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Omaha Oxbow '11

by Elizabeth Walker

It's been a busy, tremendous, whirling, twurving, exciting, interesting, roasting in the blasted Nebraska heat, four weeks of Omaha Oxbow-ing.

We've done
So
Much.

We've locked briefcases in cars,
wreaked havoc at gas stations
 Really ma'am, really. It's okay. That's why these things are made this way, he
said, as the gasoline poured down on him from the broken hose, in the crackling-
hot air.
We've marveled at the Clock tower bells, and wondered about their strange songs.

We've walked through cement,
walked through gnats,
swatted and waved with gnats,
ranted and raved about gnats.
laughed and wrote myths about gnats.

We marathoned in a Nebraska heat wave,
stayed cool with the sweet cold AC
 of Omaha's Library Central
visited the Hollywood Candy
 Second Chance Antiques
 Jackson Street Booksellers
 and the Gene Leahy Mall.
We dined on fine Italian cuisine
 and thanked each other for the
 fine writing indeed.

We've sneered at the effects of aging,
road-tripped with lessons,
flown our sister's Snoopy kite,
 broken our sister's Snoopy kite,
and walked in Jeremy's shoes
 shoes that weren't good enough
 shoes that were too tight
 and shoes, nee, boots, that fit just right.

Have you met Billie Ruben Williams and heard her ringing that marvelous and amazing
and symbolic football-field bell? What came over her and her so-big-heart?

Pow! Kick! Hit! Cut! Jab! Pow! Kick! Hit! Cut! Jab!

We've nearly orgasmed
with running,
marveled at the strong, steady, stalwart limbs
of Rhonda's Tree of Life,
and danced the salsa with a younger Gigi—
dressed to the nines for a night out on the L.A. town.
We've spotted a cool blue bird in the yard
Google it! only to discover it was a
"bluebird." Huh.

We've salivated for a piece of Amy's grandma's pie,
and we know, without a doubt, that Mrs. Kuhlman still loves Robbie. And I bet he
knows.

But mostly, we wrote.

We wrote about
pregnancies
and how life can be unfair,
Aunt Lizzy duties
and the "special drink" that makes you poop,
92-year old mothers
and their courage through life,
using sticks to scratch our sweaty backs
(Really, Pam? Really?)
wanting it to be a RED day
when it just feels BROWN
Googling "buying a dog off the internet,"
and doing so at a shady Iowa-road-stop exchange,
going out for a night at the Orpheum,
with its red chairs
sparkling chandeliers
and gorgeous music
resounding from the
theater walls.

We *Slammed!* some poetry!
We *Slammed!* it right out of the park!
Be yourself.
(even if you have to interpretative dance your way there)
I love you, Shaun Cassidy.
Watch out for those "Blue-smocked snaggle toothed" Walmart check-out girls.
Don't worry about what used to be.
Run, don't walk to the edge, because the edge is change!

“Come out, Nick. We want to help you, Nick.
The only thing we have to save you with is your name, Nick.”

We *Slammed!* so hard that we gave—
and got—
Goosebumps.

But mostly, during this busy, tremendous, whirling, twurving, exciting, interesting,
roasting in the blasted Nebraska heat, four weeks of Omaha Oxbow-ing,

we wrote.

Because we are writers.



Oxidental

James De Mott, Angela Holdren,
Elizabeth Walker, Deb Kruse, Wilma Kuhlma

Alzesta Sawyer Martin

by Wilma Kuhlman

Fifteen children Alzesta bore.
She could neither read nor write.
What future options did she have?
Laws gave her rights to nothing.

Twenty years she lived without
a husband to console.
Twenty years of poverty
enforced by gendered laws.

The well took her man away
took the breath out of his body,
took her unborn fifteenth's pa,
siblings' mentor and friend.

"Routine maintenance," he said.
"Roots messin' up the water.
I'll get 'em out and send 'em up.
Go down and be up soon."

But this trip wasn't normal.
Well swallowed the fine, lean man.
Soundless death was sudden;
the end precluded pain.

Asphyxiation from lack of oxygen?
Or too much methane gas?
It doesn't really matter;
he expired at 59.

The land Alzesta loved and lived on
could never be her own.
The county "generously" let her keep
her iron, her clothes, and sewing.

Eldest son, Bill Martin
got land, buildings, and beasts,
continued life as farmer
now owner, director, too

Took pity on his mother
allowed her in his home.
Her photo shows a surly face.
Distress leaps from the frame.

What determination kept her going?
Would she have contributed more
if she had owned and overseen
the land and crops and chores?

I wonder what she'd think of me
with rights to own and lead.
I think she'd want me grateful and
careful with values and career.

So in Alzesta's memory, I'll try to not
forget
that even though at times I'm mad
at laws and rules that hinder,
I'll respect and honor her survival
with an iron, some clothes and sewing.



Roger Lewis, Roger Dodger

by Wilma Kuhlman

Roger Lewis, Roger Dodger, Rog, Roger Marris (Grandpa Walt's choice), son, husband, father, researcher, chemist, triathlete, friend, comedian, intellectual, game player, Frisbee golfer, tennis and squash player, swimmer, and whatever else enters that man's head to undertake. That's my older son. He's a delight, an enigma, kind-hearted, and sometimes very frustrating. Most of all, he's strong-willed. And I'm sure I'll never figure him out, although he's clearly one of my very favorite people whom I long to be around more than I am, and I covet his approval and warm hugs and smiles.

Roger displayed his independence very early in life when he demonstrated that he knew there was nothing I could or would physically do to make him comply with what I required. He couldn't have been more than 3 or 4 years old when he came in from the hot outside and left the door open. Now, the air conditioner was on. You know the type – window unit stuck through a living room window – the kind that roars to life and almost makes the house shake in the process. So I made what I considered a very reasonable request, “Be sure to close the door.”

But, did he honor that appeal? His response was a defiant, “NO!” Really, now, what was that about? I wasn't even particularly parental in my request. I just wanted him to be responsible and close the door. And that simple plea became a battlefield. I reasoned with him at first.

“The air conditioner is running, and we don't want to use more electricity than needed because of the outside heat getting inside the house.”

“NO!” He was still standing beside the open door, but not making any movement toward compliance. I continued to coax and encourage him with all my motherly wiles, and he abjectly refused every endeavor. He even started crying, but he still wouldn't make any attempt to close that door, which he could clearly physically do, since he'd done so many times before.

Eventually, I took his hands in mine, put them on the door, and pushed it closed. I knew and he knew, that I closed that door. He had not! He won. And the reality that he was almost always a very obedient son speaks of the significance that it was his choice – not any fear of what we/I would do. That's our son, Roger!

Roger graduated from high school as valedictorian with a four-point grade average. I'm not entirely sure he always did the work that was required for the A, but he certainly knew how to learn and mentally grab hold of ideas and concepts that were presented to him. And I do know that most teachers trusted his brain a great deal. One of his middle school teachers told us about a multiple-choice test he'd given in history class. Roger became aware that a student behind him was copying all of his answers, so he simply chose the wrong answer each time, doing so in a systematic way that the teacher could

follow and give him the grade he actually deserved. When Roger handed in his test and explained what had happened to the teacher, Mr. W gave him the answer key and told Roger to grade the test himself, which he did. I don't know if he got 100% or not, but I do know the young lady failed the test! Clever? Yes. Effective? Also, yes. And it also indicated the way Roger's teachers respected his brain and gave him the benefit of the doubt. I sincerely think Roger probably used that trust on occasion (rarely, I hope) to get a grade he didn't quite deserve. Nonetheless, he graduated at the top of his class and gave a very humorous valedictory address that people even anticipated. And he got a lot of laughs! How often does that happen? That fits Roger.

With a bachelor's and two advanced degrees in chemistry, Roger has moved into the business world as a researcher. Since he's never lived close to us in his research positions with Union Carbide and Dow Chemical, I don't know him quite as well as I once did. However, he has informed us that he fully expects to be fired someday, because he just doesn't conform all the time. The last I knew he even had contingency plans for his work after he's fired. I think that, like he did in Middle school, he cleverly chooses his battles, but he's not very patient with protocols that are simply "Mickey Mouse" endeavors. But he's also a very smart researcher that probably makes the company a whole lot of money, so they won't get rid of him real easily.

Although Roger lives about 1,000 miles from my house, he almost never makes the effort to phone or text me. He will rarely send an email, but those are usually very specific about travel plans. When I call him on the phone because it's been a long time, I both anticipate and am a little uneasy about the visit. See if he's in a congenial mood, we have a great visit and laugh and moan together. If, however, he's mostly uncommunicative, he replies with simple one-word responses. The long silences while I grope for something worth saying are painful. Maybe he's mentally groping, too, but I doubt he'd ever let me know.

Roger as a father is just as delightful as I expected him to be. He's not always patient, but is a delightful companion, reasonable in discipline, and gets his sons to laugh when they want to cry – well, sometimes. I love to see him walking hand-in-hand with one or both of his little guys. He's almost always visiting with them, teaching them, or listening to them. That is, of course, unless they're being particularly ornery or silly or resistant to the particular path they're traveling (perhaps to bed). But now Roger's hands are the big ones holding little hands and guiding them.

When I stop to think, I see the circle of hands from me to Roger to his young sons, and I like it. For future interactions with Roger, I will remember our open door and the independent child, now man, whom I love. I will be sure to keep that door open, even when it feels like the air conditioner of cool responses from Roger is running. And instead of our hands forcing one another to do something, I anticipate continuing our interactions as peers and compatriots who learn and laugh together.

Modern Restroom Use 101: Mostly for women

by Wilma Kuhlman

Well, I'm old, and I actually remember outhouses – the ones where you had to hold your nose and forget your dignity to take care of Mother Nature's urges. And the times, they have changed, and my dignity is back in jeopardy. You face the modern restroom idiosyncrasies the minute you choose one of the stalls for your private duties. Choose with care because in some, you walk in and the stool flushes... automatically, of course. You think, "What? I haven't even begun to disrobe!" Nonetheless you continue undaunted because, well, because there's that urge in your bladder. If you were greeted with that immediate flushing sound, relax, that particular automatic eye will probably sense every move you make and flush two or three more times before you escape. You can leave that scene with the knowledge that it's sanitary for the next visitor. And even in those few stalls that operate in the ideal mode, you have to hear a warning low growl. Don't panic, it's just the pre-flush sound... nothing to fear. Unless, of course, it's one that flushes with such vigor that the water sprays up high, and you get soaked.

Other times, though, you leave and expect to hear that comforting flush, and nothing happens. You might even dance around a little bit, open and close the door a couple of times, make lots of motion in that small cubicle. But no! It just ain't happening. So you next have to search for the tiny button (no bigger than a kernel of corn in various muted colors), placed in many different spots on these scheming movement detectors. Each public building I've ever been in has different positions for those buttons. At that point, you long for the obvious "flush here" handle of old. But after you finally find that magic button you push it, and the commode usually flushes. Unfortunately, too many people don't take the time to find that useful button, and what's left behind is a scenario that's also a risk for one choosing a restroom cubicle. Beware.

The next challenge is to get water out of that "automatic" faucet to wash your hands. Automatic, ha! Those motion detectors are very skillfully hidden, so it's impossible to determine which particular place to wave your hands to get the darn water to come. Of course that magic spot varies with each sink – yes, each sink, not just each building or restroom. The sinks look innocently cloned, but don't trust that. Just because sink A rewarded you with water from hands waved in one spot does not mean sink B will have the same sweet spot. When you finally get some water, it's often one short spurt and the water stops. So we're saving water here after a stool flushes three times? Come on, now. It's interesting that those soap dispensers still almost always require one to push a handle, and as long as there's soap inside, that works well. You can soap your hands, but then you're back searching for the magic movement area required to start water flowing to rinse off the soap – which I find preferable to avoiding soap or not rinsing.

