic book collector since she was about 8 years old. It started with Archie and Casper, but soon she moved into super-hero comics and more independent fare. She often argued with people about the validity of comic books as an art form. She had even photocopied the covers of several of her favorite comic books to show people when they said that comics aren't art. "Here," she'd say, "how is this not art? Look at the way that Nightcrawler's tail circles the reclining Wolverine. Or here, look at how Daredevil's self-assurance is captured as he lounges after a hard battle." She had never changed anyone's mind.

Jayne read the comic books at the library because she knew that reading the comic books that she had purchased would damage them, causing them to go down in value. Every comic book that she read at the library, she also had stashed away at home, backed with a thin piece of acid-

free cardboard and slid carefully into a plastic bag. Once the comics had been bagged, boarded, and tucked away, she would never touch them again.

When Jayne made it to the library, she headed directly back to the periodicals section and began carefully searching through the spinner rack of recent comics. She looked at the title and number of every issue twice before heading up to the front desk. She wasn't aware of it, but as she walked, she was quietly singing "Walking on Sunshine."

Mitchell composed himself at the front desk at 11:14. He wasn't late to work. He had certainly clocked in on time; it just took him that long to actually make it to his position from the back room. Mitchell took out his lunch from his backpack as soon as he was situated. He wasn't supposed to eat at the front desk, but he knew that no one would say anything.

The little boy stopped his first bite, but Mitchell wasn't perturbed. He liked kids, especially kids brave enough to ask questions.

"Where are the Roald Dahl books?" The boy asked.

"In the children's department, see, right over there," Mitchell pointed. "They are the third row from the back, first shelf up from the bottom. They're about right in the middle of the shelf. Do you think that you can find them?"

The child nodded and ran off.

After the child moved, Jayne stepped up to the counter. She wasn't mad yet, just perturbed. This wasn't the first time that they'd forgotten to order one of her comics.

"Excuse me," Jayne said. She waved her hand a little as though the man won't hear her unless he can see movement too. "Excuse me, sir. Can you look something up in the computer for me?"

"Ya know, you can look up stuff yourself at the computer right over there," said Mitchell.

"Oh, I know. I'm just not very good with computers." Jayne was lying. She knew quite a bit about computers, databases, and even catalogs from her job; she just hated to use computers when she wasn't being paid to do so. This man, she thought, is being paid for this.

"I have a question about this," Jayne said and held up the previous issue of the comic she wanted to read.

"You can't check out periodicals," said Mitchell. Jayne could see he was getting upset. What's his problem, she thought, this is his job.

"No no, I don't want to check it out," she said. "I just have a question."

"Okay," he said, drawing out each syllable in a way that made Jayne even more annoyed with him. "Go ahead and ask your question."

"This is issue 11 of the Ultimates. I want to read issue 12, which came out three weeks ago. When are you going to get it in?"

"The computer says we have it."



"You don't"

"Did you check behind the other comics? Sometimes the new ones get hidden."

"Yes, I checked," said Jayne. "Of course I checked."

"And it's not there."

"No. If it was there, I wouldn't be asking you about it." Jayne couldn't take much more of this. She wanted to jump across the counter, grab this man by his ears, pull him in close to her face, and yell 'where is my damn comic?' Still, she knew this wouldn't get her the comic any faster. "Are you going to get in a new copy?"

"Probably not. Why don't you go across the street and buy one? What are comic books, 50 cents?"

"More like three bucks. But I already own it anyway," Jayne said and walked away. What a jerk, she thought. Now I have to pay another three bucks just to read it.

What a jerk, thought Mitchell. If she already owns it, why doesn't she just read it at home and stop wasting my time.

At 12:03 the next day, Mitchell went outside to eat his lunch. His break that day was supposed to be a half hour. Mitchell instead took 45 minutes. He justified this by saying that he had not taken a lunch break the day before. This was true; he had not. He ate lunch at the front counter and then meandered through the aisles for the rest of the day, but he never officially took a break.

Whenever his mother made his lunch, she wrapped everything in aluminum foil. Mitchell pulled out his apple, unwrapped it, took a bite, wrapped it back up, and placed it back in his bag. His father always told him that when eating outside, he should take every precaution against ants. Even though it was winter and Mitchell had never even seen an ant near the library, he took the same precaution with his ham sandwich and his pasta salad—he was certain to replace even the aluminum foil wrapped around the Tupperware holding the pasta salad.

When Mitchell saw Jayne the second time, he didn't recognize her. Sure, she looked vaguely familiar to him, but many people did at the library. Already, less than 24 hours later, he had disassociated her from the comic book woman from the day before. She was just another library patron. At that time, he only was vaguely aware of his attraction to her. He didn't know what it was about her (she seemed so average), but he knew that she was someone he would like to get to know. Mitchell, however, chose not to act and went back to unwrapping his sandwich. He had never had much luck with women.

Mitchell's only real girlfriend was an overweight clarinetist named Clare. He first met her when he was 4 years old. Her family moved next to his grandmother's house 4 blocks over on Lily Avenue. Clare was still only 2 months old at the time and did not remember the incident, much to

Mitchell's dissatisfaction as he remembered their first meeting very well. The two became involved romantically at Mitchell's 19<sup>th</sup> birthday party. Clare caught Mitchell in his bedroom and gave him a birthday kiss. The kiss, which Clare intended to be a peck, lasted until the two were dating.

Even though the two rarely saw each other when Mitchell went across town to college, they continued to think of themselves as a couple. Clare broke it off cleanly 4 years later when she decided to pursue a career in dentistry at a college in Iowa. Mitchell stayed in his room for four days after the break-up without food, but he never cried. Mitchell visited Clare on breaks from school when she stayed with her parents, but he never tried to start anything with her ever again.

Mitchell's only other attempt at finding love was with a girl who worked in the genealogy department of the library last summer. Her name was Selena, and she was easily Mitchell's junior of 8 years. He asked her to coffee one night after work to which she replied, "I'm sorry, but I've made other plans already. Maybe another time." Mitchell took this to be a gentle rejection and never asked Selena to coffee again. In truth, Selena found Mitchell to be both kind and engaging. She did truly have plans that night but had wished she didn't. When she went back to school in the fall, she was disappointed that Mitchell never asked her out again. Over the nearly six months that she had been away at college, she had resolved to ask Mitchell out next summer—if she was able to secure her job at the library again.

Mitchell, it should be noted, had never slept with anyone. While he and Clare had come close a half dozen times, he always said that he'd prefer to wait. Mitchell did not want to wait for religious or moral reasons, however, but instead was simply concerned that he would be a poor lover. He had read up much on the subject of sex, but never really had any desire to put his studies into practice. To him, it was one of those things that might be fun to try, but in reality, he'd probably never experience, like skydiving or roller blading.

Jayne's second visit to the library that week was not for comic books. Instead, this visit was a lunchtime pursuit of her other main hobby: the repair and resale of discarded Betamax VCRs. While resale had become more and more difficult, especially with the advent of DVD players, Jayne continued to insist that the Betamax player was the penultimate in home viewing technology, second only to home reel-to-reel systems, which she had had no luck repairing.

She had recently come into the possession of an SL-5010 system, which seemed at first glance to be much like the other systems with which she had worked. The VCR, however, proved much more difficult to fix than she had anticipated. She came to the library in search of a volume detailing common problems with the SL-5010 model. She had had no luck. She did, however, find issue 12 of the *Ultimates* stashed in the play area of the children's department. She glanced through the issue, having no time to

read, and then stashed it under the slide, where she was sure to be able to find it when she had more time.

Jayne, too, noticed Mitchell but not until she was *leaving* the library. She remembered Mitchell but found him to be much more sympathetic when he was not behind the front desk. Jayne did not find Mitchell to be attractive, but as she watched him try to turn a ball of aluminum foil into what might have been a turtle, she knew that if he pursued her, that the two would probably have sex.

Jayne's love life had been much more eventful than Mitchell's. Her first boyfriend was at the age of 14. His name was David and his dad owned an auto dealership. On the same day that they decided that they would be dating, the two snuck into the dealership and had sex in an unoccupied office. They talked afterward about what David planned to do next year when he went away to college. Aside from hellos in the hallway at school, this was the only time that the two had ever spoken. The entire relationship lasted a total of 12 days.

Jayne's second relationship was with a truck driver named Steve when she was 17. He was nearly 30 years her senior. While to Jayne the relationship lasted 4 months, in that time they only saw each other twice. They did, however, have quick truck-stop phone conversations that mostly consisted of Steve saying how much he missed her, and Jayne asking when he would see her again.

In the 8 months that Jayne spent away at college, she slept with five more men, only one of whom remembered her name. His name was Sandy, and the two met at a comic book convention just outside of Chicago. They had sex in the bathroom, and again in a hotel room, and again in Jayne's Geo Tracker. They tried to keep in contact through letters after they both went home. Jayne lost Sandy's address after the third letter and never tried to find it.

About once a year, Jayne would find someone on the personals site that she belonged to. She would always sleep with them on the first date and never return their messages.

At 9:18 pm that same day, Mitchell locked the doors to the library. It should be noted that Mitchell was not supposed to have keys to the library, nor was he supposed to still be on the library premises at that hour. The keys he had copied two years ago when the library manager had asked Mitchell to run out and get a brown lunch bag from her car. Surprisingly, she hadn't even wondered why the simple task had taken Mitchell nearly half an hour.

The reason Mitchell was still on the library premises four hours after his shift had ended and one hour after the library closed was quite simple: he was intensely interested in the art of flower arranging but found the pursuit of this hobby so embarrassing that he couldn't even bring himself to check out books on the subject during regular library hours. James, the security guard, had noticed Mitchell's studies but, quite frankly, didn't care

that he was in the building or that he was interested in flower arranging—just so long as he didn't try to take any books home with him.

Mitchell became interested in flower arranging the previous summer when he and his mother visited a craft bazaar. He immediately was drawn to the table with the bright floral arrangements but waited to approach until his mother was occupied with a table of quilts.

"Did you know that flowers are the sex organs of plants?" He asked the woman in her late forties behind the collapsible table.

"Yes, I did," she replied. "But they're still beautiful."

"That they are," said Mitchell and picked up a bouquet to smell.

Since that time, Mitchell had made a point of making for himself a new flower arrangement every week. He would sit the flowers right in the middle of his kitchen table to look whenever he chose. Mitchell did, however, hide the bouquets whenever his mother or father stopped by to visit. The week of January 25, Mitchell was working on an arrangement that one of the books called an "abundance bouquet." It was the first time that he had ever used snapdragons in one of his arrangements. The flowers reminded him of tiny bonnets.

After Mitchell was satisfied that no one had seen him leave the library, he headed to the coffee house across the street. He ordered a grande I mocha with a shot of caramel and a dab of raspberry flavoring. He said that he did indeed want whipped cream, but in a smaller cup on the side and not on top of his drink. Mitchell liked to spoon the whipped cream on little by little as he drank.

Mitchell noticed Jayne immediately after he sat in the big soft chair by the front entrance. He watched her finger the rim of her cup before he was aware that he was attracted to her. This almost never happened to him: he often noticed that women were attractive *empirically*, but rarely found them attractive himself.

Mitchell brought out a copy of *The Inheritors* from his bag and turned to the folded page. He glanced down at the book but focused his eyes just off the top edge. He looked right at Jayne. She's so plain, he thought; I don't understand. He traced her arm to her shoulder, her shoulder to her hip, her hip to her toe. Had she been wearing glasses yesterday, he wondered; no, no, he didn't think she had.

Oh, Mitchell thought, her eyes are brown, dark brown, like mine.

With the observation came a feeling of uneasiness for Mitchell. He had never quite felt like this before. Suddenly, the whole thing seemed silly—he seemed silly. Mitchell left his cups on the table when he got up to go.

Mitchell only draped his scarf around his neck when he went outside. He intended to just walk directly to his apartment, but when he got to the corner where he would have had to turn, he just kept walking.

