Cat scratch fever

Jill Marquis

The University of Montana

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/1749

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

** Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature **

Yes, I grant permission   X   
No, I do not grant permission  

Author's Signature  Jeff C Marquis  
Date  5/2/96  

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
CAT SCRATCH FEVER

by Jill Marquis

B.A. Northwestern University - Illinois, 1991

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Fine Arts
University of Montana
1996

Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chairman, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School

5-3-96
Date
# Table of Contents

**Fiction:**

- Lava ................................................................. 1
- Carnivorous Plants ........................................... 9
- Cat Scratch Fever ............................................ 15
- B Movie Dreams ............................................... 18
- Fellowship Hour ............................................... 32
- Louisville Slugger .......................................... 42
- Positive Bibinsky and His Badass Friends ....... 52

**Non Fiction:**

- Spit Take ............................................................ 70
- Mime Workshop .................................................. 80
Lava

Mom smoked Virginia Slims; Dad smoked Lucky Strikes. It was hot that summer, and you could smell the cherries rotting on the ground outside. It was July 2, 1970 and I had to do the dishes because I was in trouble like always for trying something new. I gave the dog a haircut. Coffee was a full size poodle and I loved her curly hair, but it seemed sort of uneven to me, so I fixed it. I got in trouble mainly for not cleaning all the piles of hair up off the kitchen floor. I refused to clean it up, because I liked to walk barefoot on the hair. I was always using that sort of excuse. It was July 2, 1970, and I was 6. When I paused by the sink to watch the water whirl down the drain, I heard mom bust out laughing at the tv, and the sound of the laugh track undulating in the background; then, as I scrubbed the sink down, I smelled dishsoap, Ajax, and Lucky Strikes, all at once. Smoke always smelled clean to me.

We lived next to Mt. Tabor park, the site of a small extinct volcano. I’d spent that afternoon up in the park with my dog Coffee watching boys play basketball in the paved court in the crater. A cliff rose steep and jagged behind the hoop, forming an echo chamber.
Ferns and moss drooped off the cliff, and the warm air smelled wet. The sounds of high tops squeaking and balls rattling the backboard rumbled all around me that afternoon as I sat courtside with Coffee waiting for the mountain to blow. The backboard boomed, the hillside boomed; Coffee barked, the hillside barked. I sat there for a long time, waiting.

I had seen a film at the science museum the day before about volcanoes in Hawaii that made lava look fun. In the film, volcanoes generally erupted at night, spraying yellow sparks into the sky and sending pulsing tubes of orange, red, and black lava wriggling down hillsides. I guess I understood that lava was dangerous but mostly I thought wow, that’s pretty, that’s exciting. That’s an event. Summer vacation had just started and already the days seemed too long and too quiet.

After dinner, Mom and Dad sat on the sofa in the family room, passing a Cuban cigar back and forth as they watched Jeopardy! like they did every single night. They smoked and talked to the TV. In the kitchen, I washed the dishes and my little brothers Willy and Timmy entertained themselves with their rubber band collection. We had tuna casserole with potato chips crumbled on top for dinner that
night. I also had chocolate milk, garlic bread and broccoli.

When I finished the dishes I went out in the back yard to dig for lava. Moist lumpy rotten cherries dotted the grass beneath the cherry tree where I worked away at the ground with a fork, a knife, and a spoon. Up in the tree a robin sang a lazy loopy song in the twilight, drunk from eating rotten cherries. I could smell the dirt at first but as it got cooler and darker out, the smell faded. I dug and dug, switching tools now and then. I figured I would get down to the lava tubes by the time night closed in, and then fireworks and heat and a slow ooze would seep out from the bowels of the earth. I couldn't wait. I worked really hard.

The hole was about the size of a bedside table when I hit something hard, a tree root, I think. I picked up the knife and hacked away at it for a while. Then I went inside to get a bigger tool, a steak knife perhaps.

In the kitchen Willy and Timmy were giggling and hitting each other on the head with fly swatters. “Bonk!” Willy said as he whacked Timmy’s head. “Bonk bonk!” Timmy said, whacking Willy twice. They laughed and laughed. Mom and Dad muttered at the TV in the other room. A stream of smoke wound its way through the
kitchen door. I put a sweater on and got a whisk, a steak knife and a really big knife out of a drawer. I don’t know what the whisk was for. I liked the whisk. I watched Timmy hit Willy a bunch of times while I tested the sharpness of the big knife on the wooden edge of the drawer. Then I tested a couple of other knives the same way. I considered the grooves I’d made for a moment, running my finger across them, then slammed the drawer shut. Coffee perked up and followed me to the door. “No, Coffee!”, I said, “Stay! Sit! Roll over!” And she did. I loved my dog. I bossed her around all the time like that. We called Coffee Coffee because one Christmas morning she ate a whole bag of chocolate covered coffee beans and did laps around the family room for hours. And I mean hours. Before that, her name was Pep. She was a good digger, so I let her come outside with me.

I stopped on the porch to see how big the hole looked. Something large and dark was lurking there by the lava hole. When it looked up at me I saw its slobber glistening in the evening light, and the glint of my fork in its mouth. “Hey dog!” I said, “Stay! Sit!” But it didn’t listen. It turned away and trotted off toward the street. I
wanted my fork, so I ran after it, and Coffee ran after me. I was in such a hurry that I fumbled and dropped the knives, but I kept on running, armed with only a whisk.

We ran down Pine Street past the school yard, then cut across the vacant lot by the store with the sign that reads -OOD S-ORE, past the dumpsters and up through the curvy streets where the rich people live. My salt water sandals slapped the pavement. The dogs' claws clicked along briskly. It was night then, and fog blew around us like fog will do in my town even at the height of summer. I was breathing hard when we hung a left through an old lady's rose garden, so I smelled them all in one huge fleeting gulp of breath. It's like licorice and peaches together, I thought. The old lady stood up on her porch and looked at us, and her Scottie dog yapped at us, straining at its leash.

On Burnside by the police station a collie joined us, and over by the railroad tracks a pair of golden retrievers fell in. Once we had reached that critical mass, crowd status, all kinds of dogs came out and joined us. Coffee blended into the crowd. It was like dog's night out. They were all ahead of me. Dogs run crooked, with the front half of their bodies listing to one side and the back half off to the
other. And that night, running with the dogs, I discovered that most of them list to the right.

They didn’t bark; they just ran, and after a while the running slowed to trotting just fast enough to keep me at a distance. I rattled the whisk along a chain link fence as we passed it. I was getting used to running then, and began to lope along easily behind them. They ran further and further ahead. I thought I’d lost track of them completely for a while. Then I saw them all in the distance milling around the water tower. I ran toward them across the field as fast as I could.

And by the time I caught up with the dog who had my fork I guess I sort of thought I was a dog. The dog sat in the middle of the street, panting. I crouched in front of it, moving my butt back and forth in the way I imagined dogs had to when they wagged vigorously. I wagged. I smiled at the dog and let my head tilt to one side inquisitively. I stretched my neck out toward it, sniffing. I closed my eyes, thinking that that way I could smell more proficiently, like dogs do. I was so close I can say it smelled like a pair of warm wet workboots. My nostrils flared and tightened, and I was just starting
to think Wow, this is exciting when my head reared back then jerked forward, and I sneezed.

That’s when it bit me. A big yellow dog with breath like a pair of boots reached out for the part of me that was closest to him and wrenched it off my face, and I thought, Wow. Wow, this hurts, and Wow, I’m going to get in so much trouble for this. This is a moment that changed my life significantly and all I thought was Wow. I stumbled around in the weeds by the water tower holding what was left of my nose to my bleeding face, my eyes closed because the pain was so great, and when I opened them, all the dogs were gone except for Coffee, who cowered on the ground next to the tip of my nose. I sat down in the dirt next to her, still holding my face, and I remember it didn’t hurt so much then; all I had was a feeling like the fast hum of power lines overhead.

Since then so much has happened. I look fine now, but I haven’t smelled or tasted a thing in 25 years. So I think of that night now and then and try to remember all of it the way it was before this life I have started; the smells of tuna and cigars, rotting fruit and warm loamy earth. I didn’t think of it then, but I wonder now, what
does lava smell like? Is it a good smell like cedar burning or bad, like hair burning? Maybe it is too hot to smell, maybe it’s just a hot rush of air. That’s how trouble feels to me now.
Carnivorous Plants

Today in American History Mr. Delacy gave us a big lecture about how we’re all beautiful people and the trouble with beautiful people is that they never really have to learn to hold a conversation. You’re lazy! he said, all of you! stomping his little foot for emphasis. But I’m not beautiful, I thought. Neither is Mr. Delacy. He wears sandals with socks. He is small, old, crooked and excitable. He once told us that he washes his hair with a bar of soap. He seemed proud of that. His hair looks very strong. After those opening comments he lectured about manifest destiny for half an hour. It’s a dumb idea, and it goes like this: westward expansion of the United States was meant to be. As if God had anything to do with it. As if. That’s all I wrote in my notebook today.

When I got home, Dad was on the couch watching the nature channel like always. He likes the nature channel much more than he liked having a job, I am beginning to think.

Until a few weeks ago he dressed up for the job he no longer had and spent his days listening to classical music and staring out
the window. Then when I got home he would talk to me quietly about my attitude problem, which I really don’t think existed. He called those talks “family conferences.” We would face each other across the kitchen table. He would talk calmly and I would try my hardest not to yell at him. He usually had a list he referred to in order to make sure the information he presented was complete. It was all very businesslike. Things like “playing the same song over and over” and “failure to take adequate care in stowing your possessions” were on the list. Noise was always a big issue. I can’t help it if I talk loud. My Mom talks loud, so loud that even though she is two thousand miles away in Alaska I have to hold the phone away from my ear sometimes. She gets really worked up about the lack of good role models for me here in Stanton.