After a time of waving, you face the final challenge of getting a paper towel in order to dry your hands. Here, you need to study the dispenser carefully. A few do still have a lever or crank that lowers the paper towel. (Those hot air blowers have actually been found to spread more germs than paper towels, I hear. Go figure.) However, most

recently, in order to keep wasteful restroom users from rolling out more length than needed, those tan pieces of paper are perforated at presumed right intervals for hand drying. But wait, in order for that to work effectively, one needs to have towel to grab hold of, and that requires at least an inch of towel hanging lower than the actual dispenser. That's true less than half the time, in my experience. Now there is a dial to roll the towels down, but it's imbedded in the side with no actual handle. It requires one to use wet fingers to twist a slightly recessed flat plastic disc. While twisting, water not only smears in that sunken dial, it drips back down one's arm, into sleeves, and generally any place that's uncomfortable, and in long-sleeve weather it wets clothes that take an hour or so to dry.

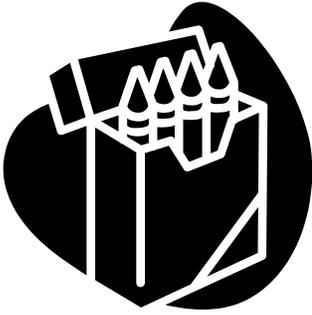
One reason that next paper towel is recessed is that people don't know how to rip off a towel. They are expecting some serration low in the dispenser to use to tear across the towel, as was the case not too long ago. But not now. Now the skill required is to pull down and jerk quickly, so that the paper towel will detach at the requisite perforated places. That happens if you're lucky, which is in no way guaranteed because those perforations are sometimes just dents in the towel. With patience, though, you can usually get enough towel to keep from dripping as you leave. Of course, if you mess around at this long enough, your hands will air dry.

If you make it through this "updated" restroom experience anything less than exasperated, I'm proud of you. If not, maybe this curriculum will help you in your next adventure.

Irrigation Meditation

By James De Mott

Moving back and forth—left to right.
Slowly pulsating one way—quickly returning
Moving with a living-- giving force, calling forth life,
Sustaining growth--for grass, flowers and weeds.
Catching light reflecting rainbows testifying to faith
And hope—my sprinkler.



What I Learned in 2nd Grade

by Deb Kruse

What I Learned in 2nd Grade, Part 1

“What page are we on?” I sat silently gazing at my open math journal in front of me. “Debbie, Debbie, what page are we on?” I pressed my lips together remaining silent. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Tina’s frizzy, wild red hair as she leaned closer to me.

Why does she keep talking to me? Please, please be quiet.

No longer a whisper she blurted, “What page?”

Too afraid to turn my head I let “shhhhh” quietly leave my motionless mouth as I stared straight ahead at my math journal.

The silence was broken by the authoritarian voice.

“Debbie, put your name on the board.”

Fear ripped through me. My stomach sank and I felt the heat rise in my face as I slowly trudged through the silent room to the chalkboard, which seemed to loom far in the distance.

With my eyes and nose stinging from fighting back tears I picked up the white chalk and scribbled the letters D E B B I E. while twenty set of eyes pierced my back. Looking down at the worn blue carpet I followed the path, which led back to my desk.

As I sat back down I fixated on the green chalkboard. Blurred by imminent tears I read the word Debbie.

I learned to fear.

What I Learned in 2nd Grade, Part 2

The line of 2nd graders waiting for help snaked through a row of desks and I was at the beginning of it. There she sat, behind her desk, helping one student at a time. Patiently I waited in line ignoring the conversation of others. Five minutes goes by, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, finally twenty minutes later it was my turn. At last I would get the help I needed to finish the page so I wouldn’t have to stay after school.

Ms Karr looked up at me with her bulging blood shot eyes. I placed the math journal on the table that separated us. I pointed to a problem and meekly said, “ I don’t understand this.”

Without hesitation, she shoved the journal across the table at me and said, “Figure it out.”

Shocked I walked back to my seat. I couldn’t continue with my math work and began to panic. I knew momentarily she would alphabetically go through the class list, say a name and wait for a yes or no. The yes or no referred to whether or not we finished the assigned page. If anyone said, “no” we all knew it meant our name on the board.

“Debbie?”

As guilt ripped through my body I hesitantly replied, “Yes.”

I learned to lie.

What I Learned in 2nd Grade, Part 3

“Class, open up your math journals.” That was my signal. I walked to the bathroom, shut and locked the door. I cried, shutting off momentarily the dreadful reality of math. I mastered the art of sobbing silently. When I could cry no more, I splashed cold water on my face, looked at my puffy red eyes in the mirror and walked silently back to my desk hoping no one would notice.

Did anyone notice? Day after day I left my seat to enter the sanctuary of the bathroom and day after day I walked back to my seat puffy eyed. Did anyone notice? Maybe. No one said a word.

I learned to hate math.

What I Learned in 2nd Grade, Part 4

Mom knew I was sad. Mom knew I needed something to give me comfort during my days with Ms Karr. Mom knew I couldn’t take my blankie for comfort so she took me shopping for a sweater. This was significant because my parents didn’t have extra money for things we didn’t need. Mom and I perused the racks of sweaters and a dark red cardigan with a tie belt jumped out at me. I tried it on and instantly felt safe and comforted. This was a special moment I spent with my mom and that feeling would join me in the classroom in the form of a red sweater.

It’s funny how a sweater can provide security and comfort and a sense of happiness. I wore that sweater everyday until, “Debbie, take off that sweater right now! It is too hot to be wearing a sweater in class!”

I hung the sweater on the hook under the window. Periodically I stared at my sweater, longing for the comfort it provided.

I lied in bed every night with sleep eluding me. Intense sadness filled me and that turned into anxiety as I watched the clock. Eleven o’clock, twelve o’clock, one o’clock. Usually

around two I grabbed my blankie and pillow and quietly walked to my parents room and slept on the floor next to their bed.

I learned to live on a few hours of sleep.

What I Learned in 2nd Grade, Part 5

At the end of the school year our assignment was to write about what we wanted to be when we grew up. I knew exactly what to write about. I wanted to be a teacher. I enthusiastically wrote my paper.

Ms Karr picked one paper to read aloud. She stood close to my desk, smiled, and began to read my paper. I wonder why? Did she pick my paper because she thought she inspired me to be a teacher? Did she inwardly smile with pride over her influence on me?

In a way, she did influence me to become a teacher because she taught me hurt could run deep and take years to heal. I knew in 2nd grade that I did not want any child to endure the pain I did.

In second grade I learned many things:

How to fear

How to lie

How to hate math

How to live sleep deprived and

How words and actions can hurt.

As a teacher I teach my students to:

Feel safe

Stay honest

Love and embrace all subject areas and

Take care of themselves

I teach my students that I love them.

Marathon Writing
7-20-2011
Jackson Street Book Store
by Deb Kruse

As the door opens the musty smell of old books wafts through the air and catches a dendrite that can't connect me to that place in my memory. I do know it is a comforting place.

I feel surrounded by unseen people and memories floating through the air. Did a small child sit on his mother's lap and listen as the mother's voice read *If You Give a Moose a Muffin*? Did the child laugh at the silly moose and beg mom to read it again? How did the book get here? Is that child too old to sit on Mom's lap? Did mom place her hand over the cover of the book and cry with memories when placing it in a box to sell to the second-hand shop?

So many stories and memories crammed into one place stacked together wanting desperately for their stories to be told.

Newer books stacked next to older books. Different topics and purposes but wanting the same thing--their stories told--to be the one book out of thousands to be pulled from the dusty shelf.

Marathon Writing
7-20-11
Hollywood Candy Store
by Deb Kruse

In reality I enter the old-fashioned candy store but in my mind I enter the tiny corner drugstore on Main Street in Coleridge, Nebraska. My cousins and I, with nickels and pennies clinking in our pockets, walk through the three aisles loving the creaking sound our shoes make on the old wooden floor. We find the small candy station and carefully pick our brand of cigarettes-candy cigarettes. We carry our treasures to the counter to pay.

"You must be Bruce and Dorothy's grandchildren."

Wow, this really is a small town I think to myself. We carefully count out our pennies and nickels. I once said, "Keep the change." Isn't that what the big city slickers say when purchasing an item?

"Dear, that is your money! You take it." Sheepishly I put the penny in my pocket. My

cousins and I leave the store smacking the cigarette boxes against our palms as we have witnessed other people do. We put a “cig” in our mouths with our other hand resting on our hips. We look cool. If we blow on the cigarette the powder comes off and looks like real smoke!

Four cousins, bonded by blood, bonded by friendship, walk with cigarettes dangling out of our mouths back to our favorite place in the world: our grandparents’ house.



The Education of Aunt Lizzy
(Getting Ready for Baby #2)
by Elizabeth Walker

This winter, I watched my 17-month old niece while my brother and sister-in-law birthed Clare's baby sister into the world. While I consider myself a master with the little ones, it took one short 24-hour span to learn how much I do not know about living with a toddler. Here's a day in the life of Aunt Lizzy and "Baby Clare."

Good Morning: Day 1

5:45am, Clare wakes me up. I imagine this is a regular, in fact, daily occurrence for most parents with babies. I, however, am not a parent. I am a single, 32-year old Aunt. I have honed down my morning routine to a mere 10 minutes for the sole reason of remaining in bed as long as humanly possible. So when Clare wakes me up 1.5 HOURS, or 90 MINUTES, earlier than usual, this is significant sleep time to relinquish. In true testimony to my strong love for Clare, I drag myself from slumber and stumble groggily to her room. Clare is standing in the crib, her baby-fine hair sweatily pressed to her face, covering her eyes. She squints in the faint light as I move to comfort her. The moment she makes out that I am neither of her parents, she begins to hyperventilate.

In my many years as sibling, older cousin, neighborhood babysitter, summer nanny, pre-school assistant, and aunt to my siblings' ten children, I like to think I have encountered every type of youngster cry: the "I didn't get my way" cry, the "I have a scrape and need attention" cry, the "I'm sitting in a poopy diaper" cry, the "I'm so very very tired but can't fall asleep" cry, and the much-feared "I just bonked my head but I'm going to scream bloody murder so it sounds as if I fell down a complete flight of stairs" cry/scream. Babies cry. Toddlers cry. Kids cry. Heck, adults cry. And yet, I have never seen anything like Clare's reaction to Aunt Lizzy's sudden and unexpected early-morning appearance. My niece is, literally, hyperventilating. The sobs and screams wrack her baby body as she gulps and gasps for air. I push us in the rocker, whispering calming words and noises, rubbing her back softly. "Shhh. It's okay Clare, it's Aunt Lizzy. Shhhh." Her sobs and body-shaking slowly subside, replaced with the occasional post-crying-jag shuddering breaths. I place her back in the crib.

This early-morning trauma is too much for Clare, though, for she does not fall back asleep. After half an hour, I stop ignoring the whimpers coming from the next room. 6:15am. And so our morning begins.

Clare's Hair

My brother left me written instructions for Clare's daily routine. After waking and dressing, "Put Clare's hair in ponytail." Hmmm. Clare's short blonde baby hair is super-silky fine, and therefore, super-duper hard to put in anything resembling a ponytail. I try, I really try. But despite my attempts, half the hair on either side of Clare's face is simply not long enough to tie back in the "pony." One rubber band, four barrettes (two on each side holding back the too-short hair falling into her face), and five unsuccessful minutes

later, I wonder how John and Jackie complete this impossible task.

Breakfast

“Cereal for breakfast,” the note reads. *Phew. THIS I can handle.* I pour Cheerios into a small, plastic bowl, debating whether I should add milk. *Who eats plain cereal?* As I pour the milk, covering the bobbing Cheerios, my groggy mind notes, *this is kind of a lot of milk.* I am tired; the thought is fleeting; I place the bowl in front of Clare.

I try to feed Clare with her spoon, but she prefers to independently breakfast, so I pack my lunch. Within moments of turning from her, Clare whines. Left with a bowl of cereal filled with milk, Clare, as any 17-month old might do, spilled the entire contents of her cereal down her front. I look at her now-soggy state, and berate my tired brain for ignoring the “too much milk!” warning. Poor Clare now must submit to “Get Clare dressed”: Take Two.

DayCare Drop Off

Do I imagine it or does Clare look relieved when I drop her off at daycare? Are her caregivers giving me skeptical looks? Is it Clare’s hair? Can they tell she’s in Outfit #2? Or do I look as frazzled as I feel?