The time was exactly 9:00 when Jayne entered Bob's Brew coffeehouse. It was *exactly* 9:00 because Jayne had waited in her car until the minute clicked over. Nine was the time that the open stage ended. Jayne hated the open stage: kids practicing guitars and reading the same poems every week. It even seemed like each different kid wrote the same poems. How many more times could she sit through butchered Bob Dylan and "I'll never find love again" poetry?

When Jayne ordered tea, the new barista asked her what kind. "Just tea," said Jayne. "I don't want to pick one out." If it had been any of the other baristas, Jayne would have had a tea, the closest tea at hand, by the time she got the register. Jayne came to this same coffeehouse nearly every day. She always ordered tea. She always sat at the back away from the door. And she always, *always* brought a new trade paper back of some comic book series that she was checking out. On January 26, Jayne had brought with her a copy of the first trade paper back of *Y: The Last Man*.

Jayne left work on January 26 at 6:44 pm. This was much later than the time that she usually left work. She normally left at 5:00 pm no matter what. This often meant that she would leave a job half-finished and other jobs undone. To make up for her unfinished work, Jayne would stay after work one day every week to make up her workload. Jayne would stay after that day and *only* that day.

The reason that Jayne had chosen Tuesdays as her day to stay after was that comic books normally come out on Wednesdays, but some comic book shops receive their shipments late Tuesday night. "The Ogre's Den," the shop that Jayne frequented, was one of these lucky shops. Jayne wanted to be the first to select her comics because the comics were less likely to be handled by kids and damaged if she arrived soon after the shipment. The Ogre's Den, however, closed at 7, so Jayne always had to be sure to get out of work no later than 6:45 in order to just slide in the doors before they locked them.

Every Tuesday, Jayne would rush in, carefully select her list of comic titles, and then rush back out to her car, where she had the proper bags and cardboard backers waiting. She would bag and board them right then to insure that they were damaged as little as possible. Jayne would also occasionally pick up a trade paper back or two in order to check out new series that she had heard good things about from the cashiers at the comic book shop.

The only problem that staying late Tuesdays caused was with the open stage. It started at 7 and ended at 9. There was no way she could make it to the comic shop *and* get her tea before it started. But she liked her tea and rarely went home without first having a mug.

Jayne noticed Mitchell as soon as he walked into Bob's Brew. She noticed him primarily because she found it so odd to see this man, whom she had never talked to before, in the same two-day span. Jayne watched him order, something that took quite some time. He wasn't so bad, Jayne

thought. He wasn't handsome. He wasn't good looking. He wasn't even really noticeable. But now that she had noticed him, she noticed little things about him. His hair was perfectly parted on the right side. Jayne could tell that his hair had a slight curl to it, but Mitchell had fought it with moose. She imagined that he'd be cuter if he just let it go. She also noticed that he had extremely good posture—something she had never noticed in anyone before.

When Mitchell sat down, Jayne brought up her trade paper back and pretended to read some more. She could tell that Mitchell was just pretending to read too but couldn't tell if he was actually looking at her or staring at something in his head. When he got up to go, leaving his drink behind, Jayne's first instinct was to follow him. She didn't really want to talk to him; she merely wanted to see where he went.

Instead she stayed where she was, unable to move, until she couldn't not move anymore and had to leave. Jayne intended to walk to her car, but when she got to the bumper, she just kept walking.

Mitchell saw Jayne for the third time that day just less than five minutes later. He had been standing on a bridge connecting his neighborhood with the part of town that his mother called "Barville." He was afraid to keep walking so he decided to just watch the river pass underneath him. He looked at Jayne because she let out a yelp when she almost fell on a patch of ice at the base of the bridge. When his eyes focused and he saw who it was, Mitchell quickly looked away. It was very hard for him not to look a second time, but he held out for nearly a minute before he heard her speak.

Jayne was embarrassed when she realized that it was Mitchell that had seen her fall. She didn't bother to brush off her pants when she got up, but instead walked up the bridge. She stopped about five feet from Mitchell and took a deep breath before she spoke.

"Excuse me, sir," she said.

"Excuse me, sir." Mitchell pretended he thought she wasn't talking to him.

"Aren't you the man who works at the library?" Mitchell tried not to turn even when she spoke. He didn't hold out long.

"Yes. I work at the front desk. I'm sorry, you are?" Mitchell was trying to be as polite as possible, but he found it very hard to do so. He didn't realize at first that he wasn't breathing. When he realized, things were much easier.

"I'm sorry, you are?" He said, politely.

"My name is Jayne—with a 'y.' Ya know, like in England." Jayne could tell that he did know. "Is your name Michael? I remember something like that on your name tag."

"No, Mitchell, but you were close." Jayne felt uncomfortable when she realized the two had made eye contact. She fought for something to say, but instead, she only managed to look away.

"No, Mitchell, but you were close." Mitchell tried to fight a smile but a little of it slipped out.

When Jayne looked away, sad and disheartened, Mitchell's first reaction was to give her a hug like he used to do with Clare. He knew, however, that she was too far away, even though less than five feet separated them.

While Jayne looked at the pavement, she wanted first to step into Mitchell, then to run away. She wanted to turn five feet into none or five feet into 50, but she wasn't sure which.

Mitchell and Jayne both suddenly became aware of the space between them. They had never felt this distance before. Both of them nodded as they turned to go. And as Jayne and Mitchell got closer and closer to their homes, they felt the distance getting greater and greater.



Cindy Minh

## Home at the House

My mom and Evan married when I was five. When I hear think of a family, I picture myself between my mom and Evan. The only memory I have of my mom's single life is moving into my grandparent's house for awhile, though it felt like a long time, then moving into Evan's. He made me a sign that read "Maner's Room" above the door to my room.

One afternoon when I was ten the two of us drove to Home Depot. I know I was ten because I had my blue squirt gun with me. He let me shoot it out the window when we were stopped. He looked at every price tag and grunted. After a long time, we went to the service counter and I looked at the candy and he filled out for a store credit card. We filled up a shopping cart after that, and my mom's mouth hung wide open when she saw the trunk. He showed her the circular saw, the new mirrors, the new bathroom sink.

I remember clearly they didn't fight until after I went to bed. Then it was loud sudden bursts of his deep voice, or a slap on a table. His deep voice and gray beard made him look ancient and wise to me. When I was real little, I never knew how my mom had the guts to fight with him.

"I will not be controlled!" he yelled a dozen times. The next day I didn't go to daycare because he stayed home from his work. We drove to a bookstore in silence and he made me stay in the car. It was summer and I had a slight sunburn. The sun just seemed to beat down on me worse as I sat in the hot car. He came out with a bag and hid it in the trunk. We got home and he sent me to play and he went into the room he shared with my mom and closed the door.

That night I woke up in swirling chaos and charred emotions. My mom was handing me my shoes and heaving my clothes into a black trash bag. She wouldn't let me put a shirt on, all I was wearing were my Power Rangers pajama bottoms. The TV was on very loud in their room; the speaker vibrated until I couldn't understand the words. My mom dragged me by the arm and I slammed my naked sunburn back into the wall.

"Sorry," she said. We tripped up in the dark kitchen and my peeling shoulder grazed against the light switch.

I screamed. I knew we were going outside and away. I knew I'd sleep on a foul couch somewhere and go through feeling dirty for two days before we came back. I hated staying at one of her friend's houses. I liked it when we stayed at Grandma's the best. We would watch *Golden Girls* and *Empty Nest* and eat ham salad sandwiches. But they asked the most questions, especially Grandma when Grandpa wasn't around. Grandpa always asked two short, yes-or-no questions and left it at that. Grandma dug deep, where I didn't have anything to say. My mom and Evan fought, that

was it. I always would see my mom ask him to do something again and again even though it was so clear he wasn't going to do it.

Sometimes I wished my mom would just stop, leave him alone. She knew what would keep the fights going; she would try to end with a low-blow:

"Let me know when you're emotionally available."

"Thank God you never reproduced."

"I should've stuck it out with Maner's real father."

Those comments would get a coffee table overturned, or a lamp knocked off the table. My mom told me one morning that Evan breaking a lamp was like he wanted to break the house up, tear it down and start with a new family. I always thought she knew better.

The trial separations started when I was twelve. He'd be gone for a month, then I'd come home from school and he'd be there. They never spoke a word to me about what was happening. I went over to one of the trailers he rented and watched TV for an hour once. Lined up beside the VCR were some porno movie boxes, and I hoped he would let me take one with me. I'd seen my first one just a few weeks before at my friend George's house. His dad had a TV and VCR out in the garage with a bunch of tapes locked in his toolboxes. George knew where he kept the key. But I didn't dare say anything about Evan's movies, because soon they would be back together and talking again. We didn't speak but a few words when I was there, but I understood his awkwardness. I had to be on my mom's side, by default.

That Thanksgiving he didn't go to my Grandparents with us. I felt so alone in the front seat instead of camped out in the back. I had always been in the back; the front felt like a gut-shot into the grownup world. I pumped gas at the truck stop and even ran in and paid. I stood in the middle of hairy truck drivers and realized for the first time that they weren't much older than me.

I could and would be an adult in a few years and then my time with my mom and Evan would be over. No more cookouts behind the house, no more family movie nights; were grownups still allowed to spend the night at their Grandparents? They might want me to chip in a little rent money if I stayed too long.

When we got to my Grandparents, I ran in their house without helping my mom bring anything inside. I hugged them both and flexed my chin to hold back my tears. As soon as my mom got inside their back porch I slithered out the front door. I sat in one of their lawn chairs and watched cars bolt by on the interstate. I sat out there for an hour before my Aunt Helen called me in to eat.

"You're awfully quiet today," my grandma said. It took me a moment to realize she was talking to me. My mind had been traveling nowhere and everywhere. The food was so hot and heavy; just sitting around the table made me sleepy.

"Oh I was just daydreaming," I said.

"About what?" my uncle Keith asked. He was my mom's brother, and from what I've gathered, had introduced my mom to my dad.

"He was wishing Evan was here," my aunt Helen said. She was Keith's wife, and my Grandpa snorted at her comment.

"I don't think anybody's wishing that," uncle Keith said. "We'd all be paranoid he didn't wash his hands."

"It's better he'd be here than all alone," I said. Everybody's head veered in my direction, except for my grandpa's, he kept scraping his plate to get all the gravy.

"He's got somewhere to go," my mom squeezed out. She wiped her clean mouth with a napkin; she was trying to filter away the crap she was saying. "Remember I told you he's going to the Catholic Church Meal for Christ."

"I bet he'll get a lot to eat," my grandma said. "What are they serving?"

"I know they're having fried turkey, stuffing with cream cheese."

"Jesus why don't we all go there?" I said.

"I don't think so," uncle Keith said.

"He's better off there," aunt Helen said. She winked at me. I looked away from her and stared at the slabs of turkey meat lying like raped road kill on my plate. The overhead fan clicked and clicked like the pulse of indifference that was my family.

"I just don't know why he couldn't have come," I said. The tears were coming and I just prayed no one would say anything out loud about them. "It's Thanksgiving for Pete's sake."

Everyone just ate.

By Christmas that year he was back in the family. No one discussed his absence at Thanksgiving. I could feel the uncomfortable silence that was louder than the Christmas music on the stereo. I think I was asked about getting my license the upcoming summer ten times.

That summer I did indeed get my driver's license. I had driven on my permit more with Evan than my mom, so I was more excited to show him my picture. More importantly, I didn't miss any on the written test. He was so proud he jumped out of his recliner and shook my hand. We went to Dairy Queen and he let me drive. We ate Blizzards that perspired and melted fast in the car and were awesome.

"I just want you to be careful," my mom said when we got home. I slowed down from my top-of-the-world pace and landed back on Earth. I tossed my Blizzard cup in the trash and went into my room. I got online and started looking up car prices. At first I just fooled around and looked at Mercedes and Jaguar websites. Then I started going to used car sites and printing out information. There were lots of good deals on cars; ones I could really buy.

That's a moment I'll never forget. Actually being able to buy an automobile was such an adult matter. It wasn't about having money it was about changing my life in a drastic way that was all my control.

