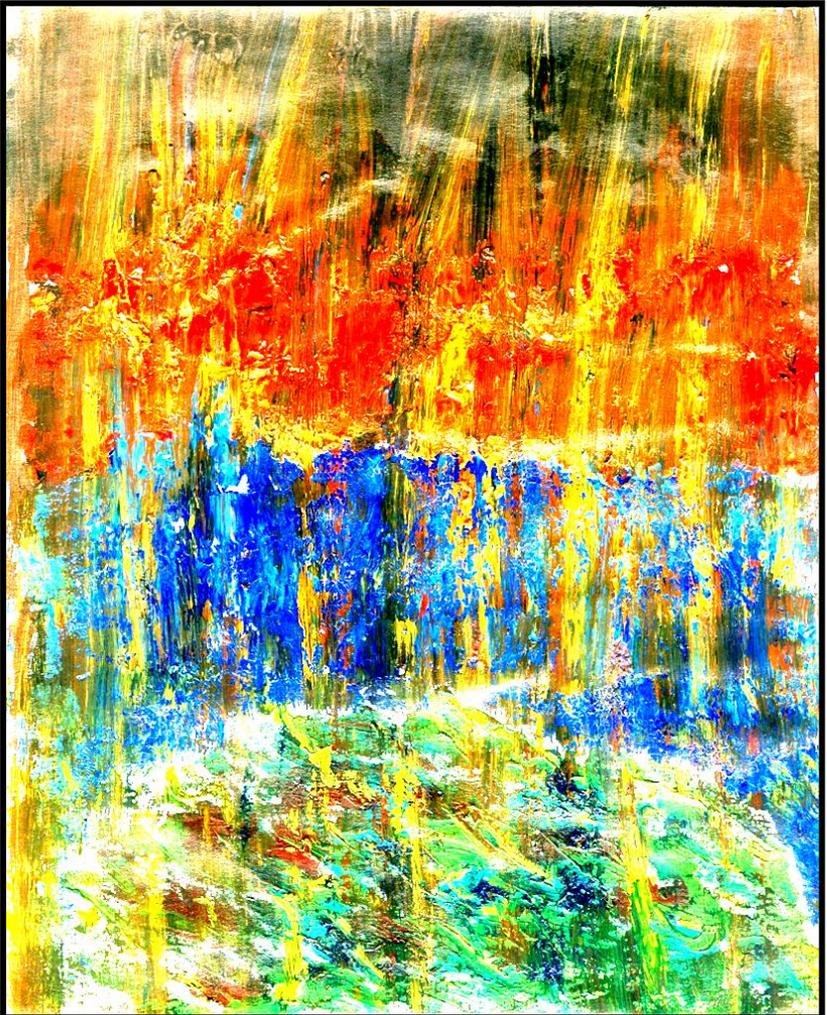


a Mixed Bag of Bones

stories



issue one, volume three

a Mixed Bag of Bones

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The editors would like to thank the editors of various magazines who rejected this work, so that we did not have to beg for permission to use our own work.

We also acknowledge the online space provided to our contributing writers at *People, Places, and Things*, where some of these pieces were reprinted online. You can have read them as blog entries at [Another Writing Project](#), or [A Creative Way Out of Work](#).

Cover artwork by Valerie Poulin: "Michael Jackson Died, oil on paper.

Photos and illustrations: Valerie Poulin's private collection.

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WE WERE ON HIATUS. IT'S TRUE. And although we were busy with other creative writing projects, we managed to amass enough pieces to pick the ones we wanted to share with you for volume three.

It is also true that in previous issues we offered a mix of longer essays with shorter ones and several sketches with one-liners, and in this one we don't.

Issue three is weighted more heavily on longer essays, but we have included a few images to break the boredom of reading so much text. However, you will find that most all of the content remains focussed on our previous theme—office work.

From tales of uninspired corporate life, to emerging artist images, join us while we try to make our way, as we circle artistic intent, and as we journey through another episode of unfulfilled dreams.

