



short prose

knowledge
KNOWLEDGE

I hated going into these God damn gas stations in the middle of nowhere, but we'd been driving for so damn long that I think I lost all feeling in my ass. Besides, I had to go to the bathroom. It couldn't wait. He said he'd pump the gas this time, so I got out of the car and began to stretch when I saw the attendant staring at me through the window from behind the counter. It was an eerie stare. A sex stare. I stopped stretching.

I walked around the side of the building, where the dingy arrows pointed to the washrooms. I really didn't need the signs, for the smell of shit that has been sitting around overpowered the smell of the dust in the air as I walked closer and closer to the bathrooms ... I walked past the men's room and up to the ladies room to find that the door was... gone. It was propped up on the inside of the bathroom wall. "A lot of fucking good it does me there," I mumbled in the stench.

"How the Hell am I supposed to go to the bathroom when there isn't even a God damned door to the damn bathroom??" I thought as I stormed into the store where he was paying for the gas.

He was buying two bottles of Pepsi for the road, to keep us awake. "The door of the women's washroom is off," I whispered with exasperation. "Well, that's no problem, honey -- just go into the men's room. I'll watch the door for you," he said back. The look in his eyes told me that he thought it was such a simple and obvious solution that anyone could figure it out. He thought he had the solution for everything. I wanted to tell him that the women's room frightened me enough for one day, and that I didn't want to risk my life by venturing into the men's room. Besides, men go in there. That attendant probably goes in there. I finally shrugged and waited for him to pay for his Pepsi and gasoline. I turned my head and followed him out. The attendant looked at me as I left. I could feel his stare burning into the back of my head.

We turned the building corner and followed the signs. My shoulders suddenly felt

heavier and heavier as I walked. He checked the room to make sure it was empty for me. He even held the door open. What a gentleman.

I closed the door, but I really didn't want to be left alone with the smell. It smelled like shit. But I could also smell sweat, like the smell of dirty men. I wondered if this is what the attendant smelled like. I lined the toilet bowl seat with toilet paper. I had to use it sparingly -- there wasn't much left. I got up as soon as I could and walked over to the dirty mirror, almost hitting my head on the hanging light bulb. There was light blue paint chipping next to the mirror.

I strained to see my image in the mirror. Instead, all I could focus on was the graffiti on the wall behind me. For a good time call.. So-and-so gives good head... Did that attendant ever call that number? I wondered if I was ever put on a bathroom wall. I wondered if I was ever reduced to a name and a phone number like that. I probably had been.

The floor was wet. I always wondered when the floors of bathrooms were wet if it was actually urine or just water from the sink. Or maybe it was from the sweat of all those men. I didn't know.

I stepped on something under the sink in front of the mirror. I looked down. It was an open porn magazine. I looked at it from where I was standing. I didn't move my foot. It was hard core shit, and it looked painful. Women with gags on their faces... I remember someone telling me that porn was okay because the women in it wanted to do it. But there was no smile on this woman's face. I pushed it back under the sink.

I stepped back. I wanted to hit something. I wanted to hit the graffiti on the wall, the porn on the floor. I wanted to smear the urine from the stall all over the place. I wanted to pull the light from right out of the fucking ceiling.

I put my hands up against the wall. I put the top of my head on the wall. I tried to breathe. It hurt. With my eyes closed, I knew what was there, behind me. It didn't scare me anymore.

When I walked into the bathroom, I was afraid to touch anything. But then I just leaned up against the door, feeling the dirt press into my back, into my hair. I wanted to soak it all in. All of it.

I shook my head and realized that he was waiting for me outside the door. I turned around and grabbed the door knob. I didn't worry about the dirt on my back. I opened the door.

Previously published in *Art/Life Limited Editions*, *Cat Machine*, *Green Cart magazines*, *Linsey Woolsey*, *Lip Service*, *Penny Dreadful Review*, *Speer Presents*, *the Poetry Exchange*, *my-diary.org*, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, <http://www.yotko.com/jkljk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, the chapbook *Right There By Your Heart*, the chapbook *I stepped Back*, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, *Children Churches and Daddies volume 4*, the chapbook *Perspectives*, and in the book *Hope Chest in the Attic*.

KATHERINE, LONDON, ONTARIO, CANADA (ON "KNOWLEDGE")

I just read (Kuypers') piece of work, and i have to say that it blew me away. Did that experience in the gas station actually happen? What an awakening. I never understood when men argued that the women in the porn mags "wanted" to be there. As if they even look at their faces, searching for a smile! I've often found myself having to use a gas station bathroom on the side of the highway, or in a dingy town with a population of what seemed like two serial killers and a shit load of perverts. I've never wanted to touch a thing in them, afraid that I would then take more of the memory of the place back with me to the car, contaminating it.

the apartment
THE APARTMENT

“Could you pull out a can of sardines to have with lunch?” he asked me, so I got up from my chair, put down the financial pages, and walked into the kitchen. The newspaper fell to the ground, falling out of order. I stepped on the pages as I walked away. I realized he hadn’t been listening to a thing I said.

He had to look for a job, I had told him before. This apartment is too small and we still can’t afford it. I put in so many extra hours at work, and he doesn’t even help at home. There are dishes left from last week. There is spaghetti sauce crusted on one of the plates in the sink. I opened up the pantry, moved the cans of string beans and cream corn. There was an old can of peaches in the back; I didn’t even know it was there. I found a sardine can in the back of the shelf.

I saw him from across the apartment as I opened up the can. “We have to do something about this,” I said. “I can’t even think in this place. I’m tired of living in a cubicle.”

He closed the funny pages. “Get used to it, honey. This is all we’ll ever get. You think you’ll get better? You think you deserve it? For some people, this is all they’ll get. That’s just the way life is.”

