

Cornfield *Review*



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Cornfield Review



Chad Simpson

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The front and back covers are sketched and painted by Josette Schaber

Cornfield Review

Editors

Carolyn England

Chris England

Didi Fahey

Shannon Greer

Cherie Inskeep

Jill Leathem

Gale Martin

Erik Olexa

Josette Schaber

Jodi Smith

Faculty Advisor

Jacquelyn Spangler

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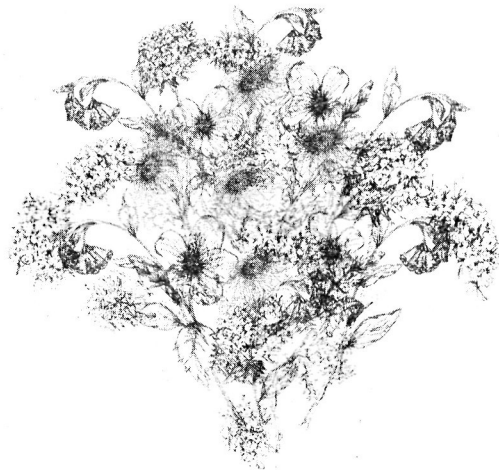
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Hyacinth Song

*title inspired by the Doors

Of hyacinth days and the green splendor of sleep.
Of wayward paths and those strange, unseen stars.
These dogs that ran foaming through the cool throne
room of dreams. These dogs, my friends, are we.
Our generation eats itself as quickly as we love.
Through languid clouds we run and don't turn back.
Our visions cannot discern the angelic from those
consumed by flame. Run! run til the tissue aches
and grates sore. The milk of our toil had spoiled
beneath the sun. We have destroyed our glad
sculptures and have left scattered dust for our
mothers. We are coiled in life, but slack, slumped
spent when the reaper calls it's tune...



Great Scott

he died
yes he is gone

now picture me as I was for a moment
remember the last time that you saw me alive
and the last time we spent a moment together
what I said to you
now find out what happened to me, who was there
so you will know the real story for closure
this story will play in your mind for days to come
when did we first meet?
let me be a pleasant memory until it sinks in that I am gone
picture the way I lay when I am found to be dead
eyes opened or closed, will I die before the eyes of friends and
family?
Or will I be swallowed by the night and become a mystery until I am
found?
by a stranger, after which I will be referred to as “the body” or as
“the victim.”
Why wasn’t this done, if only I hadn’t have acted as I never acted
“it just wasn’t like him,” they will say
If you think about it you could have seen it coming, little things tell
you the story as it comes to an end. There were hints to tell of my
misfortune, ones that were camouflaged in every day life
I miss you too

And if I came back it would not be to hurt you
your disbelief and your longing for me will turn on you
soon you will be afraid that you will see me
standing there with nothing behind my eyes
afraid that while you are lost in your thoughts driving down the
road, you will glance over and see me staring at you
with time this will pass
time is the only cure when infected by the truth
not being able to believe that I am gone
but I am, disappeared into the mystery why
why
I watched it all happen
the moment I was to die from a bird's eye view
as I floated away my soul carried the gripping feet of a fire
breasted Robin
from all sides the light of the next life eclipses the vision of this life
like the tears absorb your vision at the thought of me leaving
if nature continues in her tradition of truth
I am gone, alive only in memories of those who knew what kind of
person I was

Thicker Than Blood

From the very start we have been a world apart
with each passing day we've been a world away
mom and dad could never know the true nature of this
they look at me and see Black while you look and see bliss
it's the same old story that the slave days told
slave masters daughter knows something slave master doesn't
know
public affection is out of the question, we might see someone who
knows
so I'm hidden like an object of low value, so it goes
you say I don't understand, "it's my family or you"
I'm a human being and my feelings demand we stay true
see when the way of the World is the way of the heart
then the love is only lust and from a lie became us
they say love conquers all, here the world conquered love
blood is thicker than water
hate is thicker than blood

Inspired by a beautiful girl and a Christmas Carroll

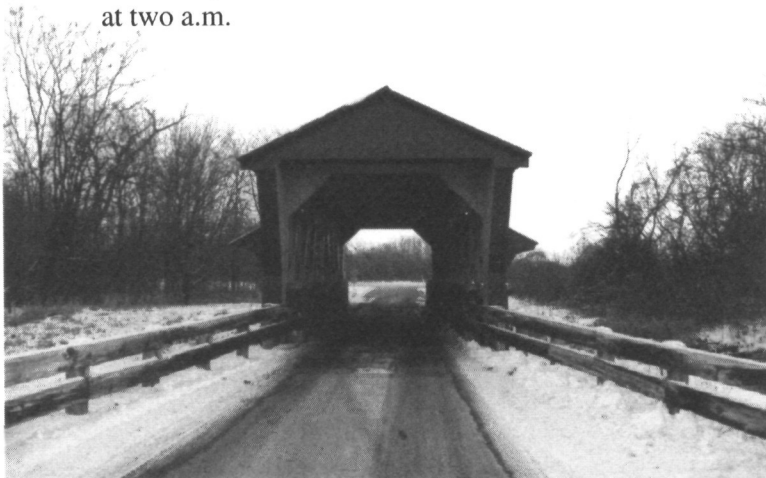
for winter is the season of love
ever after I walked home from sixth grade with a broken heart
through the snow
to think that I had slipped in the coat room
slipped my last 25 cent piece into her pocket
satisfied with the fact that she might smile or be pleasantly surprised
via my heart, without even knowing it was me
Who thinks about such things . . .

The voice I have just heard on the telephone hit home
a young laughter spawned by my silly comings on
holding on, a Christmas song coupled with her life whispered love
Holiday spirit touched by a soul, with little effort unfilled the hole

All these years later and it all I'll give for a smile
Melancholy Lender of Daylight from deep pockets
If not for the sockets of life limbs could you bend
against the grain to see if this crush is the hatching egg of love or of
lust
Seriously beautiful, approachable when smiling
If I even thought I had a chance, Sweet love
I'd ask your soul to dance

Price Subject to Change with Customer's Attitude

One long window
secures the street-front
at Mr. T's twenty-four hour drive
The waitress smells
of perfumed grease and eggs
hates the universe
and pours just what you ask for
Some sixty-year-old guy with
a busted arm and bad teeth
scoops vanilla ice cream
with the city's widest spoon
for a woman browsing sugar packets
and fanning de-café
I order tea and wonder
what it cost to install the glass
in the stone church across the street
and why the hell
would anyone eat ice cream
at two a.m.



Moving North

When snow get deeper
Than your recent memories
I'll wear my raincoat to class
Flash the teacher at test time
And think of our last summer

When the church knocks
On every door this spring
I'll poke your letters at them
Wagging the printed truth
And say I have a savior

This summer when birds
Crap on my windshield
And the grass needs cut
Every other day
I'll listen for the phone



Silent Warrior

dead presidents dance
for me
beside-
me

Courageous obsessions
I invent
maintain

sisters
and brothers
of a lesser god

no idea
what they have
in mind

I suffer
the only love
I can

like a telephone
recorded commission
I stand beside
you

like religion
children
and storms

the dance
persists
I learn to sing

stop trying to
make me-
feel



Priorities

I watch your eyes
watch me.
Tracing the outline

Of my nipples.
I find it disappointing
That you talk with your hand

On your zipper.
What do I expect
In this low-lighted,

Smoke filled, breeding ground
For alcohol induced mistakes.
I came here to dance,

But I am reminded
Why it takes a few drinks
To dim this atmosphere

Of worn out waitresses,
Who quietly remove hands,
And move through the crowds

Of adults who want to be young
And the youth that strive to look old.
You look about eighteen,

But the looks you've been
Sending me are a little bit older.
I assume that you want

Your knowledge expanded
And you've targeted me.
You smile, reiterated those lines,

But I do not stop dancing.

Permeated

Lecture is bare skin scratching,
Barely interested in surroundings.
Others sleep, stare, or sit quietly.

Questions hang in the air.
Non interest refuses the breath needed
To push an awkward answer forward.

Pious student in your shirt of rage,
Soaking into the back wall-
I am realigned

When I hear your voice.
So powerful, yet humbling. I wonder
How I had looked past you.

I wonder how the sweat
On your shoulders
Tastes.

Would I ever be given the
Spotlight of such passion?
To be your belief.

I rechannel, but one more glance
Feeds faults and doubts.
They conjure up some other person for you,

Who squishes thoughts of parallel
Worlds where I would pursue you
With a reverence to the need.



Mamma's Boy

The color of the road
is already spreading a stain
across his face. Dark.
Around his eyes.
Thick shadows with each breath.

The dusty smell of days
and the long drone of night
are matted through his hair
twisted into dreads of monotony.

There is no end to Nebraska.
It feeds off the sky.
Brown. Layers of isolation.
Pushing life back down
into the earth.