The Complete Morning Routine

Somewhere between Outfit #2 and leaving for the day, I look at the clock. 6:45am. *Awesome, plenty of time to get ready.* Between dressing, feeding, packing up, and shuttling Clare and her things to daycare; between dressing, feeding, packing up, and driving myself and my things to work, my normal twenty-five minute morning routine and drive has just taken an hour and a half. I am thirty minutes late to work and have no idea where the time has gone.

Dinner

Clare has no interest in the chicken and rice leftovers or the chopped vegetables on her plate. She won’t take a bite. I try bribing her with strawberries; fruit is her favorite. She shakes her head, avoiding the spoon I nudge towards her. Worried, I search the fridge, frantic to find something she will eat. How about string cheese? Bingo! Clare eats an entire stick! When she wants more, I feel relief that she is eating. *You like cheese, Clare. All right! Here’s some more. Want another stick, Clare? You got it!*

When Clare and I visit the hospital post-dinner to meet her new sister, I tell my brother about Clare’s cheesy dinner. His response is a slight, “Oh.” My brother’s list neglected to note that cheese is not part of Clare’s diet. Since a few months old, Clare has had trouble pooping. Some babies, apparently, are “sensitive poopers” (disclaimer: this is not the proper medical term). After one constipated-poop, these sensitive poopers associate pooping with pain, so they avoid the dirty deed altogether and hold it in. This makes sense if you’re 17-months old and don’t realize that holding poop in only exacerbates your excrement problem.

During our hospital visit, I learn that Clare has not pooped for two days. The mounds of

string cheese I fed her for dinner will not alleviate this constipation. Poor Clare.

Bedtime

Daddy John comes to the rescue, leaving the hospital to restabilize Clare's life. He cuddles her, pajamas her, rocks her, soothes her, and feeds her the "special drink" that helps her poop. (While some prefer the euphemism "Miralax," I stand by my initial drink label). John puts Clare to bed. Equilibrium restored. Bedtime is a breeze with my brother back home.

Good Morning: Day 2

Clare wakes, crying, at 12:30am. No hyperventilation upon sight of Aunt Lizzy. Cuddling in the rocking chair is very much enjoyed by Aunt Lizzy, especially when Clare falls back asleep, stays asleep for the delicate chair-to-crib transfer, and stays in this sweet state of slumber until 6:30am. What a great way to start our day.

Breakfast

Lesson learned. Do not give a 17-month old a kiddy bowl of cereal, filled with milk. Dry cereal it is. No need for outfit #2.

Hair: Day 1 afternoon daycare pick up

Clare's hair is in a cute, small ponytail atop her head. The ponytail draws only the top half of her hair, leaving the remainder to frame her face. *Ohhhhh. So that's how to do it . . . her ponytail does **not** require four barrettes to keep all the hair in place.*

Hair: Day 2

"Put Clare's hair in ponytail." Noooooo problem.

Complete Morning Routine

With a one-day learning curve, I drop Clare off at daycare, stop for much-needed morning coffee, and arrive at school two minutes early. NICE!

Miralax Results

Clare is safely at daycare when the Big Poops come. Good for Clare, good for Aunt Lizzy, not good for Day Care. Clare poops three times! The "special drink" is magic.

Day Care Drop Off

True Victory Moment—Clare wants her Aunt Lizzy, NOT her daycare. She fusses and refuses to leave my side. It is a wonderful moment—for I certainly do not want to leave her little side either. Although I hate the sight of her crying at my departure, I grin from ear to ear as I walk to my car.

What a difference a day makes. It's grand to be Aunt Lizzy, indeed.

Quenching My Soul

by Angela Holdren

Soothing rumblings and delicate rain
Trickle against my windowpane.

Dull light comforts my peaceful rest.
Silence and tranquility, a welcome guest.

Muted thoughts all hazy.
Motionless body still too lazy.

Gray light falls across the room.
The impatient day starts to loom.

Flip over to my side.
In my pillow I hide.

Sleepy closed -eyed face
Warm on the crisp pillowcase.

Stretch to feel the comfort.
Not ready to be alert.

Search for a cool spot.
5 more minutes is sought.

Glance at alarm.
Reset again... no harm.

The world is on snooze.
While the rain soothes

The earth and my soul.



El Grupo de Inspiración

Christin Ones, Rhonda Betzold, Amy Lovely,
Rosie Georgen, Janeen Kollar, Gigi Brignoni

The Evolution of an Oxbow Writer

By Gigi Brignoni



Growing from an insecure beginning,
Stretching out of the boundaries of writer's block,
Experimenting with new, never-tried genres,
Learning to trust your own stories,
Writing every day,
Changing existing paradigms,
Connecting with others,
Listening with an open heart,
Supporting the reluctant writer,
Knowing you're part of a solid community
Of Oxbow Writers.

I used to be

by Gigi Brignoni

I used to be
What you see is what you get
But now, I hide what I don't want you to see.
I used to be
My life is an open book
But now, I open my life to the chosen few.

I used to be
Live life to its fullest
But now, I am just glad I am living.

I used to be
A fantastic salsa dancer
But now, I dance in my dreams and past memories.

I used to be
Five feet two inches tall
But now, I wear flats and am four feet 11 ½ inches short.

I used to be
A goddess full of infinite potential and goodness
But now, I am a mere mortal blessed to have a second chance.

I don't dwell on my used to be's
But they help me remember where I've been.
My used to be's are my past lives.
Where I've been is my strong foundation
And I can only rise up.

A Barista's Tale (Criss Library Café Story # 1)

By Gigi Brignoni

“Hello, Miss. May I help you, Miss?”

How strange and foreign do those words sound to me? Yet, how young do they make me feel? Every morning I enter the Starbucks Café at the Criss Library, I am greeted by a very young and pleasant barista with those words.

I reply, “Yes, thank you. I would like a medium coffee – room for cream.”

“Sure thing, Miss. Thank you, Miss.”

At first, I was pleased to be greeted with the classification of Miss. I can't remember the last time anyone has ever addressed me that way. Was I a teenager or in my early twenty's? For as long as I can remember I have been addressed as Ma'am. And, I don't particularly like that term. It makes me sound older than I am. I am older than the barista

and many other people, but Ma'am sounds so generic, so not me. I like Madam – it sounds French. Actually, I like Señora because I am and it doesn't necessarily have any age correlation just a marital status classification.

I have noticed that South High School students call their female teachers, "Miss" a lot. Could our barista have been socialized to using that term in high school? He does it with respect.

Does it bother me? Why does it bother me if it does? The jury is still out on that one. The first few days last week when I was addressed with Miss, I actually looked forward to hearing it. And then, I started to think, I've lived a life. I am older than the term Miss allows one to be. I decided to tell the young barista, Kevin, that I would like him to address me as Ma'am. After all there is an age difference and I earned the right to that designation.

Last Friday, I went into the Café and was determined to let him know my preference and that Miss is not appropriate for him to use with me. I was ready, I was going to be gentle but assertive. As luck would have it, when I went into the Café, I noticed that someone else was working the counter – a female, another Miss. She just took the coffee order and did not address me with Miss, Ma'am, or any age distinction. She took the money, filled the cup with coffee, made sure I had room for cream, and went on with her counter duties.

That's when I decided that was a trivial battle to pursue. We must choose our own battles. It really doesn't matter that a young male addresses me as Miss. It actually is okay, especially when the undertone of respect is evident.

So, this morning, I was greeted with, "How can I help you, Miss?" and all was right with the world.

A Sonnet on the Farmer's Market

By Gigi Brignoni

Smells are wafting through the Omaha streets

Farmers enticing you to their tables

One man's quest for the best nutritious beets

Negotiates and pays what he's able

The strong stomached client tastes the hot sauce

Try it, it's good, it has a spicy bite

Use on enchiladas – booth a stone's toss

The Farmers Market so full of delight

Animal lovers can discover wares

That treats their canines as family kin

Balloon man creates with all his hot airs

Fascinating critters that sport no chin.

Urban Omaha folk discern what's good

In produce, cheeses, and natural food.

Bookworm

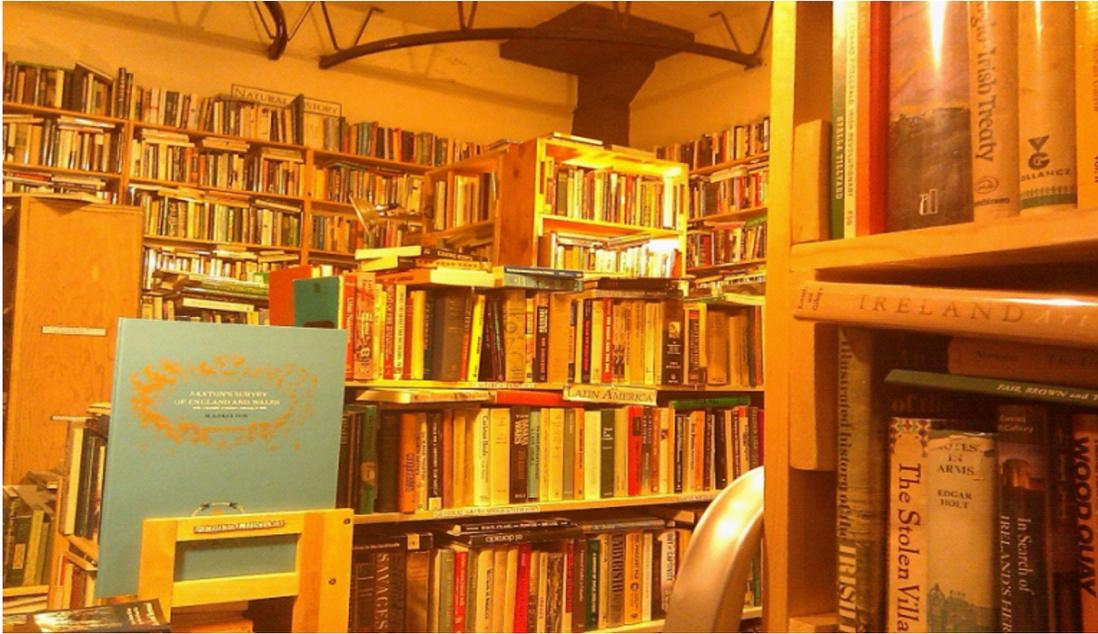
by Janeen Kollar

Jackson Street Booksellers



La Rue for Mayer lying on a pile of books. *Prairie Fires* and *Paper Moons* on the shelf between *Snowdon* and *On the Move*. *James and the Giant Peach* carefully placed in the crook of my arm. I want them all! I want to devour each and every page. You see, I am a bookworm. I climb the shelves and sometimes carefully pick out the just right book that pulls me in and occupies my mind well after the last page is read. Sometimes I browse the piles of books on the floor looking for a colorful cover that piques my interest. A book of pictures perhaps, a children's story with no words.

I lie on the tattered grey rug covering a cement floor and escape into the pages until reality jolts me back. I roll onto the cold grey floor, turn the page and continue my journey.



I climb to the highest shelf, 10 rows up to be exact. I spy a mystery – a Who Done It. That intrigues me. I run my hand over the cover. A beautiful book. I open the pages and smell the history. The edges are yellowed from age and elements. This book has a story not merely the words on the pages.



Sweat Soaked Folks

by Janeen Kollar

“Jab, Cross, Hook, and Step. Jab, Cross, Hook, and Step.” These words ring in my head well after our very fit instructor, Jacquie shouts them in the microphone on her headset. Work at your level 10 she shouts. Today should be harder than yesterday if you’re working at level 10. “Jab, Cross, Hook and Step. Jab, Cross, Hook and Step.” Ten more minutes and I’ll let you have a water break. These words are beautiful. I wonder when the oxygen break is ‘cause I’m going to need that too.

You see, in an attempt to “get healthy” I committed to a routine of kickboxing and resistance training six days a week along with a revamping of my nutrition practices. I wasn’t sure how I’d like kickboxing but I’ve come to really like it. You get to punch stuff and it’s OK. Resistance training – well it’s slow and not very exciting but I’ve learned it’s very important in my effort to become fit. Nutrition has been the hardest component to wrap my head around. While the nutrition isn’t hard to figure out, it is hard to stick to especially when you want what you want.

