

WRITINGS from the EDGE



*stories and poems from
the Edgewater Library
writing group – issue 2*

About the Edgewater Library Writing Group

The Edgewater Writing Group was initiated in Fall of 2017 in response to the desire to continue writing, expressed by several participants in a library-sponsored creative writing class. As an extension of the open community that is the public library, the writing group is open to anyone seeking to develop their writing and contribute to a community of writers. Currently the writing group meets on Zoom, in response to the pandemic.

About the Community Writing Project and Real Conditions

The Community Writing Project offers writing workshops to people who ordinarily do not consider themselves to be writers, and publishes their reflections and stories about everyday life in *Real Conditions* magazines. Because only the collective efforts of ordinary people can make a better world, we are interested in the creative expression and unique understanding of those who have been relegated to the margins of society, including the poor, the oppressed, immigrants, and those who risk their privilege to join them. Their stories are found in these pages.



THE WRITERS

Sue Cargill

Daniel Fleischman

Terrence Hull

Katherine Linehan

Mary Nishiura

Bria Phillips

Kathy Powers

Juliana Ravelli

Dalia Stewart

Igor Studenkov

Ilze Vitands

INTRODUCTION

On the second and fourth Tuesday evening of every month, writers meet in the large conference room on the second floor of the Edgewater Library (pre-Covid!). Gathered around a pair of long tables the writing group shares a collaborative purpose that strives to be both welcoming and earnest. The creative process for the participants is to prepare a piece in anticipation of the meeting, read it aloud to the group, then discuss it with their peers. Eventually, the writers select one or two pieces to revise -- again with input from the group -- for publication in a *real conditions* magazine.

The writers represented in this issue come from different Chicago neighborhoods, different backgrounds, and different relationships to and purposes for writing. Each has their own powerful story to share, each a unique voice and a stunning imagination. Their individuality is conveyed in the issue's variety of genres and styles: from poignant or humorous poetry and song lyrics, to surreal short fiction and captivating creative non-fiction; from exciting fantasy to satire, from enchanting personal narrative to sobering social commentary.

Readers will be delighted by the wide-ranging themes taken up in this issue: from a surreal encounter with a tiger to children arguing over a Ouija board; from coming of age stories to stories about aging; from futurist conversation in a Chicago coffee shop, to dialogue with animals or inanimate objects. There is also a vast generosity these writings offer: life stories imparting wisdom; humor as a coping mechanism for everyday challenges; reflections on current events that speak to present-day issues and age-old concerns.

Just as this magazine is a product of the community that the Edgewater writers have formed through their biweekly gatherings. Through that sharing, writers find a sense of solidarity and understanding that extends beyond the paper and pen, the workshop always serving as the medium to explore this connection and bring these experiences to fruition. Just as the Edgewater writing group serves as a beacon to these writers, we welcome other writers who wish to share their writings and add their voices to this chorus that epitomizes the diverse experiences, imagination, and insight of Chicago's community writers.

— *the editors*

SUE CARGILL

The Tiger

I was crouching in the middle of my neighbor Herb's lawn, minding my own business. Earlier, I'd lost my house keys on the way back from carrying garbage bags to the curb. Herb's front lawn serving as a shortcut for me. My own yard was grim—stones and dead leaves rubbed in dirt. Too barren for weeds even. I much preferred Herb's velvet expanse and those prima donna lilacs he fussed over. They looked carefree. Well-satisfied with the cards life had dealt them. Little pink and white and purple mouths wide open.

There I was on all fours getting grass stains on my good paisley housedress and seeking out a glint of silver under Herb's neatly trimmed bushes and hedges. Looking for my keys, yes, but a couple of weeks ago I'd found a fresh pack of cigarettes in the Kiplinger's' driveway and I wouldn't have minded a score like that either.

I kept my head down and moved slowly in case Herb was watching from his upstairs window. He didn't appreciate me sneaking around his property. That's how he worded it in the email. I was nosy, I was a fat-ass, no wonder my husband left me, and so on.

I was reaching for a teensy souvenir lilac sprig when I saw the tiger.

The tiger was heading for me at a good clip. Swivel-hipped. Muscular thighs pumping. When the tiger was one block down, past the O'Shaughnessy' curly-haired Buddha statue but not quite up to the Kiplinger's' twisting driveway, I got to my feet. Then I turned sideways and stood stock still. I felt running might incite the tiger and it was already baring its teeth. I watched the tiger charge down the sidewalk, fur blazing in the sun, nostrils shaking from the penetrating sweetness of the lilacs, muscles and nerves and everything rippling. Like the rust-colored ripples a river might make if an unstable person were to throw big orange rocks into it all day long.

I wished I could think of the recommended response— with certain animal attacks it's wise to be still, with others your best shot is to run. Was I confusing tigers with bears? After all, I told myself, it was only a big cat. Perhaps if I kept standing politely on my neighbor's lawn, it would come loping up and lick my hand. I'd say, "Kitty, kitty, what a beautiful face," and it would calm down. Yet, I wasn't really such an idiot. Is this how it ends? I thought. Ripped apart by a tiger? That would be strange, a



death people might gossip about. "But why did she stand so still?" "Why didn't she try to run?" Thoughts like these disturbed me. But maybe if I held out my hand, "Here, kitty..."