I played the blame game later for what happened. I kept thinking if I hadn't started the whole thing about the car the chain of events that happened would have never occurred. But I guess they both still did what they did anyway, and that is the root of the problem, not my bringing it out into the open. It was a typical Sunday morning, with no fighting and even less family interaction. We crowded around the small kitchen table, trading sections of the newspaper back and forth. I mainly looked at the classifieds, and I kept grunting and saying 'wow' at different cars.

I finally had to start marking the cars with a pen before my mom looked up and spoke.

"And what are you doing?"

"Oh just looking for cars," I said.

"How do you expect to pay for one?" she said.

"I'll get a job...pay you guys back for it."

Evan laughed and patted me on the shoulder. He folded his newspaper up and scratched his beard.

"You've got it all worked out don't you," he said. I have friends whose step parents are such jerks that they are always near blows. I've seen step dads make kids do exactly the opposite of what they want to do over and over again. George's step mom switched his room around, to make it more Feng Shue, because it was disturbing *her* sleep in the next room.

But Evan was always great about the big things.

"We can draw up a contract and everything," I said.

"Of course we will," my mom said.

"I was thinking around a thousand dollars, I'd give you like most of my paychecks till it's all paid off."

"We should get it notarized," my mom said.

"That's not necessary," Evan said. "A regular contract is good enough." He scooted his chair back and stretched. "I'll go draw one up on the computer."

My mom waited for Evan to be out of earshot and she said:

"What do you need a car for anyway?"

"Just to go do stuff," I said. I couldn't tell her about dates and things like that. I had never gotten 'the talk' from either of them and I didn't want it. As far as the world my mom and I lived in, there was no such thing as sex.

She leaned in close to me, her old and worn bra strap lying dead on her shoulder. I thought she was going to tell me to be careful. Instead she said:

"You're going to take girls out in the country and get in their panties."

"What, no...why do you say that?"

"Because I know!" She got up and left the table. I sat stupefied and stared at the scattered newspaper. What was her problem? Of course the thought had crossed my mind, but I always envisioned my first time in a bed with plenty of time to do everything right. I didn't think twisting around in the backseat of a car was the way to do things. What if a bunch of guys came and saw me naked? My mom acted like I had asked her permission to do that.

I signed Evan's contract and he signed it and took it to my mom to sign. She stayed in her room the majority of the day, and I stayed in mine. Evan brought my circled car ads in and I looked at them with him with zero enthusiasm. We decided on two cars to look at and we left. What should have been an exciting day in my life was a blur of questions and confusion.

"How long were my mom and dad together?" I asked Evan. He looked over at me but not really at me, he inspected the floorboard beneath my feet.

"Maybe you should ask her," he said. He scratched his beard and wiped dust off the dashboard.

"I've asked her a million times," I said. It was weird how I talked to him as an equal; he was no longer an elder, just a friend. "She won't say."

"I don't think I'd better."

"C'mon," I said. I knew if I didn't get it out of him right then, I'd never get it. "Just give me an estimate; a few months, a year?"

He looked over at me with that said he was going to tell me. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yeah," I said. I had a tightness in my chest, a little pinch telling me to back down and back out before I crossed into something I couldn't handle.

"She was with him for five months. They never went out or did anything, just sat around their apartment watching TV and smoking dope. He drank beer all the time...had a cooler right beside the sofa. As soon as she got pregnant he split. She has no idea where he is and doesn't care."

We were at the first car place way too quick. I tried to look at the car and really think about it. I couldn't. The story of my conception wasn't as bad as it could've been, but wasn't exactly my ideal model either. I figured my dad had been scared to have a kid, but just knowing the truth made me feel worse.

Lucky for me Evan didn't like the first car or the second, and we headed home. He sensed my awkwardness and kept talking, saying how I could take my time and choose a good car. There was no fire, after all.

When we got home I didn't see my grandparent's van until I was on the porch. It was parked halfway down the block and I could see my grandpa sitting in the driver's seat.

I walked in right behind Evan and he stopped right in the doorway of the kitchen. I could see my grandma and aunt Helen sitting on either side of my mom.

"What's going on Keith?" Evan said. Uncle Keith was standing with his arms crossed against the wall. He weighed forty pounds more than Evan and looked too big to be in our house. He and my aunt hadn't been there in probably a decade.

"I'm showing them what you really are," my mom said. Evan stood still for a moment longer and darted left back towards their bedroom.

"No! You stay out here and face up to yourself!" my mom shouted. She stood up and kicked through the pile of magazines scattered on the floor.

"Hon don't," my grandma said.

"Chickenshit pervert," my mom said. She marched as Evan slammed their door shut. She stood outside it and pounded without a pause. She hammered her fist and the thin interior door shook on its hinges.

"Maybe you should go see how grandpa is doing," my grandma said. She made a move forward to pick up the stuff on the floor, then rethought herself and sat back. My aunt Helen sat with a smirk on her face; I could only imagine their conversation on their way back home.

The things on the floor were porno magazines. There were smashed adult movie boxes and broken tapes. I didn't know what the hell she was even doing it for; exposing him wouldn't make him stop.

"Yeah just look at it," my mom yelled from down the hall. She kicked at the door and yelled at me at the same time. "See what Evan does on his spare time."

I picked up a magazine and he had redone the cover with pictures of other girls' faces. Inside the magazine had been cut up and different parts of women had been removed.

"Maybe you shouldn't look at those things," my grandma said.

I let it fall from my hands and it fell down to the rest. Uncle Keith was looking up at the ceiling. My mom gave up on Evan and came out into the living room.

"You see!" she barked at me. She was angry and energized, it didn't matter what anyone said to her, she wouldn't hear them. "See what I've put up with for years. He spends so much on this sick shit and I can't stand to touch him."

"Then why did you stay with him?" I said.

"Oh it's not that easy!" she screamed and flung her arms like I was such an idiot. "This is his house, he makes more than me. You want to go live in an apartment?"

"I would if I was as unhappy as you are."

"Sure you've got it all figured out."

"Well what the hell," I said. "You act like you're going to divorce him twice a year like fucking clockwork. One holiday he's a great guy, the next one you spend the whole time bitching about him and bring everybody down."

I had to keep going.

"Don't you ever pay attention when you diss on him to grandpa and everybody? We all just stand and nod 'uh-uh' and 'yeah' because you'll be right back with him then be mad at us for bad mouthing him. Grandpa is cool as hell about Evan but you've got everybody hating Evan on your word alone and they don't even know his half of any of your fights."

"What other half is there to this?" she said and pointed at the floor. She used the only thing she was totally right about.

"I look at that stuff too," I said. I heard my grandma gasp and uncle Keith snicker. "If I would have known he had all this stuff I might have borrowed some myself."

She slapped me across the face. It hurt for a second physically, then the skin pain was gone and it milked my heart. I slipped and fell on the magazines; then I bolted and ran down the street. I ran right by grandpa and he didn't even see me.

I ran to the next block and stopped. I looked back at my house and nothing had changed. I waited and waited, I knew something would give. I heard the back screen door slam and my mom's voice reached me despite how far away I was. Evan's car started up and roared backwards down the driveway. He turned and came my way.

I stepped out a few feet into the street. He came closer and was speeding very fast. I started to wave. I thought I could hop in and stay with him wherever he was going. He didn't slow down so I started jumping. The headlights were all over me but he still didn't slow and he blew right by me. He almost clipped my leg I was so close; he looked straightforward and I realized he was never going to look back. I sat down on the curb. I looked at the street but didn't see it; I didn't see anything or feel anything. My blood-family was waiting for me; the motions would have to be played again and again until it was time to escape. Relatives are relative and who ever is there for you is who you love. I used to think about my real dad coming back one day and us being friends. I wished he were there at that moment so I could shove him away, because my real father had just driven off.



Cindy Minh

Two a.m. in a Gas Station Bathroom

I saw a picture of you last night  
while traveling to Miami.  
We stopped driving at two a.m.  
just to feel.  
The only bathroom at the Texaco was dimly lit  
and smelled of stale air.  
As I sat down  
the stall door closed and there you were.  
Drawn out in black  
Magic Marker  
right above *big dick*  
and below  
*fuck you.*

The likeness of you is uncanny  
and your vulnerability radiates.  
How lonesome how exposed.  
It's quite a lovely picture.  
You have the demeanor that all women are  
supposed to have.  
A sex kitten, growling lips and purring eyes.  
Your breasts are larger than your head,  
ostrich eggs.  
Your hourglass shape  
cannot reveal your age,  
and your legs are spread eagle  
open, inviting  
intruders into your vagina  
that's gasping,  
like a fish out of water.  
Your arms and feet are missing,  
appendages you obviously do not need.  
*Ricki* is scrawled in graffiti letters  
below your gaping  
manhole.  
That's what it is, isn't it?  
A hole where a man can lose himself?  
A refuge any man wants  
on a cold lonely night?  
A picture drawn by a man

for a man. A picture of you  
ready and willing,  
a woman in her place.  
A poem of a picture  
dedicated to Brian, to Billy,  
to Stephen, to John, to Jack  
off to,  
A wish on their list  
right above *big dick*  
and below  
*fuck you.*





## Burning Butterfly Bush: A Weatherman's Forecast

As a result of a cold front coming in from the north mixing with the warm front from the southeast, the eastern part of the state is in for some heavy storms tonight.

Moonbeams bounced off broken treetops. It seems it will be a clear night. I don't think that a little rain will stop the fire. Either way it's too late now.

*He took my hand. I tried to pull away. He led me down the pew, blessed himself with holy water along the way. Insisting I sit next to him, I attempted to scoot away. The scent of incenses stained my black sweater, brown hair, and clammy skin. I sat silent as he bowed his head to pray. I wonder if he prays for forgiveness for his sins. He should.*

Flames spewed from the attic. Raining ashes glided to the ground. I only had to light one match. That was all it took. I think I hear the sirens in the distance. Distant screams that are slowly growing. Louder. Intense. I sit on the sidewalk as I watch my parent's room blacken and tumble.

Take extra caution tonight as they may produce wind gusts up to thirty-five miles per hour. Those of you don't have to go out, stay in tonight and enjoy the comfort of your home. Stay safe.

*I wanted to be a ballerina. Gazing up at my mother as she gracefully gliding across the kitchen floor with soapsuds up to her elbows glistening under the fluorescent light. She was beautiful. I was too young to tell her how beautiful I thought she was.*

*She smiled a lot. Cried a lot too.*

*He told me I could be whatever I wanted to be. As long as I was a good little girl. "Do what daddy says and you'll be okay." When I asked him for money to take ballet classes he told me that I ask for too much and that he just doesn't have it right now. He told me I'd have no ride home from school if I decided to stay for choir practice. I'd have to walk home alone and pass the creepy abandoned warehouse on Magnolia Drive.*

The bathroom where he use to barge in on me while I showered. Gone. The smell of gasoline made my head ache. The approaching sirens didn't help.

*He told me not to talk to mom. I figured I had to do what he'd said. She cried for hours alone in her bed, too frightened to figure out what voices were really hers that she was hearing in her head. When I'd get home after*

*school I would try to tell her how my day was. I wanted to share with her what I had learned that day about the Boston Tea party. She smiles and nods and tilts her head. Then she'd ask, "I'm sorry honey were you talking to me?" When I'd tell her yes she'd start beating her head, "Shut up! Shut up! Leave me Alone. I can't hear what she said!"*

*I'd leave while she started to dance around the room to the beat of the music that played in her head. I didn't hear anything.*

*I was so excited when she told me I was going to be a big sister. Every other kid in the second grade had bothers and sisters but me. I thought I'd finally have someone to play with, someone to walk home from school with me, just someone.*

*Dad said that he was not going to let her have any more children of his because she would just make them sick.*

*She locked herself in her room for three days. I'm not sure what happened, she must have gotten sick or something because they took her to the doctor.*

*I never got a brother or sister. I would have really liked a little sister.*

If you do have to go out make sure you take along a raincoat because along with high winds this storm may bring along some heavy raining that could produce a flash flood warning as well as hail.