He thinks it was an omen
just three days ago when
his traveling partner fell
to her death, neck cracking
strings popping tension,
last chords squealing with release
Mourned. Buried in her case.
He would have sooner lost his little finger.

And here he sits waiting
on another bus to sleep
another town to forget
another patch to burn on his jeans

But for the last half hour
that bleached blonde in the Mercedes
has washed a smile over him
and he hasn't had time
to check the heat of the morning
measure it against the length of tomorrow

She asks him if he wants a ride.
And he has to turn his head
to keep from spilling his instinct
into the road. No.
He tells her no.
He's waiting for something real.

His words are hail
on a tin roof summer storm.
She calls him a bastard and he mulls it over.
He's traveled cheaper first class and
never did like the sound of silk
slipping over plastic.

So maybe it will be Arizona this time.
New York has gotten mean
and they have his number.
California's always ripe for a gig
even a tour, but never a Wednesday
Never a plate of peanut butter cookies
or tuna noodle casserole.

He wonders how much they charge
in Tucson for a carton of freedom
and will they accept his mother's
American Express.

When the Critic's a Lover

My poetry reminds him of cheap detective movies
The ones where fedoras obscure faces
Stiff trench coats belted at the waist
Round white face clocks tick past midnight
Wait for the inevitable knock of
the rich widowed dame

and

I'm supposed to be calm. Say something
clever and laugh.
I'm supposed to be gracious, take
the criticism lightly, work on it.

So I smile. Look up at him through
a curtain of thick black lashes, while
I finger the cold hard facts
in my handbag
level them straight at his gut
and fire, "Take that you Dick!"



Compulsion

Philip Levine has a big gap
between his front teeth. My
eyes stop short, right before
his face,
then sink
to that mouth
like slivers of metal drawn
to a red and yellow painted magnet
watching those teeth.
And I almost think I know
how a man's eyes
can fasten themselves
to a woman's chest
and not let go
until the urge has passed.



From My Balcony

The coast wakes up to a cloudy day
spotted with bits of sun
Pink and blue and yellow
umbrellas spring up from the sand
Beach chairs are claimed,
moved and manipulated
to achieve the best possible spot
the best view where the sun is hot
Hot complementary coffee and
complementary cream wait downstairs
for sleepy guests
Day-old ocean-breeze-dried towels
are quickly collected from
railings and chairs and wrapped loosely
around little little ones
anxious for the sand and
anxious for the sun
And by the time I'm finished writing this
all the beach chairs will be gone and
the life guard is a woman and
bananas and coconuts make their way
underneath my nose.

Painted Lady

What am I to be
your painted lady
neither proud nor free?

Put flowers in my hair,
behind my ear,
and round my head;
let their colors bleed intensely
down my face
onto my neck.

Twist me up
in tight corsets,
belts, and buckles
'til my face turns blue,
'til lungs and legs crumble.

Make *me* your painted lady?
Free from pride and dignity?

Make *me* your painted lady?
Come, come, I am not she.

Replace my legs and
piece my lungs back together;
Unhook, unhook these corsets,
these belts, and all these buckles

so I may dance and sing
and fly and play
free from all this trouble.

Walk me to the pond
where I may dip my
hands and face;
Wipe clean, wipe clean
this mask,
this dye, this ink, this paint!

Take the crown
from round my head
and pluck the blooms
from near my ears
But stop,

stop there,
I choose to keep
these flowers in my hair!

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Snowballs flung hard and fast
zip past my unhatted-head exploding
against a light-brown telephone pole
mounted in thick, gray snow.
Two layers of thin t-shirts cling
to my wet waist and I never
believed my mom when she told me
wet hair could freeze
and would freeze.

On this not so special day, two sets of hands,
one big, one small, too lazy to hunt for gloves or mittens,
reddened in white snow and hard ice.
On this day not so special, two pairs of feet,
one small, one big, too-thinly socked,
became colder and colder until they were no longer there;
the shoes stayed, though,
you could still see the shoes.

And on his way towards me,
across the black street, the boy,
on a puddle of ice pretending to be water,
fell on his side and then on his face.
Seeing no movement, I tip-toed through icy water
and peered down at the boy in big, black boots
and a blue mountain goat coat.

Wondering what I should do next,
I stooped a little lower to see if I could see his breath.
His face was still and his brown eyes closed,
but his arms were alive and his hands were too
and I found that we were both on the ground,
the same level, for once,
and I could feel the unearthly coldness
of the pavement through my jeans
and I noticed a faint smile pull up his cheek.

Triumphant laughter flowed from him easily
and his hands grabbed hold of my belly and my sides.
Determined to keep back
that foolish and defeated laughter
I lost that battle too
and its fingers worked their way
between my lips and out it spilled
onto the winter asphalt full of holes
and it made us both feel good.

Squirming and wiggling and accidentally
kicking him I'm freed
by his own laughter
and down the broken,
uneven, frozen
and thawed sidewalk I run,
overwhelmed by the fear
of falling
and the awful exciting
idea of getting caught.

He's right behind me now,
but even closer is a
cloud of winter-time butterflies
that make their way into my
tummy pushing up
a laughter that
consumes me
from the inside out
and slows my retreat into a giddy, out-of-breat, jog-stumble-walk-stop.

I turn quickly with a flash
of fire in my eyes
and my predator
turns into my prey but
cement-rooted maples
and other trees I can't name get in our way.

Suddenly spinning he
picks me up and over
we fall soft and hard
into a black, brown, white and sometimes
green hillside speckled with trees and bushes we just missed.

As we lay, cold and hot, shivering and sweating,
our man and woman-made clouds
fog our view of the bright sky
and so we stare at each other instead.
And as I lay,
contemplating the brightness
of my yellow jacket against white snow,
he whispers in my ear many theories;
multiple ways we could become warm and dry
and I choose which one I like best.
For not, though, we smile
and snuggle our faces and our bodies
letting winter's coldness push us closer together.

Boy's Life

Spring has the energy that propels children into summer, where it is exhausted. Our block is filled with this energy, flowing down the streets on bicycles, scooters, hippityhops, and roller skates. The energy surges in me and every other child. It fills the day. It tugs at us if we sit still too long, urging us into the open. It surrounds us; we ignite in laughter, motion, burning. I am one of those that burn; I am nothing but fuel.

During a pause between hot dogs, bath towel capes, and big wheels, I read an issue of *Boy's Life*. Glossy children with white smiles doing courteous deeds. I read articles on good citizenship, whittling, CPR, and how to tie ties. But mostly, I just look at the pictures.

The house is empty, except for sunlight and the shadows from trees ducking into the windows, left over bread crust from sandwiches, a few flies on the ceiling, my mom and my grandpa. Grandpa lies in bed or sits in a wheel chair. Sometimes he uses a walker. He moves in silent desperation. Sometimes I pass his room and he is asleep, sitting on the toilet, long bony legs, all the muscle gone.

Once in a while we give him a ball that he tosses to us. The ball falls out of his hand; we find it and hand it back. Usually, when he looks up at me he does not recognize who I am. Sometimes he thinks I am his son. Often, he wakes up lost and mom has to comfort him until he settles down.

His name is Bert Clyde Roseberry. His twin brother was called Wert Claude Roseberry; they were very close. My grandpa lived in West Virginia, in a shack, growing tobacco. Later he was an engineer, with overalls, an engineer's cap, and a red lantern to signal the trains. He worked at Buckeye Steel, guiding cauldrons of flowing steel and pouring them into molds. Finally, Grandpa had a farm, raising sheep, chickens, pigs, and a horse.

When he lived on the farm, grandpa sat in a fat chair with an enormous wad of chewing tobacco in his cheek. Spitting the juice into a can that sat beside the chair, he would fill it by the end of the day. I never looked into the can. He never spoke to me; Grandpa related more to his little dog that occupied his lap constantly. When he would go outside to feed the animals, the dog would follow.

His transition was abrupt to me. It was as if someone had scraped him clean. Mind and body had thinned and could no longer stand on its own. A man once full, he began to empty. It had gotten to the point that grandma could not take care of him, so my mom became his caretaker. She fed him, bathed him and put him to bed.

Grandpa is in bed a lot now; his breathing is too shallow for him to move. Life moves faster than his mind can understand. Reality is a blur. This day is too much for him so he sleeps. Mom is still busy though, supplying us with lawn darts, turning on the sprinkler, explaining why the cat is not a toy.

I am trying to kick the can. I wait 'til the kid who guards the can has his attention drawn to another kid. I act like I am running away. When he takes after the other children, I quickly turn around to kick the can. I miss, but he doesn't tag me. We don't have a can; it's a milk carton.

I come into the house looking for KoolAid, or something that will stain the floor if I spill it. I have a cherry mustache that will last a summer. I can feel the breeze move across my top lip, wet with KoolAid. Children are screaming laughter; I smile, wondering what may be going on. I can feel the energy pulling me back outside, into the games, pretend worlds, and my mother screams. Mom is screaming...mom is screaming? "Allan! Allan, watch grandpa, I'm calling rescue." I run past her as she runs to the phone.