“Jab, Cross, Hook and Step. Jab, Cross, Hook and Step.” “Get those gloves up. Don’t give up now. Don’t cheat yourself. This is *your* workout. Make it count.” Jacquie encourages as she purposefully checks out each station correcting form as she makes her

way around the gym, jumping and bouncing as she goes.

I wonder what goes through her head as she watches this very diverse group of exercisers. Does she think, “Wow, this group is working hard.” Or is she thinking about what she is going to have for dinner? Does she see people transforming and becoming healthy?

“Drop it down for a plank,” She instructs. A plank is a special form of torture. You get on the floor and you are on your toes with your forearms on the floor. Your back should be flat like a *plank* of wood. “Find your happy place. We’re a team. No one drops. Don’t give up. You CAN do it.” Sometimes I think she has said these words so often she doesn’t even think about what she’s saying. I guess when you’re sweating and tired it doesn’t really matter.

We all drop down to our elbows and toes. You can tell those people who are newbies because their butts are sticking high in the air. The veterans have nice flat backs. Per Jacquie, this exercise is the BEST for the abs. I can’t wait for the evidence to prove she is right.

At 5:15, many panting, sweat soaked folks head off. We are all looking forward to the next class and the promise of flat tummies, firm thighs, and lifted butts. Jacquie smiles sweetly and says, “I’ll take that dirty look as a thank you.”

Teacher Slam (with tears)

(note to self—remember to use your teacherly voice)

by Rhonda Betzold

“Welcome, freshmen,
to the first day
of the rest of your lives.”

Why do you sit there
and stare
at me
as though by the end of May
we won't be fast friends?
As though you won't have asked me
for a band-aid
or a tampon
or a time extension
on that paper
you just couldn't finish because he
or she
broke your heart
right on the due date?

You're so quiet, like sheep
staring out of dewy eyes
fresh from 8th grade—
where I know you were wolves.
Bad-ass
top of the class
don't need a pass
first never last
moving too fast
having a blast—
but all that is past.
Now you're the bottom of the totem pole once again.

Babies.
You were just babies.
You're closer to infants
than my age
and you look it today
the first day of class
sitting there
silently staring
Hands folded, even.

You needed a pacifier and your sippy cup
not so long ago.
Closer in time to your first hot lunch
with chocolate milk
than your first legal beer.
But some of you may try that beer
before this year's end.
(or maybe you already have.)

“Get out your planner.”
and you have one!
It's new and fresh
filled with blank pages
of possibilities.
Just like this year.
Your new backpack doesn't even have any
Sharpie doodles yet.
And all the zippers work.

“Everyone take a copy of my syllabus.”
and you'll see the plans
hatched from a troubled mind
that may
or may not
work.
Last year
Jack and Kayla and Vivek
could always manage to get me off track
just enough
to wreck those plans
with a simple,
“Mrs. Betzold, I have a question.”
that invariably led me down
rabbit trails and
water ways and
wild goose chases and
tangential targets
where they wanted me to go
until I learned to Just Say NO!
most days.

But last May
My Freshmen—
formerly someone else's 8th graders—
didn't leave remembering the syllabus.
They left in a raucous confetti cacophony

of crumpled up balls of colored paper
(formerly known as my handouts).
They left with hugs
and a few tears
but smiling
and loudly talking
and a scrapbook of “remember when’s”

“And so, new freshmen,
these are my rules.
Respect each other and me.
Take responsibility for your learning.”
Who knew that lifetimes could begin this way?
And in May I’ll go, once again,
to the sea of blue caps and gowns
and see formerly freshmen
moving from the totem pole
to the “real world”
that may or may not even exist.
But I’ll yearn for them
as I’ve learned from them
While pretending to teach to them
as I’ll pretend to teach to you, too.

So welcome, freshmen,
to the first day
of the rest of your lives.

Mercy

By Rhonda Betzold

June 29, 1920

Watewin held her head high as she walked into the town’s only store. She felt all eyes on her, but she didn’t meet their faces. Instead, she looked at the ground, a show of respect. She saw Mr. Wilson there, and he tipped his hat to her. “Winnie,” he said as she approached.

She had been working for Mrs. Wilson for 6 months, and although Mr. Wilson wasn’t often home while she was working, occasionally their paths crossed. While her people were not allowed to shop there, they all knew who he was.

Watewin was meticulous about her work, but lately she had begun to see signs of Mrs. Wilson’s displeasure. “Make sure you put that crystal back exactly as you found it, Winnie,” she said, frowning. “Mr. Wilson’s mother owned that crystal, and he likes it just

so.”

Yesterday, Winnie was rocking the baby while the two older ones played outside. George threw a ball a little harder than he needed to and it hit Dorothy squarely in her midsection. Furious, Dorothy ran at him. He laughed as he pushed her away, swinging wildly. Winnie stood up and came between the two, and Dorothy buried her face in the Indian girl’s skirt.

“Watewin, he hurt me,” the girl cried, holding fast to her caregiver’s leg. She smoothed Dorothy’s hair as she cried, and looked at George sternly.

“I know, little one,” Watewin soothed. Their parents called her Winnie because her name was “too difficult” to remember, although the children had no problem remembering.

She never let her gaze waver from George’s defiant face. Eventually, he hung his head in contrition, but a smirk still teased the corners of his mouth.

“Sorry, Dorothy,” he mumbled.

Mrs. Wilson appeared on the porch. She watched Winnie, her arms wrapped protectively around Dorothy, the sunlight glinting off the thin silver bracelet she always wore, and she thought they looked like a family. She felt the jealousy rise, once again, within her, and decided right there it was time to send the girl back to her teepee.

“Children, your father will be home soon. Don’t make me tell him about this,” she said. Dorothy’s tears dried up and all traces of George’s pleasure vanished. Both children turned toward their mother, “Yes, Ma’am,” they said in tiny voices. Mrs. Wilson’s eyes met Winnie’s. The time had come.

The last baby had been a difficult birth, and while Mrs. Wilson needed help tending the children and taking care of the house for a time, she was gaining back her strength. Winnie handed the baby back to her mother as the sun began to set.

“Will you need anything else today, Ma’am?”

Mrs. Wilson took the baby and spoke in Watawin’s direction. “You may finish out the week, Winnie, but I don’t think I’ll need you past Friday.” She didn’t look at the Indian girl, or she would have seen the dismay that flickered there.

“Are you sure you are strong enough, Ma’am?” she asked, trying her best to look compliant, turning her bracelet round and round on her slender wrist.

“Oh, yes. Your services will no longer be needed,” she said, proudly bouncing the baby on her hip. Watewin knew she was dismissed.

And so, Watewin decided to see if Mr. Wilson knew anyone else who might be willing to hire her. She lived in a one-room shack with her elderly mother. The income she brought

into the family was all they had; without it, they would both be destitute.

“What brings you in here today, Winnie?” his voice was iron underneath the friendly words.

“Sir. I have enjoyed working for your family, and rejoice that your wife is now able to care for your children without me. However, I am now in need of employment. Do you know anyone who might desire my services?”

He smiled then, snakelike, she thought, for the tiniest of moments. His eyes drank in her long black hair, her smooth brown skin, her poverty.

“Yes, I think I just might.”

The Watcher took the worn pencil in hand, sharpened the nub carefully with her father’s knife, and began writing.

January 20, 1980

Our Redeemer Hospital, Aurora, KS: Rebecca Reilly (26) died today from sepsis. Her fetus (7 months gestation) had been deceased for two weeks and had undergone decomposition, which led to its mother’s death. By the time Rebecca admitted herself to the hospital, removal of the uterus only sped up her condition. She died hours after her arrival.

Her heart lightened, accompanied the writing of the words. She wondered if her father had felt this release from the sound when he’d been Watcher. Blood crying out for peace, momentarily quieted at the surfeit of the guilty. Pages and pages contained the events since the tragedy, and still the blood wasn’t paid. Glutted for now, but not completely. Not yet. Her spirit would hear silence when she wrote the last lines, and the blood would be satisfied.

“How will I know?” she had asked her father during her training. Her small hand tentatively caressed the skin of the worn leather journal, mimicking her father. The furrows in his face deepened around the eyes as he thought of an answer.

“I have not felt it, my child. But your spirit will know when the blood is quiet. You will not hear it crying out from the ground any longer.”

“Why does it cry, Papa?”

He tipped his face toward her, then, and touched the top of his forehead to hers, his hand cupping her chin. His warm breath smelled of comfort. “It cries for peace, my child.”

October 15, 1984

766 D Ave., Mercy, KS: William Band (22) died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the upper torso. Coroners guessed that he had survived for at least 16 hours, but no one noticed his absence, so he slowly bled to death. His body remained undiscovered for at least four days.

When she first became Watcher, her father warned her about the burden.

“Many have not been able to bear this burden I pass on to you. They have tried to make the blood stop crying with their own lives. They let their own blood out onto the ground, but it is not for us the blood cries. If ever you feel tempted to this path, you must pass the mantle on to another. Look for the next Watcher.”

“How did you know I would be Watcher, Papa?”

“Little one, it has always been you. I knew the moment you were born. They placed you in my arms, wet from your mother, and I knew your spirit was Watching.”

So she contemplated others as possible replacements. She had her eye on her nephew Editon—his sharp mind and patient ways made him a good choice. He seemed to sense a kindred spirit with his aunt, often coming to visit her, and their bond was growing as time passed.

But she wasn't sure whether he was the one, and since she constantly questioned herself, she thought he must not be. A long time ago, she had thought it might be Anna, her sister, but her lack of certainty grew over time until she wondered how she had even considered her in the first place. Such an obvious mistake.

Her father had been so sure of everything, so unlike her. Outside of Watching, she was plagued with doubt.

But the Watching had never been a problem. Watching was the purpose and the dignity in her life, waiting to hear the silence when the blood stopped crying from the earth.

August 6, 1986

Rural Route #6, Mercy, KS: Brian London (19), Julie Briggs, (16) and Christine Walsh (16) were killed when their car was struck head-on. The pickup was driven by Eliza Wing (41), who was driving while intoxicated. She was not injured. Molly Keane (16) survived, but remains hospitalized with a fractured hip, pelvis, femur, and trauma to the face, hands, and arms.

Now she understood what her father meant. The burden was upon her. She was aging, but not growing. Stinted by the blood. Always the blood between herself and others. She

decided that she would never marry nor bear children as long as the blood cried out. She could not be pulled in more than one direction, so she chose the journal. Her father had married and still Watched, raised his children while Watching, served as the Watcher until she herself was old enough to take the mantle. But this duality was not for her. There had been a man, once, who came to her in the cool nights, wooing her with his slippery tongue. They took long walks together in the cool of the evenings, and when she closed her eyes, she could still feel his smooth, dry hand in hers, still taste his kiss on her lips. He smelled like rain on freshly mown grass, and even now, when it rained, she smelled him. His words rolled like butter and his caresses almost coaxed her off her porch and into his bed, but she pulled away into watching, rejecting him.

For a time, he pursued her. He knocked at her door in the mornings, and called her name when she didn't answer. When the moon was large in the sky, she heard pebbles hitting her bedroom window. She could still see him standing there, a respectful distance away, not threatening, but pleading. The whites of his eyes were made brighter by the darkness of the night and the tint of his brown face. Although she looked out at him, she did not go out, and eventually he melted into the darkness.

He used to walk past her place, while she sat in her rocking chair on the porch, and at first he tried to talk to her, but finally her silence had discouraged him away, and she hadn't seen him now for many, many years. He had taken another, and was now a grown man with children of his own. The last time she saw him, he smiled at her. She didn't smile back.

Instead, she married this life, sitting on her porch, faithful to her calling, birthing journal entries covered with blood. Watching and listening and waiting for the silence.

June 30, 1989

518 Oak Street, Mercy, KS: Aileen Brody (24) was killed when she fell off her roof. She was on the roof to retrieve a baseball lodged in the gutter by her son, Connor, (6). He was present when she fell, but was not injured. She died instantly upon contact.