We've always had nosy neighbors. I wonder what they're thinking now. I can see them as they peak through their blinds and curtains. They use to laugh at her when she danced. They knew and never offered to help.

*He cuddled close to me while he listened to what the priest said. I counted the lights on the ceiling, the pews in each section, and the mass of balding heads. I never really listened to what the priest said. I don't think he really did either. How could he have been listening? How could he make the sign of the cross on his head, lips, and heart with the same hands that caused me so much pain? He loved it when the children's choir sings. He told me I could be a singer, that he'd like it if I'd sing some hymnals. He'd glare at me when I refused to sing.*

*He told me I could have a sleepover for my ninth birthday. I didn't want to bring my friends into my house. I only had two friends and I wanted to them to stay my friends. I could have what happened last time to Suzie happen again. Her parent's still look at me with sympathetic eyes with a hint of repulsion. How was I supposed to know he'd corner her the way he did? I thought he only touched me that way. I didn't think any other kid in school would talk to me ever again.*

The screams got inside my head. I think I remember the weatherman said there's a chance of rain. I sit and watch the flames. I wonder if they've gotten to him yet. I wonder if they'll cause him pain.

*After the Suzie incident dad stopped drinking for a little while. It was the happiest I can remember ever being. They had enough money to get mom some medicine for her head. She planted a honeycomb butterfly bush for me. She cautiously hid it in the back left corner, behind the shed. She knew that he would want to pull it out. "NO FLOWERS!" is what he always said. But she loved flowers. She could spend endless days in the garden carefully walking the path. Taking note of each weed, and its progression of growth. She never pulled them. She counted the leaves on the baby Autumn Blaze Maple. On those days she liked to be called Rose. She said it was her real name but I knew better. I saw her driver's license once and it said her name was Angela. I could never keep track of who is who in her head. I knew the medicine wasn't working. So did dad. He said that she should stop wasting his money when it's no use; she'll always be messed up in the head.*

The smoke is dwindling out of the windows. Should I sit, or run to save my beta fish? The flames may reach my butterfly bush, but I haven't the strength to pull it out. It was planted there years ago and towers far over my head.

*I never understood why we had to sit, then stand, then kneel, then sit. We were just like robots working off cues the priest had said. When I would dose off and it was time to kneel he'd pinch me in my side. I'd always have a bruise in my side.*

Folks I have an update. We were just informed that there is in effect until two-thirty a.m. a sever thunderstorm warning. Although it is currently clear out that storm is headed in our direction at rapid pace and increasing in intensity as it heads our way.

*I tied blue, red and yellow balloons to the light pole outside to make sure no one got lost. I invited ten girls from my class to my birthday party but only two of them had ever been to my house before. I cleaned the whole house and nervously waited, staring out the screen door for guests to arrive. No sleeping bags, is what I said. I didn't want them in my house in the first place, but dad insisted. No point in trying to argue with him.*

*I popped the balloons and slammed the door to my room. No one showed up, not even my two friends.*

*I did always like Christmas Eve midnight mass. It was the one time that we went to church as a family; dad insisted on her going that one day only. I sat between them; daydreaming about what it'd be like if I had a*

*normal family, what I would be like. The candlelight, soft music and scent of poinsettias mixed with holly, that was the safest time I ever had.*

*The walls in our house were thin. I could hear every door shut, footsteps through the kitchen and every word that was said. He yelled more often that talked. She whined and sung more often than anything. I rarely could hear my own thoughts in my head. I would lie under at the foot of the butterfly bush for hours. It became second nature to block out her singing and dancing while I watched the butterflies come and go. I admired their beauty. There were several types that visited the honeycomb flower clusters and me. There were blue ones with yellow lines running down their backs. Orange ones with black spots like a hundred eyes shut leaving only the black eyelids. Even the moths that visited were beautiful. I wanted to be that beautiful. Their wings cut through the wind sending them on to the next nectar-filled flower. I hated to see them leave.*

The sirens are growing louder. The house is not completely down yet. I thought it would topple easily. Maybe I did need more than one match. I hope the firemen to get diverted by a cat stuck in a tree instead. They'll try to save it. I don't want them to get here until it's all a pile of ashes. I have to make sure the whole thing is down. Nothing can be left standing. I should have used at least two or three matches.

*His mixture of Obsession cologne and Pabst Blue Ribbon was wallpapered in every hallway, piece of furniture, and my clothing. He said he'd never hurt me. He said that his touch was one full of pure love. His touch made me uncomfortable. What was wrong with me? He's my father, its okay for him to touch me, right? He said it was his way of showing me how much he loved me. He said I could be anything I wanted to be as long as I was a good little girl. He would pull clumps of mama's blonde hair right from her head.*

*"LILY GO TO YOUR BED!" he'd scream when I rushed to rub her bleeding head.*

*He never made me bleed, or bruised me. So he never really hurt me. He only touched me in loving ways. He told me that fathers don't use words to tell their daughters how much they love them. Instead they invite them to sleep with them in their beds. They cuddle, touch, and even sometimes kiss each other. But yet mama always cried when she walked in and see me embraced by him in their bed. She'd scream and start repeatedly wailing on her head. I don't know what I was doing wrong, she never told me. She would just yell for me to leave and cry until the music started up again in her head.*

*I always ran to my butterfly bush where the butterflies would land on my cheeks to suck the bitter salt from my tears.*

I wonder if they'll know I did it. Will they put me in jail? Mama always said nothing could be worse than living with this monster. Maybe jail won't be so bad. Do twelve-year-olds go to jail?

*He blamed me for her leaving. He said that I was too much stress for her. I knew the truth. Mama and I didn't talk about it. Talking about it was forbidden. Actions speak louder than words. As soon as she smelt him through the front door, she'd listen to the child's voice in her head. She became small. Did everything he said. She hinted that I should do the same. I liked it best when she listened to her own voice, not the others in her head. It was then that she was brave enough to plant the butterfly bush for me.*

I didn't get to turn in my spelling words. I wonder if my teacher will be mad. They're sitting on the table. Next to where he sat. He never helped me with them, even though he said he would.

*I was actually a little relieved when she left. Dad told me that they put her in a hospital especially for those sick in the head. I thought that while she was away getting better dad would be less tense. But it only got worse. Now I was the only one there for him to get mad at and everything became my fault. He grew lonelier and said that I had to sleep in his bed nearly every night. She got to visit once on a weekend; she cried when the nurse dropped her off and left her with us. She didn't say much. She wondered throughout the weed-full garden and sat near the butterfly bush. Right before the nurse came to take her back to the hospital she smiled once as she gently placed a small cluster of yellow flowers in my hair.*

*After mom left midnight mass wasn't special any more. The scent of poinsettias mixed with pine gave me nausea, the music made my head ache and I had urges to blow out all the candlelight.*

The firemen are coming up the street. I know that they won't care so I must run to save my butterfly bush. The flower petals tear and fall to the ground. I grasp as tightly as I can and yank the tangled roots from the clay soil. Butterflies fluttering around my head.

Winds are picking up and the rain is just beginning. We're in for a long, stormy night.

Bolts of lightning from the sky. Thunder in the distance.

Now we take you to Action 33 reporter Lacy Everett who is reporting to us live on scene at a horrendous house fire on 34<sup>th</sup> street.

Everything's a blanket of ashes now. I left him sitting there, unconscious.

Curt Swihart



Molly Kessler

Trivial

(To B. McLain: Fish really *do* drink water?! Hmm . . .)

*There are trivial truths and there are great truths.  
The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false. The  
opposite of a great truth is also true.*

Niels Bohr

*So remember when you're feeling very small and  
insecure how amazingly unlikely is your birth. . .*

Monty Python

Burgundy.

Velvet.

Thick and warm like Scottish sealer wax.

Liquid life.

Blood flowed from Jacob's clean-cut veins at sixty-three beats per minute; even his blood ran with apathy. Jacob studied, observed the precision with which it pooled at the edge of the countertop, and then spilled in faultless, magnificent drops to the kitchen floor.

There it mingled.

Gelled.

Played well with others.

Jacob glanced at the Mickey Mouse clock hanging above the pantry door; about thirty more seconds and it would be finished.

**NEIGHBOR #1** Oh! *I* remember *him*! We never really talked much; he was younger than me. My mom works with his dad downtown at the IDS Tower. Last Christmas he came with his parents to our party. He was so weird! After dinner, we were all sitting in the living room by the Christmas tree, and he started freaking me out, talking about how if it weren't for the Christmas tree, we probably would have lost the Civil War, or something like that . . . [voice trailing off]

*Unsuspecting German mercenaries made the mistake of taking the night off to celebrate Christmas. They stood around a candlelit evergreen tree. After sneaking silently across the Delaware River, George Washington was able to ambush them. It was the greatest sneak attack in our countries' history.*

**MOM** Son, that's . . . fascinating! [aside] Where *does* he learn this stuff?

Jacob could tell by the familiar mocking tone and the sideways, condescending glare that his mom was giving him clandestine shit. Shit by stealth. For his heart only.

*The Puritans didn't allow the use of Christmas trees in New England. In Boston, as late as 1870, kids had to go to school on Christmas Day.*

Jacob walked home.

**REVEREND** Young Jacob always had a smile on his face. He'd greet me after each service and smile his big, toothy smile! I'll never forget that smile! So bright! God love it!

*Christianity is the largest religion. Its follower's account for thirty-two percent of the world's population. In the United States alone, eighty-seven percent of the population belongs to one of four major Christian denominations: fifty-eight percent are Protestants, twenty-seven percent are Roman Catholics, one percent is Mormon, and one percent is Eastern Orthodox. Over half of the population of the United States claims that religion is very important to them, and approximately forty percent of Americans attend a religious service at least once a week. By comparison, less than three percent of the people in Japan and Russia attend religious services regularly. Islam, which is currently the world's fastest growing religion, accounts for seventeen percent of the world's population.*

They all said Jacob had ants in his pants. He couldn't sit still for more than fifteen minutes. Pastor Rodriguez sat across from him and offered to buy him another Cherry Coke.

**RODRIGUEZ** That music is bad for you, Jacob. It will lead you away from Jesus, away from the cross, away from the righteousness that God requires! You don't *want* to burn in hell, do you?!

Jacob threw up.

*The first book in the Oz series by L. Frank Baum was released in 1900. It went by four other names, The Emerald City, From Kansas to Fairyland, The Fairyland of Oz, and The Land of Oz, before being published as The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. Mr. Baum went on to write thirteen more books about Oz before his death in 1920. The name Oz came from a label on the bottom drawer of a two-drawer filing cabinet, reserved for documents between the letters O and Z. The Beverly Hillbillies' Buddy Ebsen was the*

*original Tin Man. Jack Haley later replaced him after his lungs filled with the aluminum powder used in the makeup, nearly killing him.*

**TEACHER** Jacob was such a *bright* boy! He seemed to know *so* much about *so* many things. I used to wonder if he spent too much time in the library; then he'd always impress me with some new thing he'd learned. It's such a shame!

The look has started getting old. Jacob thinks he's become quite adept at ignoring her but his rage betrays him. It wells up like a zit and then lies there, silent and smelly, just beneath the surface. Surge. Suppress. GO! STOP! It's like watching someone drive a stick shift for the first time. Lurch. Stall. SqueEEal! BraAAakes! All in a space of twenty-five yards. Half a block if you're lucky. Today, *finally*, Jacob figures it out. There'll be no stopping now.

*During its juvenile phase, it's impossible for a plant to flower. The juvenile phase in trees can last anywhere from five to twenty years. The Century Plant stays in juvenile phase for between fifteen to thirty years, then each bloom flowers once and dies.*

**NEIGHBOR #2** He was staying with us once when Bob and Sally went out of town for the weekend. We spent that Sunday afternoon watching the game. I've never forgotten it was the Pack playing because Jacob went on and on and on . . . [voice trailing off]

*The Green Bay Packers were started by Curly Lambeau and George Calhoun in 1919. In need of a sponsor to underwrite equipment costs, and provide them with a place to play, they convinced Curly's employer, the Indian Packing Company, to take them on as a "company project." The team of energetic locals became known as the Packers, and the name stuck. In their first season, the Packers won ten straight games before being beaten by another company-sponsored team from Beloit, Michigan. Never a vain man, Vince Lombardi was the only Packer coach who ever refused to pose with his players for the official team photo.*

**NEIGHBOR #2** I finally looked at him and said, 'Would you please shut up?! I'm trying to watch the game.' Besides, the Vikings were losing and I was in a pissy mood.