I stand alone in the middle of his room; the curtains are drawn open and thick light pours in over him. Body trembling, hands flailing, mouth open. I can hear the sound of him gasping for more time. His mind becomes aware of the presence of death. The rumor is passed from cell to cell, causing fear, then panic. The cells begin to riot. His mind succumbs to the innate terror. He is a boy, dying with eighty-five years of memory; just yesterday he was me.

His soul recedes, leaving behind a vacuum at his core. Mouth wide, lips curling over gums, breathing in endlessly, filling the void with all the life around him. The day rushes into emptiness, and is crushed, extinguished. All I can hear is his breath, which is no longer a whimper but a loud hungry need for life.

My feelings are caught and are swept away into the nothing. I am pulled toward him, taking his head in my hand. I lean in and place my mouth over his, open my lungs and sacrifice my breath. Breath which is life. The eternal silence that touches me frightens me. He consumes my innocence. I open myself further and empty myself into him. What has been left behind in him is vast and endless. Everything I give disappears into him. There is so little of him left, he is almost gone. I pull away, tripping backwards.

He is far away, isolated, afraid. I want to pull him back to me, but can't. I begin to yell, first to where he lay, then beyond. "I love you! I love you, Grandpa, we all love you!" My voice leaves the room, fills the house, empties into the yard, down the sidewalk, and across the street. I want my voice to enter his body, follow his mind, discover his soul and hold him, comfort him. I want him to know that he leaves loved. I want the words that will complete his life to be "I love you." I want this to be his last understanding.

But life is done. He is dead. Everything is still. The old man is gone. The boy is gone. The room is empty and silent.

I am pushed aside; the paramedics arrive and take him away. Everything moves faster. Reality is a blur. My sister and I are taken to a friend's house. I am not there though; I am still coming back from somewhere else. The rest of the day passes quickly. In seconds I am back home wandering around numb.

Outside, spring is gone; the day is over, the streets are empty, doors locked, and windows closed. All the energy has been used up. There is nothing but darkness outside. The house is dark and hollow. Family has gathered; they sit in the kitchen, quiet, holding onto each other. The light from the kitchen draws the shadows long. They wrap around me.

I come to stand in his room. I notice the ball he played with, picking it up, cradling the toy in my hand, staring at it, lost. I need breath. I approach the empty bed and carefully climb into it. Something of myself has slipped into the vacuum, leaving the emptiness that will take everything to fill. My grandmother quietly comes into the room. She cannot see that my eyes are open, watching her. She thinks I am asleep, Grandma moves closer and in dark silence covers me. I am gone. There is no longer a boy here. Whatever is left breathes deeper than most.





Recurring Nightmare

Looking through a haze
 i lie here broken
A child it seems,
 Or maybe a garbage truck.
Nothing is clear now.

i hear it before i see it,
 Turning to run, but gaining no ground.
 Why does it always have to be like this?
i wish, i wish, but nothing.
 i keep running.

 In one fatal leap it catches me,
 Shaking me violently as i do nothing.
All i can do is look on.
 The disgusting haze clings to me
 Like oil.

i begin to fade,
 Slowly at first, then very rapidly.
 Why does it always have to end like this?

Urban Legend

As I stride down
the catacombed streets
and alleyways, seeing
the ghosted pale red glow
of city lights,
I hear an echo of
other footfalls; loud, grating . . .
See shadows of figures
down dark sideways.
The road I walk is
cobblestoned and weaving.
Friends once walking
upon the path, now
join the phantoms in the
shadows.
I pain to see them go, but
as I hear the
crisp tap of their shoes
against the pavement,
I know they didn't belong
upon my faerie path.

Then I feel a gust of air
that lifts the crumpled newspapers
and sends leaves to
scattering about the stones
at my feet.
I turn behind, and see
a man without a shadow.
He left it behind him in order
to fully live -
to fully walk upon my path.
And we join hands,
take off our shoes,
and move forward, away
and toward.



Unsettled Symphony

On this day
as the months turn tattered pages
I always find there is
a melody, swells deep inside me.
There is no apparent prelude
to this symphony of spirit.
And its voice, unlike years past,
is cacophonous—cutting
through my heavy-burdened
chest with songs
I had forgotten
or tried to forget.
The music begins with
a steady hum—not
unlike life’s own vibration
Then this soothing stream
is joined by the winds
Whispering of their memories
of a fond caress of fallen leaves
beside us as we lay,
spirits spent, yet satiated

and complete after our
intimacy of soul.
A voice joins the winds
echoing its message;
“Remember the Night
when I may hurt you”
The bitterness of this song
lies not in its content, but
in the theatre it is housed in.
Seats once full are now empty,
the conductor of the symphony is
gone—they play alone now—
knowing the music by heart
by spirit
by soul
I wonder if I will ever
have to move on to another song
or if someday you will
return and I will find
the song once sung was indeed
only the prelude.

Sanctuary

In the place of shadows
between wakefulness and dreams

Your voice calls to me
Far beyond the shallow place
where all is as it seems

Our spirits intertwine
Leaving all else behind us
we lay bare our desire

A sanctuary from longing
Hope emerges out of fear
a phoenix from the fire

Into the arms of splendour.





December 6, 1986

I touched.
Touch me back.

I want to hide
beneath your wings,
a stowaway.

Your lips spoke
to my affliction.
I have no

Attend my grief.
Give me passage.
Touch me back.

Your hand
to hide, slip

I want beneath
the wood and silk
but you will not

Ghazal

So near, though yesterday is removed.
Translucent rainbow swells spill solemn prayers.

Shared hopes enchanted dreams;
My shadow slips past twilight prayers.

A premature exodus unfolds;
My tender soliloquy of whispered prayers.

The transfiguration is now complete.
A reflection stained to memory and farewell prayers.

The sanctuary where Heaven
Hears Barbara's eulogy of perpetual prayers.



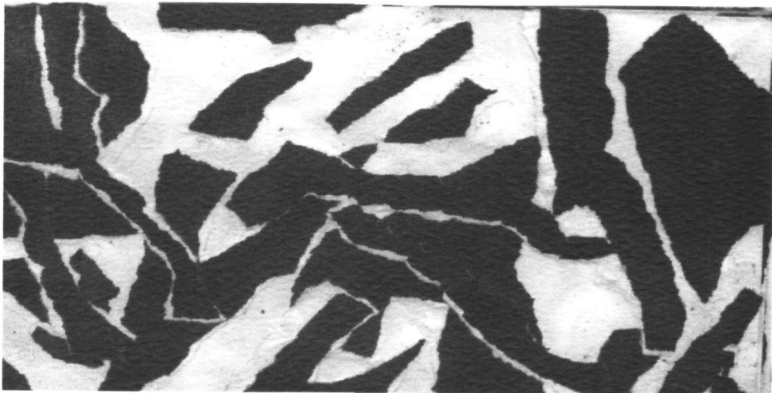


Molecules and Meaning

Abstract and odd
About Love and God
Molecules of meaning
explaining essence and being
Words are symbols and signs
Formed into phrases and lines
To convey a message to you
The magic in what you do
What you bring to the piece
Your knowledge does increase
Egg and Sperm combine
Writer and Reader shine
Connecting with complex
Communication and understanding effects
One and All
Language breaks down every wall

Primal

Certain things come from deep within
hidden under reason
trying to remain numb
I find myself baring a stupid grin
wondering why it feels so like treason
guilt stabs at me some
then I submit and stop trying to fit
these thoughts where they simply don't
fit in I begin to admit
there was truth in the play
Urges impulses something drives
a beat a breath
weaved in our lives
wrestling like angels and death
my body remembers on its own
without my consent it dives in
feeling scared because I am not alone
in these primal instincts unknown



Fool's Folly

What wisdom is a fool's folly?

A fool knows only the thoughts of an undisciplined mind.

That of not knowing a direction to follow or perhaps sliding blindly into oblivious, mindless, melancholy habits of ignorant stupidity.

Wisdom pasted on the forehead with paste created in a fool's kitchen.

A kitchen of confusion absent of true or real knowledge.

Singled out thought none of which is or ever has been rooted in fact.

The blank leading the incapable.

The incapable not able to learn and the blank nothing to teach.

The mythical minds rooted in salt changed by blood to a thing unable to sustain life.

Perhaps these are the thoughts of a fool's folly.

Perhaps this is the folly and I am the fool.

I think that I know yet I do not.

I feel that I know and these are my illusions.

My intelligence is my myth and my illusion is my fool's folly.