I looked at the can. I looked at the little creatures crammed into their little pattern. It almost looked like they were supposed to be that way, like they were created to be put into a can. The smell made me dizzy. I pushed the can away from me. I couldn’t look at it any longer.



Previously Published in *Art/Life Limited Editions*, *DCCR*, *Gin Mill Productions*, *Gypsy*, *Kaspah Raster*, *Lazy Bones Review*, *Opossum Holler Tarot*, *Poet's Sanctuary*, poets2000.com, *Slugfest*, *Tand*, *The Bridge*, *The Flying Dog*, *the Poetry Exchange*, *White Crow*, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, *Children Churches and Daddies* volume 27, *Children Churches and Daddies* collection volume 1, <http://www.yotko.com/jk/jk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, *Poetry Sampler v9*, the chapbook *I Stepped Back*, the chapbook *Addicted*, the chapbook *New World Order*, the chapbook *Perspectives*, and in the books *Hope Chest in the Attic* and *Slate and Marrow*.

chain smoking
CHAIN SMOKING

He had been acting strangely for oh, the last six months or so, but I never thought much of it. He was the type of friend who was always doing everything -- he held two jobs, was a full time student double majoring in pre-med and Russian, he was in a fraternity house and was also involved with Air Force R.O.T.C. And he still managed to find time to go out on the weekends and flirt with every girl he met. He even hit on me three and a half years ago, while we were still mere acquaintances and not the closest of friends.

But he had been acting strangely, not calling me as much, not visiting or going out. After about a month or two of this he came over one night at about midnight and started complaining to me about the stress in his life. Then he started to chain smoke, the man who never smoked before, the man who was studying to go to med school, the man who wanted to be in tip-top shape for the Air Force. It made no sense. It was two o'clock in the morning, and he was still complaining to me, he was still wide awake, and he still looked like he needed something to hit.

I had told him before that he did too much with his life and that one day it would all catch up with him. I figured that's what was happening now.

Every time I saw him after that he was the same way -- irritable, chain smoking, telling me about how he's not sleeping a lot and how he's failing his classes. His girlfriend was studying in Russia for the semester. He flirted some without her around, but he didn't cheat on her. But he didn't miss her.

Recently a group of black guys beat him up on the street one night. They picked him out of a crowd and punched him in the face, the doctors figured the assailant had something in his hand, brass knuckles, a roll of quarters, for he made a clean break in his jaw. He had his mouth wired shut for six weeks. I thought maybe this was part of the reason he was on edge, sucking food through a straw for over a month has to be a pain in the ass. But his behavior changed before the accident. And he still chain smoked through the wires in his mouth.

I figured that it must be because of his family that he was the way he was. His father was a high ranking official in the Air Force, they travelled around constantly, his father was always succeeding, always being the stern perfectionist. He wasn't like that. He wasn't stern. He was sweet, and fun.

And now look, He's probably giving himself ulcers, if not lung cancer.

So I finally got back into town and I decided that I had to get this all figured out. The latest I heard was that he was getting back to religion and thinking of talking to his pastor for advice on some of his problems. It sounded like a cop-out to me, I mean, religion wouldn't give him the answers he needed but the answers they wanted him to have, so I was thinking that if he really needed help he should go talk to a counselor. He gets counseling services free through the student clinic. Oh, shit, I don't even real-

ly know what's wrong with him, I've got to try to talk to him, I hope he opens up to me, we've been friends for too long.

So I asked him to stop by and he came over to my place and he knew very well that I wanted the truth out of him. What was the stress from? Why did he just break up with his girlfriend less than a week after they were looking at engagement rings, why is he chain smoking, is the Air Force doing this to him, does he really need the money from his two jobs?

So he comes in, sits down on the couch next to me, and tells me that he's been coming to terms with the fact that he thinks he's gay. Or at least bi, he's not sure, everything's so confusing. What would the fraternity house say? What would the Air Force say, other than good-bye, and most importantly, what would his parents say? What would the world say?

Okay, so I was shocked, but this wasn't the time to show it. I gave him a hug, let him talk for a while, told him I was there for him. I suggested thinking about counseling. Then we went to a sub shop and had lunch, tried to get our minds off these things.

And we're at the counter of this sub shop and we're making cracks about a six inch versus a twelve inch sub. He told me I was ordering the six inch because I never had him. Fuck, he's doing it again, being his same old self, flirting with women that are friends, and I can take it in good fun and all, but this just seems a little too strange. So then I start thinking, okay, does he make these kinds of cracks to other men? Is he attracted to everything that walks down the god damn street?

So then we're eating our subs and we're sharing the same drink and I start thinking, should I be doing this? Is this safe?, and I still take another drink and try not to think about it. And then he says, "My problem is that I'm horny all the time." Then he



tells me about his boyfriend Brandon and from then on nothing seemed real anymore. I had to ask if the gold necklace he was wearing was Brandon's, it's not his style to wear necklaces. It was. He was even borrowing the guy's car.

So I tell him to call me, and I tell him I'll help him look for a counselor if it will help him deal with the issue, and I tell him he can talk to me anytime. And I get out of Brandon's car and walk back to my place.

And then I just start thinking. This is the man who hit on me at a rock concert we went to three years ago by running his tongue up and down my face. This was the man that I visited on the east coast, we had a romantic dinner in a private room in the Air Force dining hall. We toured Salem, Massachusetts and took pictures posing in the witch racks they have on the sidewalks for tourists. We shopped in Maine and bought glassware and Christmas ornaments together. We went to fraternity dances, I was his date, hey, we even went to a military ball together. This is the man who would sit with me in my window sill, feet hanging out the second story, drinking fuzzy navels with me and singing rap songs. This is the man who was my roommate for a few months, we'd go to the local fitness center together and exercise, he'd be on the bicycles, I'd be on the rowing machine.

This was the man who sat with me one night in my apartment, like we were two kids in high school, and we wrote lists of all the people we made out with. His list of women was relatively short, but I didn't think much of it. He told me at the sub shop that his list of men was longer than mine.