So I lost all my “privileges” in the course of those family conferences. The first time it was no phone, no allowance, no friends for one week; then the second time it was two weeks, then three weeks, and so on. He used a red pen to mark the weeks off on the kitchen calendar at the end of each conference. By the time he got turned on to tv, I'd “earned” 39 weeks of punishment and I had started to develop a very bad attitude. I felt that I should do
something truly wrong, something that would make me feel deserving of this punishment. I wanted to make Dad lose his cool.

So, on the last morning of this terrible time, I got up early and programmed the CD player to play Santana’s “Oye Como Va” 13 times. I love that song. Before I started the music, I hurried around the house, turning on all the lights, the blender, the Cuisinart, the cappuccino machine, the vacuum cleaner, the dishwasher, the metronome, the washer and dryer. The whole house was humming. I picked up my coat and paused in the front hall to take it all in. I clicked on the cd player and, as an afterthought, I turned on the television. On the nature channel turtles were laying eggs on a warm beach far away. I put the remote control in my bookbag and stepped out the door. I was high on life.

All day long I imagined my father running around the house turning things off. I pictured him disheveled and untucked, and so angry that he couldn’t possibly form a list. I could practically see him turning the house upside down looking for the remote. I knew he would look for it even though he never watched tv back then, because with him each thing has to be in a certain place.

I couldn’t keep it to myself; I told two friends. At first they
just thought I was nuts, but as I explained my reasoning and gave more details, the beauty of what I had done became clear to them. They told others, and now I am a minor celebrity. Soon I hope to be a ringleader, guiding small groups of my peers on ne'er-do-well capers.

I loitered for a long time after school that day, putting off the family conference that seemed inevitable. At six I walked in the door and discovered my dad still in his pajamas, watching a show about peat bog ecosystems. The metronome ticked slowly on the piano. Everything else had been turned off; I guess the tv distracted him before he reached the metronome. He didn’t notice me. He reclined on the couch, calm in a fuzzy absent way. I only knew his tense variety of calm, and couldn’t quite believe that this was different. I stood in the entry hall, waiting for his lecture, watching a time lapse of moss growing in a Canadian bog. Five minutes passed like that. Then there was a commercial break, and he noticed me. “Oh, hi Charlotte,” he said, yawning, “Lair of the Wombat is on next. Should be great. Pull up a chair.”

I shrugged and sat down like it was no big deal that his personality had completely changed after just one long day of lying around blissed out in front of the tv. Since then, our conversations
rarely last longer than a dozen words. We only talk about food, drink, and whether that last one was a good commercial. I think we deserve a Nielsen box. Yesterday I tried to explain to Mom how great it is that Dad and I can agree to sit quietly on the couch and watch grass grow and slick furry babies being born. That sure made her talk loud.

Today when I walked in the house and dropped my books on the table dad said, “Shhh! This is a good one.” I sat down. He was right. The show was called *Pitcher Plants of North America*. Pitcher plants are brightly colored tall narrow vessels that grow in the acidic soil of bogs and crave the sweet blood of living things. Each pitcher plant has a leaf flopped over the top opening to keep rain water out and to trap its victims. A pool of enzymes inside the pitcher digests them. It takes three to five days for the plant to digest each insect. When the plant is full, it closes its hood flap and rests.

For one hour we watched ants march in lines up the nectar-coated sides of pitcher plants. They would reach the top, peek inside the hood, and fall in, one after another. One variety has hundreds of white spots on the side of the pitcher, like windows, so that when the ant peeks inside the hood, it’s not dark or scary at all. It looks like a cathedral. It looks like manifest destiny to the ants, I
suppose, and so even though each ant sees the ant before him fall in, he leaps to meet the light.

Dad has chosen life on the couch. Today I decided that's not the life for me. I'm not sure what to call my choice, but my first course of action is clear: early tomorrow morning I will call two friends and run down to the freeway. We'll sprawl out on the embankment and pretend to be dead. At first the sleepier commuters will cruise by, oblivious. The less sleepy commuters will slow down, rubbernecking to see us. Then one sleepy driver -- that's all it will take -- will rear end one of the rubberneckers, and somebody else will run into that person, and who knows, maybe it'll cause a 10 car or even a 20 car pile up. And all the while I'll recline by the side of the road, my mouth sagging open, my eyes closed, imagining my future: stealing from bad people, rigging elections, killing my enemies one by one.
Cat Scratch Fever

I've got cat scratch fever and a crick in my neck. My coffee's reheating but won't get hot. That microwave's so old it makes me nervous. The timer's a dial; the buttons protrude. It makes too much noise; the whole room's buzzing; my head's vibrating too. If I closed my eyes right now they might just glue shut; it's weird, this feeling, and I don't mean funny ha ha, I mean funny peculiar. Sometimes the microwave keeps nuking even after I open the door. Just now I put my hand in to check the coffee and got this tingly feeling from the tiny invisible waves, and even though I jerked my hand away and slammed the door, the waves are with me still like dozens of little sidekicks. I feel like my hands are full just keeping track of them. And I just broke another goddamn pencil. Did the whole crossword puzzle in three minutes this morning. Three minutes, three pencils. Maybe I grip them too tight, I don't know.

I realized I was sick just two days ago, when I was putting gas in the car. The guy at the next pump was rattling the nozzle to knock the last drops of gas in his tank, and he was pretty enthusiastic
about it, I remember. Rattle, rattle, rattle. Guys sure like doing that, I remember thinking. And then I started my pump and the smell of lead swept over me, and I thought Oh my head is hot; I should vomit or sleep or both.

Since then the glands in my neck have been swollen and tender. My body’s bone tired but my brain scampers forward full speed ahead. I’m not taking the meds the doctor gave me because I don’t know, I think about those minuscule bacteria floating around inside me, and I think it couldn’t be all their fault that I feel this way.

Other than that, things are fine here in Stanton. Same as ever, I have too much time on my hands, so I sit around and think of worst possible scenarios. There are worse habits. I’ve tried worrying about never being happy in my work or about ending up alone in a small dark apartment, but that wasn’t satisfying, it was just awful. I’ve also tried thinking about the big picture but it doesn’t really work for me either. Like today I heard on the news that there are 7000 pieces of garbage orbiting earth, and scientists at NASA are keeping track of them all. Why do they bother? I don’t know. They used the phrase *accident waiting to happen*. That one didn’t work for me even when I imagined nuclear garbage, huge nuclear garbage, huge nuclear germ
warfare garbage colliding in space.

On the bus on the way to work today I thought about all the cars on the roads, every one going to a different destination; all those cars crossing paths, all those drivers drinking coffee and getting angry listening to the news or finishing the fights they were having when they left the house or yelling at their kids in the back seat; all those people thinking about everything but their driving, which made me wonder, just what are the odds that I have made it this far?

It takes about twenty minutes to really work myself up. When I swim I think about all the urine swirling around in my local public swimming pool. On the phone I think about electromagnetic fields, microwaves, spurts of information pulsing down fiber optic lines. I think about the invisible waves fluttering all around us; I make a list of all the known causes of cancer, then create my own list of causes. Things like Kleenex and Q-tips could cause cancer, I convince myself. All this freaks me out. It makes my neck hurt. I’ve got cat scratch fever. I am afraid that someday my eyes will glue shut, that I will be wide awake with my eyes shut, flickering left and right, left and right, my eyebrows straining upward, my forehead wrinkled with the effort of trying to come unglued.
B Movie Dreams

Violet was about to cry. She was six and generally divided her time evenly between fussing and floating around with a half-smile on her face. She tried to breathe normally, tried not to cry by squinting across the room at her mother Lydia’s drooping eyes as she stacked the dishes in the sink on top of the dishes from the day before, and the day before that.

They had scads of dishes and underwear, because Lydia felt life was too short to spend much time on everyday tasks. Laundry day came once every few weeks, dishes no more often than twice a week. She hadn’t actually dusted or mopped for over three years, since Violet’s dad Pete left. She had completely streamlined her life, and most of the time she thought she felt fine about it. Most of the time she didn’t think about just vanishing with Violet, moving to somewhere warm where no one knew them. She tried not to worry. She took care of her daughter. She listened to the radio. She memorized the words to songs, did crossword puzzles, read about
hobbies in magazines but never actually developed one; she kept herself very busy all day long, then read herself to sleep, her eyes straining for distraction even after they closed. When she drove her bus route each night, a medley of tv jingles and children's songs meandered steadily through her mind.

A few minutes earlier Violet had shuffled into the kitchen, head hanging low, one small hand scraping her already distressed hair, the other balled up tight, rubbing her eye. As she sat down, both hands dropped to the table like they forgot their business.

Sleep well? Lydia asked, reaching across the table, mussing Violet’s hair in a lazy warm way. Violet hung her head, unresponsive. Lydia folded her hands in her lap and looked out the window.

That’s when Violet felt the tears coming on. She grimaced at the stretched out reflection of her mother’s face in the toaster and began to tell her how it was: Mommy, it looked just like in the book, Violet said - It rolled up the stairs into my room and then it grabbed me by the ankles - her voice rose, thick with mucus - and it spanked me!

But before the tears fell, Lydia leaned across the table to hold her daughter’s hand tightly, to make things better by telling this
small story:

Late at night tiny mice sneak into our rooms and perch on the lobes of our ears. Then they lean forward and whisper crazy ideas straight into our ear canals. So that wasn’t really the Little Engine That Could; it was only a dream.

Sometimes two mice work on one person at the same time. This makes the dreams even more confusing, because two brains the size of garbanzo beans are not necessarily better than one.

The mice mean well, but they are mice and so have tiny mouse sensibilities. That explains all the chase scenes. It takes at least two mice to produce a really long, densely populated, especially confusing dream, the kind of dream that leaves you bewildered and tired when you wake. Those are the kind that I call B movie dreams, Violet, and they are nothing to worry about. It’s just Mickey Mouse whispering in your ear, honey. Ok?