I heard the voices of two policemen. "A tiger is running at an old woman," one said. "What is she doing?" the other asked. I couldn't hear the reply but thought the first might be explaining how I was standing perfectly still. "Oh, that's good," the other said approvingly. "That'll be alright then."

Thud of paws on pavement, sound of a distant lawnmower—

Maybe the tiger would see a rabbit and just run past. Or the policemen might shoot it. Though their voices seemed to be getting further away.

A few yards between us, tail high, stripes pulsing—

Teeth—

In a grotesque frenzy of speed, I ran and tore and plundered an enormous bouquet of Herb's pinkest, most radiant lilacs. Flushed and sweaty, I pressed the strong-smelling bundle to my chest— the pose of a contest winner. But what had I won? Yet, there was no denying the tears in my eyes and I managed to whisper, "This is all so unexpected"

Around my feet lay the carnage of petal-mouths, snapped sticks, and blood spatter.

The sun shone through my housedress.

I made a low hum in the back of my throat and pretended that the lilacs in my arms were singing.

*Sue Cargill is a playwright, cartoonist,
and fiction writer living in Chicago.*

BRIA PHILLIPS

A Gift

The box was about 12 inches in length and 6 inches in width. Laminated and illuminated, the front of the box read “Nine West.” The sides and the back were black. There was a string at the top to carry the box in one hand. But behold, the box unfolded and the top lifted up. The once useful string that held it all together now lay lifeless and still.

There they were. A pair of knee high, high heeled suede black boots that read bad ass all over them. A size 6 1/2 pair of boots which I like to think of as a little slice of heaven—one of the many gifts from my dear friend, but by far the best. As I am a very picky person when it comes to shoes, somehow she knew that these would speak to my heart. The smell of leather rips the air every time I reopen the box, and it brings satisfaction to my olfactory system.

Although I only wear the boots occasionally, I wish I could wear them every day. But I would probably be disgruntled every time I saw a footprint on the suede material. Is this what love at first sight feels like? Being in love? Staying in love? I’m not too much of a materialistic person, but a good pair of shoes gets me every time, and this pair has me literally head over heels.

Bria Phillips is a staff member with the Chicago Public Libraries and currently pursuing a Masters in Library Science. In her free time she enjoys cooking, watching Hulu, reading, and writing.

DAVID FLEISCHMAN

The Storm Is Coming, You Have Two Minutes to Get Ready



1969. I'm graduating soon and the draft notice just came in the mail. Things are sure a lot different now from when my Mom decided in '62 not to have my shoulder operated on for the injury caused by my dislocation. Back then Viet Nam was just a few American advisors; no biggie.

Mom said, "Your brother was found to be 4F when he got his masters from UC in 1964 due to his asthma, but you're an athlete so you probably won't get a deferment." I was thinking when I graduated high school in '65 that the military wouldn't be so bad; and if I had the surgery I needed back then, I could have tried to compete in college. My friend Bob joined the Army right out of high school and didn't get sent to Viet Nam. He was sent to Georgia to learn how to maintain computers. Joe went into the Air Force and was sent to Germany, like Elvis.

But ... that was '65 and now it's '69 and everyone goes to the jungle and war.

I hope I get the deferment. I do have testimony from my doctor for my trick shoulder. My cousin Burt was sent there, had three deployments, and was severely injured. Pat was killed. So was Wendell. Those two were my best friends at Palmer School and Iowa State.

*Retired from OEM manufacturing industry as a parts buyer in 2017, **David Fleischman** decided to tell his stories, hopes, and dreams through fiction, wanting to pass on his life's experiences and values.*

DAVID FLEISCHMAN

Back Again

December 24th. For as long as he could remember, Stuart felt an emotional and familial tie to his Judaism. However, although he would never entertain the possibility of missing the holidays and celebrations that his family held to be sacred, there was something missing, something inside of him.

He sat quietly in his living room with no expression on his face, and thought to himself, “I attend the High Holiday services each year and fast as commanded in Leviticus. I light the candles and say the blessings for Hanukkah.” A small flush colored his expression as he continued to think, “But Passover, it was my favorite, at least in the past, because it often was at the time of my birthday.” Stuart was unambiguously Jewish and never hesitated to let others know that.

His late wife, Vicki, may her memory be for a blessing, wasn’t Jewish, but she supported him, often attending High Holiday services with him. At Hanukkah she was always at his side to light the Hanukkah candles. Even her family, who was not Jewish, respected his Judaism and was interested in what the various traditions meant.

Unlike the rest of her family, Vicki could not commit to any organized religion. However, the closeness to her family that Christmas represented was very important to Stuart and Vicki. His eyes moistened. He mused, “Vicki was so artistic and creative. She drew me emotionally into the celebration. Both of us, Vicki and I, at our house, and her family when we visited theirs, enjoyed trimming the tree and exchanging presents for each other and for all of the family.” Stuart and Vicki didn’t go to Christmas services, but until they moved to Texas, they did make pilgrimage to her parents’ house and to the grandparents each year. “Hanukkah and Christmas, but mostly Christmas”, Stuart continued to muse. “It was joyous for us. And those Christmas card wishes, ‘Peace on Earth and Good Will to Man’, never felt trite.” Stuart wiped his face. “It was real to us.”