This was the man I went to happy hours with every Friday afternoon. He carried me home once because I didn't eat that day and the beer went straight to my head. He called me spaghetti legs from then on because I lost all muscle control in the lower half of my body and couldn't walk. He carried me home and put me to bed.

Another day at another happy hour when we were both depressed because we thought we'd never find someone to marry he told me that if we were both single when we were forty, we'd get married. It was our little joke from then on to say that we were engaged.

I had a dream a couple of weeks before he told me this that he told me he had AIDS from a blood transfusion. The news tore me apart, my close friend, this couldn't be happening to you, I just can't believe it, it must be a mistake, anyone but you. I told him I'd be there for him, I wasn't afraid to hug him, I wasn't afraid to kiss him. And in the dream I wanted to marry him then and there, just so he didn't die alone.



Previously Published in *ArtLife Limited Editions*, *Opossum Holler Tarot*, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, *Children Churches and Daddies* volume 46, <http://www.yotko.com/jk/jk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, the chapbook *Dysfunctional Family Greeting Cards*, the chapbook *Someone Else, Anyone Else*, the 1994 chapbook *The Written Word*, *Children Churches and Daddies* ezine collection v7, and in the book *Hope Chest in the Attic*.

Clay
CLAY

so I was at this bar, on the coast of florida -- the west coast, the gulf side, you know. it was this place called lana kai, and my friend gave me a ride all the way from naples, which is a good forty-five minutes south of the place.

and so we were sitting there at the bar, which is half indoors and half on the beach, and all these old men kept staring at my friend's chest. a couple guys bought us beer and one guy asked me to dance. I was surprised he asked me to dance, and not my friend -- men were usually more attracted to her.

but the guys were jerks anyway -- one looked like a marine with that haircut and must have been high on something, one looked like he decided to forgo hygiene, another was twice my age. it's not as if I try to pick up men in bars anyway.

so after a while I couldn't stand being at the bar, next to the reggae band that was playing (I never really liked reggae music anyway, I mean, it's too slow to dance to), so I begged my friend to come walk with me on the beach.

christ, I felt like a ten-year-old with a bucket and shovel when I kicked off my black suede shoes and ran into the water. I always loved the feel of sand when it's drenched in water. it feels like clay as it seeps around my toes, pulling me into the ground.

so there I was, splashing in the water, wearing a black sequin dress, throwing my purse to the shore, taking a swig from my can of miller lite. this was life, I thought. pure and simple. an army couldn't have dragged me out of the water.

so my friend found some guy to hit on, as she usually does, and she wanted me to hit on his friend. I found him ugly as all sin, and impossible to talk to. I told him that one of the rafts on the shore was mine, and instead of driving to the bar I sailed. and he believed me. I told my friend flat out that I wouldn't go with him. she was pissed that I didn't find him good-looking.

so then He strolled up from the bar to the beach, an intriguing stranger, and He walked up right next to me in the water, still wearing his shoes, seeming to know that I

needed to be saved. as most knights in shining armor would.

and He said hello to me, and He started talking to me, and He cracked a few jokes, and He made me laugh.

and okay, I'll admit it -- he was good-looking, really good looking. I remember at one point, looking at him made me think of a greek statue, He had this curly hair, this sharp chin, these strong cheek bones. but those greek statues could never talk to me, they have no color, they don't come alive. they're made of stone.

His name was Clay. and when we talked He crept into my pores, the way the sand made it's way between my toes. His voice tunneled into me, boring me hollow, making me anxiously wait to be filled with more and more of His words.

my friend disappeared with her new-found monosyllabic lover, for hours, until long after the bar closed, leaving me stranded. there I was, forty-five miles north of my home at 2:20 in the morning with no means of transportation. it could have been worse, I could have been somewhere other than on the beach, I could have been sober, and I might not have had a knight in shining armor named Clay to save me.

and as He drove me home (an hour and a half out of his way), I couldn't help but run my fingers through his hair, it was an uncontrollable impulse, like the urge to drag your fingers deep into the wet sand. I told Him I was just trying to keep Him awake for the drive.

it's almost better if I never see Him again. then I can always think of Him this way.

Previously Published in *ArtLife Limited Editions*, *Green Cart Magazine*, *poets 2000*, *poetry superhighway* (<http://www.coolboard.com/msgshow.cfm?&msgboard=11059207679703&msg=90348940870278&idDispSub=66537967356536>), <http://www.yotko.com/jk/jk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuyppers-writing.htm>, *The Bridge, the Poetry Exchange, The Online Diary* at <http://www.my-diary.org/read?read=2443>, a French Translation of Clay at *poetrypoem* - located at <http://poetrypoem.com/cgi-bin/index.pl?poemnumber=14546&sitename=poetry1344&password=&poemoffset=40&displaypoem=t&item=poetry>, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, *Children Churches and Daddies volume 2* & 50, *Children Churches and Daddies Collection volume 4*, the chapbook *Right There By Your Heart*, the chapbook *Everyday Life*, the chapbook *Perspectives*, and in the book *Hope Chest in the Attic*.

done this before
DONE THIS BEFORE

I keep looking back at your picture. I'll flip it over to stop from staring at it while I read a page from my book, but a minute won't pass before I'll have to turn the photo over again to see your face. It's as if I can't get away from it.

My flight was delayed, I'm at O'Hare Airport, the airport that departs three planes every second, or is it one plane every three seconds, oh shit, I don't remember. I have to wait at least three hours for my next flight, hey, if so many planes take off here, then why can't I get on one of them? Oh well, so I decided to waste my time in one of the airport cocktail bars, by gate L 4. I thought I'd start with a white zinfandel and work my way to mixed drinks, but this wine tastes so good that I think I might just have to have another.