But the story just made Violet want to cry more. She choked it back, still looking at the toaster.

Lydia held Violet’s hand tightly. Worry spun down her throat, but it was hard to tell because she regarded Violet’s face like she might if she were watching the sky, waiting for weather to break. A
minute passed, and still Violet did not cry. Then Lydia let go of her hand and went over to the sink to rearrange the dishes. She ran the water and hummed a few bars of “The Itsy Bitsy Spider,” until she remembered that the idea of a little spider falling repeatedly from a great height freaked Violet out. She stopped humming.

Lydia reached under the sink to get the bucket and paintbrush. She handed them to Violet, whose expression had already started to change. Violet filled the bucket with water and went outside to paint the sidewalk. As she wrote the story of her dream on the pavement, the heat of Indian summer lifted it away letter by letter behind her, leaving blotches of water, half curves of c’s and p’s only at the places where she paused, brush on pavement, to think how to say what came next.

Violet stayed with Nancy next door on the nights when Lydia drove the #21 bus back and forth between downtown and felony flats. Nancy’s house smelled like an enormous ashtray and was crowded with all five of her kids, her sister’s two kids, four stringy dogs, ten cats and a rat one of the boys had decided to befriend. All the kids and all the animals had names that ended in “y,” which was the
source of much miscommunication. Nancy was always hollering at them from her La-Z-Boy in the tv room, and all they’d hear would be, *Mmmm-y get in here right now. Stop bugging your sister!* *Mmmmy and mmmmy, do your homework.* *Mmmmy never acted like that when she was your age!* It was easy for Violet to fade off into the crowd there.

Amy was about Violet’s age. She really wanted to be Violet’s friend. Amy needed a partner, because she liked to play a game called Maid! In that game, Amy was the rich lady and Violet was the maid. Part of the game was that Amy spoke mostly in nouns and imperative verbs, like this: *Maid! Hairdo time!* *Curl my hair!* *Mai-aid, get my pork chops and applesauce!* *Dust! Sweep that over there!* *Maid! Eat your gruel!* Sometimes this made Violet cry, and sometimes it just made her walk away. The minute she left the room Amy picked up a doll and continued the game.

Violet looked through their closets. She explored their basement, their garage, their utility closet. Grime and old used things filled every cranny of the house. She found a dusty collection of pen caps on the floor behind the freezer. Half of an ancient donut perched between two sticky children’s books on the highest shelf she
could reach. The things she found creeped her out. Some nights she went outside alone and walked around the neighborhood. They never missed her. The night after her dream about *The Little Engine That Could* she sat at the foot of the La-Z-Boy watching one of the cats watching the rat, thinking of the too tight grip of her mother's damp hand.

The previous spring, Violet had learned all sorts of things at kindergarten, including how to swear like a longshoreman. She learned that skill on the playground. One day she came home from school listing the words off: *fuck, bitch, screw, pansy* -- she cursed quietly, smiling her small half smile -- *damn, dang, crap, bull-shit*.

Lydia held her close and said kindly, *Violet, honey, you can't go around saying those words all the time. You've got to save them for when you really mean them or they won't work their magic.* Then Lydia gave Violet the paintbrush and bucket of water and directed her to paint the whole sidewalk. She wanted to keep Violet busy for a while.

Of course, Violet could never quite finish the job because it kept drying. The next day on the playground she learned to spell
those words she’d been saying.

Lydia drove her bus along Powell Boulevard, turning the events of the day over in her mind. A man standing in back almost lost his balance as the bus swung round a corner. He looked sharply toward the front, then softened at the sight of Lydia, for although she wasn’t particularly striking she almost always appeared to be smiling. That was because of her prominent cheek bones and wide mouth, not a result of any sunny outlook on life. People used to call her the clown. She didn’t notice him, as she was out of the habit of thinking that way.

First thing that morning, before Lydia even got out of bed, the lady across the street busted out of her screen door onto the porch and yelled, Get the fuck away, you little fucker! Those were the first words Lydia ever heard her say, and she wouldn’t’ve guessed those would be them. But there they were. Lydia popped up out of bed, looked through the window, and there she was, already dressed in a navy business suit, coffee in hand, threatening the small, chipper spaniel who had been making the rounds for a few days, barking at bedroom windows in the wee wee hours of the morning. The woman’s
pile of large brown hair wavered on her head like it wanted to go somewhere. *Get away you little fucker,* she said again, tossing the coffee in his direction. He barked and sidled away. She turned back inside, letting the screen door slam behind her.

*B movie dreams,* Lydia thought, *everybody’s having them but nobody’s talking about it.* And she was right; instead of talking about the dreams, people were flipping each other off, arguing about politics, getting into accidents, and yelling at nice little dogs. Providence Hospital’s emergency room was crammed with people who’d done unusually stupid things to themselves, like filleting a finger while slicing a bagel. The regulars on Lydia’s bus hardly said hello anymore; they boarded quickly, averting their eyes, thinking their thoughts. Lydia lingered a moment too long almost every time a light turned green. Three times that day she caught herself humming schmaltzy songs she secretly liked: *love hurts,* she sang obliviously, publicly; *these boots are made for walkin’; walk in the sunshine, the sunshine of love.*

Later that day, Lydia sat in the dentist chair looking at the ceiling, thinking what she always thought: they really ought to have a tv up there or something to look at, because I don’t want to look at
her. Her being the hygienist, a woman about Lydia’s age who had enormous hair and a small body. This woman looked like the kind of person Lydia’s mom always wanted her to be: perky, cute. The badge on her pink nurse coat said her name was Cindy. For twenty minutes Lydia lay there while Cindy silently scraped her teeth. Then Cindy paused, and said in a slow even tone, *You know, you sure have a lot of saliva.*

_Huh?_ Lulu said. _Oh, sorry._

Everybody’s having them, Lydia said to herself, almost out loud -- those dreams where you run constantly, where you’re surrounded by friends and enemies and all the roles are mixed up. The second you wake you forget who was there, what you did, and why you felt such rage or strong desire, such overwhelming fear. All you’re left with is a tightness in the throat, maybe a crick in the neck, and often, the vague sense that you ought to make a move.

That afternoon before work Lydia and Violet sat on the porch. Violet was trying to make the porch more tidy by knocking off the loose bits of paint and smoothing the edges of the remaining indentations with her bare hands. It was frustrating work. Soon
Violet got a sliver of paint wedged under her fingernail, and gasped, looking at her mother, waiting for her full attention before she let out a high wavering wail. Lydia tried not to worry; instead, she gathered Violet close and continued the story:

*That little dog we heard barking this morning is in cahoots with the mice. Cahooting is like strategizing. Right now you and I are in cahoots. The dog’s name is Corky. I understand a bit of most dog dialects. You’ll never guess what he was saying. You remember how it sounded, right? Ruff ruff ruff/ruff ruff ruff/ruff ruff ruff ruff. He was saying *Be My Friend! Be My Friend! Be My Friend!*  

And this afternoon before you got home from school I saw Corky out in the yard reading the book you left on the lawn. He really liked that book. He read it all at once, nosing at a furious pace through the pages, pausing occasionally to say, *Ruf ruf ruf ruf!* This is so great! This is so great! That’s how dogs talk. This is their plan: the mice freak us out with their ideas then the dog wakes us up abruptly so we feel it more. That’s the deal they have going. The thing is, I don’t exactly understand why. Maybe we’re like TV to them. Maybe we should cahoot more often, so we can get to the bottom of this and other mysteries. When Corky finished the book he looked*
way and - this is strange - I could tell he knew exactly what I was thinking.

Violet squirmed away. She ran across the yard to the tall oak and perched on its lowest branch, squinting up through the golden leaves. Lydia strained to see her, but all she could see was part of one thin leg dangling among the leaves, switching jerkily from side to side. That's my little girl up in a tree, she thought, all angles and anxiety, all mine; but then, just like that, a chunk of the lyrics to The Beverly Hillbillies theme song sprang to mind: Oil, that is; black gold, texas tea... and then how does it go? She looked down at her hands and tried to recall.

That night Amy wanted to play a new game, called Blind Girl! She tied a scarf around Violet's head so she couldn't see, then pretended to help the poor blind girl: First she braided Violet's hair, slowly and painfully. She wasn't a very good braider. Then she said, Poor blind girl, I will read a story to you later. Blind girl! follow my voice to the kitchen. I will feed you your gruel now. But because you are a poor Blind girl, I will give you a choice. Would you like gruel or would you like a lollipop?
Violet chose the lollipop. So, Amy looked around. She didn’t have a lollipop, but she did have a small handmirror that was decorated with pink and yellow daisies on the back. It looked like it might taste good. She handed it to the Blind Girl.

Violet bit the soft waxy plastic of the mirror; then, unsatisfied, she bit it again. When that didn’t work, she tore off the blindfold and tried again. Blind Girl! Amy cried out as Violet rushed, wailing, out the door. Violet ran out into the night and climbed as high as she could in the oak tree, settling at last on a thin crooked limb even with the power line. She sat there shivering, chewing on her mirror lollipop, looking across the powerline at the darkened windows of her mother’s house.

At 28th street Cindy the hygienist boarded the bus with two big bags of groceries. Lydia smiled and said hello. Cindy said Hi, but didn’t appear to remember Lydia, or her saliva. Cindy looked to the back of the bus as she showed her pass. The word bicuspid slipped softly from her lips, and she glided to the rear. Lydia watched Cindy take a seat next to the man who had been watching her since that
sharp turn on Powell. He had a curving hairline, a dark beard and smooth pale skin, sort of like a tooth. While Cindy tried to engage him in conversation, the man looked at Lydia in the rear view mirror, and let his mouth spread easy into a wide smile, revealing the gap between his front teeth. OK, Lydia thought, OK then. Their eyes kept meeting. Cindy left the bus a mile later. The man slouched there, sloppy and amiable, through two full circuits of her route, until the bus was empty and they were on their way back to the garage. She told him she had a kid. OK, he said. She took him home, and they did it in the dark for a long time, then kept touching for hours, even as they each slipped off into their own dense crazy dreams.