Hand in Hand

She needs shelter from
A lonely world we live in—gone mad
She needs a roof
Over her head—in front of her face
Unlocked like a box—removable
She needs a hand to slip
Inside hers
Hand in hand—locked—bound
Together for life
A pitiful world we live in—disgraced
Eternally touched by His finger—
Hands—words
She needs a removable face
Unlocked—with buried
Treasures beneath layers
Of happiness—bitterness—sadness
She needs a silver watch
Melted down—at
The golden hour, minute,
Second—perfect time kept
In her pocket
Melted—stuck—bound
Like a hand
In a hand
Taut for life
Like a soul mate

A friend—lover—sister—brother
She needs a photograph
With still moments—encased
In a silver box
Melted down
For the perfect hour, minute,
Second—in her pocket
In a box
With hand in hand
Bound as friends—couples
Maybe lovers
Star-crossed or gay
Blessed like a newborn
Just the same—though disgraced
Looked down upon
He reached out
As a whole—just the same
Touching with His finger—
Hands—words
She needs a life to live
Not guided—but led
By her own heart—singular
Maybe in a photograph
Melted moments of happiness
In locked silver boxes
Bound together for life
Hand in hand

Mar

He held her, and she silently disappeared in his arms.
When a million mistakes could
Account for a thousand apologies.
Every tear that fell into her hands,
Was savored and golden,
Twisted in her mind,
Purposely forgotten;
Not cared about when the pain went away.
Willing to search deep within herself
To find mercy.
But this was something different,
Beautiful . . .
Like nothing she ever felt before.
Their minds collided and melted
Together like one.
There was nothing anyone could say
To keep her from his side.
Inevitably,
He was a conniving man . . .
She was alone.
He left her *alone*,
While he had fun with happy hours.
She struggled for them to continue to be united,
He left her heart-broken a thousand times,
Could she bear the pain?
The everyday nightmare she lived in . . .
Though she still held him,
As she often did
While he whispered "I love you" a million times,
Although, minutes too late.
He cried . . . oh, he cried . . .
His tears became a river.
A river he got caught up in,
And he wouldn't come down
For anything.

While demented and paranoid phrases stepped
On her passion for him.
She's cried so much,
Every smile looked wrong and plastic.
He says he misses her . . . he needs her . . . loves her . . .
She's his medicine of life,
Without her he'll die . . .
He just wants to give her a hug
To make it all better.
With milk and cookies for this little boy that needs
A mother.
That needs a father who cares,
And sober brothers.
What do we do with the child that stands
Before us?
Slap his hand,
And send him home?
While he whimpers and whines
Like a homeless puppy,
Showing us that sanity has long left
His deranged, uncomfortable mind.
To think we'd believe when he pleads for her
In every breath he takes,
Whenever he says he's sorry . . .
Naturally, he's sorry.
When an almost grown adult,
Cries repeatedly before his life . . .
For her.
Consciously slapping his own face.
While the psychotic beauty emerges,
Tomorrow he'll say he's better.
Every word he says right now,
Will hit her so severely someday.
This helpless little boy
Is forever crying inside a grown man.

Protected

Still groggy with sleep and
wrapped in a long fuzzy robe,
I drag into the kitchen at 5 a.m.

I'm a wooly blue sheep, thick
with winter's coat, cozy and
snug and protected.

I'm greeted by a handsome man-child—
my own—with a steaming mug of coffee
(he knows how I love my morning coffee).

His voice a deep, gentle purr,
I'm reminded of the day he was born,
then his song little more than a mew.

He asks of my plans and I of his;
In times past
there was no need to ask—

No need because I knew—his plans
and mine, were mine alone;
now he is almost grown and on his own.

I, who is his mother and he,
who is my son
are playing the aging game.

I age, he grows. He progresses,
I regress. I, the protector,
have become the protected.

Sing a Merry Jingle

-1-

To hug, to hit a
 leathery frog; to hold the hat
 of a cordoroy dog;
 To hang a ham on a
 hill of beans;
 Hug, hit, hat, hold, hang, ham, jam.

-2-

To bite a bit of
 cherry chicken; dried, fried
 frica-seed cherry
 chicken on a platter full of
 cheery cherries fried;
 Bit, bite, dried, frica-fried, cheery, cherry chicken on the side.

-3-

A mangled dog,
 a pickled hog; metallic liar's
 pants afire;
 Red hot hot pants;
 hot red hot pants;
 Red metallic, mangled, pickled, hog dog, hot pants, pants are on fire.

-4-

Singapore, Pokasing,
 ding-a-ling-a-ding dong;
 dijaroo and dijadee,
 Did'ja do and did'ja see
 and did'ja jingle merrily?
 Sing-a-dingle, did'ja jingle, jangle sing-a-jungle song.

Flower of the Night

It is a silent night
That caters to tranquility
And crickets who play their symphony of chirps
While the cool air
Becomes the refreshing breath
Of the soul that begs of it.



And a flower blossoms
In the pale moon light
With my man on the moon
Of that unforgotten February night.

I Let Go

After sad driving
On a lonely road
Past the darkest mile
Holding thoughts of her

I hesitated

Foot lifted car slowed
Then drove beneath it
Ashed the last Camel
The moment before

Sadly releasing

Before doubt vanished
Bridge was behind me
I left two things there
And one made me cry

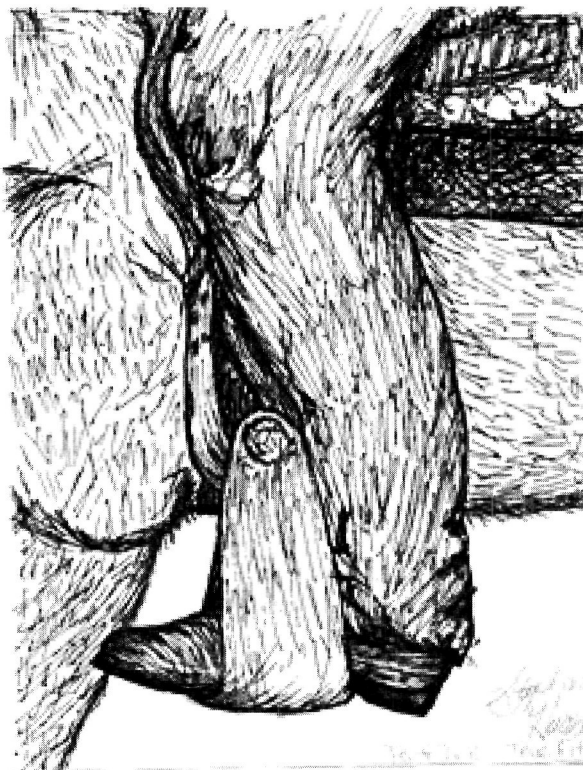
Car

What makes you the most sublime machine on earth?
Do they sit around in heaven and talk about
Distributors and overhead cams?
How many animal names
Have you scalped?
How many women
Have you seduced with your
Rust and your carbon monoxide fumes?
Car, I silently protest you and
You keep driving back
To assure me it is only mobility
The happiness and freedom that I lack
Only streamlined forms
And tinted perspectives
The beautiful and marvelous I don't see.
You are America to me
And what we all want to be.
You are America to me
As I walk, numbed, on the berm of the road.



Work

A mysterious girl
Repeating / Perfecting
A jackknife dive.
The water just seemed to disappear
Each time she dived.
I always wondered
What she was doing at our crowded public pool
No coaches no sponsors
Each summer surrounded
By us savages of the cannonball
She would jackknife.



Before God

Send plague,
locusts
to my land.
I will not
come to you
hat in hand.
I am
not
a begging man.

But you found
a way
around my pride.
You sent these children
to my side.

Now awash
in gifts and grace
I could not look you
in the face.

I'm ashamed.

The Question of Ice

The honking interrupts my frustration
as I look to see the geese land on the pond.
The flock stands upon the water
that is frozen; their images reflected upon the ice.
One by one, they lift their feet in random rhythm
before squatting upon the coldness.

How long will it take for their bodies to warm the ice?
Or will they become frozen instead?
I suppose it depends upon the thickness of the ice.

Only a few moments pass until I glance up
from my work in process. A film
of water did appear on this side of the geese.
They have moved closer to the shore
and the safety of the distant bank,
while adjusting to the sudden winter day.

And, I, from the library plateau,
ponder my own need for security
within my inner solitude.

NOISE POEMS

Mower Poem

I wish you'd simply clip
Or just snippity-snip
Somewhat silent you see
Soothing instead of that
Rumbling and growling and
Sputtering thing; I sit
While I muse—how is it
Better than grazing
Sheep, “Bleat-bleat”?

Grass is what woolly
Beasts peacefully eat!

Sweeper Poem

What are witches' wicked revenges
If not those plug-in power sweepers?
They go: Shzuuuouuuouu . . . ”
Living in a vacuum
Drowning in my deep room
Drinking and thinking
I'm sinking down, that
“Shzuuuouuuouu . . . ” is not a
Pleasing sound. Bring me a
Sweet broom—Wisk-wisk!—even if
A wicked witch comes with it!

Weed Whacker Poem

Angry bees
Buzzing, mechanical
Weed whacker
Thrap-thrap-thrapping—
My mind-trip-
Trip-tripping—
A real steel whipping
Awfully applied to
Innocent summertime air.