I'm so exasperated, I hate to wait, and all I have is a good book to keep me company. I used your photo from my wallet as a bookmark. I need these things to keep me sane.

It really isn't bad here in the cocktail bar by gate L 4, the chairs aren't that uncomfortable, even though they're a pretty ugly shade of green that doesn't match anything in the room. It really isn't that bad, in a foreign city, in a foreign airport. Not when I've got my Sutter Home White Zinfandel. And my picture of you.

You know, there's a blonde girl dressed well with a bad perm across the bar, and she's smoking a cigarette. I know I don't smoke, but I'm almost tempted to ask her for one just so I can hold the cigarette the way you do.

I'd like to taste the tar, the nicotine, the way I taste it in your kiss. You think I don't like it, but I do.

They're playing a song in the cocktail bar, a song that reminds me of an ex. I wanted

to marry that man. He had a knack of being able to envelope me, to take my troubles away.

I don't know if I can take away my troubles myself anymore. I don't know if the liquor's helping, or the cigarettes. Your photo helps, my little bookmark. At least for now it helps.

Sitting in this L 4 cocktail bar reminds me of my brother. When I was young he'd always pick us up at the airport, but if he wasn't waiting at the gate we knew to look for him at the seafood cocktail bar. a part of me expects him to come walking through the doorway now, flannel shirt, ski jacket, wind-blown greasy hair, coke-bottle glasses. You know, when I'd look at his eyes through those glasses, his eyes looked twice as big as they actually were.

I could imagine him now, I could imagine the smell of his Levi's of dirt from the construction site. I remember that smell from my father; I'd smell it every day when he came home from work. It's my brother's business now, he's got his own family now to worry about instead of a little sister. So I'll just sit here at this airport cocktail bar, remembering the days when I'd sit with him in a place like this and I was too young to drink.

God, I want to see my brother walking in to this bar at L 4, ordering a shrimp cocktail. I want to see you, babbling on about a movie you reviewed or a gig your band had. I want something that isn't so foreign, like this bar. Or maybe I want something that isn't so familiar.

I took your picture out of my wallet, the wallet that has so many pictures of men who have come and gone in my life, men who have hurt me, men who I have gone through like... like dish washing liquid, or like something I use all the time and replace all the time and don't think twice about.

I'll just sit here, in this airport, trying to care just the right amount, not too much, but not too little.

So I'll just sit here, in this airport cocktail bar, looking at your photo, and wondering if I've done this before.

"Done This Before" was the only piece of writing in the self-titled chapbook *Poem Book*, and this has been previously published in *Art/Life Limited Editions*, *Bizana*, *Gin Mill Productions*, *Linsey Woolsey*, *Oposum Holler Tarot*, *the Penny Dreadful Review*, *Pink Pages*, *Plain Brown Wrapper*, *Poetry Superhighway*, *poets2000.com*, *the Poetry Exchange*, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, *Children Churches and Daddies vol - ume 1*, <http://www.yotko.com/jk/jk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, it was in the chapbook *Right There By Your Heart*, the chapbook *addicted*, the chapbook *Somebody Say Something*, the chapbook *Everyday Life*, the chapbook *Perspectives*, the 1994 chapbook *The Written Word*, and in the books *Hope Chest in the Attic* and *Slate and Marrow*.

driving by his house
DRIVING BY HIS HOUSE

I know it's pretty pathetic of me, I don't know what I'm trying to prove. I don't even want to see him again. I don't want to have to think about him, I don't want to think about his big eyebrows or the fact that he hunched over a little when he walked or that he hurt me so much.

I know it's pretty pathetic of me, but sometimes when I'm driving I'll take a little detour and drive by his house. I'll just drive by, I won't slow down, I won't stop by, I won't say hello, I won't beat his head in, I won't even cry. I'll just drive by, see a few cars in the driveway, see no signs of life through the windows, and then I'll just keep driving.

I don't know why I do it. He never sees me, and I never see him, although I thought I didn't want to see him anyway. When I first met him I wasn't afraid of him. Now I'm so afraid that I have to drive by his house every once in a while, just to remind myself of the fear. We all like the taste of fear, you know, the thought that there's something out there stronger than us. The thought that there's something out there we can beat, even if we have to fight to the death.

But that can't be it, no, it just can't be, I don't like this fear, I don't like it. I don't want to drive by, I want to be able to just go on with my life, to not think about it. I want to be strong again. I want to be strong.

So today I did it again, I haven't done it for a while, drive by his house, but I did it again today. When I turned on to his street I put on my sunglasses so that in case he saw me he couldn't tell that I was looking. And then I picked up my car phone and acted like I was talking to someone.

And I drove by, holding my car phone, talking to my imaginary friend, trying to unobviously glance at the house on my left. There's a lamppost at the end of his driveway. I always noticed it, the lampshade was a huge glass ball, I always thought it was ugly. This time three cars were there. One of those could have been his. Through the front window, no people, no lights. I drive around a corner, take a turn and get back on the road I was supposed to be on.

One day, when I'm driving by and I get that feeling again, that feeling like death, well then, I just might do it again.

“Driving by His House” was the only piece of writing in the self-titled chapbook *Poem Book*, and this has been previously published in *Art/Life Limited Editions*, *Liquid Ohio*, *Napalm Health Spa*, *Opossum Holler Tarot*, *Pacific Coast Journal*, *Poetry Superhighway*, <http://www.yotko.com/jk/jk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dor-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, poets2000.com, *theOwen Wister Review*, *the Poetry Exchange*, my-diary.org, *poetrypoem*, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, *Children Churches and Daddies volumes 2, 23, & 54*, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, *Children Churches and Daddies e-zine collection volume 6*, the chapbook *Right There By Your Heart*, the chapbook *addicted*, the chapbook *New World Order*, the chapbook *Someone Else, Anyone Else*, the chapbook *Dysfunctional Family Greeting Cards*, the 1994 chapbook *The Written Word*, and in the books *Hope Chest in the Attic*, *Domestic Blisters* and *Slate And Marrow*

fish
FISH

It's a pretty miraculous thing, I suppose, making the transition from being a fish to being a human being. The first thing I should do is go about explaining how I made the transition, the second thing, attempting to explain why. It has been so long since I made the decision to change and since I have actually assumed the role of a human that it may be hard to explain.