Jacob missed the bus as he sat and waited for her. The knife sat on the countertop. She threw it a hurried glance as she made her way to the altar, a glistening new Bunn automatic coffee maker. Such expediency! The mug shattered as she collapsed on the counter. With each blow, she deflated a little more. Blood bubbled, and then popped. As he stepped away, she slid

to the floor and slumped onto her pin cushioned back, staring at him with a blankness only the dead can attain. The look has left the building.

*Vlad III Dracula was the real-life inspiration for the character of Dracula in the novel by Bram Stoker. Vlad was the Prince of Wallachia, what is today called Romania. A ruthless son of a ruthless father, young Vlad's favorite method of punishing his subjects was to impale them on stakes. He once ordered the impalement of twenty thousand Turkish prisoners in a macabre spectacle known throughout history as "the Forest of the Impaled." His nickname was "Vlad the Impaler."*

Why did I do it? Why did I do it. You wouldn't believe me if I told you why I did it. You'll just laugh at me like everyone else. Or tell me I'm insane. Insane? I can live with *that*; it's the laughing I can't handle. All my life I've been laughed at. No one takes me seriously.

That was Sarah's problem. I tried really hard to be normal around her. I caught up with her while out on a walk once, right after she got her new terrier, Chloe. We were actually having a really cool chat. I was as surprised as she was! We kept giving each other that look, the one that says, 'Is this really happening?' She told me about how she wanted to be a dancer after high school and maybe earn a way to Julliard in New York. I'd seen her dance as Ariel in *Footloose*. Did you know that *Footloose* was made into a Broadway musical? Anyway, Sarah was really good.

I couldn't help myself. I reached out and tried to take her hand. She turned and gave me that *other* look, the one that screams, "Are you crazy?!" Then she took off running. I called her a few times after that but never got a chance to talk to her. Her dad threatened to notify the police if I ever called again, so I quit. I'd see her at school, laughing into her locker, surrounded by her beautiful friends. Or I'd notice her walking Chloe around the neighborhood.

I really don't want to talk about her anymore. Could you please leave me alone?

**SARAH** Jacob sat in the front row for all six performances of *Footloose*. He'd stand and cheer after nearly every song. It was so embarrassing! On the last night, he sat a rose on the edge of the stage. I reached down to pick it up and he touched me. His hand was so warm. After the last curtain, we all stood around the front of the gymnasium talking with our friends and teachers and family members, and then a bunch of us decided to go out to *Charlie's* for pizza. I noticed him standing nearby and on a whim asked him to come with. He smiled real big and asked if I would ride with him. I couldn't believe my parents actually encouraged me to go with him! 'He's such a nice boy!'

*The word "Pizza" comes from the word pizziare, which means "to pluck" or "to pinch." The earliest usage of the word dates back to around 1000 B.C., used by people when they pulled a hot pie from an oven. On average, Americans eat the equivalent of 100 acres of pizza each day. That's roughly 350 slices of pizza per second. The largest pizza ever made measured 140 feet in diameter and was eaten by 30,000 hungry spectators. According to Indiana historian, and pizza connoisseur, Gaither Stephens, there are thirteen Pizza King restaurants in and around the little college town of Muncie, Indiana, population 60,000, proving there's more than corn in Indiana.*

I should be dead. What the fuck is happening!!!

**ANCHOR** [detached] Police were called to the scene of a violent stabbing in suburban White Bear Lake early today. With more on this story, here's KARE 11's Nick Miller.

**MILLER** [aside, with grand embellishment] Four years I've been covering this kind of shit and . . . *honestly* . . . I've never seen anything, *anyone*, that fucked up!

I did all that research for nothing! What a waste of precious valuable time! I wonder what I did wrong?!

Jacob struggled to free his good arm but the restraints held fast. Around him, gloved and masked EMT attendants worked carefully to stop the blood that trickled from the laceration in his right wrist. While reaching for more gauze, one of them leaned close to Jacob's ear and said, "Ya shoulda dug deeper, ya stupid fuck!" Then he laughed. Chuckled actually, a private laugh, an inside joke.

Jacob threw up.

*Ninety-seven percent of the water on planet earth is salt water. The "zip" in zip code is an acronym for Zone Improvement Plan. The first football game associated with the Rose Parade ended just after the third quarter when the Stanford University team walked off the field and quit, losing to the University of Michigan 49-0. The golden dart frog is so poisonous . . .*

[fade to black]

## Celestial Electrocutation

A solitary tea party,  
Scorched novel of matches  
Halo your electric hair  
That ties  
Ben Franklin's kite  
To the boomerang moon:  
Your lair of saintly rain

You invoke the sacred brigade—  
Raking your electrocuted faith  
In retort of a mute winter  
To find a snowwoman  
Buried in your breath:  
Birthing your suicide.

You discard in the heavens  
Along with Thor's enigmatic  
Whip of light  
To cavort  
On the electric tight rope  
A crown of quasars  
Vibrate your mooneye:  
Celestial, shock therapy.

Party of charged martyrs  
Thieve your book of ignited  
Fireflies.  
A belief in heavenly suicide  
Castrates your silver cord:  
The electrocution of your birth.

## Crazy Tastes like Milk and Tuna<sup>1</sup>

“Searing . . . *Girl, Interrupted* captures an exquisite range of self-awareness between madness and insight.” – The Boston Globe

I looked around the room to see nothing but darkness. The lights were off, the linen curtains, normally open to let the sunshine in, were tightly drawn. Supper had not been fixed and the house remained messy from the previous week’s events.

She lay quietly amidst our feather pillows. Her head was tucked neatly between her legs and her hands and feet were gently curled inward. All of her fortitude protected, nothing showing. I moved in closer to see if she was breathing and I could hear the soft, faint, hiss of her breath in and out. Her chest, decorated with creamy small mounds, rose and fell with a methodic purr. Her black velvety sweatshirt and pants erased her flesh into the abyss of darkness. It was as if her skin, pale and translucent before, had turned black. I wondered what brought forth her sudden depression, or what seemed like depression. It had been years since I had seen her curled in a ball; it had been years since the episode.

After I fixed myself something to eat, a measly piece of white toast and left over beef from days earlier, I decided to change my clothes and retire to the den. I took off my suit and placed it next to her dazzling church dresses. I put my tie on the rack. And my shoes—I put them back in their box for safe keeping.

The minutes ticked by, until it was 10:00, and I could stay awake no longer. I crawled in bed with trepidation. My body next to hers seemed so foreign. Her fur—or rather, her clothes shocked me. I was used to her sleeping naked. Only the dead of winter warranted flannel nightgowns. But here, in the heat of July, she slept fully clothed. I pulled the covers around her and over me. She murmured an inaudible sound.

“I’m home,” I said.

She did not respond, but moved in close to my shoulder and began nudging me lightly with her head. I saw her face, angelic and childlike, deep in sleep. Deep in something and that something wasn’t me.

I heard a rustle in the night. I gently brushed my hand across the bed to feel if she was still next to me. My hand touched only her nothingness and a cold sheet. I padded out to the kitchen where the light caught my eye. In the illumination, I could see the glass bottle, shattered on the floor. Milk ran from the broken container forming a puddle around her. She sat, on all fours, lapping it up.

*You know milk is a good thing for restlessness. Even if it isn’t warm, it calms the nerves. I seem to be a bit hungry too. I think a snack would be nice. A snack, a snack, a snack would be nice. How about some tuna? Where is the tuna? Can I reach it? I think it is over here. Oh yes, here it is. The tuna, delicious tuna. Then some more milk. Milk and tuna. I like it. Crazy tastes like milk and tuna on a warm summer night in the dark of the city kitchen.*

I decided I had better call our friend, Doctor A, who had been in the business of “crazy” for two decades. He would surely know what to do or what to give her. Maybe some Valium for her nerves.

“She has turned into a cat,” I said to him.

“You must be mistaken. Have you been working too much? Are you hallucinating?”

“No I am fine. It is she—she is the problem. I mean...well, she has the problem. She has turned into a black cat. Don’t you remember a few years back when she had the first episode?”

“Oh yes, how could I forget? She has always been rather frail hasn’t she? But nevertheless, I don’t think that I believe you. A cat? Couldn’t she do better than that?”

*I might like to take a nap again, but I am not too sleepy yet. I would like to look outside, but it’s so dark. Dark, dark, dark. Tuna isn’t dark and neither is milk. But I’m dark. Only my eyes show in the night, my yellow eyes. Dark and light. Man and woman. Cat and dog, mouse and rat, they are all the same. Mouse. Hmmm. I could eat a mouse I think or I could chase it and play with it like a ball. Run, run after the mouse. Eat the mouse, kill the mouse, love the mouse, save the mouse. Dead mice are fun to toss about. So are yarn balls. But the most fun is to sit in a window and peer about. I would like to look outside. Mice. Dead mice, dead fish.*

I had no more than hung up the phone with him, when she pranced past me with her tail swaying to and fro in the air. She tilted her head toward me and I could have sworn she winked. But cats don’t wink. Right?

“Come back here right now. Stop this madness.”

She continued on her merry way leaping to the window seat. She stared intently out the window into the darkness as if she could make sense of everything – as if everything was right in the world. All I could think was that I was watching my wife transform before my eyes like I was living in a nightmare.

*Trash cans are fun. Because sometimes they have lots of food in them and food is good very good food is good trash is fun and sometimes it is fun to purr and purring is good and food is good and trash is good and people are*

bad and food is good and fish is good and good and good and good and good and good and good

*I think that I mean I know that it would be fun to jump right out of this window and jump right on down to the bottom of the street and run running run fast away away fly away home to nothingness fly bottom down to the bottom  
come join me on my quest to find the stairway*

I heard knocking and I jolted out of bed. My heart hiccupped as I hoped for my friend's arrival.

*I hear a knock at the door a knocking knock knock knock knock I wonder who it is. The milk man, the baker, the candlestick maker Knocking I hear knocking Oh I hear buzz zzzzzzzzzzz ing too Hehehehe I hear buzzing like a bee Meow Bzzzzzz Ha ah ha ah*

I opened the door to find Dr. A.

"I am so glad you could come. I really am worried."

He put his hand on my shoulder and looked at me over his baby-boomer-half glasses he wore for reading. "Surely everything is fine."

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" I asked, knowing full well he wouldn't indulge, especially given that he only drank green tea.

"If things are as bad as you say, maybe we should focus on the matter at hand."

"You are right, Doc."

"So, friend, where is she?"

*where am I come and find me where am I you see me I gone and I hiding  
la da di da day hey knock knock at the door oh you a bore you knocking like a whore hee hee hee ee hee where am I hide and seek is a great game to play when you are just a little child it makes you feel so alive hee hee hee la da di da da gleefully I practice about past those groveling men you can't see me I not gone*

"I think she is in the bedroom. I am not sure."

I walked him toward the master bedroom and she was nowhere to be found. I had been keeping a watchful eye until I fell asleep, that is.

"Well I don't see her anywhere. Despite her previous episode with mental instability, I am beginning to wonder if maybe you are the problem," he said.

"No... no you are terribly mistaken. You have always trusted me before. I am telling you the truth," I pleaded.

"I don't have time for this, call me if you find her. And maybe you and your wife should think about scheduling an appointment with me. We

could call it "marriage counseling." He turned and I watched his expensive leather shoes walk down the hall.

The floor seemed comforting. I fell to my knees.

"I know you are here. Come out, come out wherever you are. Do you want a bit of tuna? Or some milk? Come on little kitty. Come to daddy. Here kitty kitty kitty."