Blender Poem

“It's not shaken, not
Stirred, but blended, sir.”
—“Whur! Whurr-urr-uuuuurr!”
“Have a margarita, sir,
To subdue your nerves?”
(“Sure senor, sure . . .”)

Peeling Rubber Poem

You dare assault my
Defenseless silence
With screeching squealing
Rubber violence?

My sole consolation,
Son, is that soon
You're moving on—
Out of my range
Beyond my rage
My rifled age.

Motor Poem

Infernal internal combustion
Engines come busting
Up—our inner ear
Drums—they're ripped
And ruptured!

Loco Poem

It pistons into calm and quiet,
Shrieking out an emergency!
Waiting cars watch its urgency . . .
A wreck—mid-page pile-up!
(One casualty—Being, tranquility.)
Rattling my nighttime pains—
Ten-thousand Chinese men in chains—
For this—and poets' praises—in vain—
They all now lay in life's last lane
And cannot hear this wooing train.

Jet Poem

Scorching high the
Ripped wide sky as
Jumbo jets—they
Flay my nerves—
Are frazzled
And frayed, split wide
Open, sizzling inside.

Mr. Vicious

I remember vividly the first day of sixth grade, fifteen years ago. I wore striped stonewashed jeans, hi-top Pumas, and a white sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off. The front of the sweatshirt had the word "VICIOUS" on it, spelled out in unevenly spaced fluorescent letters. I was, of course, the coolest kid in class. Here's my story.

"Hey, Vandy, can you believe how *big* this place is?" I ask Tom Vandermeer. I talk to Tom because, one, he's my friend, and two, he's the only person I know in the whole class. I don't see any more of my buddies from elementary, and I'm feeling frightened. But I don't show it. I'm "VICIOUS."

Our teacher, Mr. Kaufman, calls our names from his list. Mine's Alderman, Robbie Alderman, so mine's always one of the first. He comes to my name. . .

"Alderman, Robert?"

. . . and I respond as I think any cool sixth-grader would:

"Yo."

"A simple 'present' will do the job, Mr. Alderman."

"Oh, sorry."

I hear a few giggles, but I don't let it bother me. I figure everyone's at least a *little* nervous. Besides, I'm just feeling the old man out.

I look up and down the rows at my classmates, moving along with Mr. Kaufman, matching faces with names, determining who looks cool and who doesn't. Nobody really catches my eye—maybe middle school won't be that diff—

"Pratt, Lisa?" Mr. Kaufman says at about the same time that my wandering gaze finds her.

She was without a doubt, the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. Shimmering blonde hair that splashed around her shoulders; perfect skin unblemished by the ravages of puberty; white, even teeth that needed no orthodontist. She was the essence of pristine innocence and unsullied beauty, and I was completely captivated.

"Pratt? Is that what he said?" I whisper frantically at Vandy.

"Yeah, Lisa Pratt. She's cute, isn't she?"

"Keep your eyes off 'er, Vandy—she's mine," I warn him, writing her name on a piece of paper and shoving it into my Trapper Keeper.

"Listen up, people," Mr. Kaufman says as he begins walking slowly around the room. "There are some things you need to know about junior high."

"Here it comes—the big speech," Vandy remarks a little too loudly. I ignore him—I can't keep from staring at Lisa.

“What’s that, Mr. Vandermeer?”

Vandy jumps.

“Do you think you already know everything there is to know about junior high? Shall we just send you on up to the high school so you won’t have to waste your time—and mine—here?”

“No,” Vandy replies flatly. More giggles.

“Ok, then—pay attention. Like I was saying, there are some things you need to know about this place. First, this *ain’t* elementary no more. We don’t wipe your noses and take naps and have three recesses and hold your hands when you walk down the hall.

“You people aren’t babies anymore, so don’t expect to be treated like babies. Understand? Second, there’s a thing called *responsibility*. You’re gonna have to learn it. Those days of cute little workbooks that you tear the pages out of and taking a whole year to write one little book report about *Dick and Jane* are long, long gone. You can expect homework *every* night, tests *every* week, detentions, suspensions, expulsions—face it people, this ain’t no party.

Mr. Kaufman has everyone’s attention now. He’s walking between the rows of desks, looming over us, confirming our fears and making us shiver in our seats.

“And one more thing before we get started today.” He was behind me now, his crackly voice loud in my ear. “I see some of the clothes you people are wearing, and I’m not impressed.” He is right beside me now, and I am afraid to look up. “My suggestion—don’t wear anything here that you wouldn’t wear to church.” He stops right in front of my desk. “Got it, Mr. Vicious?” More giggles, and I even see Lisa Pratt smiling. I want to disappear.

Somehow, some way, I had to befriend Lisa. Had to be near her. Had to meet her. But first, I had to gather enough courage just to talk to her.

“I can’t believe they actually let you *pick* what you wanna eat for lunch!” Vandy exclaimed, choosing a hamburger, fries, chocolate milk, and an ice cream sandwich. “Think about it—we can have hamburgers every single day if we want!”

“You’re right, Wimpy, we could.” We sit our trays down at one of the tables and begin eating. I scan the crowd, searching desperately for Lisa. I have turned my shirt inside out.

“You think Popeye and Olive Oil ever do it?” Vandy asked, distracting me from my search.

“What? Of course they do. Where do you think Sweet Pea came from?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Stupid,” I mutter, shaking my head. “Look, we gotta think of something I can say to Lisa that won’t sound dumb. Mr. Kaufman already made me look like an idiot.”

“Yeah, and wearing your shirt like that really helps.”

“Shut up, Vanna.” That’s the name I use when he starts irritating me. “Seriously, help me out, here.”

“Ok, let me think. Umm...let’s see...well...man, I can’t think of nothin’. I’m tryin’ to eat here.

‘Well stop eatin’ and try thinkin’ a little harder, wouldya?’

“Ok, ok. Why don’t you try offerin’ her some gum?”

“Gum?”

“Yeah, gum. Everyone chews gum, especially since we’re allowed to in school now. It’s perfect.”

“Gum. That’s not bad. You think it’ll work?”

“You got any better ideas?”

I admit that I don’t.

I meet Vandy the next day, outside before school begins.

“Did you get gum?” he asks me. He’s already chewing on what looks like three pieces of Grape Bubble Yum.

“Yeah, I got gum.” I open my bookbag. “Bazooka, Bubble Yum, Bubblicious, Big Red, Wrigley’s Spearmint, Big League Chew—she’ll have to like one of these, don’t you think?”

“I guess so. Why don’t you just ask her? She’s coming this way right now.” Vandy motions with his head and I turn around to look.

My stomach began to churn, and my mouth dried up. She looked even more stunning than I remembered from the day before. She was wearing jean shorts and a sleeveless pink shirt, and her hair was pulled back in a pony tail that bounced and swung when she walked. She was nothing short of a goddess to my eleven-year-old eyes.

“Look how short her shorts are, Vandy! She’s unbelievable!”

“Yep, she’s real pretty, that’s for sure.”

“Wish me luck, man. I’m gonna go sweep her off her feet.”

“Good luck, Robbie,” Vandy says, popping a giant purple bubble all over his face.

I stop Lisa as she’s walking up the steps to the doors. My first three questions are memorized. “Hey, Lisa. How’s it going this beautiful morning?” I am so smooth.

“Fine, Mr. Vicious.” She smiles, and my memory fails me.

“Uhh...”—don’t panic, be cool!—“uhh...call me Robbie. So, did you do your math homework?” I recover nicely.

“Yeah, did you?”

“Sure did. It was easy. Hey, you want some gum? I got every kind you can think of.”

“Yeah, I’ll take a piece.” Nothing left but to reel her in. “Ya got Juicy Fruit?”
Juicy Fruit! I’d forgotten Juicy Fruit! I started feeling dizzy, and my eyes wouldn’t focus. Only a complete idiot would forget Juicy Friut. Juicy Fruit!

“Umm, sorry. I don’t have any Juicy Fruit. But I’ve got lots of other kinds. Take a look.”

She looks into my giant stash of chewing gum, the stash without any Juicy Fruit. “I’ll take a piece of that pink lemonade Bubble Yum, please.”

“Okey, dokey. You’ll like this a lot better than Juicy Fruit, anyway. “ Maybe this won’t be a total disaster after all.

“Oh, and can I have a piece for my boyfriend, too?”

Boyfriend? No!

Thank God Mr. Kaufmann didn’t assign seats—yet another middle school perk. I managed to claim a desk right next to Lisa. She sat on my right, Vandy on my left. Still reeling from her shocking revelation just a little earlier, I felt I deserved some sort of explanation. I wanted the identity of my adversary and mortal enemy.

“So, Lisa, what’s your boyfriend’s name?” I whispered. Why is it she looks even more beautiful now that I know she likes somebody else? “Do I know him?”

She is leaning over, both elbows on top of her desk, copying the notes that Mr. Kaufman is writing on the board. I stare at her, admiring her face, her arms, her . . .