Before my role in human civilization, I was a beta — otherwise known as a Japanese fighting fish. Although we generally have a beautiful purple-blue hue, most people familiar with different species of fish thought of us as more expensive goldfish. I was kept in a round bowl, about eight inches wide at it's longest point (in human terms, that would be living in quarters about 25 feet at the widest point). It may seem large enough to live, but keep in mind that as humans, you not only have the choice of a larger home, but you are also able to leave your living quarters at any point in time. I did not have that luxury. In fact, what I had was a very small glass apartment, not well kept by my owners (and I at that point was unable to care for it myself). I had a view of the outside world, but it was a distorted view. And I thought I could never experience that world first-hand.

Previous to living anywhere else, before I was purchased, I resided in a very small bowl - no longer than three inches at the widest point. Living in what humans would consider an eight foot square, I had difficulty moving. I even had a hard time breathing. Needless to say from then on I felt I needed more space, I needed to be on my own. No matter what, that was what I needed.

I lived in the said bowl alone. There was one plastic tree in the center of my quarters — some algae grew on it, but that was all I had for plant life in my space. The bottom of my quarters was filled with small rocks and clear marbles. It was uneventful.

Once they put another beta in my quarters with me — wait, I must correct myself. I thought the put another beta there with me. I must explain, but please do not laugh:

I only came to learn at a later point, a point after I was a human, that my owner had actually placed my quarters next to a mirror. I thought another fish was there with me, following my every motion, getting angry when I got angry, never leaving me alone, always taking the same moves as I did. I raced back and forth across my quarters, always staring at the “other” fish, always prepared to fight it. But I never did.

Once I was kept in an aquarium for a short period of time. It was a ten-gallon tank, and I was placed in there with other fish of varying species, mostly smaller. I was the only beta there. There were different colored rocks, and there were more plastic plants. And one of the outside walls was colored a bright shade of blue - I later came to discover that it was paper behind the glass wall. Beyond the other fish, there was no substantial difference in my quarters.

But my interactions with the other fish is what made the time there more interesting. I wanted to be alone most of the time — that is the way I felt the most comfortable. I felt the other fish didn’t look like me, and I often felt that they were specifically out to hamper me from any happiness. You have to understand that we are by nature very predatorial — we want our space, we want dominance over others, we want others to fear us. It is survival of the fittest when it comes to our lives. Eat or be eaten.

I stayed to myself most of the time in the aquarium; I occasionally made shows of strength to gain respect from the other fish. It made getting food from the top of the tank easier when no one tempted to fight me for the food. It was lonely, I suppose, but I survived — and I did so with better luck than most of the others there.

Then one day it appeared. First closed off to the rest of us by some sort of plastic for a while, then eventually the plastic walls were taken away and it was there. Another beta was suddenly in my space. *My* space. This was my home, I had proven myself there. I was the only fish of my kind there, and now there was this other fish I would have to prove myself to. Eat or be eaten. I had to make sure — and make sure right away — that this other fish would never be a problem for me.

But the thing was, I knew that the other fish had no right to be there. I didn’t know how they got there, what those plastic walls were, or why they were there. But I had to stop them. This fish was suddenly my worst enemy.

It didn’t take long before we fought. It was a difficult battle, all of the other fish got out of the way, and we darted from one end of the aquarium to the other. It wasn’t long until I was given the opportunity to strike. I killed the other beta, its blood flowing into my air. Everyone there was breathing the blood of my victory.

Almost immediately I was removed from the aquarium and placed in my other dwelling — the bowl. From then on I knew there had to be a way to get out of those quarters, no matter what I had to do.

I looked around at the owner; I saw them walking around the tank. I knew that they did not breathe water, and this confused me, but I learned that the first thing I had to do was learn to breathe what they did.

It didn’t take much time before I was constantly trying to lift my head up out of the bowl for as long as I could. I would manage to stay there usually because I was holding my breath. But then, one time, I went up to the top in the morning, they way I usual-

ly did, and without even thinking about it, I just started to breathe. I was able to keep my full head up out of the water for as long as I wanted and listen to what was going on outside my living quarters.

Everything sounded so different. There were so many sharp noises. They hurt me to listen to them. Looking back, I now understand that the water in my tank muffled any outside noises. But beyond that, no one in my living quarters made noise — no one bumped into things, no one screamed or made noises. But at the time, all these noises were extremely loud.

I then knew I had to keep my head above water as much as possible and try to make sense of the sounds I continually heard. I came to discover what humans refer to as language only through listening to the repeated use of these loud sounds.

When I learned I had to breathe, I did. When I understood that I had to figure out their language, I did. It took so long, but I began to understand what they said. Then I had to learn to speak. I tried to practice under the water, in my dwelling, but it was so hard to hear in my quarters that I never knew if I was doing it correctly. Furthermore, I had become so accustomed to breathing air instead of water that I began to have difficulty breathing in my old home. This filled me with an intense fear. If I continue on with this experiment, I thought, will my own home become uninhabitable to me? Will I die here because I learned too much?

I decided that I had no choice and that I had to ask my owner for help. I had to hope that my ability to produce sounds — and the correct ones, at that - would be enough to let them know that I am in trouble. Furthermore, I had to hope that my owner would actually want to help me. Maybe they wouldn't want me invading their space. Eat or be eaten.