After a conversation with friends, I realized that cats are actually lactose intolerant. What a surprise! Yet another example of a cultural fallacy that society has led us to believe. So, if your cat is lactose intolerant, vegetarian, or vegan, please feel free to insert: Crazy Tastes Like Tofu and Water...



Amy Kline



## Surrealism at a Picnic

Day 1: Today I hid my head. I am so drunk. I got beat by a band of roving minstrels. It was senseless. I was beaten with accordions and trombones. Later I found a pennywhistle in my ... well it was not pleasant.

Day 5: I have been living on the streets for five days now. I think that this is what is meant by the statement "I fought the law and the law won." I am eating a cereal bar that I found. It tastes like dog pee.

Day 6: Today I met Pat Sajack. I consider him god. He showed me pictures of his girlfriend; I think that it was really a man. I said my morning prayers to a McDonald's cup I found in the trash. I put 5 dollars in the cup and got 5 dollars back. Those who give to the cup receive from the cup. I think that Pat was happy. I have found a companion who I think will accompany me on my mission. But he threw rocks at me. I think that Pat was displeased by his karma.

Day 7: Last night I got in a car with Pat Sajak. He gave me a piece of liver on a cracker. I passed out and when I came to I was sleeping in a dumpster. Just like grandma always said, "Rocks are not like doors. This brick is a radio." I remember Pat Satjak. His radiant face is the visage of a cranked up border collie. I will call today day 45 because I never learned to count.

Day 26: I think that this is the right number. I never learned to count.

Day 103: I saw a monkey fly bumble puppy beer was a cat house yum yum! Slay me with a blade of grass.

Day 9931: What did Pat Satjack give me? I miss prison; my friend sent me a letter. Not in a bottle. It was on a bathroom wall. It said "rob was here" Then it said, "Rod is an ass" under it. Yeah he was.

Day 50: My aspirations are revealed today. I will conquer the world. Discloding the llama nations. They signed a treaty with me back in 1973. I miss my immortal soul. Perhaps they will sell it back to me some day. A car hit a lamppost as I walked by. This is the sign that I was waiting for. Thank you for the providence Drew Carey and Diane Sawyer. I got in the car and when the cop came and arrested me, I said thank you officer for when you sacrifice me I will arise in glory. I went to the asylum but they let me go. No ascendancy for me today.

Day 75: Another day, another world to conquer. I built my alter to Pat Sajak. It was really a donut but a bird came and ate it. I met a man of Chinese dissent and with him a small dog walked. I said to the man "you know this is a lot like bowling. The dog is like a tree and the pins are moving." He just looked at me. Yeah, well I hope they get a divorce. I started building a rocket. So far I have a hubcap, string, and a pinwheel. Pat Sajack be blessed.

Day R14: Shake me up well before I ride a Popsicle doorpost one-armed neon light Jesus. You break you leg, I buy a catfish side arm, musical pop feels bubble gum pie dream.

Day 51: I received a message from the llama nation. Not a singing llama gram Oh no friend. It was from the clouds my suspicions were confirmed when I saw a red truck I saw the man with the dog. I said you should be ashamed this dog was used for illicit gain. I said I would not have him living on my street; he must live in a tree. The llamas have mercy on his soul. The llamas sent a message today soon I will conquer the world. My sacrifice is eminent and when I die my body will return to my soul, which resides with the llama nations in a worn out distributor hooked to an ignition coil. This is similar to a gene lamp.



Amy Kline

Chorus

I could have done better than  
 getting stuck under E 52 street  
 on a summer day.  
 My shirt sweat-stuck to the iron  
 fire escape ladder, lapping up  
 cheap tokay, and digging the  
 words of past icons.  
 Their prayers haunt me through  
 the reverberations of the wrought  
 iron.  
 In the kitchen Alice is frying up  
 some potatoes and onions.  
 Their smell mixed with the smell of  
 the wine makes my stomach  
 gorro gorro.  
 I watch the old Chinese produce  
 vendor as he buys flowers  
 for his wife.  
 They're lilies  
 and their color matches the pages of my old book.



Carol Kapp

Untitled<sup>1</sup>

i'm the target of your extortion game, and though i am bitter, there's nothing  
 like a sour note from a trumpet grapefruit to make a morning sparkle  
 do you turn your money from one hand to another? or does it change into  
 thigh slapping, hundreds of thunders clapping, hearts of fun?  
 nah, you look like you're eating yourself alive, and getting FAT not sassy  
 your home, your rent, your truck, and ever growing storage areas fill with  
 things to make your life more fulfilled, easier, cleaner, more more more  
 toys which strangle and choke you  
 numerous dolls that all look the same  
 the homeless would choose a good cardboard box and a doobie rather than  
 your order of sterilized and nail polished saints  
 blisters are not sold in the boutique  
 and keeping your feet clean will not shorten the distance between you and  
 other people  
 a mile long bridge is jammed into a tunnel under a large river, and  
 skateboarders give it brazen swerves  
 their best shot cant be gathered by the invisible cobblestone woven by your  
 sleeping now you are always whining that you're broke... is your Mercedes  
 auto a white tombstone? your four-wheel drive van big enough for 3, your  
 husband and his son limp under your burden even in the car and van  
 poverty rages in the steaks you eat  
 lying spikes your stories

your broad brimmed hat reminds one of Easter, but your flat mouth lacks the  
 joy of the resurrection  
 you announce that your husband is mentally disabled  
 : he's weak because you boss him  
 i suggest you need exercise, your flabby legs look like oatmeal and you are  
 getting varicose veins  
 you threatened me " ill throw you up against a wall and say you did it!"  
 you take my mirror and shelf, i ask if you want me and you bellow like an  
 awful bag of wind that i talked of your \_\_\_\_.  
 i never talked of your private one, the least messy.  
 boys have pickles and girls have cookies

: you got flab that could stuff several couches  
 it would be such wacko highest cool runnings if you joined the parade, the  
 charade, the masquerade, the promenade  
 you're not old, but slightly drunk on vinegar jealousy  
 you've got to let go and show off your shark with false teeth

: tidy communication workshops wont help  
you walk in fear ready then you go up on tiptoes because a blade of grass  
may reach up and goose you  
tiptoeing in pumps that make you look like a hippopotamus chasing a  
motorboat  
don't worry about the grass, you wont get such an attractive offer as long as  
white bread holds the patent

enough of you, time for some random skeet's....  
now we're doing it, moving in the right direction  
now we're doing it, straight on to perfection now we're doing it just like we  
oughta, now we're doing it, moving straight on forward  
i put dimes in my darlings slot and the time lever goes ba rah ring  
she and me go shopping and come out with sneaky gifts to smooth anything  
odd  
but you  
better dogs avoid your fire hydrant...

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Rebecca Robinson submitted this poem, which was written by a homeless man in San Francisco. He was riding a bus, walking up and down the aisle, reading his poetry and offering it for sale. It was written on scraps of paper, bound together with shoestrings and wire, and he was charging whatever people were willing to pay. All spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors were present in the original copy, Arts Group and Confluence classifies them as intentional errors and are simply copied here as perhaps the original intent of the author.



Amy Kline

## Po-ett-errorism

*Stick beans in your nose and you cain't smell honey*  
Thomas McGrath

I.

Brahms beat me over the head with a violin,  
violin, viola, violence  
step by step fall out of the depravity of conceptual suggestion  
locale, end cliché, part and split,  
trouble *do* represent your life,  
answer the panicky ask gravity for a lift.

II.

somehow Co-Op seemed cool  
the place where all the hipsters hang their coats,  
buy actual Turkish coffee, Brazilian mangoes, Arkansas rice,  
by the bag full.  
I don't go to a Co-Op Co-Op where I come from means grain elevator,  
ammonia fertilizer, hog pens, Indiana corn,  
by the fifty pound bag full.  
I don't go to a Co-Op, I go to *Wal-Mart*,  
and buy *Folgers* instant crystals,  
buy the plastic jar full.

III.

don't stash the mermaids.

IV.

steady beat bring in bathroom bear sound,  
like talkin' about cutesy Anacin,  
belong to air fabric shuttle shift chronology,  
block three cars.

V.

guilt neighbors  
tend to expect 13 years to need business tears that strong,

strange to cleanse it must be about her,  
that kind of eleven is trying to connect to suicide,  
get rid of the dad,  
go for Scottish high and wipe the floor with your consciousness.

option 2:

prop the papa and complicate the man,  
the feather.

VI.

very different beast internal for a mass of woman,  
witness recent country for she country between us acts as witness,  
who says I see you work through pain,  
comfort to mass other human beings in the house,  
don't domesticate your politics,  
connect to them in some regard.

VII.

we'd follow piranha footpaths,  
slowly, looking for signs or ambush  
for tufts of goat hair, discarded horns  
sometimes I would find an eyelid,  
pasted to a banana tree.

VIII.

I write poems because I can't write or speak in,  
complete sentences.

IX.

how do you keep the car in drive?  
strip and go nowhere, do it!  
god send and hit me strongly, meditate and go to a seed,  
write and worry about dinning better, that pulling a man here,  
so sit there and include all the children, their powers of thirdly imagination  
lift the structure and primordial put in the pot,  
don't let it simmer, burn it black  
take the residue left after you scrape it,  
don't wash it in soapy water, scrape it with a dinner knife,  
one with small teeth^^  
this is really happening.

my drawers are closed to through traffic.

X.

they argued over whose town was smaller,  
and started each sentence with,  
"I am the American dream."

XI.

I had sex with your dream last night,  
your reflection bouncing down the road,  
blown into a cornstalk stumped field, into tree branches  
stuck there  
rode the bounce, inflecting feels,  
hanging over me.

XII.

why are you molesting my lemon?

XIII.

the look on her face says bitch, says,  
"yes, I'm a bitch I'm better than you  
look at my tightly curled, pulled back brown black hair  
I wear it the same way every day, sometimes  
the headband's a different color.  
I laughed when the professor told me to recycle my can."

XIV.

he crushed my paper turkey and stole the fruit punch,  
the popcorn balls ended up in his pockets,  
he always spoke of hubcaps  
rode noise into his rut and called to ginger bread man  
breathless, he classed work and sat in hot chocolate,  
pretending he was a marshmallow  
he's concerned with Rita's restricting organic form,  
he doesn't know why she's so natural.

XV.

have you listened to Mozart's Sinfonia concertante for Violin,  
Viola and Orchestra in E flat major, k. 364,

accompanied by leaf blower in A sharp?  
It really sucks.



Molly Kessler



Amy Kline

### Division of a Stressful Impression

I don't know if a step out my rental door  
is a contribution or disconnection to reality—  
a cultural mirage or inner-factual sediment.  
It may be an energetic spark because I get a jolt  
when I remember I left the damn bolt unlocked.  
Why do I walk to my car when a bus ride is twenty-five cents?  
I don't have Channel Thirty-Three News posted  
on my dashboard, but my eyes sense their billboard  
through the fresh summer rain as I intuit friendship  
before a game of tennis. This is why I see commercial  
NEON green on their sign, but I'm really seeking a tennis partner  
to share the aroma of fresh Wilson Matchpoints. And so a cool  
perfume blows through the vents and I notice "Chi Omega"  
on a Toyota Camry's window in front of me.  
The connection is only in my mind, having once shared  
breathalyzer tests, as the golden Camry mixed with  
exotic red letters could tell me that if I had participated  
in the election results at my house,  
I could have elected myself as president,  
and realized we all forsake ourselves for each other  
when it is all work and no play,

for Christ's sakes.

For cryin' out loud,

would we know humanity if it wasn't suffering?  
The Thirty-Three Newsroom can't get through to me  
that if I had voted in the community election today,  
we would have a leader promoting that what is best for me  
would be to start walking to work and look at the green ivy  
growing up to swallow billboards and beautify a counseling office  
where one day I will welcome that leader who was not  
on the left side of the road  
where other drivers abuse the curve and don't ride it,  
nor on the right side of the road  
that had a few cars in reverse gear,  
scraping bumpers, bicyclists passing by.  
The optimal candidate is bent over with black asphalt  
on his hands and face, orange and yellow flack jacket on,  
paving a smooth ride without boundary lanes.  
We can roll down a window discussion, like a drive-thru  
of representatives home-style government

between a psychological Camry driver  
and the "me that I put asunder" when I don't need to,  
because the outer political world already excels at  
infiltration.