They were living in Texas when Vicki died that July and it felt natural to him to continue their traditions. They always bought their Christmas tree on December 18th. That was her grandmother’s birthday. They would trim the tree together and hang stockings. That year, though, Stuart didn’t start to think about the tree until the 18th. When he finally bought the tree, it was the 22nd. He put the tinsel and lights on and the tree skirt at the base, but he couldn’t get himself to hang the stockings or the mistletoe. There was little joy.

This year, he again started to think about the tree on the 18th but he didn’t go out to get a tree until this afternoon, December 24th. Going to four different tree lots, all that he could find were trees that were completely unacceptable: too short, many missing branches, extremely dry or bent over, as if they just couldn’t stand up straight—and there weren’t many of those. This time he didn’t buy a tree and was so sad that he cried when he got home. Slumped in the chair, he thought to himself, “I started lighting the Hanukkah candles two weeks ago and completed the rituals over the next eight days. I chanted the blessings, but there was no joy then and there sure isn’t any now.”

Not wanting to cook (he hardly ever did lately) he went out to Jack-In-The-Box and picked up his “Christmas Eve” dinner. When he got home to eat he put on some music, but then immediately turned it off. As he choked down his Breakfast Jack and fries, he thought, “I can’t stand this. I miss her so much. I am nothing without her. I don’t even feel Jewish anymore.”

Sitting at the kitchen table, other thoughts started to creep into Stuart’s mind, “I am Jewish. I’m not Christian. Christmas was her holiday. I can’t celebrate Christmas on my own. It is not my holiday! I loved, I still love Vicki. I always will, but she is gone. It’s not her fault or mine, but I have to go on living and I am Jewish.”

It was too late to get to Temple that night, so Stuart decided to go to *Erev Shabbat*, Sabbath Eve, services the next Friday, December 31st.

Glad to attend and participate in the prayers, Stuart nonetheless felt very alone. One of the few worshipers there asked him to join in for *Oneg Shabbat*, Joy of Sabbath, for sweets and fellowship; but he declined. Never one to mix easily, he feared being rejected by strangers. Wondering if he could ever feel at home, he pondered if there was some other way to contribute to the congregation. A couple of weeks passed. Finally, Stuart called the synagogue office and was connected to Nancy, the synagogue Director.

He asked, “Is there anything I can do to help in the office? I’m good with computers.” Nancy said yes and asked him to stop by Sunday morning at 10:30.

Arriving there early, he was greeted by no one. He kept his head down, went into the office, and nervously asked the receptionist for Nancy. A few minutes later Nancy came out, greeted him warmly, and led him to her office.

“How can I help you?” she asked. After some discussion, she told Stuart that she did data entries every Tuesday evening. “At last,” he thought to himself, “I can do something for the tribe.”

Stuart continued to work with Nancy each week for some time. Every once in a while, he would run into Rabbi Beurger and they would greet, until one day, the Rabbi invited him to his office to chat. Stuart told him his story. Sensing Stuart’s need to rejoin the community, he asked him to say *Kiddush*, the blessings over the wine, at the March 3rd Erev Shabbat service. For Stuart, this was the tipping point. Grinning, he whispered to himself, “I am back again.”



JULIANA RAVELLI

Interview #1

1. Hi!

2. Hello.

1. How are you?

2. Nothing to complain about.

1. (Laughs) Can we start?

2. Sure.

1. How would you describe yourself?

2. Well, I always in this surprised mood, very attentive about what is happening in front of me, despite my limitations, you know. I'm supposed to be the representation of a famous figure, Polyphemus, they say. But... In the end, I'm just a piece of wood with hollow spaces and some old trinkets inside of me.

1. Wow! That's really profound.

2. Really? Well, if you think so...

1. Yeah, I mean... How all of us, humans and pieces of art, are just a bunch of materials with a lot of empty spaces inside of us.

2. Oh.

1. Don't you think that?

2. No... Actually, I see your point. The thing is, works like me tend to be more skeptical about what we really mean.

1. Okay... It's like if you question your own relevance.

2. Something like that...

1. But your name... Your name gives us a lot to think about...

2. Actually, I believe this has more to do with the fact that humans love to give meaningful names to everything. So, he gave it to me. What could I do? Seems people can't bear triviality.

1. But you were created with the purpose, a message, right? I mean... That is supposed to be your role.

2. Really? Uh...

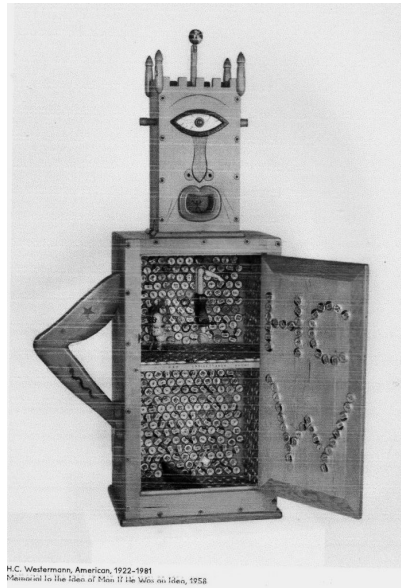
(Silence)

1. Your concept...

2. I wouldn't go so far...

1. Your concept has to deal with quotes if a man was an idea." What if you were a man?

2. Well... I wouldn't take myself so seriously.



Juliana Ravelli is a Brazilian writer, journalist, and dancer, currently living in Chicago. Juliana continues to develop her writing as an MFA student and graduate instructor in Creative Writing Nonfiction at Columbia College

DALIA STEWART

A Dog's Thoughts

“Get out!” she yelled to the dog Pete as she was closing the door to the bathroom.