But I had to take the chance. One morning, before I received my daily food, I pulled the upper half of my body from the tank. My owner wasn't coming yet, so I went back down and jumped up again. Still nothing. I kept jumping, until I jumped out of the tank completely. I landed on the table, fell to the floor, coughing. I screamed.

The next thing I remember (and you have to forgive me, because my memory is weak here, and this was seven years ago) is being in a hospital. I didn't know what it was then, of course, and it frightened me. Doctors kept me in place and began to study me. They sent me to schools. And to this day I am still learning.

I have discovered one thing about humans during my life as one. With all the new space I have available to me, with all of the other opportunities I have, I see that people still fight each other for their space. They kill. They steal. They do not breathe in the blood, but it is all around them. And I still find myself doing it as well, fighting others to stay alive.

"Fish" has been previously published in *Art/Life Limited Editions v17 #3 No. 179*, *poets 2000* at <http://www.poets2000.com/kuyperswriting/>, <http://www.yotko.com/jk/jk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, *Children Churches and Daddies* volumes 77 March 1996 and Volume 84 October 1996, and in one of the versions printed of the book *the Window*.

scars
SCARS

Like when the Grossman's German shepherd bit the inside of my knee. I was baby sitting two girls and a dog named "Rosco." I remember being pushed to the floor by the dog, I was on my back, kicking, as this dog was gnawing on my leg, and I remember thinking, "I can't believe a dog named Rosco is attacking me." And I was thinking that I had to be strong for those two little girls, who were watching it all. I couldn't cry.

Or when I stepped off Scott's motorcycle at 2:00 a.m. and burned my calf on the exhaust pipe. I was drunk when he was driving and I was careless when I swung my leg over the back. It didn't even hurt when I did it, but the next day it blistered and peeled; it looked inhuman. I had to bandage it for weeks. It hurt like hell.

When I was little, roller skating in my driveway, and I fell. My parents yelled at me, "Did you crack the sidewalk?"

When I was kissing someone, and I scraped my right knee against the wall. Or maybe it was the carpet. When someone asks me what that scar is from, I tell them I fell.

Or when I was riding my bicycle and I fell when my front wheel skidded in the gravel. I had to walk home. Blood was dripping from my elbow to my wrist; I remember thinking that the blood looked thick, but that nothing hurt. I sat on the toilet seat cover while my sister cleaned me up. It was a small bathroom. I felt like the walls could have fallen in on me at any time. Years later, and I can still see the dirt under my skin on my elbows.

Or when I was five years old and my dad called me an ass-hole because I made a mess in the living room. I didn't.

Like when I scratched my chin when I had the chicken pox.



“Scars” was the only piece of writing in the self-titled chapbook *Poem Book*, and this has been previously published in *the 1993 poetry datebook*, *the May 1995 Poetry Sampler v7*, *Aldebaran*, *Art/Life Limited Editions*, *Impetus*, *Feminist Studies*, *Gin Mill Productions*, *Linsey Woolsey*, *Mythic Blue Corn*, *Opossum Holler Tarot*, *poets2000.com*, *Tand*, *the Poetry Exchange*, *The Starlite Cafe*, *The Village Idiot*, *Victory Scars*, *Ya See I Got This Turtle, Hellp*, *Larry’s Poetry Page*, *Opossum Holler Tarot*, *Poetic Realm*, *Reuben’s Kincaid*, *Short Fuse*, *Snakeskin*, *tc[r]*, <http://www.yotko.com/jk/jk.htm>, <http://www.deepthought.com/scars/deepthought-dot-com/kuypers-writing.htm>, *the New Moon Review*, *a Room Without Walls*, *poetry-today.com*, *poets2000.com*, *my-diary.org*, *Third Lung*, *ilovepoetry.com*, the chapbook *addicted*, the chapbook *New World Order*, <http://www.poetrypoem.com/poetrybooks>, the chapbook *Everything and Everything*, <http://www.mishibishi.net/kuypers.html>, *Children Churches and Daddies* volumes 2, 11, 21, 77, 79 & 98, the chapbook *Perspectives*, *the ce&d literary magazine 1997 wall calendar*, the 1994 chapbook *The Written Word*, and in the books *Hope Chest in the Attic*, *Slate and Marrow*, and *Side A/Side B*.

I remember
I REMEMBER

I remember the hot tub party at the end of our junior year. Remember how I begged you to take me, because it was a date dance and not a casual party? You already had a date so you set me up with Reedy, and I thought it was just an innocent friendship set-up... Ugh, what a mess, there I was, trying to push him away from me, and then Chad came along and saved me. I have pictures of us from that night, in the hot tub together, with Tres, who won the palest-man-at-the-party award, or photos inside, with plastic leis around our necks.

I remember when we went to the They Might be Giants concert and managed to get seats in the third row. The two of us, along with four other strangers, then yelled requests at the band when they weren't playing music. I still can't believe we actually got them to respond to us while they were in the middle of a show.

I remember when we were travelling through Boston, how we stopped at Cheers to take our picture in front of the front door. We were soaking wet because it was raining on our only day in Boston. But we followed all the painted red lines on the streets to find historical landmarks, stood on the torture devices on the sidewalks, took pictures everywhere.

And when we drove to Harvard campus, we took pictures of ourselves looking "intelligent" - looking upward, hands under our chin, poised in thought, looking as tacky as possible.

I remember how we would sit in my dorm room, in the window sill, feet hanging outside, my stereo blaring. You used to always joke that one day you'd push me out the window. But we'd sit there, listening to music, singing to people that would walk in front of my window. Remember how we'd sing to Potholes in *My Lawn* by De La Soul or *Pump Up the Jam* by Technotronic or *Hoe Down* by Special Ed. How you thought the lines to *Istanbul (Not Constantinople)* by They Might be Giants wasn't "This is a recording" but "Give it to me, give it to me." How you thought the lines to *Headhunter* by Front 242 wasn't "Three you slowly spread the net" but "Three you slowly spread the legs." We'd sing, make people look up at us, and either wave or laugh.