Curt Swihart



Amy Kline

## Square Sand

I.

The city park sparkles  
like sand in the sidewalk.  
Cigarette smoke spins  
from a charcoaled finger,  
a machine manufacturing  
waves, currents,  
wind.

II.

She pays rent with white sand.  
She can't give them to the woman at the desk,  
she refuses to take them.  
She shows the tenant back through the office where  
she has to use tape and tape the sand to paper, it has squares.  
She must tape the sand in the proper squares.

III.

I keep them all,  
the receipts,  
or I would forget  
where I've been,  
what I've bought.  
I staple,  
tape them into a book,  
history written in squares.  
The date is smudged  
into a fingerprint.

Walking Through the Blood of Christ

If there is man                called Jesus  
     whose hands are nail scarred    from Roman Soldier's  
     hammer,  
 if there is serpent    whose name  
     is Satan,  
 if there is mound    where trees crossed,  
                                      my God  
 will remember me when new earth swallows.

If there is mustard seed  
     that holds thousand  
     beadier and beadier blood cells    of searching  
     human,  
 if there is fig tree    whose pruned limb multiply  
     the temple of limb,

if there is tongue  
     like double edged sword    which lops off  
 government's  
     ear, lip, cheek    to make sand sift, filter  
     the beggar's eye,  
     I can survive.

If there is swastika  
     and burn cross, and chain  
     thrown    at night to rip throat,  
     I will be

    coiling cobra upon                                heel, talon nailed in my  
 hand.

If there is tongue  
     that will speak towards its master with sorrow,  
     weeds    shall fall from pruned gold root  
     even through times battled land    where rabbi  
     pray for manna  
     to feed chosen    and blind  
     senses. And

if there is city  
     in Israel where blood  
     spurts out

like oil wells    not tapped, and turban and veil

soil their own loved land  
with red water of brother,

Christ

will be bread    to break  
 when all food has spoilt;  
 will be bread    to break  
 when lion snarls its teeth to its paw on a rock;  
 will be bread    to break  
 when madness . . . . After,  
                                      I'll know

                                     my name is printed  
 in book    similar to word of Jesus.



Elaine Collingsworth

## A Window without a House

A thundering, staticky voice yanked me out of sleep, "Next stop, Philadelphia! Thirty minutes!" I sat up and stretched out my awkwardly positioned body. If only the seats didn't have that lump in the middle. The seventeen-hour train ride (which was supposed to be fifteen) was finally coming to an end. Reminded of the cold, I quickly threw my jacket over me again. Trains are always overheated in the winter and freezing in the summer. I looked out the large window to my right and thought I saw a sad-looking, half-headed creature, but, in fact, it was just my tired reflection, my hair flattened from sleeping on one side. As I kneaded my hair back into place, the mountain-wall receded, revealing the radiant skyline of Philadelphia. Leaning my elbow on the armrest, I watched as we traveled closer and closer. This always brought a smile to my face.

I had made this trip countless times, visiting from one parent to the other, and this was my favorite direction. This time, my best friend Kevin was picking me up at the train station. We had both been giddy on the phone when I told him I was finally coming down. We hadn't seen each other for almost a year. The warm feeling faded eventually, though, as I passed through the outer part of town. The rundown houses and dilapidated apartments flashed between the trees outside my window and I couldn't help but feel a strong sense of pity.

The speaker announced that it was my stop, so I gathered my bloated bags together and stood in line in the aisle. By only a miracle did I fit everything into these bags; one medium-sized, one 'half-my-size,' and my purse. As I stood there, I wondered if security would be checking me out, considering I could fit a body in this bag, or at least a small child. Thank God, I wouldn't have to lug these long.

As I stepped off the train and greeted the warm night air, the good feeling returned to me. I had just moved to Indiana that year and it felt good to be home again. I made my way to Gate Nine, suffering and thawing under the heavy burdens. As I stepped onto the escalator, I knew I would see Kevin standing at the top, waiting for me. I tried to remember his face as I traveled lazily upward. His head was shaved and he always wore t-shirts, boots, and suspenders. He had a stocky, muscular build and, on top of that, he always looked angry and was covered in tattoos. That is, until he smiled, revealing little baby teeth. Then he looked like a happy little kid who liked to draw on himself, which would explain why he didn't like to smile in pictures. This characteristic I never failed to enjoy teasing him about.

I reached the top and at first didn't see him there. I slowly made my way to the rows of slippery, wooden pews. It was an enormous old train station with high, decorated ceilings and in the center stood a twenty-foot,

pale statue of a man on a rearing horse. Some Civil War hero, I supposed. Every sound echoed in the lofty room, especially the sign referencing delays, arrivals and departures. Just then, the board's clicking tabs spun loudly for at least thirty seconds and all heads turned to see the outcome. "Number 43 On Time"; that was me. Kevin, on the other hand, was not. I sat with my eyes on the door for thirty minutes. No Kevin. I looked at the clock again. An hour had passed and he still hadn't shown up. I remembered some confusion on the phone about which station it was and wondered if this whole time he was at the wrong one. Well, I had sat there long enough. I had to do something. I dragged the body bags over to the main desk. Seated in the middle of a mess of papers was a thirty-something-year-old black woman with her hair tucked under her uniform hat. As I walked up, her head was down, absorbed in reading something I couldn't see.

"Hey, can you tell me where the other station is?"

Without looking up she rattled off a jumble of streets unintelligibly, (in what sounded like one long sigh) then flipped a page. When she didn't hear an 'Alright' or 'Gottcha' she shot a glance upward, then reached over and snatched a folded paper.

"You wanna go out those doors. Here, you're gonna need this," she stated and handed me a small, black and white map.

"Thanks," I said, uncertainly, and made my way to the opposite doors. The wide doors stood open and the warm air flowed in from dimly lit streets.

It was a beautiful night with a soothing temperature and I would apparently get to enjoy it on my long walk through the unknown. The thought occurred to me that any smart adventurer would carry some kind of weapon on their quest. I plopped my bags down in front of the doors and began skimming through them. I came up with a razor and a pair of tweezers. Not exactly storybook material, but the best I could do. I didn't like the thought of walking through Philly at one o'clock in the morning by myself, but hey, I could always pluck their eyes out and scalp them if it came down to it.

I positioned my bags in the most comfortable way possible and placed the map on top of the bag in front. The little star said 'You are here.'

"Well, that helps," I said, sarcastically, to myself. I ran my finger down the streets to the smaller train station. It looked simple enough. As I began walking down the streets, memories of trips to town came streaming back. They were always at night. I recognized a building or two but nothing that could actually help me orient myself to where I was. I passed bookstores, adult stores, a Seven-Eleven, towering brick buildings and a strange geometrical art figure that looked vaguely familiar. I looked down at my map, turning it as I swung around the corner, when I almost walked right into a group of sleeping bodies.

I sidestepped them just in time and crossed the street so as not to disturb them. They were clustered together on the sidewalk, wrapped in their



jackets like life-size burritos. I couldn't help but look. Down the street I could see another group under an overhang. As I got closer, I could hear someone, a man it sounded like, snoring. They littered every street. I felt like an unwelcome guest at a private, depressing sleepover, but they paid no attention to me as I made my way through the slumbering atmosphere. Often, I would see a homeless person or two when I was in town, but I had never seen groups of people occupying the sidewalks like this before, or since. I didn't want to look at them because it made me feel guilty carrying these bags full of things they were forced to live without—and they knew, like every one else, I wouldn't share.

After a few blocks, I breathed a sigh of relief. I looked back down at my map and I was to make a right at this street. As I turned, I was confronted with a dead end. There was some kind of construction going on and no way through between these two buildings. I grunted and turned around. Now what? I turned the map upside down and started walking. I had no choice now but to go halfway back the way I came so I could make a u-turn. I passed another group of homeless people, but was less affected due to my increasing annoyance. As I came close to where I had been before, I saw the large digital clock that told me it was two in the morning. I wondered if Kevin was worried. Was he mad? I hoped he didn't have the same brilliant idea and was making his way to the station I just came from, which would make this whole adventure of mine pointless. I knew, though, once we met up we would just laugh about the whole thing. I couldn't wait until the ride home where we would recap all that had happened these past few months. I would tell him how I hated Indiana, how I almost stepped on a homeless guy, and more than anything how I was glad to not be walking around completely lost at two a.m. with bags weighing as much as my younger sister. Not that I would ever admit to being lost.

Just then, farther down the street, I caught a glimpse of the station's glass windows on the corner. I quickened my pace and would have run had it not been for the bags. I dropped them with a loud thud and began to float upwards. Pressing my hands against the glass, I tried to see Kevin. I remembered when I was catching a train out of this station once; I had looked up and wondered if people could look down at us. Now I knew. But there was no one to look down on. I couldn't see Kevin anywhere, or anyone else for that matter. The station was completely deserted! I banged on the glass more out of frustration than expecting anyone to hear me. I went over to pick up my bags and go in the door. It didn't budge. My heart sank.

Just seconds later, I heard voices coming around the corner and, feeling desperate, didn't think twice about asking for help. It was a group of teenagers. I picked out the girl on the end.

"Excuse me, is there any other way in here? These doors are locked. Are they closed?" This last question I asked, dreading the answer.

"Nah, they're closed." My heart sank lower.

"Is there any other train station around here?" I was grasping at anything now, hoping for a more uplifting response.

"Not that I know of. Sorry." I nodded my head. I sat down next to my bags. The last thing I wanted to do was lug these things around again.

As I sat, exhausted and not knowing what I was supposed to do, and now really wondering where Kevin was, I remembered passing a pay phone a couple of blocks back. It made me feel better having some form of an answer to this growing problem, so I picked up my bags and walked back. It felt like they had doubled in size. I let them fall off my arm and dug for change. I called Kevin's house. No answer. I put the change back in and dialed another friend whose number I could still remember. No answer. Finally, I broke down and called my father. I hadn't wanted to worry him or wake him up, but most of all I didn't want to hear him say 'I told you so.' No answer! This time I slammed the phone down hard. But once wasn't enough. I scooped up the phone and beat it against the receiver a couple of times. No answer. I plopped down on my bags.

Down farther across the street, someone groaned and turned over. There was another sleeping cluster on this street that I hadn't noticed until now. Apparently, the phone mugging had awakened him. I leaned against the phone pole and attempted to form a plan. What else could I do? I had exhausted all of my options. The reality that I was alone and stranded set in. When I realized that there was nothing I could do at the moment, I actually felt better. I was free from all demands at that time. The only thing I could do was walk back to the train station, but I had to rest first. If he was waiting at the station, he would just have to understand (which I'm sure he would have), because I wasn't going anywhere.

With that decision came a sense of relief. I took out a cigarette and my attention turned to the homeless man I had awakened down the street. I began to wonder what his first night must have felt like. Was it anything like this? Who did he try to call? How did he get here in the first place? Did he resent the rest of society for passing him by every day, every person absorbed in their own lives and crises? What would he think of me and my own little crisis? I would eventually get back home and be rescued. Where could he go? It probably wasn't until all money and resources had run out that the reality of his situation and feeling of abandonment or hopelessness struck home.

As I was finishing my cigarette, a tall, slender figure turned the corner and made its way up the street. Without thinking, I put my hand on the tweezers in my pocket. As the person drew closer, I was able to make out that it was a young, black male, probably about my age, wearing a book bag. As he was about to pass by me he stopped.

"Are you okay?"

I looked up into a warm, concerned face. "Yeah, just stranded," I answered back with what must have been a pretty thin smile. "My friend was

supposed to pick me up at the station," I thumbed towards the long road back, "but, he never showed."

"Well, I'll walk back with you if you want and there's a phone in there you can use."