As always, we hope that you enjoy this issue. If you like it, let us know. If you do not, be sure to recycle the paper if you printed the document.

for those who get it, and to those who come close

What's Surprising about Midlife? A Second, Unpaid Job

A friend recently asked me what is the funniest, most surprising or unexpected thing about being midlife. “Midlife????!!!” I responded. “Who says I’m midlife?”

A fellow writer, a friendly Texan, who was creating an online community for women of the mid-life variety, was looking for an entertaining, preferably humorous, but brief quotation about mid-life to post alongside my picture on her website, but my mind went blank. Then it went in a million directions.

I had yet to find anything funny about being middle-aged. In fact, I was taking it pretty seriously now that I was waiting for menopause to begin and work life to end.

When it came to my personal life, I’d always made a few assumptions. I expected my mother’s mannerisms and maxims to creep into my life, for my vision to change, for the aches to arrive, for the sagging and bagging of skin and body parts. And when my face plumped, then subsequently fell, I wasn’t surprised as much as disappointed.

My hair colour is also a disappointment. It isn’t turning grey fast enough and still needs expensive monthly sessions of tinfoil and chemicals to add blond highlights.

Without a humorous view of midlife, or interesting observations to offer, I emailed a benign response and continued to think about the question.

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What I hadn’t said to my writerly friend was the continued displeasure in my professional life was indeed unexpected, surprising, and comical only in the unreasonable length of time it was taking for me to make a career change.

When it came to my professional life, I expected to have some sort of commercial success by mid-life. Sure, I’d moved up the corporate ladder one or two steps early on, when I switched from managerial and administrative work to writing magazine and newspaper articles, victory was at a standstill. I spent my 30s and early 40s trying to learn the art and craft of creative and professional writing only to end up earning a living as a technical writer. I’d given up one corporate career for an equally unsatisfying one.

Don’t get me wrong. I understood the concept of “paying dues” even as I came to this new profession later in life. This wasn’t just aspiration, or a creative outlet. This was a strategic career move, but it was one that seemed to be taking a long time.

It had taken me more than a decade to come out of the creative writer’s closet, and when I did, I came out swinging. I took writing courses and attended seminars; I hired editors for feedback on poems, articles, and short stories. I joined mentorship programs. I wrote a couple of screenplays. I was still finding my way (while collecting college credits), but began publishing my work. I published poetry in micro-press publications, I self-published a book, I snagged a cover story for a national arts magazine; I collected print and online publication credits. I wrote weeknights, weekends, and during holidays. I wrote in the free time between corporate writing contracts.

I paid close attention to my personal creative writing projects and tried my hand at freelance writing gigs.

My parents taught me that hard work pays off, but as I wrote to the exclusion of almost everything else in my life, I was still waiting. Do what you love and the money will come. I became weary from waiting.

Where the hell was my big break?!!

Failure at 25 is simply a concept; at 35 it keeps you running for the prize because you understand that failure is possible (if not imminent). But failure at 45 is demoralizing.

In pondering a better answer to my writerly friend's mid-life question, I came to terms with my side career and began to accept that my creative writing projects would remain in the margins of my life. Something unexpected happened. The consistent pain in my hip and lower back resulting from the car accident months earlier, according to x-rays, had jolted my hip into revealing its osteo-arthritis. The prognosis? A walking cane and lifetime supply of Advil.

With the possibility of living with debilitating, chronic pain, compounded by hours at a desk doing work I don't enjoy, I decided that there was value in having my second, part-time job, in having worked at unpaid blogging and contributing to low-paying regional publications, in giving away articles to community newspapers. There was value, too, in having shared my fiction and poetry in the warm and welcoming confines of the writing community. While I now understand that it is possible I may never make the jump to full-time writer, it is still incredibly satisfying and as it turns out, it is difficult to give up. And that's one thing I hadn't expected.

This essay appeared in slightly different form as a blog entry (October 12, 2009) at *People, Places, and Things* < www.Durhamregion.com >. It was reprinted in *Mississippi Crow Magazine* (fall 2010).

My boss asked for clarification, so I told him. I think "CEO" is a euphemism for "slow learner."