Yesterday was the first day that I hadn't cried for you. Those first two days had been so hard, I might have been fine for a half hour and then something would trigger it in my mind and I would want to cry. I thought maybe I'm getting used to the news, but today I cried again.

I remember the Valentine's Dance we went to together. It was at your fraternity house, you came over, dressed up in a nice suit, I was wearing a red strapless Vanna White-style dress, and you came over and you looked so mad.

"Why are you mad?"

"I just came from the house, it's an hour before the dance, and everyone is wearing jeans watching the basketball game. Decorations aren't even up."

I look at my dress. "So what you're saying is that I'm overdressed?"

We decided to take pictures of us dressed up before I changed dresses. We went through a few photos, then I changed into a more casual, cotton, off-the-shoulder dress. We took more pictures with outfit number two. Then I felt a breeze. Apparently there was a rip in the back of the dress, making it indecent at best. So, back to the closet I went, found a casual black dress, and so we took yet more pictures. Then off to the dance we went.

I remember how you'd come over to my dorm on Sunday nights, and we'd order pizza, usually Grog's, Home of Mold, I think, and spend the evening together. We'd play Stand by R.E.M. and do the dance they do in the video. Or we'd play Madonna's Vogue and you'd contort yourself around. Once we even spent the evening writing up lists of exes, like we were in high school.

I remember how we met - I was sitting in the cafeteria with the other girls from my dorm, and you were friends with them so you sat down and ended up right across the table from me. And it was right after Christmas break and I just got back from visiting my parents in Florida and was tan, so your first words to me were, "Is that a real tan?" And I was so mad at you, I thought you were a cocky jerk.

"Well, you could have gone to a tanning salon over vacation!"

I don't know how that could have been the start of one of the best friendships of my life.

And when you called me on the phone to tell me the news you still sounded so happy. Your viewpoint was that anyone could die at any point in time and we have to live every day to the fullest. "And I could be hit by a car tomorrow," you said. You can't let the thought of death kill you. And you were telling me these things, and I was trying so hard not to just start sobbing on the phone.

I remember our freshman year in college, after the horrible way we met, of course, and how we'd go to Eddie's bar for ice cream drinks. They were about the only things we could order while underage, so we'd spend I don't know how many Saturday afternoons drinking Oreo shakes, or maybe peach, or mint. I remember walking home to the dorms with you one rainy Saturday after an Eddie's excursion, and we just decided to walk in the middle of the street, jumping in as many puddles as possible. A truck

even drove by, yelled that we were going to catch colds. And we just laughed. We were alive, and invincible.

I remember when we met up in New Orleans, I was with Eugene, you were with Randy and Jessica, and you found out how to get to the roof of the Jackson Brewing Company building. It was the highest building near the French Quarter, and we had a fantastic view, all to ourselves.

I remember our freshman year you invited me to see the Violent Femmes in concert at Foellinger Hall. You got drunk, and ended up trying to make the moves on me, knowing I had a boyfriend... I knew you had just drank too much, but I had to draw the line when you licked the side of my face. I still like to tease you with that one.

You're not supposed to die. This isn't supposed to be happening to you. I've always expected to be able to visit your family after we all retire, compare photos of grandchildren. You can't leave this hole in my life.

I remember after I broke up with Bill I still tried to remain friends with him so I could periodically borrow his black convertible. So one day I did, told him I needed to get some groceries, but I picked you up instead and we put the top down even when it was sixty-five degrees and about to rain and cruised around the mecca known as Champaign, Illinois.

I remember the Halloween Dance we went to. We couldn't come up with costumes, and last minute we went to Dallas and Company costume shop and you picked up a Dick Tracy bright-yellow overcoat and hat, along with a plastic machine gun with two water cartridges. I put on a black cocktail dress, pulled up my hair, added rhinestones and a dimple and was Breathless Mahoney, but we made a point to fill the machine gun water cartridges, one with peach schnapps, one with peppermint. Someone at the dance would say, "Don't shoot me!" And we would say in unison, "Don't worry." No one could understand why we were shooting at each other's faces.

I remember how every time we were going out for the evening and you'd be over waiting for me to get ready, I'd come out and ask you how I looked and you would always tell me that I looked really nice. Or sexy. Or fantastic. Or whatever. But you'd always say something to me me feel like the most beautiful girl in the world.

I don't want to catalog these events, these times I've shared with you. I don't want to feel as if there will never be any more memories with you.

I remember how every time you guys would come over to my apartment and start drinking, you would inevitably pull out my hats, particularly the wide-brimmed straw ones, and wear them. How many pictures do I have of you with Jay, or Brian, or Brad, all in a drunken stupor wearing women's hats?

I remember how at your fraternity house, every time they'd have a party they'd have to play "Crocodile Rock" by Elton John once. And when they did, people made a ring around the dance floor (otherwise known as the living room), and your fraternity

brothers would then proceed to do somersaults and other strange dances with each other. I'm glad this whole scene frightened you as much as it did me, because I remember how every time we heard the song we'd run into the basement where the kitchen was and hide until the song was over. Usually we'd find some potato chips or salad croutons to munch on, and we'd sit on the steel counter, amongst racks of generic white bread and bulk containers to tomato paste and talk.

I remember taking Dan out for his twenty-first birthday, this six-foot-five animal of a roommate of ours, and how he got so drunk that when he started to get violent in the bar you suggested that he "play with Carol" in order to entice him to leaving the bar. So we carried him through the bar until he broke free and fell right in front of the bouncers at the front door, and you tried to drag him outside, and then the five of us ended up carrying him blocks home, stopping occasionally from exhaustion and setting him in the dirt. When we got him in you suggested we write all over him, but me being the voice of reason suggested we only write all over his back, so in permanent markers you and Chad and Eric and Ray and I scribbled "I am a drunk moron!" and other intelligent remarks all over him. And you, you were smart enough to be gone when he finally woke up in the morning.