When she woke the next morning, he was gone, and nothing had changed. The dog was barking at her window. Across the street the screen door slammed. At least I have Violet, she thought. In the next room, Violet was curled up tight as a potato bug under the blankets, dreaming of mice and men. Outside, indian summer was over and frost lay heavily on the grass. Bits of ice glazed the pavement black and shiny where Violet had been painting the night before. It was hard to read. F ck, it read, sh , crap la, and then there was a whole
sentence you could read perfectly clearly, but by the time Violet and Lydia left the house, the sun had risen enough to warm the ground, and the words written there had faded to plain gray pavement. I'm alone here, it had read, I'm all alone here with my mom.
Fellowship Hour

After the service during fellowship hour me and Cindy and Freddy and Sara and Scotty and various little kids would take our Dixie cups of Koolaid and slip off one by one downstairs for some unsupervised hijinx. We’d slide down the stair railing and run through the cool halls to the classroom at the end where the two chairs with wheels were. After negotiating for a minute or two about whose turn it was, we’d take off down the hallway again, slipping around on the linoleum in our tractionless shiny Sunday shoes. The basement was shaped like a big H, so there were lots of corners to swing around. The kids who didn’t get chairs played with the light switches, and that flickering added to the excitement of pushing my little sister down the halls at top speed.

I liked to park her and the chair outside the nursery and visit the babies each week. I would teach the babies valuable life skills, like spitting. After the visit I’d go pick up my passenger and get on the road again.

Cindy couldn’t stop laughing the whole time I pushed her
around. When we arrived at the wide open area near the kitchen I'd yell Ole! and whirl the chair around good, and Cindy would scream with surprise as she twirled across the room gripping the seat. She loved it, except when she fell off.

Almost every week fellowship hour ended the same way, with one of the little ones getting a rug burn or a strawberry and running blubbering upstairs to his mama. Usually it was Scotty Smith or his sister Laura, but sometimes it was my little sister. In our family Cindy was the cute one and I was the smart one. That's what everybody thought then. And the hard part was I knew she was adorable. The other hard part was I always got in trouble.

We liked chair races and chair rodeo plenty, but those were just warmup activities for the real business of the hour: striving to be the greatest. *The Guinness Book of World Records* clearly defined greatness in thousands of categories. On the day I remember best, I stood absolutely still for 7 minutes, and it was only due to interference that I did not break the world record for motionlessness.

Our parents told us not to go downstairs but every week we got away, departing by ones and twos, ostensibly to go to the bathroom.
We thought we were sly. We thought they couldn’t hear us as we clattered up and down the hallways and played the organ softly. We could hear them. Every five minutes or so a roar of laughter would rise over our heads, filtering down through the acoustic tiling. This was one of the great mysteries of life then - why did grownups always laugh at the same time?

Sara, the oldest of us by two years, was usually sent down to the basement to keep us in line but all she ever did was sit on a bench out in the courtyard and read a book. She was deaf in one ear and didn’t listen with the other, which is why I say we were unsupervised. She had a Dorothy Hamill cut. She had large thick glasses, the kind that cover most of the top of the face and go dark in the sun, just like her mother’s.

The grownups we knew weren’t inspiring. They had damp hands, poor posture, uneven complexions, and a complete lack of fashion sense. The few who weren’t quiet and nervous were way too loud. They either hurt our eyes or hurt our ears. I suppose we could have guessed even then that genetic factors would deter us from becoming publicly great like the Bionic Woman and Shazam! but we loved them anyway and were sure we were destined for similar greatness. It
was 1978 and the *Guinness Book of World Records* was our bible.

That’s why I was standing there. The world record for motionlessness was 6 hours and 53 minutes, set by a woman in Gloucester, England in 1970, the year of my birth. Glowkester, I thought, Gluesester. It was one of those words I couldn’t figure.

I had been standing still facing out toward the courtyard for five minutes and thirty-five seconds already according to the clock over the door. Cindy had been playing “The Good Ship Lollipop” on the old organ for just as long.

Over at the table by the light switches and the kitchen Scotty Smith sat across from his little sister Laura, who was only three. They were blonde rosy cheeked kids who knew more then about how to pitch a fit and manipulate a parent than the rest of us could learn in a lifetime. Scotty picked the salt shaker off the table. Laura locked eyes with him and reached for the pepper. He brought the salt up to his chin, then lifted it to his mouth and, eyes still locked, Laura followed suit. Scotty licked the top of the salt shaker then tilted it a little so that salt would pour into his mouth and entranced, Laura did the same. Outside the door in the courtyard, Sara turned the page.

Cindy plunked at the organ keys and sang - on the good ship
lollipop, it’s a good trip to da da gumdrop/ da da da da... She was so sweet you could hear the smile in her voice. *Doi,* I said through my teeth, *duh, you don’t even know the words.*

Freddy Rosentreater was at the blackboard busily proving that he was a mathematical genius. Freddy’s dad Mr. Rosentreater taught wrestling and shop at the local technical high school and it was from him that Freddy got most of his bad ideas. The rest he made up on his own. See, he really was smart. He was trying to memorize all the digits of pi by copying them from the *Guinness Book* onto the board. The world record for memorizing pi was way too big to be attainable, 3,025 places. The world record for organ playing was 80 hours and 35 minutes. I was a realist. I had been standing still for 5 minutes already.

I only had a couple of hours to go, and though I realized that being the greatest at something is tough work and requires a lot of training, I was fairly certain that soon it would be my picture, not Mardeanna Odom’s, that graced page 51 of The Book.

Freddy was one year older than me. He could pin his dog Duke to the ground in 8 seconds flat. Duke was a Saint Bernard. Those dogs slobber a lot. Every time we went over to the Rosentreater’s house I
got to see that same trick and hear the long explanation about leverage and science and stuff. Freddy’s parents had made him skip a grade because he was smart. I comforted myself with the thought that skipping a grade would make him permanently socially maladjusted.

Freddy had recently told me an idea that I had never encountered before, and this is how it went: girls can’t. Girls can’t run fast, girls can’t throw, girls can’t grow up to be famous scientists like he was going to be. This idea flabbergasted me then, because I was living proof that he was wrong on all counts. My second grade teacher had given our class a little talk about how girls could grow up to be anything they wanted to be, and so could boys, except boys could never give birth. Hey Freddy, I said through my teeth, Fre-e-dy, you can’t ever have a baby. Too bad you’re a boy, Freddy, huh. Too bad you’re not a girl Freddy ‘cause boys can’t.

He ignored me. Cindy ignored me. So did Scotty and Laura, who by now were busy pouring salt and pepper in long slow swoops across the table. I felt completely invisible. I started to feel like I was upstairs again, sitting in the pew waiting for the fat lady to sing. I
thought about my week at Camp Arrawana the previous summer - the decorated wood cookie name tags we all wore, the counselor with the hair under her arms, the enormous swarms of mosquitoes. My nose started to itch, then the itch spread to a spot on my scalp. Sara turned the page.

Cindy sang “Gu-umdrop, da da da da...” Der, I said, and a tiny tickle sprang up in the back of my throat. She punctuated the end of the verse with a flourish. Ole! I said.

Then, in a moment of silence between Cindy’s refrains, I heard a thump against the window outside and then some quiet. Sara checked the index of her book. My ankle itched. Scotty and Laura tipped their Dixie cups of Kool-Aid over and watched while the two red streams slid racing toward the edge of the table. Cindy started playing again. I said “duh, you don’t even know the words, you baby,” and then the bird walked in the door. It was a fat robin with a hitch in its getalong. Hey robin, I said through my teeth, there’s no worms in here, go away now! Fellowship hour is for people only. Robins can’t.

The bird’s head leaned off to one side like it was thinking something through. It limped toward me a couple of steps at a time.
I'm not sure it saw me. I was thinking, I'm not going to let this robin mess up my greatness. I looked at the clock. Six minutes and twenty seconds. I wondered if Mardeanna Odom had moved her eyes. The side of my chin, the outside part of my left ankle and my belly button all itched, while the other itches faded in and out. I closed my eyes and tried to focus all my thoughts on page 51, but I couldn't because it was then I realized that Freddy was humming "The Good Ship Lollipop" and that across the room, Scotty and Laura were humming one steady low tone. They stared at each other and hummed intently. Sara ruffled the pages of her book again and again with her thumb. I scanned the room suspiciously, through half closed eyes. I knew then that I was alone with the bird, even though I was surrounded by my best friends.

Hey bird, I said through my teeth, c'mere, peck on my ankle a minute, will ya? I got an itch, Robin.

The bird took another unsteady step toward me. It was so close I could hardly look down at it without moving my head. Good robin, that's right, I said. Get the left one, OK? And it actually looked like it was going to do just that - but then, instead, its head twitched to the side and it looked me dead in the eye. A gale of laughter
descended from above us as our eyes locked tight for an entire second. I can’t explain how it felt. My eyes were stuck open the whole time. Then it was over, and the bird drooped to the ground.

Freddy hummed extra loud as he turned his head to smirk over his shoulder at me but when he saw my face, and then my bird, he shut up and turned all the way around. He dropped the chalk and started striding across the room toward us. I knew he was going to goddamn do something to my robin, but I couldn’t move; I was still frozen, trying to think things through. The bird was hurt, I realized. Cindy finished her song with a flourish. Sara turned the page. The bird let out a tiny squeak.