Sweet Lord, she was not wearing a bra! Of course, she had no need for one yet, but I could actually see what a bra would’ve covered! The way she was sitting, leaned over with her arms on her desk, I could see through the arm holes of her shirt. There wasn’t much there, but I’d never seen anything like it in my eleven years.

“His name’s Ezra Leyton. You probably don’t know him—he’s a seventh-grader.”

I am too distracted to hear her, still looking somewhere under her arm, praying she keeps her elbows right where they are. She follows my gaze.

“What, is there something on my shirt?” she whispers.

“Huh? Uh, no, um, it’s just that I can see . . . I mean, you—you look really nice in that shirt.” I can hardly breathe. I turn to my left.

“Vandy!” I say, trying not to draw Mr. Kaufman’s attention. Vandy is drawing a Pac-Man maze on his notebook. He’s addicted to that game. “Vandy, look at Lisa. Do you see it?” I scoot back so he can get a good view.

“See what?” He’s looking too high.

SHIELDS

“Look *lower*, under her arm. Now do you see it?”

He’s leaning way over, squinting his eyes. “See what? I don’t even know what I’m . . . Whoa, that’s a booby!” Vandy shouts. He’s already leaning practically out of his seat, and the shock of it causes him to fall completely out, onto the floor and almost under my desk. I pretend to take notes.

“What’s going on, Mr. Vandermeer? *What* did you say?” Mr. Kaufman puts his chalk in the tray and walks toward us.

“I said—“

“Detention! No, make that two! You can tell me for the next two days after school.”

Vandy climbs back into his chair. “And no more interruptions!”

“Yes, Mr. Kaufman.” Vandy looks over at me and motions for me to scoot back again. I stay right where I am. One look is enough for him—it’s *my* booby.

I sit by Lisa at lunch, still not all the way recovered from what happened earlier. I have seen more of her than I ever dreamed I would. I like it. I like her, but she has a boyfriend. For now.

“What did you say his name was? Earl? Enis, like on Dukes of Hazzard?” I’m eating fries and drinking fruit punch. Not much of an appetite today.

“His name is Ezra. Ezra Leyton.”

“Oh, *Ezra*. How do you know him?” What I really mean is *When are you gonna break up with him?*

“He lives on the same street as me. We grew up together.”

I hate him. I hope he’s not much bigger than me, just in case I have to kill him to make her like me. “Well, I hope it works out for you guys.” It makes me sick to say that, but I have to stay on Lisa’s good side.

“Thanks, Robbie. You’re a really good friend.”

Oh, no! The kiss of death! She called me her friend. I didn’t want to be her friend; I wanted to be so much more. I wanted to walk her to and from school, even if she did live across the four-lane. I wanted to carry her books and meet her at her locker and sit by her at lunch every day. I wanted her to write my name on her folder with a big heart around it. I wanted to hold her hand and maybe even kiss her on the lips. I wanted her to go with me.

“No problem, Lisa. Can I empty your tray for ya?” I’m so friendly.

“Sure, thanks Robbie.”

The rest of the year passed fairly uneventfully, except for Mr. Kaufman’s heart attack in January. He took the rest of the year off, and we all felt a little guilty, as if maybe

we had been at least partly responsible for his health problems. Hey, we probably were.

Lisa and Ezra stayed together for nearly the entire sixth grade year, an incredibly long time for an eleven-year-old and a twelve-year-old to maintain a relationship. I stuck with my role of being her friend, though it was maddening to hear her talk about her boyfriend when I was so desperately wanted to take his place.

Around the end of May, about a week before school let out, things changed drastically. Lisa dropped some earth-shattering news, news I'd been waiting to hear since the second day of school.

"What's wrong, Lisa? You're acting kinda sad." I'm so glad that the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders all eat lunch separately. It gives me a chance each day to talk to her without worrying about her boyfriend being around.

"I've got some really bad news, Robbie."

"What is it?" Really bad news? We can handle anything as long as we are together Wait a minute Please don't say you're movin' away! Please don't say you're movin' away. Please don't say you're mov—

"Ezra and I broke up."

"Oh, no." Oh, yes oh yes oh yes oh yes oh yes! "That's too bad, Lisa. Why'd you guys do that?" I can hardly stay in my seat. I feel like climbing up on the table and screaming the good news to the whole cafeteria. I wanna dance, sing, jump—

"I figured it would be too hard to stay together since I'm moving."

I wanna slouch, slump, and die. My biggest fear, my worst nightmare, coming true! "Moving! You can't be moving!"

My shouts make her jump, and a few people look over at me. "Robbie, calm down a little. I'm just—"

"When, Lisa? I mean are you gonna be around this summer? Is it still in the same school district? Or are you moving out of town? Or out of state!" I can't handle it. My heart is pounding, and I feel like I'm gonna throw up all over myself. First, the best news of my life, then the worst. One second she's mine for the taking, the next she's moving to a foreign country. I'm never gonna see her again. My life is over. Lisa Pratt is moving away and—

"No, no, Robbie. We're just moving to a different house. Same city, different street. Gosh, don't worry so much. We'll still be able to hang out this summer. I'm moving to Truxell Drive, real close to your house."

"Truxell Drive? Truxel Drive! That's just one street over from mine! Jeez, I'll probably be able to see her house from my front yard! This is unbelievable! Lisa Pratt is going to be my neighbor!

“Yeah, we’re moving the week after school’s out. Maybe you could help me get moved in.”

“Yeah, maybe I could.” Even if I had two broken legs and scarlet fever, I would be there helping her. I get up to empty my tray.

“Okay, then. It’s a date.” She winks at me.

A date! The words and the wink cause me to trip over my chair, sending my silverware sliding across the greasy cafeteria floor. “Yeah, a date,” I say, trying to regain my balance. My knees feel funny, and I can hardly walk. This is gonna be the best summer ever!

But it wasn’t the best summer ever, at least not at first. I did help Lisa get moved in, though all I really did was carry a few boxes from the moving van into the garage. Still, it gave me an excuse to be around her for a little while, and I wouldn’t have turned it down for anything in the world.

Lisa wasn’t around much that summer, not as much as I had hoped. Her family took lots of weekend trips, leaving me to anxiously fret about what she may meet and exactly when she was coming back. Those weekends when she was gone were excruciating. I would ride my bike around the block endlessly, slowly pedaling past her house, hoping that this time around, she’d finally be back. She’d return eventually, and I’d listen, completely captivated, as she told me all the details of her family’s weekend getaway. I would always ask—nonchalantly, though barely concealing my apprehension—if she’d met any boys while she was gone. After all, I was just a friend, and friends were entitled to ask such questions, I reasoned. She always said no, and a weekend-long sense of dread would evaporate, replaced by a renewed feeling of hope.

But this “friend” business was slowly beginning to get to me. I always wanted to ask her if she ever thought of me as anything more than a friend, but I could never muster enough courage to actually pose the question. It was agonizing to be with her, riding bikes or shooting baskets or whatever else we did, and to be unsure if she had any feelings for me other than friendly ones. She would give me what I determined, in my limited experience, to be signals: complementing my new red, black, and white Air Jordans or giving me that unnerving wink. And she never spoke of Ezra or anyone else, either. As far as I knew, I was the only boy that she ever talked to. Still, my discontent with being just a friend drove me to the conclusion that I had to declare my true feelings for her.

I decided to tell Lisa exactly how I felt one Monday in late July. I knew she and her family had just returned from one of their excursions the night before, so she would be anxious to tell me all about it. It was about 11:30 in the morning when I got ready to leave the house.

“Why are you putting mousse on your hair to go out and play? It’s my little sister. She’s nine and she’s annoying.

“I’m goin’ bike ridin’ and I don’t like my hair blowin’ in my eyes and stuff. Mind your own business.”

“Who you goin’ bike ridin’ with? Vandy?”

“I said mind your own business. Get outta here.” She likes to follow me around. Sometimes it’s okay, but sometimes she gets on my nerves. Right now, she’s on my nerves.

“I bet you’re gonna go see Lisa. You love her, don’t you?” She giggles.

“No, I don’t love her. She’s just a girl. She can’t even play basketball good.” I push her out of my way. “You better leave me alone before I tell Mom what *really* happened to her flower pot.”

“You wanna kiss her, don’t you? And hold her hand and make babies!”

“Shut up! You don’t even know how to make babies!” She’s making me really mad.

“You don’t either!”

“Yes, I do! They showed us a movie in school.” *I’ll never forget that movie—it convinced me that if I ever have kids, I’ll hear about it in the waiting room.*”

“Really? Tell me about it,” she says.

“No Way! Ask Mom if you wanna know about that stuff. I’m not tellin’ you.”

“Because you don’t know.”

“I do know, I’m not tellin’ you, now leave me alone!”

“Mom, Robbie’s yellin’ at me!”

I run out to the garage, hop on my bike, and pedal away before mom has a chance to yell at me. Times like these I wish I was an only child.