Before the Red Ribbon

Before the red ribbon, I would press the snooze button once, maybe twice, then shower, dress, and eat breakfast: toast & peanut butter, orange juice.

Before the red ribbon, I read the morning paper, or a book, or took a nap during my morning commute. At Union Station I would transfer from a GO train to the Red Rocket and rattle past four subway stops to Wellesley station. As I exited the station, every day I would step over a scribble in the sidewalk reminding me the “Cities should be cold.” I wondered who might have etched that saying when the concrete was wet, without attribution.

Before the red ribbon, I would plod up the walkway between the buildings through one parkette into another, passing urbanites walking teeny-tiny dogs. Sometimes the dogs were dressed in outrageous outfits. Once I passed a man wearing a mucky housecoat.

I would arrive at the office building, slip through a black metal gate that was permanently ajar, and walk up three stairs to my day job.

At 3:15 p.m. I will do all this in reverse. Not backwards; in reverse order.

Before the red ribbon, surrounded by mushroom grey walls, I would process cheques for our clients. Sometimes this made them happy, sometimes it did not. Sometimes my boss was in a good mood, most times she was not.

Because I worked at a prominent agency for television and movie actors, we received many calls from people desperate to get into show business and many more from established performers looking for new representation. To those who did not know it well, my workplace seemed glamorous.

Before the red ribbon, a prospective client called to cancel his appointment. He was due to arrive any moment, so he apologized for the short notice. Then he apologized again. He was upset; his voice wavered. But having been at the job a while, I knew how to reschedule without making the agents angry. Talent agents did not like actors who cancelled appointments at the last minute. It was a mark of things to come, they would say.

I said what I could to calm him. I said it wasn't worth getting so upset about. I said that we would reschedule and that I would take the heat for booking it for the wrong day.

He said he did not know if he could go on. Then he began to sob.

Before the red ribbon, I did not know what to say next. Then he told me that he had just returned from New York. Today is a loss, he said. Tomorrow does not matter.

Yesterday my doctor told me, he said. I have AIDS.

The caller apologized again then abruptly hung up. I stared at the telephone receiver in my hand. This was August 17, 1989. Before the red ribbon.

A Northern Ontario Writers Workshop (NOWW) Postcard Story Challenge contest winner, this essay was displayed at the Annual AIDS Day Breakfast, December 1, 2010, sponsored by NOWW and AIDS Thunder Bay, in slightly different form. The essay also appeared, in slightly different form, in NOWW magazine, December 2010.

Mag & Ricca

I don't get it man, I mean, what the fuck?

Ricca's low, harsh voice rumbles across the table. Her hand claims a smouldering cigarette and stuffs its filter into lips licked by Revlon's Wine with Everything.

I mean, like, he's single now. Right?

Mag says nothing. She watches her friend French inhale a cigarette, watches the smoke as it rolls into and back out of her mouth, then up her nostrils. She shakes her head when a waitress stops by to refill their coffee cups.

Think he'd be in'erested? I mean, you know, in you I mean. She slurps from her coffee cup. You know, I heard that Chuck did it, too, just to get back at Kate. Can you imagine that?! Screwing your husband's mistress?! Man what a sordid deal. I love it. So, you in'erested or what?

Mag flattens a napkin, presses it into the table.

Are you listening or what?

I heard you Mag whispers, but her eyes never leave the table top.

Smoke escapes Ricca's mouth and twirls to the ceiling. You are really beginning to piss me off.

Eyelashes downcast to fingers shredding a napkin to pieces.

What the hell is wrong with you?