Pete didn't understand why his human didn't want him in there with her.

After all, she went with him to the bathroom and she even watched him do it.

Pete thought to himself, “Maybe she's just joking ... she wants me in there. So instead I will let her know that I am still near by putting my paw underneath the door.”

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

“Hmmm. That didn't work.”

“Okay, now I'll sniff under the door just to let her know that I'm still here. Just in case she needs me.”



Dalia Stewart has always been a storyteller. She loves to listen, read and tell stories. Now she's just putting them down on paper.

ILZE VITANDS

The Ouija Board

Janet, Robin, and Sandy were having a sleepover at Janet's house. The girls were on the floor, huddled over the coffee table in Janet's living room. The room was dark. The only light came from three sputtering candles placed on the lamp stands at each end of the long couch against the wall.

A Ouija board lay on the table before the three girls. Actually, it lay before Janet and her little sister Robin. Janet's friend Sandy sat, with her back turned. She refused to even look at the board.

"Oh, come on Sandy," eleven-year-old Janet chided, her fingers resting stiffly on the white rolling marker like a girl about to take her first piano lesson. "Don't be such a wuss."

"I'm not a wuss," Sandy replied sullenly, not looking at them. "I told you I'm not playing. God's gonna get mad at you two, not me."

"Is God gonna get mad?" eight-year-old Robin asked wide-eyed as she jerked back her fingers from the marker.

"No, Sandy's just a wuss," Janet told her.

"I am not," Sandy protested, indignant.

"Fine. Me 'n Robin's gonna talk to Princess Diana, and you can just sit there," Janet said in a dismissive tone.

"What do you care about Princess Diana anyway?" Sandy asked as she picked at a cuticle on her bare little toe. "She died before you were even born."

"I'm doing that report on her for school this Wednesday. My report's gonna be better than anyone's because I'll have actually talked to her."

Sandy snorted. "Yeah, like anyone's gonna believe you."

"I don't wanna talk to Princess Diana," Robin whined. "I wanna talk to Teeny."

Janet frowned. "Teeny was a cat. What's she gonna say? Meow?"

Robin seemed about to cry. "I wanna talk to Teeny! I wanna know if she's in heaven! You promised!"

"All right, all right, we'll talk to Teeny," Janet assured her. She paused, then added, "*After* we talk to Princess Diana."

"You're not gonna talk to Princess Diana." Sandy sounded absolutely certain. "Ghosts don't talk to Ouija boards. Demons talk to Ouija boards."

"How do you know?" Janet demanded.

"My mom told me. Dead people don't talk to living people. It's only demons pretending to be dead people that talk to Ouija boards."

"Your mom doesn't know everything," Janet sneered.



This insult finally caused Sandy to turn around to face the pair of them. “My mom knows about demons from the Bible!” Sandy insisted, knowing that this was an unimpeachable source, even if she didn’t know the word “unimpeachable.” “If you talk to this Ouija board, you’re gonna be talking to a demon pretending to be Princess Diana, and then you’re gonna get possessed!”

“Get outta here! I am not!”

Robin burst into tears. “I don’t wanna get possessed!”

“We’re not gonna get possessed!” Janet told her sister with extreme forbearance.

“You are too!” Sandy said, her fervor in her faith rising. “Just like in *The Exorcist*. And God won’t help you because he’ll be mad at you for playing with a Ouija board when he said not to!”

“Where in the Bible does God say anything about Ouija boards?” Janet wrinkled her nose and shrugged a single shoulder in knowing contempt.

“He says not to go to fortune tellers. It’s the same thing,” Sandy replied evenly as she drew herself up.

“Oh really?” Janet said with a smile. “Then how does God feel about your Magic 8 Ball?”

Sandy froze for a moment, then resolutely turned her back again. “That’s different. That’s just a toy.”

“I’m not playing,” Robin announced as she got up.

Janet shot her a reproving look. “I thought you wanted to know whether Teeny’s in heaven.”

“I don’t wanna play,” Robin said. “I’m gonna ask God if Teeny’s there when I pray tonight.”

Sandy swiveled around and gave Robin an approving smile, as she might to a new disciple. “Yeah. Praying’s better than messing around with...” She looked as if she might spit on the board, or maybe even on Janet’s poised hands on the marker, “...with this thing.” She got to her feet and put a protective hand around Robin’s shoulder. “Me and Robin are going into the kitchen to make some popcorn.”

“Well, fine!” Janet huffed, “You two go! I’m gonna talk to Princess Diana for my school report!” She pressed her fingers even more firmly on the marker in defiance.

“Fine!” Sandy snapped.

“Fine!” Janet snapped back.

Later, Janet joined the other two in the kitchen. She snatched some popcorn from the bowl on the table. The three of them ate in a silence as stiff as the salty, empty microwave bag before them.

“So,” Sandy spoke up. “Did you talk to Princess Diana?”

“Yeah,” Janet said airily. “She said you two are wusses.”