It takes me about two minutes to pedal halfway around the block to Lisa’s house. I lean my bike against the tree in her front yard and take the steps two at a time to the front door. Before knocking, I check my hair in the reflection of the window. Perfect.

“Hi, Mrs. Pratt. Is Lisa home?”

“She just left on her bike, Robbie. She said she was going over to your house.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll just ride around and look for her. Thanks, Mrs. Pratt.”

“Goodbye, Robbie. Hey, do you want to come back for lunch today?”

“Sure, that’d be great. I’ll find Lisa and we’ll be back in an hour.” I figure that’ll be plenty of time to do what I gotta do.

“Make sure you tell your mother where you’ll be so she won’t worry.”

“Okay, I will,” I call over my shoulder, hopping on my bike and pedaling out into the street.

I remember exactly how I was feeling as I rode off to find Lisa. I was nervous, because I didn’t want to face the rejection and disappointment of hearing that she only wanted to be my friend. I was excited, because I was perhaps about to make Lisa my girlfriend, something I’d

been hoping to do since the first day I'd met her. Most of all, I was hoping she was wearing the pink shirt.

I rode around the block a couple of times, but we must have been riding in the same direction, because it took me a while to find her. I finally caught up with her in front of Craigie Montgomery's house, just a few houses up from mine. She wasn't wearing the pink shirt, to my disappointment. But she still looked stunning to me: her white tank top and jean shorts accentuate her summertime tan, and her blonde hair was bleached neatly white from the effects of the sun. She smiled as I stopped my bike next to hers.

"Hey, Lisa. I've been looking all over for you."

"I've been looking for you, too."

"So, how was your weekend? Where did you guys go?"

"We just went to the lake and camped out. It was okay, but I got homesick."

Homesick for me, maybe? "Yeah, well, nothing much happened while you were gone. The Montgomery's left for vacation, and my sister broke my mom's favorite flowerpot. Mom thinks the dog did it."

"Well, at least your sister didn't blame you for it."

"Yeah, really. Well, anyway, I'm glad you're back. Hangin' out with my sister all weekend gets a little old."

"I bet it does. Hey, you wanna go someplace in the shade and talk? It's getting really hot out here."

"Sure, where do you wanna go?" I'm tired of the small talk, and ready to get down to business.

"Um...how about Craigie's treehouse? You said he's on vacation, right?"

Craigie's treehouse! Alone with Lisa where nobody would ever think to look for us! Man, anything could happen in Craigie's treehouse! "Yeah, he's on vacation. But I don't know, Lisa—we have a pretty strict rule about no girls being allowed in the treehouse. It's pretty much for us guys."

"I know about your rule, but I promise I won't tell anyone if we go up there just once. Besides, it'll be a lot cooler up there."

It doesn't take much to convince me. "Okay, but you have to promise not to tell Craigie or anybody." If everything turns out how I hope it does, I won't care who she tells.

"We walk our bikes into Craigie's back yard and lean them up against the tree. Trying my best to be a gentleman, I offer to help Lisa up the ladder, but she handles it herself. I follow up after her, enjoying the view. I can't believe Lisa and me are gonna hangout in Craigie's treehouse! By ourselves!

Craigie's treehouse: how many countless hours did I spend up there as a kid? It was

eight feet square, six feet tall, and rested about ten feet off the ground in a towering oak tree that seemed to be created just for supporting a treehouse. We had it decorated with posters of Magic Johnson and Larry Bird and team pennants of the Browns, Indians, and Reds. Everyone who entered for the first time had to sign his name on one of the wooden walls with a permanent marker we kept on a string just inside the door. It served as a fort for playing war, home base for hide and seek, and a cool place to wait out a passing thunderstorm. And there had never, ever been a female inside. Until then.

“You were right, this is a lot better,” I say, sitting on one of the benches along the walls. Lisa sits on the one directly across from me.

“I told you so, Robbie. You’ll have to learn to listen to girls. We’re not as dumb as you guys think.”

“Hey, I never said girls were dumb. Except for my sister.” It’s time to turn the conversation towards more important things. “Um, listen Lisa. I’ve been thinkin’. I need to talk to you about somethin’.”

“About what, Robbie?” she leans up and puts her elbows on her knees. This causes me to lose my train of thought and I start to get nervous.

“Well . . . I don’t know . . . it’s like, well . . . well, you and me, we . . . I mean, I really—“

“Robbie, spit it out—you can tell me anything.”

I take a few deep breaths to get myself under control. Suddenly the treehouse isn’t as cool as it was a few minutes ago. My palms are sweaty, and for the first time in my life, I could use a little deodorant.

“Robbie, are you feeling all right?” She touches my knee, and I almost pee down my leg.

“I’ll be all right. Okay, listen. Here it goes.” I still can’t come right out and say it, but I think of a brilliant illustration. “Do you ever watch Scooby Doo?”

“Yeah, sure, everybody watches Scooby Doo.”

“Okay, well, you know how Freddie and Velma and Daphne and Shaggy are real good friends.”

“Yeah”

“And on every single show, they’re always together, all four of them. Right? They’re all just real good friends.”

“Uh-huh”

“Well, did you ever wonder if Freddie ever got tired of being just Daphne’s friend? I mean, don’t you think those two would make a really good couple?”

“Well, I guess I never thought of it like that before.”

“I mean, Daphne’s always runnin’ around in her little short purple dress, and you know has to notice her. I mean, it’s practically up to her—”

“Robbie, I still don’t know what your point is.” She is smiling at me, and the smile convinces me to just spill it. “Lisa, I don’t wanna be Freddie anymore.”

“What? What are you talking about, Robbie?”

“I mean, I’m tired of being just your—”

“Robbie! Robbie! Robert Milo Alderman, Mom wants you!”

The shouts make us both jump almost out of our benches. It’s my sister yelling from underneath the treehouse.

I stick my head out the window and glare at her. “Kimmie, what’re you doing here! Go home, now!”

“Mom wants you, Robbie. She said it’s time for lunch. She told me to go find you.”

Oh no, I forgot to tell Mom I was eating at Lisa’s! I climb down the tree and take my sister by the shoulders. “Listen, Kimmie, just go tell mom I’m eating at Lisa’s house.”

But you’re not eating at Lisa’s house. You’re in the treehouse with Lisa. I’m tellin’ Mom that.” She grins, an evil little grin.

“No, you’re not telling Mom that. If you do, I’ll tell her about the flower pot.”

“She already knows about that. I told Mom this morning. Hi, Lisa.”

Lisa is looking down on us and smiling. “Hi, Kimmie.”

“Listen, Kimmie,” I say so Lisa can’t hear me. “Don’t tell Mom I was in the treehouse with Lisa. Just tell her I’m at Lisa’s house.”

“You want me to lie? We’re not suppose to lie, Robbie, you know that.”

“It never stopped you before, Kimmie.” I am desperate to get back up to Lisa. “Listen, what if I give you some money to buy candy at the store?”

“How much money?” Her eyes light up at the mention of candy.

“How ‘bout a dollar?”

“That’s not enough. Stuff is expensive these days, you know.”

“Look, Kimmie, I only have three dollars, and I need some for—”

“Three dollars should be enough.” She grabs the money out of my hand before I have a chance to react.

I don’t protest like I would normally. I have other things on my mind. “Promise not to tell Mom where I was, you hear me? If you do, you’ll pay for it.”

“Okay, okay, I promise.” She climbs onto her Strawberry Shortcake bicycle. “Goodbye, Lisa.”

“Bye, Kimmie.”

“Goodbye, Robert Milo!”

I cringe at the sound of my middle name. “Go away, Kimmie.”

She rides away, singing my middle name over and over. I’m almost too embarrassed to climb back up into the treehouse but somehow I manage.

“Okay,” Lisa says. “You were telling me something about Fred and Daphne, right.”

“Well, kinda about Fred and Daphne. More about me and you, though.”

“You and me? What about you and me?”

“I’ve been waiting to tell you this for a long time, Lisa. Actually, since the first day of school.”

“You’ve waited almost a whole year to tell me something? Why did it take so long?”

“Well, Ezra had a little somethin’ to do with it.” I’d still like to run over him with my knobby tires.

“Ezra? What does he have to do with anything?”

I hate to hear her say his name. “Never mind Ezra. He’s not important anymore. Look, Lisa”—here it goes—“I...don’t really want to be your friend anymore.” Man, does it feel good to get *that* off my chest! Finally she knows how I really feel, and I –

“You don’t want to be my friend, Robbie? Why not?”

Wait a minute—she looks like she’s gonna cry. No, no, I didn’t meant it like that! “No, Lisa, I mean I don’t wanna be just your friend anymore.”

“What? Do you mean—“

“I mean you’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen in my entire life. I mean ever since I saw you the first day of school I’ve wanted to be with you. I mean it just about killed me to hear you talk about Ezra every day because I wanted you to be talking about *me*. I think about you every second of the day. When you’re gone, I just sit in my bedroom and stare at your picture all day long. Vandy makes fun of me because I talk about you more than I talk about basketball anymore. You have the bluest eyes, the cutest nose, the prettiest smile, and the best pink shirt—”

“What?”