Her spirit told her that Editon wasn't to be Watcher, but she knew he had the sight. She kept him near her, teaching him in the ways of inner seeing. The two were partners in the spirit world; this much was certain. Anna always understood, although sometimes she frowned when the two of them were together. They were a circle and she was outside it. He attended tribal functions, but it was really under her tutelage that he learned to understand secret things. He told her his dreams and she told him their meanings. She showed him the sacred herbs and taught him their uses. Together they mourned their people, and together they rejoiced in small victories.

Still, he never saw the book, never knew her role or the part she had once considered for him. He whispered to her his fear, the sounds he heard in the middle of the night, and she taught him the chants to calm the noise, to bring on the inner quiet, even while the outside spirits groaned and wept.

One night several years ago, while Editon was still a teenager, he stumbled upon her porch, bleeding, his face and hands bloody and the end of his braid hanging ragged. She stopped Watching, then, as she acted.

Her spirit rose up larger than her body. She brought down a large pottery bowl, filled it with warm water, sprinkled herbs onto the surface, and stirred the mixture gently. She went to him, the soft cloth in her hand as she knelt before his shaking frame. She washed the back of his head where a gash continued to weep through his hair, humming softly to give him courage. The water turned red after her first pass at his wound, but she firmly pressed the cloth to it. He sucked in air through his clenched teeth as the healing water stung.

“What happened to you, my boy?” Her eyes sought the truth.

“They jumped me. Said I was a dirty Injun faggot. Said braids were for women, and did I want to be their bitch. Someone hit me over the head with something heavy, and some others held me down. They kept hitting me, and someone sawed off the end of my braid. They heard someone coming and scattered, otherwise...” his voice trailed off as he imagined how much worse it could have been.

He reached for it then, and felt the loss of his hair. “Shit.”

She pulled her hand away and let the crimson stain roll from her fingers onto the night earth.

“More blood. More blood to satisfy.”

December 7, 1993

Hwy 16 between Aurora, KS and Mercy, KS: Two more dead—James Fitzpatrick (17) and Steven Hogan (16). Michael Keane (17), was taken alive by ambulance with fractured ribs and collarbone, lacerations to face and hands. The automobile they were in was struck by semi-truck driven by Frank Bell of Laredo, Texas, who walked away from the crash, unharmed.

She only wrote what happened to the people of that place, of Mercy. Often, she felt vindication in addition to the quiet. The blood must be satisfied by the guilty. This is how it had always been.

But sometimes the innocent got in the way.

April 2, 1997

South Railroad Crossing, Mercy, KS: Linda MacDonald, (32), was killed instantly when her car was struck by the southbound train driven by Mark Freeman (59).

Her son, Todd (9), managed to free himself from the car before the train arrived and was not injured. Mark Freeman was unharmed.

Editon went to the Watcher first after Wilson made his proposal.

“His name is Joel Wilson, and he wants to hire me to help him clean up his father’s farmstead. He’s from Oklahoma, but his father was from Mercy. I’m to go with him to his father’s place outside of Mercy to hear exactly what he wants me to do.”

She was silent, weaving the strands of the rug together tightly. If he didn’t know her better, he would have thought she hadn’t heard. Instead he remained seated and still, his fingers interlaced on the weathered table, measuring his breaths, watching the strength in her hands as she examined the pattern of the rug.

“Do you want to go with him?” she finally asked.

“I’m broke, and need to raise some money if I want to go to college next year. He has money and wants to pay me for my labor.” he replied.

“That is not what I asked. I asked if you want to go with him. Does your heart warn you to stay away?”

Now it was Editon’s turn to be quiet. He searched inside himself, and felt a warning that Wilson was dangerous. Nothing about him seemed threatening—he could have been any one of several men Editon worked for in the past. Coupled with the warning, though, he felt a quickening of his pulse, an anticipation of what this intersection of destinies might mean for him.

“Yes, I want to go,” he answered.

“Fear is the ultimate enemy of our people,” she said, twisting and pulling the skein of string.

Editon rose from his seat without a word. He tucked his buck knife deep inside his boot and left his aunt’s house. He saw the path outlined before him, and his heart beat furiously as his mind conjured this journey’s end.

There was an ancient sorrow in that place. I felt it the moment I stepped out of the truck. Here was an old evil done to one who still cried for blood.

My boots crunched on the gravel, and I sniffed the air, the breeze lifting and releasing the hair around my face that had escaped my braid.

“This is no good,” I said.

Wilson looked at me with cool, calculating eyes.

“I already know that, Eddie. I brought you here to tell me WHY.”

He was an asshole. This was clear. I didn’t need my auntie to tell me this, but the path’s end still remained unclear.

“What exactly is it that you want me to do for you?” I asked, looking around at the broken down shed beside the house, the piles of tires overgrown with weeds, the tree sprouting between tractor wheels, the missing sections of fence, the roof caving into itself, unsure where he expected me to start.

“I didn’t bring you here for labor. I got others can handle that. What I need is answers, Eddie. And I hear tell you might have some.”

As he used the nickname Whites often chose for me, I felt my fists involuntarily clench. His voice was mocking, challenging. My body was ready for the fight. It took all the force of my will to unclench them, to follow the path before my feet.

I walked further down the gravel driveway toward the wreck of a house. It looked to be about a hundred years old, give or take a decade. Abandoned out here in the country, the front windows were long since broken out and birds had claimed the front porch as theirs, given the depth of droppings and the nests that poked out of eaves and exposed wood beams.

I was reaching for the doorknob when he spoke again from behind me.

“Don’t.”

I pulled my hand back and didn’t turn around.

“Now it’s your turn to tell me why.”

“You people aren’t allowed inside, Eddie.”

So. There it was, then. My kind was good enough to give answers, but not good enough to walk on the white man’s refuse. Even after all this time.

“Then I’ll tell you what I know from here, but it won’t be the complete version.” I turned, my black eyes meeting his blue ones in challenge. He looked away, and I felt a minor victory.

“Inside the house ain’t your business. It’s what’s outside I wanna know.”

I side-stepped him and moved off the porch, made my way around the house and into the

strand of trees. The spirit-song grew stronger, and I knew he was right. Whatever had happened in the house was the result of the presence in the trees. I stopped and breathed in through my nose, forced my heart to slow, willed my mind to release the hatred I felt for my employer.

Closing my eyes, I stood still amidst the presence. The chant began itself involuntarily from my closed mouth and I knew the ancient answers were forthcoming. I freed my tongue, allowing the words of my fathers to fill my mouth, felt the power of my ancestors even here, and knew I had nothing to fear. It was Wilson who should feel afraid.

He hadn't joined me in the trees. Instead, he stayed rooted to the porch, his lips pursed in arrogant disapproval. He feels safe there. The thought hovered above my consciousness. The chant formed itself in my mind, and the words slipped from my mouth like honey. My body picked up the dance and I felt the power building as the words and my movement became perfectly aligned.

I saw the past, saw what had happened, knew the cries of horror and pain as the men raped and raped and raped her. I felt the hot blood running between her legs, leaving her body where they cut her, knew the dust had drunk her blood, holding it here, saw the men laughing as she died, not knowing what would come from this act. She was a worthless Indian girl—who would even know?

But some had known. They each whispered their secret to others, who knew the truth. Her beauty was laughed about as the men peered through hazy cigar smoke and slopped glasses of whisky without ice. Her story was suspected by women who saw their men's hungry eyes when they watched her walk past, and then noticed her absence. Her murder was confessed in a dark closet to a man of the cloth who found 3 hail Marys for 60 days sufficient to excuse the sin in the eyes of his God.

They had remained silent when my people came to them for answers.

“Have you seen her?” they asked, desperate for answers. The whites shrugged their shoulders and went back to their business, not troubled in the slightest by the missing Indian girl.

“Her name is Watawin—she has been missing since yesterday,” they asked the priest, but he glanced at the image of the suffering Christ and said nothing.

And, worst of all, I saw a woman discovering the dead girl's slim silver bracelet in the pocket of her husband's coat the night she disappeared. She knew whose it was—she had seen it hundreds of times. She buried it right here, in the trees, and never said a word to anyone.

“Have you seen her? Her mother is alone,” they said to that woman, right here on that porch. But she glanced away darkly and told them she'd be sure to let them know if she heard anything, never hinting at what her heart already suspected.

No one from Mercy sought justice. No one stood in Watawin's place. So her blood cried justice instead.

The guilty men had buried her body elsewhere, in a shallow grave. The coyotes dug her up and feasted on her remains, but it wasn't her body they had offended on this spot. Here her spirit remained, wreaking the vengeance her blood demanded.

One of them met his untimely end almost immediately, when his house burned to the ground, taking his wife and young son to the grave with him.

Another one almost survived, but turned to alcohol to avoid the guilt. He met his death through a drunken stupor, drowning in his own vomit.

I saw their stories unfolding like scarlet ribbons in my mind and could sense the longest strand unfurling before me.

The last one, Wilson, had lived here, in this house, but fled soon after the burial. He left behind his silent wife and innocent children to pay his price. The wife soon lost her life in a tragic farming accident, and the children went to live with relatives far away from Mercy.

But Wilson—the perpetrator of her death--escaped the blood demand and started a new life and a new family far away from this place. Joel Wilson, the man who had hired me, casually leaning against the rotting porch support, a superior sneer painting his face, was a child of his second union, come back to claim his inheritance.

It was for him the blood sought. His life begat death in Mercy. Her spirit cried out from the earth in this very spot, and the Great Spirit complied with her wishes.

All this I saw in a moment, and as easily as it had begun, the ancient chanting dance ceased. I looked at the white man on the porch and knew it a second before he did, but there was no saving him, even had I wanted to.

The center beam he was leaning on gave way beneath his weight. He looked straight at me as the roof caved in, pounding him down through the rotted floorboards and into the earth. The coroner told me later that he had been driven down past his knees in the soft fertile ground like a railroad spike, his spinal column driven into his brain.

I went back to that spot in the trees weeks later, but the presence was gone. She had at last reaped the final blood at the site of her undoing, and her blood rested in peace.

June 21, 1999

Hwy. 2, 10 miles outside Mercy, KS: Joel Wilson (41) was killed.

And the blood was satisfied.

So. Editon was not the Watcher, but he had ultimate sight. It was through his eyes that she had seen justice done. His eyes that had been present as the blood finally sighed its last.

The silence was palatable. It rolled over her, a cleansing wash. Pure. For the first time in her life, she heard the hush of peace. As if her mind had been clenched into a fist forever, and the fingers now unfurled into slack release.

She closed the book and placed it in the box. She now knew why no other Watcher had been born—there would never be the need for another. At least not in Mercy.

Brown, with a dash of red

By Rhonda Betzold

What color am I today?
Today I am brown, the color of earth,
the color of chocolate,
of coffee with creamer
and deer
and Leslie's eyes.

But my shoes are red.
I wanted to be red today.
I tried to find red in my closet,
to write with a red pen,
but it didn't fit me
today.

Because I smell like
freshly turned earth
like cocoa puffs and vanilla.
I wish for strawberries
and cardinal songs,
but brown it is.

Downtown brown.
Upside down brown.
Muddy brown,
Stone Mountain brown—
or is that red like Georgia dirt?
Brown leather baseball mitt,
the smack of a ball firmly caught.

Bruised apple brown
wheat bread brown
fresh from the oven and smoothed
with creamy yellow butter.

But my shoes are red.

Maybe I'm like a cut flower,
and the red will work its way up my legs
as into a stalk
pooling the red in my petals
and my hair.
Or maybe they're the only red I need,
today.