Scotty and Laura’s heads turned toward me and the bird as their hands slid up the wall toward the light switches. Then with a click there was darkness, and Freddy stopped striding, Cindy screamed, and my left foot jerked forward. I touched the bird by accident and it took off flying above our heads round and round the room. We could hear it flapping and feel the cool wind it moved above our heads as it careened around, too addled to find the door. A long wave of laughter filtered down through the acoustic tiling, and Cindy started crying. Freddy said “Turn on the lights! Turn em on NOW!” Clammy wind
fluttered all around us. The bird flew out the door just as Scotty flicked the switch. Cindy rushed down the hall blubbering. Scotty and Laura ran after her, working up tears of their own.

Freddy and I ran out into the courtyard, but the bird was already gone. We sat down next to Sara on the bench. I scratched my nose while Freddy stroked an imaginary beard. I thought about God and Jesus, and for that moment, I believed in all of it. Sara put her *Footsteps in the Sand* bookmark neatly in her book and snapped it shut. Then she stood, adjusted her tinted glasses, and walked inside. It was one o’clock and according to her watch, fellowship hour was over.
Louisville Slugger

Annie Olson was one of those girls who loved horses. She was always drawing horses and making things in her E-Z-Bake Oven. She also played Barbies, house, and school. She usually wore a white headband over her straight blond hair. At eight, she was already dieting, just like her mother. I sort of hated her guts back then, but I am a psychologist now so I have learned to rise above that sort of thing. I don’t hate people anymore, I just try to figure them out.

I was one of her bridesmaids because Sammy is my brother, and because I think she believes we are friends. I’m honestly not sure whether we are. We are so different. I drank three or four beers before I stood to tell this story at their rehearsal dinner, trying to figure out how to say it without seeming like a complete ass. I failed.

I said something like, “I remember when we were little and all of us were up at the Johnsons’ fishing out their lake - Annie was about eight then, and she was such a cute little girl. It was funny because when our dads started catching fish, they caught a whole
bunch at once and cute little Annie ran around the shore clubbing the fish on their little fish heads with a Louisville Slugger. She kept missing. She was giggling the whole time. I remember seeing Sammy watching Annie that night. That's when I knew they would be together.” Then I paused, swaying slightly, suddenly very aware of all the beer coursing through me, and I teetered for that one moment toward saying more; but then, whoa!, I caught myself and said, “Let’s drink to Sammy and Annie!”

I smiled bravely and raised my glass; everybody drank. Then I sat down, my duty done. It wasn’t like the other stories people told, heartwarming or very funny, but it is what I remember as the kernel, the real beginning of their life together, and after the initial silence, it got everyone talking. “I did not giggle!” Annie said to Sammy. I heard someone at the next table murmur my name and the word “unusual” in the same sentence, which is all it takes to make me paranoid. I tuned them all out and thought about how I had planned to tell the story:

I was 10, Sammy was 9, and Annie was only 8. She has always been beautiful like she is tonight. It was late summer and the Johnsons were moving to Texas. They invited everyone up to their
place to fish out the lake before they moved, which seemed sort of stingy to me. It was like they didn’t want the new people to have any of their fish, like they owned those fish or something. Most of the families we knew from church went. It was a cool evening; the air smelled of lighter fluid and pine needles, like a freshly mopped floor.

Sammy and I sat on a mossy rock by the shore watching fat dragonflies hover over the lake. A cloud of gnats looped slowly around us. A bunch of the other kids conferred under the deck. Annie’s brother Eric tried to start a fight over a grimy little matchbox car. He was always starting fights. Our moms sat on the deck waiting for fish, playing canasta and murmuring to one another. The dads lined the shore monopolizing the fishing poles. Their lines lay slack in the water. It was getting dark. Everyone was hungry.

A hummingbird dropped down in front of us, checking out Sammy’s red baseball cap. It swerved to the left, then to the right, then forward towards the hat. That bird was looking for love, or food, I’m not sure what. It stopped just short of the hat, then jerked upward. I jumped away, but Sammy just twitched - he stood his ground a few seconds longer until the bird buzzed him, well, hummed him, from behind. Then he ran after me, toward the line of
fishermen.

Just then, the fish started biting. Annie’s dad caught one and swung it to shore. The trout shimmied in the mud. Annie ran toward it with a Louisville Slugger and clubbed the fish until it was still. Sammy and I looked at the fish a moment, thinking that through, and then Mr. Waldo caught one too. And then everyones’ dads were catching them. The fish flopped around in the mud. Annie ran up and down the shore clubbing fish. She would club each fish once then move on to the next, then come back to the first one to hit it again and make sure it was done. The bat was heavy for her, so half the time she missed. She was giggling. Some of the men were laughing too. Eric kept grabbing at the bat, but she wouldn’t let him have it.

I guess I was shocked or horrified, but mostly at the time I remember I was hungry. Sammy moved away from me and stood up on the edge of the deck, his arms tucked inside his t-shirt for warmth. It was getting dark so I couldn’t see his eyes, but I saw him facing her. I saw his hands poking out at the base of his shirt, wiggling. The light from the house lit him from behind as I watched him watching her, fluttering his fingers against his jeans. I suppose I could have known then that they would fall in love, but sometimes you don’t
know it when these things happen. It’s like all those mosquito bites I got that night; sometimes you don’t figure out how you feel until later.

When I tuned back in to the talk around me, Annie was still insisting that she was not laughing at the time, but Sammy remembered. He was so sweet, touching her arm, saying, “That’s right! I love you because you’re one bloodthirsty babe! You’re my Louisville Slugger!” He would have said that even if he wasn’t a tiny bit drunk, which is part of why I like him. Annie’s jaw tightened, and she looked away from us to her mother Suzette, who raised an eyebrow at her, signalling. So Annie rose to make a toast. Her voice is small and high, like the voice most people reserve for talking to babies and cute puppies.

“Um, thank you all for coming. I’d like to propose a toast to our mothers, who have done so much to help put this wedding together. Um, I also want us to drink to my grandmother, and to Sammy’s grandma, who passed away this last year. I only got to meet her once. She was a real nice lady.”

People smiled and murmured in agreement as she sat down.
“Way to go, Slugger!” Sammy said, and gave her a hearty pat on the back. Her jaw tightened again. Oh god, I thought, I’m going to have to be nice to her from now on because she’s marrying Sammy; I have to be nice to her until I die, and then she’ll say I was a real nice lady. I am not! And neither was my grandma. She was more than that.

“Hey Sammy,” I said, “when Grandma was dying I went to visit her. I rode my bicycle clear across town through the fog to see her, and because it was late at night, I was the only one there in intensive care with her. She was already in the coma then and she was on a respirator. Remember all those tubes?”

“Yeah.”

“I never told you this: I stood there watching her for a while, and then she started to move her arms, like this: both arms at her sides, curved slightly inward, moving slowly toward her center, then falling back out, then toward the center, and back out, over and over again. Oh god, I thought, is she dreaming? Does that motion mean she’s floating, or is she gathering? Sammy, she looked so much like me.”

Sammy looked up from his drink to me, concerned. I could feel my parent’s eyes on me from clear across the room. Their eyes, the
Olsons’ eyes, the Waldos’ eyes. I imagined my mother’s perfectly shaped eyebrow arching across the room toward me, looming, expecting me to behave like Annie. I realized then that I was a little bit drunk.

“She was a real nice lady.” Annie said again in her small efficient voice, as Sammy’s arms slid around her. I tried to smile, but I could feel the smile coming out all wrong like it usually does in pictures, my mouth all spread out but turned more down than up. I tried to fix it, but couldn’t, so I said, “I’ll be right back!”, and walked away to the bar.

When they married, Annie had just earned her degree in elementary education, and Sammy had graduated in electrical engineering. He started making a lot of money. They bought a little white house in the suburbs and made two beautiful babies and a life together. They bought a pair of Volvos. She went vegetarian, “for health reasons” she told me. Years passed, and I moved to another town and now only see them at holidays occasionally. I heard from Sammy that she went back to school in biology and got some job in a lab, but I never thought to ask for details. It is impossible to get an
interesting word out of her at those family dinners. She is one of those people who goes on and on about food, which makes me impatient.

I have what I like to call a healthy disrespect for people who always do what is expected of them, for people who enthusiastically choose to be bland, but I'm noticing more and more with each passing year that those kinds of people tend to end up in charge. Those kinds of people own real estate and other nice things; those people have pleasant, long lasting marriages. They are able somehow to float through life with the same small set of ideas someone told them long ago, unruffled and unaltered by the world swirling around them.

Some people get all worked up about the government; I get pissed at normal people. I know full well that I sound deluded and jealous, and well, maybe I am, but this is honesty, honesty from a wistful person who spends her days listening to the confessions and paranoias of others, helping them feel good about themselves. And so, here is my confession: only the sick people babystepping their way through life seem good to me anymore - all the others pale in comparison; I have to picture Annie in her most perverse moment, wielding that Louisville Slugger, in order to like her.
Every day people with amazing life stories pass through my office. The state sends them to me for mandatory family counselling. In counselling we never say good or bad, right or wrong; instead, we say “inappropriate” a lot. Today a five year old and his three year old sister were added to my caseload. “They don’t sit in chairs! They don’t know how to use forks!” the foster parent told me when she dropped them off. Their mother is 22, a recovering junky just like their dad. She loves her children, she really does, she told me today. I gave her a Kleenex and a soda. The children ran all over the furniture while we talked, making bird noises.

After they left, I opened the newspaper. There was an awful picture in it of a mouse with an ear growing out of his back, a human ear. And there she was! Sammy’s wife Annie posed behind the tiny hairless mouse, slightly out of focus. The headline read, *Scientists Use Mice to Grow Human Tissue*. The picture caption read, “Health Sciences University lab technician Annie Porter examines Louie, the mouse with the extra ear.”

They used porous biodegradable polyester fabric to shape the ear, and then grew cartilage cells on it, the article said. Polyester! Annie helped them find a use for polyester! It figures! She also
helped find a way to replace ears when little boys bite them off other little boys on playgrounds, and soon they’ll be growing noses and livers and heart valves using this procedure.