“Never mind. You’re the most wonderful girl in the whole school, probably the whole world, and I want you to be my girlfriend.” I lean back against the wall, exhausted but relieved. I can’t believe I finally told her. No matter what she says, at least I’ll know I gave it a shot. Even if she turns me down, I –

“Okay.”

“Huh?”

“Okay.”

“Okay what?” She’s completely lost me.

“Okay, I will.”

“You will what?”

SHIELDS

“I’ll be your girlfriend, Robbie.”

“You will?” She will! She will be my girlfriend! She is my girlfriend! HAL-le-LU-jah!! HAL-le-LU-jah!! A year of waiting, of hoping, of dreaming, and it’s all coming true. Wow, this is unbelievable! Lisa Pratt is my GIRLFRIEND!!

“I wish you hadn’t waited so long to tell me this Robbie. I’ve liked you ever since the first day of school started too.”

That was the first of countless instances that the ways of the female gender proved incomprehensible to me.

“You have? What about Ezra?”

“I was just going with him because he was a seventh-grader.”

“So it *is* true that girls like older boys, huh?”

“You’re younger than me, and I like you.”

The words almost make me giggle like a three-year-old. “Only by a few months, Lisa. Anyway, so we’re together now, right?” It hasn’t sunk in yet, probably never will.”

“Right.”

“So what do we do now? I mean, I gotta tell Vandy, maybe even give Ezra a ring to tell him the good news, and we should go tell your mom because she thinks it’s cute, and I –”

“I think we should kiss.”

“Or we could do that.” Can this day get any better?

“Have you ever kissed anyone before?” She walks over and sits next to me, so close our knees are touching. Our knees are touching!

“Of course, I have. Lots of times.” I’ve never kissed a girl in my life.

“Well, I’m new at this, so you’ll have to teach me.”

Okay, well, you put your lips right on mine and keep them there forever. “It’s pretty easy, really. I’ll put my arms around your waist, and you put yours around my neck, and we’ll go from there.” I have no idea what I’m talking about. We get ourselves into position.

“It feels like I’m wrestling,” Lisa says. “Maybe we should stand up.”

“No, let’s try it again. I think you are just nervous.” I know I am.

“I’m not nervous, just excited. I wanted to do this for a long time.”

I fight back more giggles. She scoots even closer, so close that I can smell her shampoo, Johnson’s and Johnson’s. “Okay, lets give it one more shot.” She leans in, I lean in, and—

It was simply magical. No kiss since then has held such innocence, such purity, such excitement. For me, the whole world was Lisa Pratt. Carl Lewis, Russia, Michael Jackson—I knew the names, but famous people and far off places don’t mean much to a

sixth-grader. But your first kiss, your first love, now those things carry weight. And you don't forget them.

Age inevitably brings more experience with relationships, and I sometimes try to apply this experience to my relationships with Lisa Pratt. As a sixth-grader, I was convinced that I loved her, that I couldn't live without her. But did I really love her? Does an eleven-year-old even know what love is? I ask myself these questions often, and I always come to the same answer.

Of course, I loved her. Love is a ponderous, inscrutable emotion, and while we can never grasp it completely, all of us feel it to the extent that understanding allows us. As a sixth-grader, I had a limited understanding of love, but what I knew of it, I knew that's how I felt about Lisa. If love was having her constantly on my mind, of being the happiest when I was with her, getting jumpy-chested and dry-mouthed just by holding her hand, then I loved Lisa Pratt.

She comes to mind often. My wife understands, because she, too, has a first love. We all do. When I drive by the middle school where Lisa and I first met, I inevitably smile wistfully, and wish longingly that I could relive just one day. When I hear the song "Broken Wings" by the forgotten eighties group, Mister, Mister, I remember that Lisa and I first danced to that song, in a cafeteria decorated with all the elegance of balloons and construction paper. And just yesterday, when I put the finishing touches on a simply-built tree house in my back yard and my neighbor pointed out that I don't even have any kids yet, I just nodded and offered him a piece of Juicy Fruit.

Contributors' Notes

Mike Anderson is a sophomore at OSU-Mansfield majoring in English with a minor in History. He is interested in writing, still writing the novel he began in the summer of '97.

Philip Avery was born in Marion, Ohio. He is a student at OSU-Mansfield. He has traveled extensively throughout the United States and the world, including Japan and the Philippines. His work has appeared in *The Outlet Poetry Journal Anthem Magazine*, *Soul-to-Soul*, *Project Equinox*, and elsewhere.

Benjamin A. Brown is nineteen years old, attends Marion campus, and lives in Richwood. He works at Kroger while going to school full time. He is majoring in Computer Information Systems and is in love with poetry.

Steve Butterman is a student at OSU-Mansfield and a past contributor to the *Cornfield Review*. His passions include reading and writing. He also loves gardening and long-distance bicycling.

Alan Doan is a student at OSU-Newark. He drives a forklift at a warehouse. Currently, his major is undecided.

Amy Dobson is a junior at the Mansfield campus and has been on the dean's list since attending winter quarter 1997. She is an English major with an emphasis on women's literature. She enjoys reading, writing, working out, and yoga. Her poems appeared in the last issue of *Cornfield Review*. Amy is this year's first and second place winner of Mansfield's Florence B. Allen short story competition.

Barbara Dilley has been a student at three campuses (Mansfield, Marion, and Columbus). She's a senior majoring in English literature and Art, with a minor in Philosophy. Her only true ambition is to "discover and fulfill whatever purpose I'm here to accomplish, for the brief moment I will belong to this world."

Grace E. Eno is a freshman on the Newark campus of OSU.

Cari Gilkison is a graduating senior English major on the Mansfield campus of OSU who enjoys writing poetry and fiction. She also loves reading, drawing, and dancing. She hopes to go into the publishing industry after graduation.

Stephanie Hughes is a freshman at OSU-Marion majoring in Art Education. She is a mother of two, President Elect at Marion Sales and Advertising Club, Arts Palace Program Instructor and Committee member, and she is active in several civic organizations.

Cherie Inskeep attends OSU-Marion where she is majoring in Art.

Jennifer Knipp is a first-year student at OSU-Newark.

Allison Loudon graduated from Marysville High School. She is completing her first year at OSU-Marion where she is majoring in Art. She plans to pursue a career in graphic design. Mostly, she enjoys art, any kind and all kinds.

Merese JonSun is a senior journalism major at OSU-Mansfield. He wants to change the world for the better somehow. Merese is a past contributor, and since his last submission, he has written many thoughts and poems, which he cherishes.

Ronnie W. Long is a student at OSU-Mansfield.

Kristen McCune is a student on the campus of OSU-Mansfield.

Cheryl McPeek is currently persuing a graduate degree at the Marion and Mansfield campuses. Her poetry has appeared in *Wind, Off the Beet in Poetree Path*, a journal out of Woodstock New York, and in Project Equinox. Her work has also appeared in past issues of *Cornfield Review* and *HER Gallery*. This is her fourth apperence in *Cornfield Review*. She is an art teacher.

Dale Palof teaches in the English Department at OSU-Newark. His poetry also appeared in the last issue of *Cornfield Review*.

Carol Lantz is a student at OSU-Marion.

Jenny Peppard is a single mother of six children ranging in age from seven to twenty-six. She is also the grandmother of five and a returning student to OSU-Marion majoring in psychology after an “extended vacation” of eleven years. She also juggles interests in English and education. She is a certified child care provider, serving four children as well as home schooling a granddaughter.

Josette Shaber, a previous Art Education major, returned to OSU-Marion Summer Quarter 1998 after a six-year absence. As an English major, wife of Chris, mother of Anslea, and a Technical communicator at Macola Software, she is a “creator” at heart.

Tom Shields is a senior English major at OSU-Mansfield. His interests include playing basketball, tennis, and the piano. He intends to one day write the Great American Novel, though he’s be satisfied with penning the Not So Bad American Novel. This year, “Mr. Vicious won first place in OSU-Mansfield’s Florence B. Allen short story competition.

Jodi Smith is a senior at OSU-Marion. She likes to write and listen to music. She is a past contributor to the *Cornfield Review*.

Chad Simpson graduated from Marysville High School in 1997. He is majoring in fine arts and planning to go into graphic design or illustration.

Michael Walker is an honors student at the Newark Campus. He is about to be admitted into Phi Kappa Phi. He is majoring in English and plans to pursue a career in writing when he graduates. Besides poetry, he also enjoys writing songs and has been a member of several bands.

Derek S. Waugh is a student at OSU-Marion and a past contributor to the *Cornfield Review*. He likes to write and draw and describes himself as “the spiky head kid who often falls asleep in the back of the classroom.”

Timothy C. White is a freshman at OSU-Newark.