I walk the brick sidewalk

by Christin Ones

I walk the brick sidewalk

click click click

excitement growing

I look my best

in my red heels and black dress
unafraid to be alone

the marquee looms into vision
large letters proclaiming stars

lines of art-loving people

wait to enter

interesting

diverse

I show my ticket

and am welcomed inside

my eyes take in rich carpet

curving staircases

the theater is filling up

I glimpse a twinkling chandelier

hanging high above

as I find the plush red seat

that belongs to me

I glance at my neighbors

curious

I wonder if they wonder about me

the murmur of expectant voices

fills my ears

snippets of conversation

pictures into unknown lives

the lights dim

the murmur falls

to a hush of anticipating whispers

and then

to nothing

the pure silence is broken

by notes lovingly played

I am engulfed

I close my eyes
and drink in the sound
absorb it into myself
music feeding my mind
causing images to flit
across my imagination

the well-played notes
tell a story
unique to each listener
provide an escape from the mundane
the everyday

the busyness of our lives fades
as the melody and the harmony
tease each other
then combine
in beautiful synchronicity
we are transported to other times
other places

as we sit
together

a family of strangers



Dad

by Christin Ones

I have sisters, a lot of sisters, five to be precise. People always say, “Your dad really wanted a boy, huh?” And I always say, “No, he actually likes having girls.” My mom always says, “We specialized, it's easier that way.” And my dad agrees.

Living in a houseful of women would be trying for some men, but not my dad. He's an easygoing, hard-working guy, who doesn't mind the noise. And let me tell you, it gets noisy. Every Sunday we crowd around Mom and Dad's dining room table to have family dinner and sometimes it seems like we are all talking at once: telling stories, laughing, shrieking—we aren't quiet talkers either. We can be LOUD. Often Dad joins in, though not as frequently as any of us girls, but every so often he gets caught thinking his own thoughts. We will have discussed, hashed out, dissected, and worn thin a subject—such as what the plans are for next week—when, ten minutes later, during a slight lull in the conversation, Dad will ask, “So what's going on next week?” We just laugh and fill him in.

My dad never saw it as a disadvantage that he didn't have any sons. Sure, when we need to move a piano it might take more of us than if we were boys, but the job gets done and that's all that matters to him. Dad always included us in the “man jobs” around the house. I have roofed, done electrical work, gutted fish, and laid foundation. My sister, Natalie,

goes hunting with Dad—which I would never do. There are lots of dads, who I won't name, who would never include their daughters in these manly activities. I am lucky to have a dad that couldn't care less about those social norms. Working alongside my dad boosted my confidence and instilled in me a work ethic that I wouldn't give up for anything.

Dad isn't perfect and he would never claim to be, but he's the best dad a girl could ask for and each one of my sisters would loudly agree.

Weeding
by Christin Ones

sometimes
when I'm weeding
I feel sorry for the weeds

they are fighters
those weeds
warriors claiming whatever soil they can find
vanquishing weaker plants
never giving up
even after a routing by a calloused hand
they rally and march back into battle

they worked so hard
to grow strong and tall
stretching to catch the sun's sustaining rays
snatching cool drops of water
whenever they get the chance

they tenaciously cling as I pull and yank
tossing them into a brown paper grave
I hum cheerily
as I kill them by the dozens...

yes, sometimes I feel sorry for the weeds

sometimes
but not today

I am not good enough
by Christin Ones

I am not good enough

I'm too big here
 too small there
 too loud
 too boring
 too religious
too immature

this is society's voice
 thrusting it's nonsensical norms on me
 ingraining them so deeply
 my own brain repeats them

 the world tells me
I don't match up
 to the ideal
 of touched-up magazine models
as real as plastic Barbies
 feet formed
 for perpetual heel-wearing

it tells me
 I should act my age

and lower the volume of my voice
“seriously,” it says
as I do something stupid
“grow up”

it tells me
someday my prince will come
and if he doesn't
well...
something's gotta be wrong

it tells me
that no one listens
that no one cares
that everyone laughs
behind my back
that I don't even want to know
what's being said

so
I compartmentalize
divvying myself
into digestible pieces
to be brought out
one by one
according to the eyes of the moment

thus I have lived
too timid to be me
too scared of what others think
too worried about the watching world
(like it even knows I exist)

but now
it's time
it's time to take a stand
time to show my true feelings
my real personality

I will not give in
to any perceived notion of normality
its different to everyone anyway

I will be myself
all of myself
not a little part here

and another part there
 here a part
 there a part
 everywhere a...
you get the idea

I will be my whole self everywhere

I will be the conservative homeschool girl
 the caring, progressive teacher
 the big sis
 the good friend
the Bible-reading, church-going believer
 who may not agree with you
 but will treat you with respect
 —no matter what

I will embrace my immaturity
 love my quirks
 unashamedly use my booming loud voice
 to proclaim that
 singleness is OK
 I will flaunt
 my so-called disproportionate attributes
 as I walk proud through my life

I will be me

what about you?

People Watching

by Christin Ones

the view from here is colorful, unique
great throngs of people made in many hues
their day-dreamed stories does my mind bespeak
it's like an endless play without the cues

all unsuspecting actors come and go
within their eyes the mood of each discerned:
a small boy asking questions face aglow

tall man with earbuds in, so unconcerned

their friends right there, teens text as though obsessed

chihuahua leading owner with delight

a stone-like face masks feelings much repressed

young love still clear in wrinkled hands held tight

I sit and watch humanity pass by

a symphony of music to my eye

The Sweet Smells of Deodorant

by Amy Lovely

Thank goodness for deodorant
Long rides on busses with broken windows
Teenage boys after PE
Crowded elevators, especially in the summer

Thank goodness for deodorant
A hug from your favorite uncle in July
A boy's weekend
A first date

Thank goodness for deodorant
Mom's house full of boys
The car ride home from a baseball game
A packed lake house

I am from...

by Amy Lovely

I am from music baby, threadbare and nearly headless,
Cold, creamy monkey tails and frozen grapes in the summer.
Practicing my "curly writing" instead of taking a nap
And, much to Mom's loathing, reading Inspector Gadget nearly every night

I am from yelling, fighting, listening, scared and hidden in the dark of night,
A divided life, being in two places at once, growing up too fast.
Being passed off like luggage every Saturday morning.

I am from cool damp grass beneath my bare feet,
Stained hands from collecting walnuts before the squirrels can hide them all away.
Watching the miracle of birth in the barn and history lessons at the dinner table.
Purple and white irises along the fence, cotton candy pink peonies, and a sweet-smelling lilacs bush

I am from the cinnamon smell of homemade apple pies,
Fresh picked, by my own hands, sweet corn and tomatoes with fried okra.
Peas that soar effortlessly and dive into a glass of milk.
from "That's what little legs are for"
"If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." and
"Have you checked your oil lately?"

I am from homesickness with a love of independence,
A newly formed family complete with Thanksgiving dinner.

I am from being hit, bitten and peed on but loving the kids anyway.
From falling in love with being in love, losing touch with family and friends,
fights and giving in, bracing for the worst, running for my life, long cold nights, lonely
tears
Bouncing from place to place with no real home,
The generosity of others with open hearts and open doors.

I am from an online profile that started as a joke, long nights of conversation, a trip to the
ER, princess for a day, and strong shoulders and always open arms.

Feline Groovy

by Rosie Georgen

It is one of those endless series of categorical questions we use to classify people: are you a dog person or a cat person? Oh, there are the diplomats who say, "I like both." You realize they say this just so they don't piss off 1) the owner of an anti-social mastiff or 2) the owner of a psychotic cat.

And then there are the stridently partial who wear their affection not only on their sleeves but on their cars, their walls, their chests, and their skin.

Just the other day I saw a bumper sticker that said, "I heart my Shitzu." Really? Awww... I am touched. Your Shitzu must be very proud of you.

Another sticky message proudly commanded, "Honk if you love Himalayans." So I honked and the person driving the car flipped me off.

I yelled back, "No, really lady. I love Himalayans. I married one! Got married in Katmandu, too." Evidently she didn't believe me because she mouthed something that through the traffic that sounded like, "Luck to you."

"Thanks! I hope you have luck, too! Especially with your Tibetan honey!"

Later in the day, after I left Pets Mart with two bags of Worlds Greatest Cat Litter, one bag of Science Diet for older cats with bladder issues, one bag of Kitten Chow, a dime bag of cat nip, two jars of Pounce treats, a small rhinestone tiara, a dozen fuzzy pseudo mice, and three bags of Purina Seafood Favorites, I bumped into a lovely lass sporting a huge brightly colored tattoo that spanned her right arm from elbow to shoulder. Her stingy dishwater blond locks were pulled back with a velvet scunchi that approximated cheetah fur. Her ribbed white tank top proclaimed, "Ask me about my Persians." Well, if I honk for Himalayans I may as well ask about the Persians.

Within the outlines of the tattoo were inscribed the names Sniggles, Pooky, Licorice, and Johnny Cakes. Now, these could be the names of family members (her children, nieces, or nephews) but unless the chick had a penchant for oddity, I took a leap of faith and asked, "Are these," I ventured to ask pointing to the multi-colored hues on her arm, "the names of your pets?"

"My pets? My pets?" She sounded simultaneously wounded and disgusted. "These," she stated with great gravitas, "are the names of my children."

"And do your children have four paws and a tail"? I did not think it sounded that sarcastic.

After I picked myself up off the pavement, and admired her Tyson-like finesse, she duly

apologized for decking me and added, “Why, yes, they do! How did you know?”

“It was merely an inspired guess.”

“Would you like to see their pictures? Here.”

She pulled out her phone and proceeded to show me a photographic menagerie of feline pulchritude that could be published in *Cat Fancy*. With each photo that flashed on the screen, she had a story to accompany each image as well as a story about cute thing they did, much like a doting mother would gush about her daughter’s dance recital or a father bragging about his son’s game winning home run.

She beamed.

“This is Johnny Cakes with his punkin’ hat on from last Halloween. And look at Licorice in the background giving him the evil eye. Licorice is the real genius in the family.”

I stared closely at picture of Licorice. His eyes were red, surely a sign of genius. I thought to myself, “What a braggart. While, I bet my Felix could wipe Licorice’s butt in a Kitty Quiz Bowl.”

She broke my reverie with another picture from her electronic album. And another, and another. I was being held hostage by a feline fanatic the likes of I had never meet before.

“And here is one of Sniggles on his third birthday. Oh, my baby Sniggles! He so loved his cake!”

Well, who wouldn’t? She had it specially made in the shape of a carp and it was filled with Friskies liver pate, salmon surprise, freeze dried mice with a garnishment of assorted goldfish. Not the Pepperidge farm variety but the genuine article.

“And, oh, wait till you see this one!” she cooed.

I felt inadequate. I did not have any pictures of my cats anywhere on my person. I harbored nothing but maternal memories of dead mice delivered to my pillow and piles of hairballs I had lovingly cleaned up just like a parent performing yeoman’s duty by mopping up the puke of a sick child.

I love my cats (my children) as much as I could ever love another person. They are so vulnerable so sweet, so soothing, and so bloody expensive to take care of.

Guess I shouldn’t have purchased that rhinestone tiara for Mama Kitty after all.

If Robert DeNiro was an advocate for traffic safety...

by Rosie Georgen

“Heh, you. Yeah, you who just ran through the red light like ya got a hot date with Sophia Loren and your little guy is doin’ the happy dance. Heh, you! Yeah, I’m talking to you. And you lady. What’s the deal with speeding through the yellow warning light? Brad Pitt gonna meet you for cocktails at the Ritz? Fat chance. And you, you pinhead who thinks a stop sign is for every body else ‘cept you cuz you’re texting your bff (whatever the hell dat means) about some OMG BFD LOL bullshit.

Here’s is what you all need. You need to go back to kindy garden and learn your colors, your numbers, and your shapes. Or do I gotta mess you up a bit? Kinda rearrange your facial features so to speak. Ya get my drift, snowflake?



Foist of all, a red light means stop. Not go through the intersection like you friggin own it. You know what I mean? And a stop *sign* is also red. FYI, Red is one of dose, you know, primary colors and a sign is usually a hunk of metal on a pole screwed into the ground or sumpthin’ like dat. And this STOP sign gots 8 sides, which if you are color impaired, also means stop cuz it’s an oct-o-gon. Octo means eight in some dead language.

Here let me draw one for you, on your arm with my sharpie that’s really sharp. Really sharp.

And about dem numbers on signs with the words “Speed limit.” Here’s what dey mean. In your car you have a bunch of numbers right above the steering column. Put em’ all together and they are called a Speedometer and it measures how fast your car is goin’. It has little numbers that go from 0 to 190 if you have a fancy car like me.