Ilze Vitands is a frustrated writer living on the north side of Chicago. Her writing is heavily influenced by the classic works of Mike Royko and Mad Magazine.



MARY NISHIURA

A Politically Incorrect Urge

“How much you got?” asked the clerk.

“About 10 dollars.”

“Well, I got some stuff on sale. Over there by the window. Go take a look.”

Barry Bud Barry and Jakil walked over to the sign that said “Paint Sale,” all the while their too long pants legs making rubbing sounds on the wood floor.

They looked over the quart size cans of paint and read out loud some of the names on the labels.

“Crescent Moon Yellow.” “Arizona Blue.” “Aubergine.”

“What’s aubergine?” Barry Bud Barry yelled across to the clerk.

“Purple.”

“Polar Bear White.” “Spinach Green.” “Disco Ball Red.” “That’s it!” Jakil said, sounding like he’d discovered a magic treasure.

Barry Bud Barry took the can from the shelf and looked at the price. “Only four dollars. Maybe.”

“Hey what about this?” Jakil grabbed for a gaudy looking can with a gaudy looking label.

“Fireball Red? Nope, not flashy ‘nuf,” said Barry Bud Barry with certainty.

C’mon, let’s get going. It’s past ten. This all’ll do. This all’ll be great!

Barry Bud Barry and Jakil, string bean and ping pong shaped respectively, picked up the paint can labeled “Disco Ball Red” and went to the counter to pay.

“Four twenty,” the clerk barked. Barry Bud Barry pulled out a roll of quarters wrapped in tough plastic. He squeezed and twisted the tuff plastic tube until he could make a tear in it. The quarters came out quietly and lay neatly in a row on the counter.

“Fifty, dollar, two, three, four, twenty five.” Barry Bud Barry paid.

You want a receipt?” asked the clerk, but Barry Bud Barry and Jakil had already **scattered** out the door.

“It’s cold. You sure you wanna do this?” Jakil asked.

“Yep.”

“K. Then letz go.”

String bean and ping pong, respectively, got to the plaza in 10 minutes. They stood there awhile looking at the figure, all white and dreamlike in sandals and a summer dress.

It was Marilyn Munroe, twenty feet tall, her legs in a stance, smiling and flirting in her summer dress and sandals.

Jakil looked at Barry Bud Barry. Barry Bud Barry looked back, and then they were running to her, Disco Ball Red paint can in hand.

“Hey, I can see them. She’s wearing panties,” said one.

“Told you,” said the other.

“Open the can first,” Jakil said. “Then pick me up and I’ll throw it. Yeah.”

It took awhile; string bean was tall but not very strong. And ping pong got wiggly once string bean was on his shoulders. But they managed, and with one big whoop from both of them, Jakil pitched the open Disco Ball Red paint can upwards, but at a slight angle so that it wouldn’t fall back on them.

Unfortunately, Jakil’s pitch wasn’t enough and the Disco Ball Red paint can, instead of reaching Marilyn’s underpants, got only as far as the top of Marilyn’s right knee. But the paint did splash out. It left a satisfyingly huge gaudy Disco Ball Red paint mark that cascaded down Marilyn’s right knee to her sandals, even dripping down in between her toes.

Next morning it was on the news.

Epilogue

“It’s disgraceful. Defacing such a beautiful work of art.” said the mayor staring at the camera with his severest law and order glare, jaw clenched and neck veins popping for extra effect. “I promise you these vandals will be caught and punished.”

Barry Bud Barry and Jakil, string bean and ping pong, 12 and 11 respectively, looking every bit the punky pre-teens they thought they were, lounging on their momma’s couch, looked away from the TV, looked at each other, one rolling his eyes, the other crossing his eyes, started to laugh . . . and laugh and laugh and laugh.

*Mary Nishiura is a near-sighted novice writer who takes
inspiration from misreading signs and people.*

TERRENCE HULL

The Journeyman

My name is Eric Walker. When I was five years old my parents died in a car accident. I was adopted by their closest friends the Todas. At age ten I learned that they were the descendants of a group of Shinobi known as the Phantom Clan. Because my adopted parents could not have children of their own they decided to train me in the way of the Phantom Shinobi. When I became a teenager my adopted father taught me how to be a bladesmith. On my twenty-first birthday I swore an oath to protect my village in any way possible from those who would plunder it, and to protect those who couldn't protect themselves. By taking this oath I officially became a member of the Phantom Clan. My village is the city of Chicago and in 2019 the United States government passed the Street Hunters initiative into law. This made a lot of people very nervous, because legally vigilantes can kill any criminal who has escaped prosecution three times and take all cash and property belonging to said criminal. This meant that I could fulfill my oath to protect my village and its people. I'm sure that there are others out there taking advantage of the law and taking out nefarious criminals who couldn't be punished by the system, using every type of firearm known. I'm taking full advantage of my training and using the weapons of the Phantom Clan. These weapons include the shinobigatana, black eggs, kunai daggers, sais, bow and arrow, shuriken, and the fukiya blowgun. I call myself "The Journeyman" so I don't draw any attention to my clan. I know what you're thinking: "Don't modern criminals use firearms?" And the answer is yes they do. I wear body armor under my battle garb capable of stopping a 50-caliber bullet at close range .