Freaking normal people like Annie change the world every day. I don’t know why they chose to start with an ear. I don’t know why they had to sprout it on a hairless mouse’s back. It’s so horrible. I’ll have to ask Annie, because it must make some sense to her. I can imagine her on the phone now, saying to me, “Oh! You saw Louie in the paper! He’s the sweetest little guy!” In the picture, Annie can’t seem to decide whether she should smile. A stranger would say she looks thoughtful, and appropriately concerned.
Positive Bibinsky and His Badass Friends

I thought my friends and I were freaks until I met Positive Bibinsky and his badass friends by the bison pen in the Lincoln Park Zoo one day. They are freaks; we are just pale imitations, but knowing that we are not the weirdest has not improved my life as much as I had hoped it would. I am only 15 and already so full of bad habits and uncharitable thoughts. My friends and I don’t drink, don’t smoke, and don’t drive; not those kind of bad habits. We read books and slouch around being unhappy.

We are all liars. I lie to my parents, my teachers, to friends and strangers alike. Yesterday on the El platform a guy walks up to me, looks at my Birkenstocks, and says, You’re from out of town, aren’t you? Yes! I said. I’m from the great pacific northwest! I lie about where I’m going, who I am, and what happened to my homework, even if I did it. I do all this partly for the hell of it, partly because I don’t like a lot of people, and partly because when I trick them I feel a little better.

Also, I feel that they’re all asking me the wrong questions. The
right question, of course, is *Amy, do you have a headache?* YES I DO! In fact, I’ve had a headache for almost a year now; sometimes I imagine it bulging like a walnut over my left eye, but when I look in the mirror I just see the same old me: baggy black sweater, jeans, Birkenstocks, pale skin, black, black hair. And then there’s one strand of hair that always sticks up at the top of my head, sort of like that kid Alfalfa on the *Little Rascals* but not really because my hair is long; it doesn’t stick up so much as loop away from the rest of the hair, which sort of pisses me off because I’d rather look like a famous dork than a regular dork, thank you very much.

My friend Nancy calls me all the time and talks really fast for a long time without stopping about school and about our teachers and about which of our four or five friends are mad at each other. She doesn’t really stop much at all, although sometimes she does slow down a bit, her voice rising at the end of a sentence, which means she expects a reply. So I say, *Yeah,* and she goes on. After a while my ear gets tired, so sometimes I quietly put the phone down and go make a snack and some coffee while she’s talking. When I come back, she is still going strong! That gives me hope. Nancy is a little bit overweight and, like several of my friends, sometimes will write a
poem about rain and loneliness, but unlike most of us, she sure can talk.

So one day last summer I sat by the bison pen waiting for Nancy to arrive. It was Bastille Day, and her fifteenth birthday. Darren, Gary, Alice, Sally and I had planned a gradual surprise party for her. We were each stationed by different animals in the zoo, waiting for her to walk by on her way to the concert in the amphitheater with her boyfriend Jack. She was an hour late. There were only three bison in the pen, two big ones and a baby. Their hair was falling off in clumps and they hung their heads low, ashamed. The baby was not cute. They didn’t move much, just wavered and snorted.

I looked toward the entrance, but the only person I could see was Darren, leaning against the giraffe cage, clearing his throat. He does that a lot. It has something to do with the fact that he is too tall and talks softly. People are always saying What? Did you say something? to him.

The baby bison made a congested noise and lifted its tail. I averted my eyes, in time to see a young guy wearing a purple hat shaped sort of like a creampuff sit down next to me on the bench. He had the pale wispy beginnings of a beard too. Ewww, I thought.
-What’s your name? he asked.

I paused for a moment, choosing a name - Nancy, I said.

-You like bison, Nancy? Bison have thirteen sets of ribs. Buffalo have fourteen. That’s the difference, FYI.

-Oh, I said.

-There’s a bison pen in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. My aunt lives there. In San Francisco, I mean. One day when I was out there with my parents visiting I rollerskated clear across San Francisco in one hour. That’s fast! Once you get to the park it’s downhill all the way to the beach, and it is such a rush. The bison pen’s by the side of a really steep downhill stretch of the road. I was going so fast down that road, I thought I was going to fall down and fucking perish. Then I saw the bison, and felt better. The road levelled off after that. I come here a lot. It calms me.

Perish, huh? I said. I think I smiled a little, even though the way he said rush bugged me. It sounded like he meant I’m tough, I’m so cool, that kind of rush. Guys do that sometimes. Gary, for example, reads a lot of Freud, or says he does and he says Freud that same way.

I looked toward Alice and Gary over in the aviary. Nancy had
just arrived, and so they were acting out their mock surprise. Alice held her arms high, towering over Nancy’s head like a monster in an old movie would, while Gary’s stooped shoulders shook, laughing silently. I couldn’t hear, but I know Alice was saying Toast! Toast! Toast! because - and I can’t explain this one - that is how we greet each other.

The guy next to me shifted noisily, and because I didn’t want to talk to him, I looked away from him toward Darren for a while, waiting for him to sense my stare. Finally, he caught the vibes and looked my way. Just as I raised my hand to give Darren the sign, the guy with the hat leaned in and breathed two words - Nicce Hhhhhhair - right into my ear. I jumped up off the bench and about three feet away from him, then tried to act like I meant to do that by clinging to the fence casually.

-You freak! You scared the shit out of me! I said.

-I’m no freak, he said, smiling broadly - I’m Positive Bibinsky, and these - a group of four skinny boys in black rose slowly from behind the bench - these are my badass friends.

I thought about that for a second.

- That’s not your real name.
- So? And the problem with that is...? We’re in a band called Ganglia. Cool name, huh?

Before I could answer, I spotted Alice and Sally and Nancy staggering toward me with their hands grasping upward like the living dead, like Freddy Kreuger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Darren and the other boys slouched along behind them.

- Hey guys! I said, feeling brave again - this is Positive Bibinsky and his friends. They’re badasses. Positive, this is my friend Nancy. This is also Nancy, and this is my other friend Nancy.

Positive kept smiling. Nancy and Sally and Alice’s arms wavered in the air, like they forgot them up there. They couldn’t believe I was talking to a guy, I think. I continued the introductions.

-That’s Negative, and that guy’s name is Negative too! The other guy is just Jack. We’re lameass losers.

Alice’s left hand formed an L, which she snapped to her forehead. That’s the sign for loser.

And Positive said, You know, bison are the losers of the animal kingdom.

It’s true. I liked that. And that’s how we met.
Positive Bibinsky 58

Positive is 17 and has his license and is always busy thinking his thoughts when he drives which is fine for him but frightening for the rest of us. Red light! I am always having to remind him.

He is not skinny or fat, ugly or good looking. His face is on the pudgy side. He has a gap between his front teeth which is good for whistling and spitting, both of which he enjoys tremendously.

I gave him my number that day at the zoo. Two days later the phone rang and my mom knocked on my door and said, Amy, it's a boy named Hubert!

She sounded alarmed, but then that is how she has been sounding since I first showed symptoms of teen angst about ten years ago. I picked up the phone.

-Hey, I thought your name was Positive, I said.

-Hubert's my middle name.

-Wow. And what's your first name?

-Positive.

-No it isn't.

It took me about ten minutes and a few confessions of my own to squeeze the information out of him. First I had to tell him my middle name, which is Agnes and is not my fault and therefore is not
embarrassing at all. And then he wanted to hear five embarrassing stories about me, which was tough because although I am almost constantly worried about being too much of a dork, I have a feeling none of that will make sense to anyone. Like I worry that words will come out of my mouth all wrong. The word Marlboro is just one example. It never fails; I prepare for that word carefully but then the syllables tumble out completely garbled, which feels awful, and is part of why I do not smoke.

Positive ticked like a timer while I struggled to come up with something good. Your time is almost up, contestant! he said. The crunch was on, so I had no choice. I lied. I told him I broke my ankle getting out of bed one morning. And I sleep on a futon! I said.

A what? he said, because the word “futon” came out like “photon.”

A futon! I said, getting it right that time. - Isn’t that nuts?

A short round laugh burst from his end of the line. Very suave! he said.

I didn’t tell him that story was my friend Alice’s or that the other ones I told were Nancy and Darren’s, and he didn’t seem to catch on; he just kept pumping me for details. I kept cool. Come on, I
said several times, your name is not your fault!

Finally, he told me. It’s Leonard. Leonard Hubert Bibinksy.

-Well, well! I said. Such an attractive name. Why on earth did you change it?

We went for a drive around town with all the badasses piled in the back seat of Positive’s parents’ Buick. We roamed the streets in search of spinning food signs, starting with the big loaf of Wonder Bread that rotates over the bread factory near my house. We found a spinning carton of milk on Diversey and a prime rib hovering over the Beef and Brandy steakhouse downtown, but then we didn’t see any for a long while.

The badasses passed a pipe around amongst themselves. Positive took a few hits. They didn’t offer me any, which was odd but okay with me. Then they got quiet and seemed to forget that we had a mission at all. They didn’t say anything, just stared out the windows, their pupils big and black like Li’l Orphan Annie’s. Positive didn’t say much either, just whistled and drove obliviously, and so I sat there thinking oh no, this is not promising at all; oh no, we’re all going to perish!; oh no, this guy’s not so interesting after all.

Watch out! I kept shouting. Hubert! Oh lord! - and he would
slide his eyes toward me briefly while he casually swerved back on course. We drove clear to Lake Forest and back like that. It took a couple of hours, and when he dropped me off I was glad it was over.

Bye, Hubert! I said. No handshake, no hug. He said, Bye now, Amy Agnes. I shut the car door. As I climbed the porch stairs, Positive honked the horn. I turned around in time to see the car swing around the corner with the badasses in the backseat holding their arms out the windows like the living dead.