Now, stay with me on dis. If the sign on the road says, and I'll slow this down for you, cretin, 35 Miles Per Hour means you should be driving at 35 miles per hour and here's the real miracle of the deal: all you gotta do is match the number on the sign with the number on your speedometer. Thirty-five, not 65, moron. Capeche?

And another thing, don't tailgate me or cut me off. Evah...Sure, I know how it is. You're in some big ass hurry to get to the liquor store or you need to get home cuz you think your old lady is keeping time with the Rotowherever and I am in your way because, you guessed it, I am driving the speed limit. All I am saying is don't get too close to me because, well I am a nice guy, but I got grandkids to protect.

Anyway, that's all I got.

Take care of yourself, okay?



WO & CO

(Whispy Onion & Company)

Courtney Stevens. Jed Givens, Pam Vap,
Melitta Wilson, Michelle Bruland

Not as Easy as It Sounds

by Pam Vap

As soon as the bell rings, I explain
to my seventh grade English class
that there is only one rule:
keep your pencil moving.

Today we will free write.
We will liberate the writer
within all of us.
We can write anything. Anything!

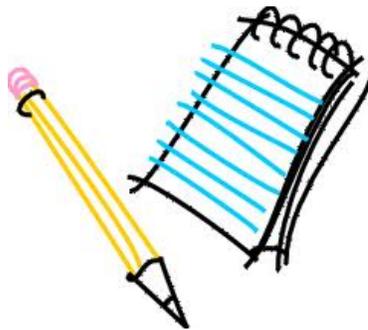
Be bold, I advise. Do not
allow your pencil to dawdle.

And I, I brag,
will write along with you.

Begin!

The clock ticks.
My pencil inches along.
I tremble at the thought
of the ideas which will float
down and land like open-winged butterflies
on my students' pages. I guide them
on an uncertain adventure, point the way
to an unknown land.

I glance up to see Ethan
staring back at me. Jacob
is bending a paper clip. And Araceli
is doing her math homework.



Nick

by Pam Vap

At each end of the block
a police car barricades the road,
five more patrol cars assemble in a stiff row,
the ambulance hovers like a chief at the head
and a fire truck looms on the side.
uniformed men move seriously,
everyone crouches, nobody conceals their weapons.
The swat team, decked out in their bulky bullet-proof vests,
jumps from the dark jeep to enter into the ring.
Three newsmonger television vans nose their way
to the edge of the scene. All other onlookers are unseen,
trapped haphazardly in their homes or unable to get home.

The floodlights glare at the house. But the house,
the house remains quiet, aloof and quiet,
a mint green ranch with clean white shutters.
A row of soft evergreens lines the foundation
and a few early crocus and daffodils huddle
at the base of the porch steps, closed up for the night.
Interrupting, the megaphone blares:

C'mon, Nick. Come on out, man.
Come out with your hands in the air.
C'mon, Nick, we want to help you.

Inside my house next door, I kneel under the window,
listening keenly through the open screen. Every sound,
from the megaphone scrapes the air like a scream.
And I remember how a few weeks ago on Highway 46
a state trooper threatened me with his flashing red lights
and warned me into compliance. I remember his swagger
and his heavy belt loaded down with authorized equipment,
the wide-brimmed hat, the shiny metal badges,
the sound of his hard voice, "I'm just out here saving lives."

C'mon, Nick. Answer your phone, Nick.
We don't want to hurt you, Nick. Talk to us.

Still under the window I sit and grip the edge of the pane,
wondering if the young man is alive or already dead,
wondering if the manual at the police academy
advised that the negotiator should use the distraught person's name

over and over again as a tactic, a useful strategy.
Wondering if the sound of one's name over and over again
is annoying or comforting or distracting.
Wishing I could tell Nick that I will not blame him
if he doesn't come out.

C'mon, man. C'mon, Nick. Come out and talk to us, Nick.
We can't help you unless you help us.

Wishing I could tell Nick that I'm sorry,
sorry that we have nothing much to save him with.
My whispered prayers will not do it. The officer's training
seems useless; it cannot save him. None of the equipment,
none of the concern is going to cut it.
Certainly the assault rifles of the SWAT team will not rescue him,
nor the massive fire truck, nor the impressive line of patrol cars.
Not a religion, not a lighted candle, not a tear or a smile,
not a psych evaluation, or a counselor's couch, a cell or a warm bed,
not a program or a meeting, a pamphlet or a friend,
not a whole medical team, not a prescription, a band-aid, a street drug,
a mother with a hug, a group hug, a hand, not a kind word or a hard blow,
a threat, a promise, a plea, a consequence means nothing.

All we have is a fucking megaphone and his name.
It is not enough.

But, please, Nick, please make it through anyway.
Answer that damn megaphone voice repeating, repeating
the only thing we have to save you with. Your name.

Phillip Dugan

by Jed Givens

Phillip Dugan was far and away the meanest S.O.B in the 6th grade. As a lowly 5th grader I would tremble in fear if our paths ever crossed. At this impressionable time in my youth he had a legendary status. There are a few things I know to be positively true: I am sure that he used to beat up little boys' dads just to give himself a challenge. I remember going to the zoo and seeing the rhinoceros' and thinking they had nothing on Philip Dugan. He had red hair and an irrational amount of freckles covering his entire Herculean body. His green boogers had bigger biceps than I did. He was scary. He was the protagonist of my nightmares.

When I was in 5th grade I was exposed to the world of fighting -- fists to the nose and knees to the groin kind of fighting. For whatever reason the only slightly bigger 6th graders challenged my friends and I to a duel on the playground. When you're in 5th grade you have a tremendously small capacity for rational thought, thus staging a bloody fight on the playground seems like a swell idea, like something Einstein would come up with while sitting in his most comfortable chair in his basement. As it would turn out, I didn't simply lack a simple level of intelligence, I discovered I also had a minor deficiency in the area of courage.

I was a pretty scrawny 5th grader. I weighed less than most of my friends and that was even with my blue-rimmed glasses on, which I'm pretty sure helped me finally reach triple digits. "Yay! 100 pounds!" To add to my awkward nature I had a somewhat oversized head. I'd trounce around on the playground, randomly losing my balance, falling all over myself like some drunk out of the local watering hole. I had no sense of style so I had a bowl cut (!) with a Nike swoosh carved into the back of my head. Unfortunately as I look back, it resembled more of a check mark than anything. This was probably what drew Phillip's attention to me and prompted him to declare me as his first murder victim.

I can vividly recall being way too scared to participate in the fight. I went to a small Catholic school, but my class was fairly large. We outnumbered the 6th graders and so I saw this as an opportunity to stick to the sidelines. "I'll let you guys take care of them. I'll make sure to watch for teachers. Promise."

I climbed to the top of the jungle gym to get a better view of the melee. I sat there, legs crossed and arms in the air, cheering on my friends. I had escaped the dangerous battlefield. Wouldn't you know this would all change when freckle-faced Dugan spotted me.

I'm sure I screamed.

Phillip Dugan was climbing up the jungle gym. More accurately, he was coming to destroy me. While I sat there, frozen like Mona Lisa, I began to pray to God.

“Lord, oh Lord of...hosts, pleasepleasepleasepleasepleaseplease I’m so sorry for my horrible sins! I promise, if your can get me out of this, I’ll give back the \$11 I stole from Grandma Lucy. After all, that was the money she made from the garage sale that she worked so hard on. God, please. Kill Phillip Dugan for me. Isn’t this how it works!?!”

I guess God answered my prayer in the form of my own clumsiness. As Phillip approached me I uncrossed my legs, got to my feet and did the only thing I could: I started to run. Running on a jungle gym is not advised, particularly when you’re me and you lack the grace and balance that is required to do such a feat. God answered my prayer in His own funny way, having me take a weird step, prompting me to fall right through one of the gaping holes that highlighted the jungle gym’s dangerous side. As I fell to the ground, now below Phillip’s swinging fists of fury, I quickly hopped up and began again running for my life. I had narrowly escaped death. God is good!

Phillip was pretty pissed that he missed an opportunity to decapitate someone and as I looked back I could see him with a nasty look upon his face. His nose was all contorted and his ears began to take the shape of camping tents. I saw him stick his head up into the air and I swear he howled at the moon. It was in that instance that I was sure Phillip Dugan was a werewolf. Not in the literal sense, because we all know werewolves don’t exist (or do they?), but more in the figurative sense, as in, he gave me nightmares and seemed to have rather large teeth.

From my recollection, my class won the fight. I’m not entirely sure how we, or better, they, managed to defeat the legend that is Phillip Dugan, but I’d like to think that as he stared down at my weak and fragile body below him from the top of the jungle gym, that some friend of mine picked him up and flipped him over their head or something great like that. I imagine Phillip turning over and over, finally knowing what it’s like to be scared. I hope he cried like a newborn baby, waiting for its diaper to be changed.

Luckily I was able to avoid Phillip Dugan for the rest of my days in the 5th grade. After that year I didn’t see much of him. He was around, but just not as scary anymore. He went on to Junior High, no longer the biggest kid on the playground. When Phillip turned 16 he dropped out of school. I remember on his first day of freedom he drove by the school in his car. He drove this rusted, brown, ugly, old station wagon. I know for a fact that the stereo system he installed cost more than the car itself. I was in Math class and he drove by, really slowly, blaring his music, bullying us one final time with his noise pollution. My math teacher rolled his eyes. My friends shuddered in fear. I just stared out the window, feeling sorry for Phillip.

I’m all grown up now. I have one more college degree than Phillip does and one more job than him too. In that moment of 5th grade terror I didn’t have courage, but I wonder if now, Phillip would trade me places. If he’d give up being the tough kid in 6th grade for some sense of purpose in life. I wonder how much courage he has now, and I wonder if that moment on the playground ended up giving me mine for today. I wonder if Phillip wished things had worked out differently, and I wonder why I’m glad they didn’t.

Seclusion
by Courtney Stevens

She sits, all day, every day.
Television turned off and phone on silent.
Cigarette smoke lingering in the air.
Curtains closed, camouflaging the sun.
She sits. Wasting away.
Her figure fading to a mere ninety pounds.
Clothes slipping off her frail frame.
Veins protruding from her body.
Yet, she continues to sit. Mind astray.
Memories are blurred and present thoughts intermix.
Voices take control, paranoia creeps in.
Life slowly fades away.
But still she sits.

An Affair to Remember
by Courtney Stevens

I am having an affair... a love affair to be exact.
On sunny days he calls my name, and I can't help but come running.
What would my beloved do if he found out?
It's not that I don't love him, believe me, I do.
He is strong and secure.
He lights up whenever I touch him.
But my affair is so pleasurable, the desire is there.
The high he provides me is one that can't be duplicated at home.
Everything I want, I receive, and I don't have to push any buttons in return.
Don't get me wrong, I love my treadmill, I do.
But our relationship will never compare to the affair I'm having with running outdoors.

Me

by Courtney Stevens

It is funny how you can somewhat consider yourself as a creative individual, yet bottom out when you're given the opportunity to be creative.

If you gave me a paintbrush, a canvas, and an hour, I could create.

However... you gave me a pen, a notebook, an hour, and I cannot create.

Maybe because the painting would be **abstract**.

It would encompass the *colors my emotions bleed*,
and *twirl like the ideas* that drown my mind.

The lines and shapes would be **rigid and angry**,
yet shapely and comforting.

Everything would eventually collide into one
twisted masterpiece.

Now, tell me, how is it possible to transform that into words?

Untitled "Chapter 1"

by Michelle Bruland

“Oh come on! Get the hell out of the way! Why is it when I’m in a hurry and want to pass someone, the car in the left lane is going the exact same speed as the car in the right lane? Nothing but idiots on the road. Move, I have things to do,” I yelled raising my arms and probably looking crazy. The blue minivan signaled, waited for the Toyota Corolla to pass, and got in the right lane. “Finally,” I said glaring at her as I sped passed her stupid kid-filled minivan. “Thanks for letting me get around you, idiot!” I looked forward and on my left appeared the 1940’s hotel that some developer remodeled into apartments in the 70’s. “I hate this! Why does my mother always ask me to do this crap when she’s out of town? I swear. Just because I’m the only single one, she thinks I have nothing better to do in the evening. I should be home; my poor dog has been stuck inside for hours and needs to go out. And, of course, Mr. Johnson is outside smoking those cigars; he’s gross!” I flipped a u-turn and parked right in front of the green canopy that read “The Gardens” and jumped out.