I log in and find out the names of the criminals I'm allowed to hunt. The criminal in my city is one Victor Ramon. Victor is a major drug kingpin in this city. He has connections to a few of the South American cartels. According to police records he owns a warehouse on the West Side. I'll start my search there.

I start preparing my weapons by sharpening my blades, filling the black eggs with crushed glass, pepper extracts, and metal shavings from my grinders, and dipping the blowgun darts in exotic poisons. I load my gear into my van and I'm on my way. The van is a Chevy Express 3500 cargo van that has been outfitted to resist small arms fire, and for off the grid living with a ten thousand volt battery bank that can be recharged by the 9,000 watt solar panels on the roof or the under hood generator.

I park the van a few blocks away and approach the warehouse on foot. As I get closer I use my binoculars to see how many guards are on the premises. I count ten guards. I isolate and take them out with the blowgun. I hide the bodies so I don't draw attention to my presence. After I take out the guards outside I make my way inside. I use the shuriken to take out the guards inside and I hide their bodies also. I see Victor in the office counting money. He has so much faith in his thugs that he left the office door open. I stick to the shadows and take Victor from behind. I slit his throat with a Tanto and run my sword through his heart. I take all the cash I can find, then take Victor's body back to the van. According to the street hunters initiative, vigilantes have to turn the bodies over to the medical examiner once the kill has been made. The medical examiner confirms Victor's identity and gives me the reward for Victor's body, which is about \$50,000 cash. Not bad for two hours of work. With this I'll be able to make improvements to my shop and gear. I get back to the shop, put away my gear, and turn in for the night.

I turn on the TV just in time to catch the news. It appears that the police got my tip and arrested all the thugs I took out with the blowgun. The darts were dipped in a tranquilizer solution. They were out cold for about three hours and the police arrived as they were about to come to. Since we can only kill the criminal on the list, the underlings have to be dealt with non-lethally. The shuriken were coated with the same tranquilizer as the blowgun darts. All the shuriken had to do was pierce the skin to take effect. I wonder if there are any police officers taking advantage of the Street Hunters initiative.

Spy Writers

The members of the Edgewater Writing Group remind me of famous fictional characters. The basis for this observation is in their writings and occupations. There's Mary who reminds me of the Watcher from Marvel comics. Mary tells stories based mainly on what she observes. Her stories are funny and shocking at the same time. Deep down inside Mary is a romantic who might be a matchmaker. Next is Katy the librarian. I see her as a real-life Lara Croft. She is adventurous with her writing and has an inquisitive nature, which is important for a librarian. It isn't too far fetched to imagine her on an expedition looking for a lost city. Joey is a scientist and his analytical mind shows in everything he writes. Michelle is a curator always leading readers through fantastic events and making them feel like they're really there. I'm more of an inventor, creating new ways to fascinate readers and inviting them to join me on an adventure. The group's facilitator is M from the James Bond films. She always has positive input on the group's work, and will give tips on how to make improvements in our writings.

The group is always open to new members who are looking to improve their writing. If I were to write a story with all of the members of the group, it might read like a spy novel. Here's an idea, maybe it won't read like a spy novel if we all write it. What if I wrote a story that starred them individually? This seems like a better plan.



Terrence Hull is a comic book artist and graphic designer. He has lived in Chicago all his life .

IGOR STUDENKOV

Sweet Bundle of Pretty

The Q Line train barreled down into Manhattan, toward the co-op where my parents and I moved to a few months after we left Japan, and where my parents still lived over a decade later. My mom kept my old room pretty much as I had left it. I was sure Riley would love to get a look at that time capsule, which, I admit, made me just a little nervous. Even back when we were just friends, she never got a chance to see it. Or talk to my parents all that much. Which was a big reason why she was fidgeting in the seat beside me, pushing her thumbs' fingernails into the sides of her index fingers.

This was still Category 2 Nervous Riley. But it was just one step away from her wincing and chanting “idiot, idiot, idiot” under her breath. I knew that was part of the Riley process, and I just had to let it play out, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

“Should I have worn a dress?” she asked suddenly. At least she wasn't freaking out about her hair anymore.

“No,” I shook my head. “You look great, and if you wore a dress, you'd fidget in your chair all afternoon and tear the stupid thing off as soon as we're out the door. Don't get me wrong, I like me some naked Riley, but I don't want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Seriously, Daisuke,” Riley glared. “You rich people have rules and stuff. Isn't wearing a fancy dress to a social thing one of them?” “Maybe for the WASPy types,” I shrugged. “Which, let's face it, my parents aren't. Honestly, my mom will probably be like ‘Oh, so Riley-san has fashion sense now. That's very good.’”

For our meeting with my parents, Riley went with a variation of her standard business casual look – black slacks, boots, a choker and a teal button-up shirt with white labyrinth-like patterns. The colors went pretty well with the light-blue dye of her hair and the black frames of her glasses. She put on a little more make-up than usual – which still wasn't a lot – but it was enough that I wasn't allowed to touch her face until we were on our way home.

“Besides,” I added, “I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm not exactly going for nice and preppy, either.” I gestured at all the black and leather in my outfit. “And you know how I *used* to dress.” To quote our friend Liamhain, like a gothy-mcgoth-goth. “Trust me, you're fine.”

“Good point,” Riley smiled slightly, which was already progress.