Positive called me later, fully recovered from the drugs, and we had a real conversation for over an hour. I was kind of mad at him, so the whole time I was trying not to laugh at his jokes, which was hard because he's very good at funny, funny voices in particular. Funny sort of builds, if you know what I mean. Not once did I have an urge to put the phone down and go make a snack. I did stretch the cord to the sink to get a drink of water at one point. As I filled the glass, I told him he sure drove funny and he said, Funny? What do you mean, funny? - His voice dropped low and suspicious like a private eye in an old movie. - What do you mean? Like funny odd, funny imbalanced, funny quirky?

Funny ha ha, I said evenly, and drank some water. And he copied
me exactly; he said Funny ha ha just like I did, in my voice, which may not be so amusing to anyone else but made me laugh so hard I spewed the water all over the kitchen. So, when he called the next day I realized I didn’t have anything better to do than hang out with him. And since then we have seen each other almost every single day.

Turns out that Positive Bibinsky’s friends are not such badasses after all, just metalhead wannabes who do a lot of acid. They tell stories about how bad they are, breaking things and stealing and jumping off dangerous places, but no, I don’t think so. That’s my favorite phrase lately: No, I don’t think so. I think, what with all the drugs they have in them, that walking up Belmont is such a fucking rush that they don’t have the energy to do much besides sit in Positive’s parents’ basement rec room and watch tv.

The first time I went over there I sat on the couch watching Looney Toons with them. That macaroni and cheese commercial about the virtues of “cheesier” macaroni was on, so Positive said more cheesier! and then the badass named Joe said american cheesier, and another badass said god bless america, and another one said goddamn america, and someone else said goddamn your bald
headed granny; I wanted to join in on the free association but they got louder and sped up as the insults worsened and nothing that sprang to my mind seemed right until I realized that all I had to do to fit in was say something gross or lewd, but by then they had all calmed down again because the show was back on.

The other thing they do is play video games for hours, which is completely lameass. I guess Nancy likes Joe the tall one now. He has a mournful look about him.

Nancy and Jack broke up because Jack stopped returning her calls and she was hanging around the badasses for a while trying to get close to Joe, the tall one, but she got no response from him. One afternoon I watched it all happen from my corner of the couch. Positive sat in the middle of the couch drawing pictures of grotesque creatures with all kinds of extra parts while Joe sat at the far end playing video games for hours. I sat there and watched Nancy watch him, waiting and hoping, with this terrible thin smile on her face. Joe didn’t notice.

Positive didn’t notice anything at all, just sat there drawing creatures with extra legs and bosoms and very strange hair. Then later Nancy called me to complain about Joe ignoring her, which is
the sort of thing that makes the pain in my head worse, because it makes me think that maybe people aren't really interested in being good to each other, that I may spend the rest of my life watching one person after another making herself miserable. I'm always watching people and thinking I don't want to be like that person or that person or that person. I surely don't want to be the one who's looking at someone else all sad and hopeful, waiting. But I surprise myself. I have to catch myself all the time.

Things have been better since Positive totalled the Buick. His parents won't let him drive the other car because they know he'll crash it too. The badasses aren't around so much anymore now that the Buick is gone, so he spends less time alone behind Li'l Orphan Annie Eyes and more time with just me. I'll think of something and he'll say You betcha! We better do that but now! But now? I'll say. Yes'm you heard me right! he'll say. So we have been very busy doing things like following strange people who interest us around the city and bowling remarkably badly. Sometimes my friends come along, but mostly they don't.

And so finally one evening almost a month after we met we
were sitting on the couch in the rec room staring at the tv, all tired from a long day of exploring the city. I was so tired I was melding into the couch, totally becoming one with it, sort of dropping in and out of sleep; then I noticed something funny was going on.

Positive was sitting straight up next to me, his eyes glued to the tv, his hands clenched at his sides. Then one hand unclenched and crept slowly toward me. It only had about 10 inches to go but it took a long time because I guess it was supposed to seem accidental. It just barely made the crossing over the crack between the cushions. It stopped there for a second. Then, with the back of his hand he sort of brushed my arm. I shifted a little, pretending to be asleep. Then he did it again, so I sleepily skoched over and rested my head on his shoulder, and we were like that for a while, his hand all awkward half clenched between us. Then nothing happened for so long that I decided nothing was going to happen and I started dropping off to sleep again. But then I surprised myself because when I opened my eyes next just a few moments later I had draped myself all over him and we were all hormonal and touchy feely and it was not so difficult after all. We knew just what to do. But even now after weeks and weeks it's the first move and the minute after the last move that are
not so easy.

Positive has an old turntable which he broke, so the regular speed doesn’t work at all. The 78 rpm works and he likes that, but what I like best is when it’s on 33 rpm and he sits next to it, twirling the record unevenly so the voices get low and slurry - *herrr naaame is Ri-oo and sheeeee dances on the sand.* Sometimes he twirls it backwards, and I like that too. We know all the words, backwards and forwards. Sometimes I try to sing along, but he always trips me up by changing speeds, so I lean back on his bed and close my eyes, listening. He hands me the aromatherapy mask, and I put it on.

*Donnt drink, dooont smoke what dooo youu do?* Adam Ant asks and I feel OK, and the walnut of pain shrinks to the size of a chickpea for a while.

Every week Positive shaves another part of the beard off, and I touch that part of his face and say, Smooth as a baby’s bottom! We meet at the bison pen and ride buses around town all day, or sit in his basement watching tv with the sound off, filling in the words ourselves.

Yesterday after school I sat in the coffee shop with Darren and Nancy and Positive, wishing that Darren and Nancy would disappear
because I wanted to say something to Positive that they shouldn’t hear. I don’t know exactly what I had to say, but I know it felt urgent and unhealthy to be sitting there, waiting. I have this sort of feeling all the time lately, and I don’t like it one bit.

Darren sat across from me clearing his throat then slurping a milkshake, clearing his throat, slurping the milkshake. His way of breathing was getting on my nerves. Nancy sat next to me telling us about how awful her parents are. She went on and on. Periodically Darren would pause between inhale and exhale to look up at me for just a second. One of those sad looks. He was really starting to irritate me. I kept feeling my face because it felt heavy, because it felt almost too heavy to smile or move. It had been like that all day, and I was beginning to think it wasn’t just being tired, that maybe there really was something wrong with me. My head hurt so much, and all the while Positive sat at the table looking blankly off into the middle distance, thinking his thoughts, letting wispy notes slip from the gap in his teeth.

Next week we’ll all go to the Winter Formal Dance in ridiculous hippy clothes. I’m picturing bell bottoms, lots of horizontal stripes. We’ll vote on which of the people at the dance has the most
horrifying formal wear, and I'll walk up to that person and say Nice shirt! Nice Ruffles! I'll probably get one of those looks I get all the time, a direct squint that I think means I'm not sure I like you but I'm trying to figure you out.

Positive and I practiced for the dance today, following the disco footprints on his rec room floor. After a while we forgot about the footprints and moved on to spinning and dipping, the best parts of dancing. He’d put some hyper jazz record on, so we were moving fast. After one spin that felt particularly spectacular, I said, “Hey Pos! We should go into professional figure skating!” He swung me low and said, “but of course.” And then after a while we got tired of spinning and were just dancing sort of close, but not really because we’re never quite sure enough, and I was on the verge of saying something mushy, something that began with the phrase I know this is corny but... it was on the tip of my tongue, and I almost came out with it, but that’s when he leaned in a bit closer and started whispering things in my ear, things like you’re such a badasss, Amy; nice hhhair; freak is a verb, you know, meaning to speckle or streak with color; one night I saw lightning freak the sky.
Nonfiction
Late last fall I was having a delicious beer at the Eastgate tavern with another teaching assistant and three of his students, his fan club of bright young men. They are so young that two out of the three still have the remains of freshman-boy long-hair syndrome. I had met these guys once before. They talked about things like UFO crash sites, circus freaks, and the Church of Elvis. They loved to talk about low art and literature and seemed excited to find like minded people. I thought they were interesting, my kind of people.

But, I think the talk must have turned to sports scores or something because I was drifting far afield, thinking my thoughts and looking around the bar when the one with the sideburns said “...and it was like she was fucking me!” That caught my attention. “Like I was getting fucked!” he said happily. He was pretty excited, figuring all this out as he explained it. “You know what I mean, right?” he said, looking at the guys who were leaning forward, listening intently. The one with the pony tail nodded. They all seemed to agree. My friend the teaching assistant, who is gay, sat
back, smiling in a noncommittal way.

I was trying to wrap my mind around this whole “getting fucked” idea when the sideburns guy turned to me and asked if I understood, if I had ever “fucked” a guy. But of course! I said. Why wouldn’t I? It was clear to him that I did not understand the concept. He explained it, sort of, and here is the gist: he thinks that normally, men fuck women; fucking is something you do to someone else; one person acts, the other one is just along for the ride.

My eyes got wider and wider. My jaw might have gone slack, I’m not sure. I always figured that since I was there in the bed, I should participate. Am I the crazy one? I don’t think so. My mouth hung open as I imagined a nation of young women inert as potatoes, getting fucked by sensitive young men, young men who are pleasantly surprised when once in a long while a potato springs to life. Oh lord, I thought, this idea is not in anyone’s best interest. Good god, wasn’t there a sexual revolution a quarter of a century ago? Shouldn’t we all be a little bit more up to speed than this? Where do all these dumb ideas come from? Is there a factory or something? Have I been missing the shipments? I mean, imagine my surprise.

My grandfather is almost constantly surprised. He is 86 and
has Alzheimer’s. Sometimes he calls me again and again, as many as four or five times in one afternoon, forgetting that he just called. Sometimes he thinks I’m his niece. He is quiet and distant and naps all the time, but he lights up when he sees me. He dances with all the ladies at the nursing home socials. His girlfriend Mrs. Majors has Alzheimer’s too.