Nodding, I tried to rush past Johnson with a quick, “Evening, Mr. Johnson.”

But, he placed his hand holding his soggy stogie on my shoulder and slowed me down, “Little Ms. Keri Daniels, you know that was illegal,” he said looking over his square, brown, plastic frames. “You okay? You look tired; are you on your way to see your Aunt? I haven’t seen her all day.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry, I don’t have too much time to chat?” I replied trying to scoot closer to the door.

“Oh don’t worry about it. I gotta get back to my wife cause she still has pain in the one leg. The doctors keep giving her those little orange pills, and I keep telling them they don’t help much cause she still wakes up in the middle of the night with aches. But, the doc keeps telling us to give it time. Plus, my no-good son brought over his three kids to terrorize the building, while he took potential wife number four to dinner. You’d think that boy would meet a nice girl like you, but no, more harlots and more kids. He needs a nice girl like you. Hey, why don’t you bring Pauline over, and we’ll have some coffee and chat until Bill gets home?”

I pushed my way through the door and jumped onto the elevator, thanking the heavens the door opened, and said, “I’m sorry to hear Grace isn’t feeling well, but I am sure she will be fine. I have to run, maybe we can stop by another day. Good luck with your son and grandkids!” Shut, shut, shut, please just shut!

“I’m sure my son would love to see—“

“Today just isn’t my day,” I mumbled counting the dings for each floor. “Six, seven, love to see me yeah, like that is what I want to marry, ten, eleven...Ping!” The doors slid open revealing the green and orange wallpaper with gold embossing, the brown linoleum tile

that had been the same since the renovations, and a beautifully crafted sideboard table, which did not fit the rest of the décor, held a dusty plastic flower arrangement. The recessed lighting added an eerie ambiance. Putting the key into the lock of apartment 1128, I felt uneasy. Why are all the lights off? “Aunt Pauline? Where are you? Did you go to sleep already?”

I threw my purse on the card table functioning as the dining room table and made my way to the living room of the small apartment. Flicking on the table lamp did nothing to quiet the silent tension of the room. I brushed past the itchy flower print sofa with coffee stains and cigarette burns to her bedroom door, one of only three doors in the apartment. I whispered, “Aunt Pauline? I felt the side panel next to the door and hit the switch. Sprawled on the floor next to her bed laid my Aunt Pauline.

I should have rushed to call 911 or for help, but I just stared focusing on the thinning of her nightgown. The baby blue knee length pajama had an opaque collar with a lacey fringe that had been worn to practically see through. The collar was flapped up against her graying cheek. Her left arm was stretched out under the bed, while the right was hidden beneath the lifeless remains. Her blue-veined stick legs were curled close to her body like she was trying to keep warm, while her pink fuzzy slippers seemed too happy for this occasion.

“I’ve been waiting for you” a voice said right next to my ear as a large, callused hand covered my mouth.

“Don’t Mess with Me”

By Michelle Bruland

I just flicked a bug;
he was crawling on me.
To close for comfort,
along the ground, he should be.
He soared through the air,
and I heard a crunch.
Someone walked over him
and gave a bird its lunch.



“Random Day in the Life of a Teacher”

By Michelle Bruland

I stood at the door to room 314 and said, “Hello” to each student, while handing them their individually decorated manila folder, the standard routine for our Writing Skills class. Each folder showed characteristics of the individuals. Blank with just a name lightly penciled on the tab, a large pot leaf with the quote “legalize marijuana,” or colorful names written in bubble letters. The students were as different as their folders, but all complained about the frigid temperature of the room. “This school is so ghetto. What we don’t have heat?” Or, “It’s so cold. Can I get my coat out of my locker?” I smiled and responded with a “you’ll be fine” kind of comment and waited for the stragglers who pushed the bell time to its limits.

“Good afternoon, how’s everybody’s day been?” varied responses emerged. Things like: crap, fine, or gotta a good nap in got thrown around, and we began the last block of the day with our brainstorming session. Everyday I took a different approach to get my students to think about writing. This day, I chose the infamous “Turkey Story” debate, which forced my students to look at perspective. With the “Turkey Debate” finished, we were ready for writing time.

Now the set up of Writing Skills is important for the rest of this story so let me explain a few things. Writing Skills is what my school district calls a recovery class, or in leman’s terms, a make up class. Each student enrolled had failed at least one of his or her previous English classes. The reasons were as assorted as the class. One student disliked English and any homework pertaining to English, so he never “did anything.” Another student had a baby the previous semester, which forced her to miss two months

of class, way above the absentee policy. A couple of the young ladies had children and missed too many days for sick children or childcare glitches. Other students, behind in grade level, could not keep up with the required work and fell further behind increasing the school's achievement gap. Some students skipped, while others slept in class, or former Honors English students hit a wall with the work, or simply didn't want to work that hard. One student had spent the previous two years in Douglas County Youth Center (DCYC) or juvy. Ultimately, each student needed to make up his or her credit. This diversity formed our Writing Skills Winter semester of 2008.

Liked I'd said before the class had started like any other. We finished our turkey talk and moved to the writing portion of the class. During class, the students worked on their portfolios, a collection of narrative, descriptive, persuasive, or expository pieces. One student in particular, we'll call him Ned, was a special case. Ned had autism. Normally, this played no part in our daily routine. Ned, the class, and I all had an understanding. If Ned did his work, he could print two pictures of his favorite game characters for his book. He could also research the newest gaming console and games on the market. Most of the time, this partnership worked well. The other students didn't complain, and Ned did his assignments on time and without complaint. Turkey day, however, did not run as smooth.

I had just begun my teacher/student conferences when I noticed Ned skipped the writing portion of our deal and was researching the new Sega system. I could not let this slide because the class knew the requirements, deals, and contracts I had made with each one of them, and they would not have it if one person got "away with something." I walked over to Ned and asked, "Why are we not writing?"

"I am not writing today," was his short curt reply.

"You know I can't let you sit here and not hold up your end of the bargain. You have to write something for your portfolio today, we have a conference tomorrow. Plus, you won't receive your daily points."

He slowly turned his head in my direction and glanced up, "How much do I have to write?"

"Well you have at least four paragraphs to write today for your Sonic story. That's what you wrote on your calendar. It's what you said you would do."

“How long is each paragraph?” he shouted grabbing the attention of his classmates.

“The class decided 3-5 sentences was elementary school, 5-7 was middle school, and 7-10 was high school or adult level, so you need around 7-10 sentences per paragraph.”

With this last statement, Ned pushed his chair backwards put his hands on his legs and yelled, “I can’t write 7-10 sentence paragraphs.” I was about to ask if he needed a cool down minute, something else we’d worked out early in the semester, but within seconds, Ned, hands still on his legs, stretched his neck as far as it would go and sprung from his chair, with the grace of a seal, and throwing himself onto the floor. How was I to proceed? I have had a student with autism ever year I’ve taught, but I had never had one explode like this. I stared at Ned lying prostrate on the floor, muttering something about sentences, when the class exploded.

“Oh my gosh, why you on the floor?”

“That’s childish!”

“That’s the funniest thing I’ve seen!” All 27 other students were laughing and hitting each other as they looked at Ned. Bad turned to worse when Ned realized the class was laughing at him. He jumped up and got nose-to-nose with Jasmine and yelled, “Don’t laugh at me!”

“You’d better get outta my face,” Jasmine said rising from her chair. I’m thinking, “Oh shiz...it’s—about—to—go—down.”

“Jasmine sit. Ned hallway. Now. Move.” With a light touch on Ned’s shoulder, he moved toward the door with his head down. I turned to my class and said, “WRITE.”

Turning around they began writing.

After a short conversation with Ned in the hallway, he explained his frustration from earlier in the day. He had to write an essay in another class and was upset. I came into the room, grabbed his folder containing his calendar, and we reworked his portfolio plan. Today, he only needed to work on two paragraphs. One problem solved. Ned walked into the room, sat down, and began writing (oblivious to the stares and whispers of the other students). He promptly opened Word and got started.

“Jasmine, please come here.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“I just want to chat,” my common response to statements where student’s claim no responsibility. Jas and I talked for a few moments about how to better handle situations when people invade our personal space—at least in school, and she came up with her own action plan for possible future instances. The two of us walked into the quiet room talking about her baby boy, when from the back of the room James piped up, “Hey, Ms. B. how long is each paragraph?”

“Really James? You know how much to write.”

“7-10 sentences? Are you serious?” And with that, James flung himself from his chair just like Ned had moments before. The class roared with laughter. Ned didn’t even turn around and continued typing. James pleased with his sense of humor got up, grabbed his hat, and hugged me.

“You’re such a turd,” I said trying not to smile. James could always ease the tension.

“I know, but ya love me.” He smiled, walked back to his seat, and wrote his 7-10 sentence paragraph.

“Is this really my life?” was all I could think.



Gina's Poem

by Melitta Wilson

Source: Giovanni, N. (2002). *Quilting the black-eyed pea: Poems and not quite poems*. New York: Morrow.

So

This is a poem for **Gina**

It is full of ingenuity and charisma
It is concerned with all in her life
It is always willing to help when needed

This is a poem for **Gina**

So It is full of allegiance and sympathy
It is full of matchless qualities and intrepid deeds
It is full of buoyancy and guarantee

This is a poem for **Gina**

So It is beautiful both inside and out
It is awash with lexis of exactness
It is written with aptness in sight

This is a poem for **Gina**

So It gives me approbation and affirmation
It gives me humility and intrinsic support
It gives hugs in times of affliction and confusion

This is a poem for **Gina**

So It sees my light through darkness
It hears my music through deafness
It touches my life through emptiness

This a poem for **Gina**

So Let it be **Glorious** and **Intellectual**
Let it be **Nurturing**
Let it be **Astute!**

This is a poem for you, **Gina!**

We Are Not the Same

by the 2011 Oxbow Writing Project Teacher Leaders

We are going to remember (despite the forget-me-gnats)
this summer where we formed a community,
a unity of I's melding into We,
and leaned together
and taught one another
and marveled
at the power of the We

I am going off on an adventure to a place I do not know.
I'm not sure where I will end up, but I know
I will write when I get there
because I am a writer.

I'm going to have my students say, "I am a writer," often and forcefully until I'm convinced they mean it.

I am going
to inspire dreams, creativity, resistance, and choice.
to breakdown stereotypes and numbers
and rip off the words carried in our minds and on our backs.

I am going to return with a sense of gratitude for a job that is important and needs to be done. I return remembering and celebrating the things I love that enliven and renew my spirit.

I am going to bring stacks of journals to classes filled with writers (even if they don't yet know they are)

I am going to empower my students and myself through our own stories
Because we will be writers.
We are writers.

I am going to know more deeply than I knew last year.

I'm going to change.
Going to finally reach "that" student.
Going to finally live up to my own expectations.
I'm going to let my kids sleep so they can finish their dreams.

I'm going to grapple the manifestations of who I am destined to be.
I'm going to explore endless possibilities and share my love, life, and laughter with my students.

I am going to a class full of eager yet hesitant young writers
To trying new lessons to make better writers
Writing, writing, writing
And then more writing
Yes, I'm going to write.

I'm going to be a writer,
and I'm going to invite my students to be writers, as well.

I am going with the excitement and knowledge that our year will be filled with
learning, growing, friendships and lasting memories.

I'm going back to crayons, markers, and construction paper.
To "ain't got no" and "Can I use it?"
I'm going back home to my kids.

I am going to inspire writers to compose stories from their hearts.

I am going to teach one educator to be a writer, and I will reach thousands of
young writers exponentially.

I am going to push myself and my students to be the writers I know we can be.

We are going, one at a time, into the unknown,
to explore it
and conquer it
and know it.
We are going armed with ideas and influence.
We are going to change the world
(one writer at a time).