“It's going to be fine,” I said. “My people aren't big on eye contact, so you don't have to worry about that. And it's going to be just four of us, so you won't have to worry about sensory overload. Just... try to keep your hands on your lap and remember not to answer questions too literally, and you'll be okay. I promise.”

“You're not going to screw this up.”

“I can think of at least six ways I can screw it up! What if I miss a social cue? What if I don't get a hint? What if I blurt out something stupid?”

At times like this, I just wanted to hug Riley and never stop. “I know all this social stuff is hard for you,” I said. “But you're getting better. Like, compared to how you were when we first met, you've made amazing progress. You're way better at reading expressions. You can hold conversations! You can even do a little small talk! That's pretty awesome.”

“I guess,” Riley kept looking at her hands.

“And speaking of blurting out something stupid – remember when I met your parents? I just want to point out that, when I first saw their place, I was the idiot who said ‘is that it?’ And, when we were going to have dinner, your dad asked me if I was okay eating with a fork. When you think about it, sticking your foot in your mouth is pretty damn neurotypical.”

Riley lifted her head and turned toward me. She didn't exactly look straight at me, but Riley didn't need to. “I... I know dealing with me can get... tiring,” she said. “I just want you to know that I appreciate it. So much.”

I reached over her shoulder and pulled her closer. “You know what I keep thinking about?” I smiled. “I keep thinking about how you’ve always known what you wanted, and you never let anyone stop you. How you never take ‘I’m fine’ for an answer. Sure, it used to be annoying sometimes, the way you wouldn’t let things go, but most of the time, you were right and I was just being an idiot. I love how you always speak your mind, and never hesitate, because, damn it, the other people are objectively wrong.”

That got another smile out of Riley.

“Asperger’s is part of who you are, Riles. I wish it didn’t make things hard for you sometimes, but you know what – it’s also the part of you that makes you awesome. You are so beautiful, you are so amazingly smart, and you care so much, and I just want my parents to see it.”

Riley reached over and squeezed me in a tight hug. “You’re pretty awesome yourself, you know that?” she said in my ear – the subway noise made whispering impossible.

“Of course,” I hugged her back. “But not nearly as awesome as you.”

We pulled apart and just sat there for a minute or so as the Q train rumbled underground. Only two more stops until Lexington, then a walk down a few blocks, and it’s home old home. My parents, and my old room, were waiting.

“It’s going to be fine,” I said as I put my hand over hers. “Honestly, I think my parents are just glad that I’m bringing a girl for a proper visit. Instead of, you know, trying to sneak you in and out of the apartment.”

“Oh really?” Riley smiled mischievously. “Be honest – how many other girls did you bring to your room?”

This was one of those times when I was glad Riley and I became friends long before we started dating. With other girls, I might hesitate, but Riley already knew my history. Hell, she probably remembered it better than me.

“A few,” I said. “Liamhain, Tara, Nicole, Yumiko, Supriya... Supriya actually got caught.”

“Because she got all theatrical and made loud sex noises?” Riley grinned. I chuckled, because that did sound like something Supriya would do. “Nah. She was supposed to sneak out early in the morning, but she went to take a shower and get some coffee... and walked in on my parents eating breakfast.”

“Oh, I can just imagine how that went,” Riley smirked. She stuck her nose up and imitated Supriya’s shoulder shake. “Why, hello there, Mr. and Mrs. Izumi!” she said in a really obnoxious Cockney accent. “My name is Supriya Mazumdar, and I just gave your son a jolly good boinking!”

I did a double-take. “Why is your Supriya impression British?” “I don’t know,” Riley shrugged. “I just like saying ‘jolly good boinking.’” I pulled her closer and kissed the side of her head. “I love you, you adorable dork,” I smiled.

Riley actually looked straight at me. The smile spread across her entire face, and .. Now, I don’t want to get *too* cheesy, but it really did feel like a sun coming up from behind the clouds. “I love you too, you sweet bundle of pretty,” she said.

“Only a bundle?” I smiled

“It’s a pretty big bundle.”

I still wasn’t sure I deserved the “sweet” part. But, sitting there next to Riley, I decided that for now, at least, I was happy exactly where I was.

Igor Studenkov is a journalist who hails from Russia and currently lives in Edgewater. His work has appeared in a number of regional newspapers. In his spare time, he enjoys photography, exploring the Chicagoland region, and availing himself of Chicago Public Library’s extensive collections.



KATHY POWERS

Dust If You Must

Dust if you must but wouldn't it be better
To paint a picture or write a letter.
Bake a cake or plant a seed,
Ponder the difference between want and need.

Dust if you must but there's not much time,
With rivers to swim and mountains to climb!
Music to hear and books to read,
Friends to cherish and life to lead.

Dust if you must but the world's out there
With sun in your eyes, and wind in your hair.
A flutter of snow, a shower of rain,
This day will not come around again.

Dust if you must and bear in mind,
Old age will come and it is not kind.
And when you go, and go you must,
You, at last, become the dust.



How Peace Works

All hail to the peacemakers:
Their presence so strong.
Their outreach encourages
Wise sense in our throng.

The schools for the peacemakers:
Utterly serene
Universal, inclusive,
Structurally clean.

We get from the peacemakers:
Goodwill, synchronized,
Harmony, tranquility
Composed, equitized.