I had lunch with them at the nursing home recently. The attendant brought us each a bowl of cream-of-something soup, some peas and cole slaw. He also brought me the hot dog I ordered. When Grandpa saw my hot dog, he got the idea that he might want a hot dog too, and then Mrs. Majors said that maybe a half a hot dog would do. He agreed. The attendant was gone by then so Grandpa grumbled about how you can’t get good service anywhere anymore. Then the attendant returned, and Grandpa ordered half a hot dog.

The attendant asked Mrs. Majors if she needed anything and she looked up quickly from her soup and said, “Oh!” She smiled brightly and said, “Yes, we need half a hot dog! Thank you!” So the attendant wrote that down too; two half hot dogs. I don’t think they both wanted half hot dogs, but I didn’t say anything. I sat back and smiled noncommittally. For a few minutes Grandpa grumbled about the
service; then he asked me about my life. I hate that, so I asked him about his life when he was 25.

He told me that his first job at the phone company was to help set up phone service in remote parts of the Oregon coast. He had to drive the corduroy road over the coastal mountains between Portland and the Pacific many times. A corduroy road, he said, is a road made of logs laid down over the mud parallel to one another, like a long swath of corduroy. It's a very bumpy, very primitive type of road. I looked at Mrs. Majors gazing at her soup and imagined Grandpa's brain getting scrambled, shaking up and down with the car for hundreds of miles. I imagined him getting out of the car at Seaside, still trembling all over, inside and out, all the ideas of engineering, of how to make connections, jumbling around inside him. I imagined him looking out at the Pacific and trying to remember why he came.

Years ago, when my hyper little cousin Andy was seven or eight and I was a troubled teen I would grab his head, shout Scrambled Brains! and shake him. Each time, Andy would laugh like crazy, like it was something new and marvelous that I had just thought up. He was always surprised. Maybe that was a bad thing to do. Maybe I scarred him for life. To this day, I occasionally have the unhealthy urge to
grab someone by the head and shake them, shake some sense into
them, or shake it all out, clean house, incite some tabula rasa,
already.

Then the attendant returned with two small plates, half of a
hot dog on each one. Grandpa said, “What’s this?” a smile spreading
quick across his face - “Did I order this?” And Mrs. Major looked at
hers, equally surprised. She picked up her knife and cut her half a hot
dog in half, and put part of it on Grandpa’s plate. I don’t know why
she did that, and neither did Grandpa. It was just one more pleasant
surprise for Grandpa in the long line of surprises his life has become.

I like his approach to things, even though it is not a path he
chose, but rather the result of synaptic misfires and all the traumas
a brain endures in a long life. I think of Grandpa sometimes when I
am confronted by a dangerously stupid idea, when I am on the verge
of pitching a fit at someone. I think of him and try to forget my
pessimistic theories about the way people are. Then, I try to be
surprised. The alternative, for me, is to make predictions about the
way people will behave and watch them live down to my expectations
over and over again. That’s a good way to make yourself miserable.

I was truly unpleasantly surprised that night last fall in the
Eastgate, which felt bad, but not as bad as I feel when it is a struggle to be surprised. Today, for example, I'm sitting in the University library reading up on my generation. The walls of this carrel are littered with insults and frat letters. There's a small cramped suicidal meditation to my left, along with a message from a pent up copy editor: Learn to spell, dumbfuck! There are also names; sometimes there is just a name written alone, but mostly the names are used in connection with strong emotions: I love Kelly! I loathe Nathan. I'm Hot for You! Exclamation points are part of at least 50% of the entries, punctuating the passions of this supposedly passionless generation. Words surround me, most of them written by college boys. I try to be surprised by their bigotry, their misogyny, their poor spelling; by their, uh, dickocentric world view. I was going to say phallocentric, but that seemed a little too highbrow.

It is common knowledge that Trevor C. has a small unit is written on the wall to my right in cramped red block letters. Someone else scrawled You Deserve It! about a foot away - but there is no sign of who deserved what in the layers of smudged unintelligible words nearby. I look up to consider that for a second, and there, right at eye level, I see Frat boys are pussies! spread out
in huge letters spanning most of my immediate horizon.

At first I think, No, that’s all wrong; Frat boys are dicks, not pussies! Then I think, Wow, that’s fairly intolerant of me! Then I remember that being a pussy is much worse than being a dick; that for a guy, being a pussy is worse than being an asshole or a jerk or even a dumbfuck. And although no one has ever told me in so many words, I’m sure throwing like a girl is much worse than throwing like a dick. I can’t really picture “throwing like a dick”, although, believe me, I have tried. But let’s not go there. Let’s just say there is something creepy and insidious about the misogyny that persists in our language, and I wish people would stop it. It’s getting to be too much of a challenge to be surprised by it, anymore. If one more guy tells me admiringly that I sure have balls, I might just do something drastic. It’s not balls, it’s eggs!

So, last night I resolved to spend more time walking around slackjawed and wideeyed. I resolved to smoke less and talk more, to spend less time sitting back noncommittally. I think that may be the key to winning friends and influencing people. I don’t want to be cautious and judgmental; instead I plan to approach each situation and each person as though I’ve never seen anything like it before, as
though anything could happen. I’m going to say most everything that springs to mind, and expect that it will sound rational to others. No worries. Three sentences summarize this new world view: *Who knows? Why not? and Surprise me.*

Maybe that sounds corny, or like the latest shipment from the dumb ideas factory. I don’t care, because I think about the times when I have been happiest, most engaged, and it always, always has to do with someone catching me off guard. Like the time my old boyfriend Frank came up with a fantastic new accent when I was in the middle of a big drink of milk and made me laugh so hard milk flew everywhere. That was quite a moment. Filmmakers call that a spit take. It’s funny to think that actors have to practice doing spit takes, have to manufacture the same look of surprise again and again for the camera until they get it just right. I imagine after a while spit takes become second nature to good comic actors. After a long day of practicing surprise on the set, I bet they even take their work home. It becomes a reflex.

Maybe if I start doing this, it will catch on. Maybe an army of good people walking around with their mouths hanging open, an army of people saying whatever springs to mind could change the world.
Once everybody’s talking, it may become clear that very few of us actually agree with the dangerously stupid ideas that prevail in these dark days. If everyone really does agree, I am determined to be surprised, to continue to question every bad idea that comes along. So, I have a dream that one day everyone everywhere will be doing spit takes: the milk will fly; new, better ideas will pour forth, and as a result, ideas like “getting fucked” will seem as harmless and dated as dodo birds.

But for now, I am in the library, reading: Some days are so hard, I don’t know why I keep on living. No exclamation point there. Your a pussy! is right below it, and below that there’s Learn to spell, dumbfuck! There it is, the triple threat: despair, bigotry, misdirected aggression. And the worst part is, I've seen it all before so many times.

In the face of all that, what’s a girl to do? I have a nice thick green marker. I’ve got it out, and I’m ready to write, but I can’t decide which one to answer. How should I put it? I don’t want to seem angry. I don’t even want to be angry, you know? I’ve had it up to here with angry, so, even though my life is not so great, I will answer despair first: What do you mean? I’ll write - People are
always surprising me. Then I'll underline it once for bigotry, once for misdirected aggression, and once for each time I've heard it all before in the past week. Then I'll make a list in my mind that may not make sense to any of you: the movie Flubber, the bubbles rising on the Lawrence Welk Show, the way Anita snorts when she laughs; the sorority housemothers who picked me up hitchhiking; the man who recently told me the light was hurting his eyes; the dental hygienist who told me I have a lot of saliva. I can make a good long list of surprises, and I bet you can too. If I had a first aid kit, I'd keep my list there. Try it, you might like it. Start by thinking of something small, like how it would feel to watch Mrs. Majors nestle half of half a hot dog next to Grandpa’s cream-of-something soup.
enough talk, already. . .

**Mime Workshop: A guide to successful silent workshopping**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop Catch Phrase</th>
<th>Mime Equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obligatory opening remarks:</td>
<td>Make a movement like you're demonstrating a refrigerator on <em>The Price is Right.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I liked this piece a lot; it has a lot of excellent features.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“This is just my reading of it, but...”</td>
<td>Bow head slightly, flutter hands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t know, it didn’t work for me.”</td>
<td>Crinkle brow, scratch head; work arms like a train’s gears.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Have you earned this?”</td>
<td>Palm faces upward, thumb brushing across fingers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“But does it work?”</td>
<td>Work arms like the gears on a train; crinkle brow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Either expand it or get rid of it.”</td>
<td>Swoop your arms out wide, pause thoughtfully while touching your cheek with an index finger, then jerk your thumb over your shoulder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Where is the story here?”</td>
<td>Put your hand to your forehead like a sailor and scan the horizon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What’s the center of the story?”</td>
<td>Hold a fist in the air, and point to it emphatically with your other hand. Crinkle your brow, as always.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I wanted to see.”</td>
<td>Make raccoon eyes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I wanted to see more here.”</td>
<td>Breathe heavily, make raccoon eyes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“More!”</td>
<td>Breathe heavily; if you really mean it, pant!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You need to focus more on this.”</td>
<td>Touch the tips of your fingers together, point to the text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“This needs to be developed.”</td>
<td>Swoop both arms forward over your chest in a circular motion, forming breasts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrase</td>
<td>Action Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It's working on a lot of levels.”</td>
<td>Make rapid lateral karate chop moves with your hands in front of your chest; vacillate the chop level up and down.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“This is confusing.”</td>
<td>Crinkle your brow and make vogue moves, hands sweeping in front of your face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Resonated.”</td>
<td>Put your hand to your ear, listen carefully, look mystified, then pleasantly surprised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“This is problematic.”</td>
<td>Look studious; stroke your beard if you've got one. Do this for at least 15 seconds, emitting syllables here and there in a random but authoritative way. Then throw your hands up in the air like you give up, you don't know what it is, but there certainly is a problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Flow.”</td>
<td>Make waves with your hands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There are a lot of possibilities here.”</td>
<td>Sweep your hand out wide, as if to display the landscape.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>