And you were on the phone with me saying that you just have to get used to the fact that you're not going to grow old, have a family. That all your superiors tell you, wait till you get that promotion, and you know there is no waiting for the future, you won't be around. People take for granted that they're just going to be around.

You never did, of course, you were the one that was always making a point to cram as much living as you could in a day, but most people aren't like that. Most people are never as alive as you.

I remember you and Sara standing on Green and Sixth waiting in line for the cash station when a cop walked up behind the two of you, and appeared to be in line. You asked, "Do you think the cop wants cash?"

I remember visiting you in New Hampshire, trying to decide where to go out to eat for lobster, 'til I decided on the mess hall at the base. So while you were at work your mom showed me a private room in the hall, with one elaborately set table for two, with china cabinets and a couch and roaring fireplace. I reserved it, went home and put on a black velvet dress and waited for you to get home from work. When you got back, I told your brother and sister to tell you that I changed our plans and I was in the bathroom. You started banging on the bathroom door, and when I opened it you were stunned. You were wearing a uniform that looked like a gas station attendant's, and there I was, completely dressed up for a formal dinner.

Your sister took a picture of us in your hallway, you just after your shower and still in a bathrobe, and me in that dress.

And after dinner we went for a stroll outside, and you were holding my hand, and I remember thinking that I wanted you to kiss me. It's funny how we both have thought about dating each other, but never found the right time.

I remember shopping with you on the East coast, going into a clothing store and watching you look for sweaters. You pulled out a pink patterned one, asked my opinion, and I shook my head no. "I'm not a pink person," I said. You kept looking, so I pulled up a dark brown and black cardigan from the rack and held it up from a few feet away. You shook your head no and said loudly, "I'm not a black person," loud enough for the black security guard to give you a funny look.

I think I want all of my friends to die after I do. I don't think I can handle this. You're not supposed to leave me, I'm the one that's supposed to make the dramatic exit. Besides, whenever I get married, you're supposed to stand up in the wedding. If you die before then, I swear, I'll kill you.

I remember once our freshman year we were sitting in the cafeteria, I don't remember if it was lunch or dinner, my roommate Lisa was there, and we were screwing around trying to be funny. Well, I got up and got a soft serve ice cream cone and acted like I was tripping as I got to the table, like I was going to drop the cone into your lap. Well, I didn't, but the ice cream wasn't securely anchored to the cone, and the next thing I know all my ice cream was right in the middle of your food.

I remember visiting you in New Hampshire, and one night we just watched Ferris Bueller's Day Off over and over again. We learned half the lines to the movie that night.

"I could be the walrus, and I'd still have to bum rides off of people."

"Drugs?" "No, thank you, I'm straight."

We'd always find something, a line from a movie or television show... Oh, and Heathers, we could probably recreate scenes from that movie, we've seen it so much.

"Thank you, Ms. Fleming, you call me when the shuttle lands."

"Icklooga bullets, I'm such an idiot..."

"Great patè, but I gotta motor to get to the funeral on time."

"Will somebody tell me why I smoke these damn things?" "Cause you're an idiot."
"Oh, yeah..."

God, these quotes make sense to no one else, just us, just you and me. It was like we had our own language.

I remember when you came to Chicago to visit me, it was around Christmas time, and you finally saw the house I grew up in. The only thing you noticed was that all of the lamps in the house were hanging from chains.

You said that some people feel like they are on death's door with a T-cell count of four hundred, and some people can run marathons with a T-cell count of zero. You tell me yours is at eighty, and you feel fine. A little run-down, but that is to be expected.

This scares me. I know I'm being selfish, I know that deep-down inside of you it has to scare you too, but you're too strong to let it beat you. I don't want you to feel a little run-down, I don't want you to feel just fine. I want you to feel alive, more alive than anyone else. I want you to live forever.

I remember once when you took me to an Air Force dinner dance, and afterward I went with you to a party of mostly Air Force people. There were people there I knew, and we were out really late, and by three-thirty in the morning you and Chris walked me home. And we stood out on Fourth Street and talked for a while, and before we knew it you had fallen to the ground grabbing you knee, screaming. You knew how to pop your knee back in place, and granted, from what I understand having your knee pop out is really, really painful, but watching you there almost made Chris and I laugh. After you got it back in place you were just drunk and sad and still in pain and all I kept thinking was “Oh, please, he just needs some sleep,” and I just kept thinking, “Oh, we’re right in front of my apartment, please, it’s four in the morning, let me just go to bed,” but I stayed out there with you and Chris until you were ready to get up and make the long journey home.

I remember the Halloween party I held on Friday the thirteenth of October - your birthday. I put up pages from the Weekly World News about supernatural sightings, lit candles and pulled out the ouija board, then you came over, put on one of my hats, I gave you a carnation, and then we all went out for the night.

I remember when you and Jay and Ellen came over to welcome Blaine to Illinois. You got really drunk, fed Ellen my pound cake that my mother gave me, then proceeded to fall asleep in my chair, sitting sideways with your head in my open window sill. And yes, I have pictures, so you can’t deny any of this.

I remember going to C.O. Daniel’s with you on Friday afternoons with the other guys from the house and how we’d dress up in our Greek Sweatshirts to fit in... Well, you always fit in, that’s how you dressed, but I had to make an exception in my dress code for these weekly happy hours. And I remember how we were wallowing in our respective depression one Friday afternoon, saying that nobody loves us and we’re ugly and we’ll grow up old and alone. Well, the vision I had of my future was that I would be an old maid living in an apartment with forty cats, periodically picking one up and asking “You love me, don’t you?”

Well, anyway, I remember how we made a pact that if the two of us were still alone by the time we were forty, we’d get married.

We made a pact. You can’t back out on me now.