We give to the peacemakers:
Agreed assurance,
Unity, purposeful oaths
Pledge reassurance.

*We all become peacemakers:
Enduringly kind.
Evolved, inevitable,
A product of mind.*

KATHY POWERS

57 Years

I was eleven when a 16-year-old man molested me. I told my mother and we took it through the court system. I wish we hadn't. I felt so small in a large court room with my braids tightly wound. I entered the unreality that was adult trauma. That was 57 years ago.

When I was 16, the hormonal curiosities fell upon me, weighted like my molester's sweaty frame entrapping me. Sex, a dirty, unwanted, urgent aversion consigned me to frivolous behavior of fever-pressed imperatives to shake free sexual negativity. I tried to erase foul, obscene, indecent thoughts from my soul. That was 51 years ago.

In my twenties, countless men delighted in my frenzy with orgies, binges, and debauchery. Quite suddenly, my mania ceased to drive me to the edge. I felt despondent and depressed, to the point of suicide attempts and isolation. That was 46 years ago.

Six years later, I enjoyed the company of my son's father-to-be, who respected me as I respected him, and I became pregnant. That was 40 years ago.

Motherhood taught me self-importance, appreciation, and strength to persevere in my trials as a single mother. Sexuality no longer seizes my attention. That is now.

For the past 57 years, I relive the moment of my violation when I was eleven. Every time the news focuses on a new sexual abuse, I relive the moment. Every time the abusers get away, I relive the stark helplessness I felt when I was eleven. EVERY TIME!

I will not say that I relived this foulness 57 times; it is more like a multiple of 57, probably more than one time per year. The judicial system does not appreciate this. It perceives that the crime is over. The crime is NEVER OVER!

What did my violator get for a sentence? Probation. 57 years ago.

Kathy Powers has learned after 55 years of a bipolar diagnosis that her passion is recovery and the elimination of mental illness stigma. She writes to reduce her angst and to help her audience. Advocacy is her therapy.



KATHERINE LINEHAN

Bedtime at Granny's

Kerry, my sister, and I were in our pajamas, sharing a queen-sized bed in Granny's house. It was summer vacation and we were visiting Granny in Maryland for two weeks. I was eight years old and Kerry was six. We were waiting for our parents to come in, say goodnight, and turn off the lights.

Except there was one problem and his name was Mitchell. Mitchell was Granny's cocker spaniel who felt it was his special duty to protect us girls from the evils of the world. Those evils included Mom, Dad, and even Granny herself.

Mitchell was in his usual nightly place when we visited: the foot of our bed. When the adults tried to cross the threshold, Mitchell began a soft, warning growl. When the inevitable happened, and my parents actually entered the room, Mitchell backed up and settled himself between Kerry and me; he was our self-designated protector. Mitchell expressed his disapproval with great intensity: barking, shaking, and hair standing on end. It amused Kerry and me to no end. With Mitchell's help, we had a newfound power over the adults!

Other nights that summer, Mitchell was there but more subdued. He wasn't objecting as strenuously to the adult presence in the room as we would have liked. Kerry and I looked at each other, grinned mischievously, and knew what to do. We grabbed a hold of Mitchell's body and shrieked, "Mitchell! Help, Mitchell! Save us, Mitchell!" That was all that was needed to rev Mitchell up, just like a motorcycle.

Every night it ended the same. Granny entered the room and, ignoring Mitchell's antics, carried him out, thereby humbling him before the evil adults that had entered his lair. It was our nightly bedtime routine and we loved it.

KATHERINE LINEHAN

Broken Arrow Library Visit

“Mom, when are you finally going to get wireless internet?”

“Katy, I don’t know. Why don’t you just go the library for a couple hours?”

I found myself immersed in checking my e-mail at a public terminal at the Broken Arrow branch of the Tulsa Public Library over Christmas break. I had graduated high school ten years earlier and had lived in Chicago for about five years at this point. I heard a hesitant whisper. “Katy? Is that you?”

Confused, I looked to the person sitting at the computer next to me and I hesitated. It was like that night when I saw John Cusack standing on a street corner, taking a break from filming a movie in my neighborhood. I recognized him, not as a movie star, but as someone who seemed out of place and didn’t belong in that setting. Then it clicked.

My eyes widened and I couldn’t help myself. “THERESA! OH MY GOD, IT’S YOU!!” I hadn’t meant to scream but my excitement at seeing one of my best friends from high school who I had lost touch with was completely overwhelming. I imagine Theresa laughed internally, thinking “*same old Katy*,” while the librarians and several patrons shushed me with obvious annoyance for disturbing the pristine quiet. I covered my mouth for a few seconds to regain my composure, Theresa smiled, and then we began a whispered conversation.

Theresa was still living in Pennsylvania, which is where she had attended college. I told her I had graduated from Oklahoma State and had moved to Chicago. It was a wonderful renewal of our friendship; since then, we kept in touch and visited one another several times.

My parents finally got wireless internet, but for sure, I ended up being very happy that they didn’t have it that particular year.

Katy Linehan is a librarian at the Edgewater Branch of the Chicago Public Library who loves reading but never considered herself much of a writer. Through her participation in the writing workshop these past two years, she is happy to be wrong about that.



Edgewater Public Library
(photo courtesy of the Edgewater Public Library website)

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