I shrugged my shoulders, "All right." I picked up my bags and we started talking. He asked where I was from and offered to hold a bag for me. I declined, considering I didn't know this person and he might feel the urge to walk off with it. As we talked, I found out his name was Sean and that he was homeless. It surprised me to hear this because he was dressed well and seemed so positive. His mother was a coke addict and had thrown him out for some reason. Talking to this warm-hearted person, I couldn't imagine her reason was worthy of disowning her only son.

He paused in front of the small Seven-Eleven. "Let's stop in here, I know this guy. He gives me water." We walked into the store and they waved to each other. "This is April. She's thirsty, too."

"Go ahead, you know you don't have to ask," the clerk said through a thick Middle Eastern accent. He had a hawk nose and olive skin. We went over to the soda machine and poured ourselves a cup of water, and then Sean went over to talk to him. The cashier asked him about how school was going for him, his grades, and his job search. His manner was detached, yet concerned. He had a stern expression on his face, which made him look like an angry bird. As they were talking, I slipped an M&M cookie in my bag. We thanked him and left the store.

As we were walking and feasting on our half-cookie and water I said, "This is great. I haven't eaten all day." He turned to me, "You don't have any money at all?" I shook my head, wondering why he was asking me this, considering he obviously didn't either. "Here take this," he said, handing me two dollars. I was stunned. He was offering me money. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around?

"No, I'm fine," I said. He insisted.

"It's okay, I have three dollars in my bank account."

"No, really," I tried to persuade, "you need it more than I do." I couldn't believe he would be willing to give me almost everything he had to accommodate me for a few hours when he needed this to survive day to day. Was he incredibly generous or naïve? In either case, he was nothing like how I envisioned the homeless man that I disturbed earlier to be. As the conversation went on, I wondered if I could have done the same. Would I be this helpful and selfless to someone who had everything they needed if I were in his position?

I was ungrateful and spoiled compared to him. That cashier had been kind to me, yet I had stolen merchandise right from under his big, bird nose. How often did teenagers I knew complain about their parents and petty concerns, and how many would offer help as freely as Sean? I had, up until now, measured my own maturity against my peers. This person who I had

pity on was pitying me. I began to question just how concerned I was about other people compared to how concerned I was about myself.

We reached the train station about two-thirty in the morning. Sean led me to a small office where I could use the phone. I called Kevin again and this time he answered in a groggy voice. I quickly learned he thought he was picking me up tomorrow.

"Well, it is tomorrow. You can come pick me up now." He said he would be there in an hour. I sat down next to Sean in the cushioned chair.

"I can stay until they kick me out," he said.

"All right," I said, "I'll get us some water." I walked over to the mini-McDonald's across the station and brought them back. Five minutes later, the lady working at the desk, the one who gave such good directions, walked up to the office. She poked her head in and said in a stern but (as I realized much later) regretful voice, 'You gotta go.' Then I recognized the same look that was in the cashier's eyes; it was a parental look.

Their attitude disgusted and outraged me at that moment. I gave her a hateful look when I felt that she treated him like a delinquent, when all he wanted was a place to sit. I realized later that she probably had to deal with a lot of similar people and, though she didn't enjoy it, the decision most likely wasn't hers. Her attitude, which I understand now, was one of restricted emotion because she could only help him so much. If he felt he could rely on her, or the Seven-Eleven cashier, or the homeless shelter workers, they would at one point have to let him down. They didn't want him to fall into laziness or self-pity or to give up. He was thrown into this situation, and though he wasn't an adult he had no choice but to grow up fast. If they babied him, he wouldn't become self-reliant, which is something I still haven't figured out.

At the time I pitied him, but he has most likely accomplished more in life than I have because he worked hard, living through an injustice without self-pity. At the time, he showed me a more raw view of society and made me realize what being independent truly meant. Independence wasn't thinking differently than my peers or being able to do whatever I wanted without the relentless 'criticism' of parents, police or teachers, it was taking care of myself responsibly. From that moment on, everyone I knew and met after that would seem greedy, self-preoccupied and coldly unaware when compared to my memory of him.

Sean nodded his head and turned to say goodbye. I didn't know what to say exactly, so I said, "Thank you for helping me. Good luck." He returned a hindered smile then turned to exit the office without protest. I watched uneasily as he made the long, slow walk across the station to face his unsheltered world.

## Catholic Baptism

Eventually, the sidewalk  
will turn into water,  
into the weight of these words  
pushing stones, gravel.

Calling a name,  
only a whisper of sand  
sinking in water,  
shifting the current.

A priest stands in the water  
with chapped hands clapped together.  
The feet drown in the river,  
where fish swim in place.

The water tickles  
the small hairs of the toe,  
The priest stirs his words  
with a rosary.

"It's too cold to bathe.  
A catholic ceremony of reflection  
will divide you  
into one."



Elaine Collingsworth

## The Barn

He moved his hand across the coarse splintered siding of the barn. From a distance it was a faded red. The bright, noonday sun illuminated its broad plane sides casting harsh shadows on the long unkempt grass. He could see that the paint had flaked off and faded. The grain of the wood scratched through the gaudy red to once again breathe the fresh summer air. He walked around the barn, stepping high through the weeds and dodging fallen slate tiles. He thought he knew what a barn looked like, but he had never been this close to one. It was more than red with white trim. He could see where boards were nailed to the beams, how the foundation was carefully flattened and where the cable wire from the lightning rod was grounded. The hinges on the door were black and pointed, nailed to the outside. Not like the houses *he* built, the hinges were always inside, hidden.

He had wandered from the worksite for a lunch break. The Pine Grove housing addition was his project. Just through the thin veil of tired trees behind him he could see where large mounds of bare dirt lay. Large bulldozers and yellow cranes moved slowly in the distance looming like giants over conquered land. He and his crew had just started framing the first string of houses on the east side. They had trucks full of fresh pine boards and boxes of brand new nails. Not at all like the barn. This barn said something else to him, something of history and character and mystery.

He grabbed the black handle and jerked on the door. It stuck a little and creaked as it swung out. The inside was dark. Small beams of light poked through the corners and cracks making visible the dust that glided past its rays. Its construction was not unlike that of his houses. He marveled at the large beams that spanned the length of the roof. It would cost too much to do something like that today. He could smell the trace of hay and found evidence of it scattered on the floor. He shuffled it with his feet as he moved.

He usually sits on the tailgate of his truck to eat lunch and make phone calls. Today he was drawn away from construction and into the thin veil of trees. He saw the barrier between simple life and the new suburban lifestyle dissolving. These last few trees stood guard around this red artifact, and without restriction they let him through. He remembered where he said he wanted to be at 27. Married, at least, with a couple of kids. He always envisioned living in a house that he built. Something tucked away in the country and hidden, but that dream seemed to be slipping away. He carried two cell phones with him at all times, one for work and one for personal use. They were small and silver with glowing green buttons. He lived out of his truck and only ate fast food, always racing to the next jobsite.

He stepped out of the barn and closed the door behind him. Leaning up against the side he sat down in the shade of the barns deep shadow. He

opened his paper bag and pulled out a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Biting into it he turned and looked up at the barn. He didn't know who built it. How many people did it take to nail each one of those heavy black slate tiles to the roof? It made him sad to know that this was the next spot the bulldozers would be. The barn was rundown and out of date; he knew it had to go. It did not fit into the new landscape of this place. He finished his sandwich. Getting up he walked back through the thin veil of trees nodding slightly at the old guards still standing watch over their red artifact.



**Elaine Collingsworth**

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**Dear Salvador Dali**

**Sarah Sandman**

The ladybugs swooped down around my face. Instantaneous hallucination. Damn, not again. Why is this happening? Blink. Blink. It's the small things that turn first. Bricks become fish become faces become ladybugs. My therapist says it's paranoia. If she only knew she had horns in her blond hair.

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**Chad and Me**

**Jamey DeKorsej**

He said, "It's Chad and I." Corrected again, interrupted again, all because of a stupid colloquialism. He wants to change the world. I just want to finish my sentence. Why must he attack my words? I smile and nod, he knows I could share his goal. I continue, "Chad and..."

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**Fatherhood**

**Becky Cler**

Twenty-one. This girl says I'm gonna be a daddy. My momma said, "Are you going to marry her?" My brother said, "Don't you know how to operate a condom?" My buddies said, "Do you even know if it's yours?" My dad didn't say anything. We've never met. Is history repeating?

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**Witness**

**Christina Bonifer**

Gripping the doorknob, tears streaming, fighting not to take one breath. He's out there searching, hunting for his prey. Through the crack I can see her draped across the bed, like a coat haphazardly tossed. The flow of blood crawling from her chin makes me realize the fear completely.

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**From the Latin**

**Colby Prough**

"How are you today?" asked Dr. Lang.

"Okay," answered her patient. "I don't have enough money to drive my car anymore, so now I'm a pedophile. I give music lessons—no, wait, what is that...pedestrian! Now I'm a pedestrian. Anyway, now I have to walk to the kid's houses."

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**Self-Employment****Patrick Macknick**

"What the hell am I gonna do," Mickey whined. Mickey's brain is mush, Victor thought to himself. Can't remember nothing. "Mickey," Victor replied, "This liquor store isn't gonna rob itself. You won't need bullets anyway. Nobody's gonna know you forgot to load." "Victor," Mickey said, "I forgot my mask, too."

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**Pick Five****Mark Truesdell**

Jeremy never had many friends. He kept mostly to himself. That is, until he hit the lotto. After that, his phone rang constantly. They had different voices, but it was always the same person.

"Hello?" Jeremy said.

"Is the money there? Oh, I mean is Jeremy there?" they would ask.

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**Wifey's Lament****Steven Brecount**

As she closes her eyes and pages through chaotic transitions and personal views, a dog-sly smile comes to her face, deep breath soothing her like a lover's warm skin on a cold day, and she realizes... Her shifting sun sets, making life golden in time, dreaming of life, it's hers.

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**Genre Writer Genesis****Eric Mory**

He held it by a short damp patch of matted hair from the top and watched. The skin of the face had turned pale green, and had an almost crisp feel to it. Suddenly, the severed head screamed, "Tommie! Quit playing with the lettuce and get all the groceries in!"

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**He'll Regret It****Joel Ruprecht**

She stopped and looked at herself in the mirror. Placing her hands on the counter, she rocked forward on her tiptoes and looked into her own eyes. Her hair neat, clothes wrinkle free, and makeup on right, "He'll regret it," she thought and finished brushing her teeth.

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**Neglect****Jennifer Bowman**

We lost her. Somewhere in the conversations of our own lives we forgot about hers. Perhaps her silence finally swallowed her up. The house is in a panic. The colors and furniture sense her silence in the emptiness of her skin touching theirs. Where did we put her?

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**A Worm's Prayer****Dawn Luebke**

Dear Mother Nature;

Wiggling slowly upon the black top lot I wish for the sun not to rise. I haven't made it to the crack where green resides. I ask thee for some rain to keep the black top cool for my crossing. I don't want to bake today. Amen.

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**A Guy Can't Compare with a Dog****R.B. Arnett**

Tom entered the apartment and plopped down heavily.

"What's wrong?" Dave asked.

"She has a dog."

"So."

"So? A dog never complains. A dog can be treated like crap and still loves you. And a dog'll snuggle night after night and never want sex."

"Dude, you don't have a chance."

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**Job Satisfaction****Louisa Danielson**

Straw is itchy. Wood is slivery. Dinky chimneys scrape. That's not what stopped the wolf though—he was tougher than that. It was the pigs themselves—and their blackbelts. After three deadly encounters, the wolf quit. He is now the Structural Weakness Consultant for TLP Builders and relishes his job.

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**What Would Jesus Do?****Mark Truesdell**

Paul faced a moral dilemma after he smashed into a lime-green hatchback at the 7-Eleven with a bumper sticker that read, "I Brake For Jesus." But Paul's daily Twinkie fix was calling his name. Besides, Paul thought, Jesus had scraggly, long hair and wore sandals. He would understand the munchies.

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**Cindy Minh**