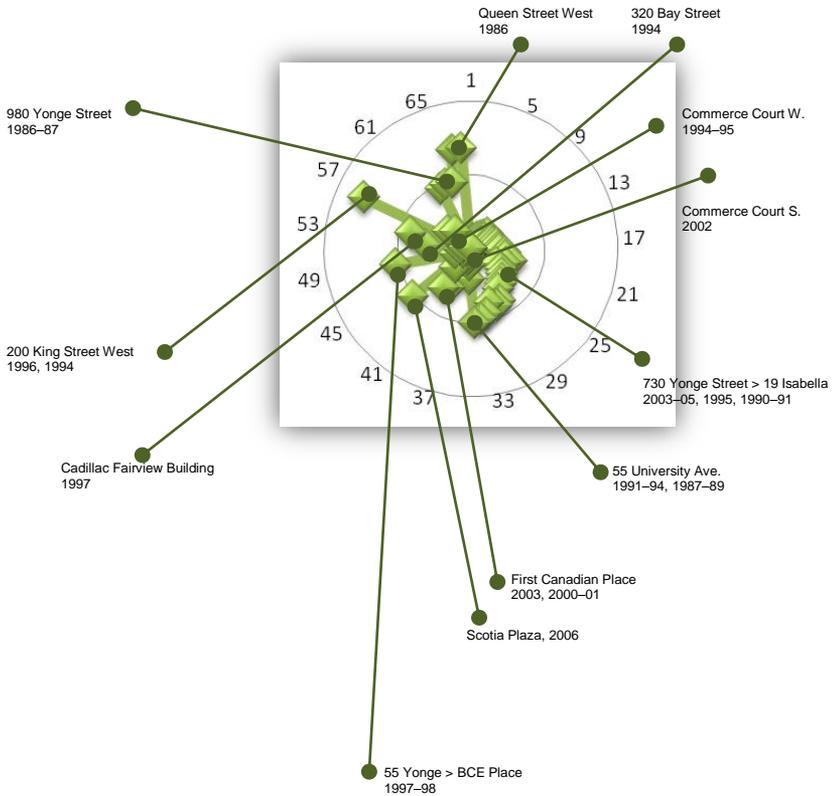
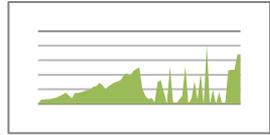
People will do the math, thinks Mag, but doesn't say.

Mag looks across the table at Ricca who is holding a cigarette in one hand and wiping a French fry across a puddle of gravy with the other, smooths fabric over her slightly rounded belly, and considers how much she will miss them both.

A Writers' Union of Canada (WUC) 2004 Postcard Story *Competition* wash-out, published on www.valeriebeanonline.biz in 2010.

Artist's Statement

An office worker spends most of her working life in office buildings in mid-town Toronto and the downtown core. She escapes to her suburban area for a short time, only to return again and again. Short-term contract work occasionally takes her to Scarborough and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), including Markham and Mississauga, but the money always brings her back.



Salary, Revenue, Income: Job Numbers 1977-2010.

Career Planning, Celestially

Up to this point, my life story might be suggested to be one of delayed success.

Part of the blame for my steep and elongated learning curve, I believe, can rest on words printed in the front of a diary that I received as a gift when I was seven years-old.

According to a list, circa 1973, individuals born under the astrological sign of Aries make great bankers, brokers, clerks, lawyers, managers, promoters, travelling salesmen, and writers.

And so, I followed this solid case of career planning through astrology and after a year of college courses, I did clerical work at financial institutions until it turned into a managerial career—working with bankers brokers, and salesman—before finally giving in to my desire to write for a living.

I recently learned that due to the changing calendars and scientist's mathematical errors, I was born under the astrological sign Pisces, not Aries, and my slow-moving writing career began to make sense.

Morgue

I

Hands pull a lifeless organ
from your chest. Its muscular rhythm still,
without a beat for 17 minutes after your
pelvis was smacked by inconsideration
of a sport utility vehicle. Hours later, after a
uniformed paramedic pressed thick fingertips into
your wrist, you lay here before him.

But he gets none
of the usual flurry of images; sensations specific
to this muscles are remarkably absent. The scientist
in him is intrigued despite your resemblance to his
dead wife.

II

You lay here naked and cold
in the ice-blue glow of examination room “A”
long fingers play against your florescent skin.

The first vibration, a mild one. You push it
the length of his scalpel.

He concentrates. Hard. Makes a slice beneath each
breast. He draws his metal instrument down
along your stomach to the curve of your abdomen.
Stops short.

He fastens a T-pin to hold each skin flap in place.
Trying to pin what he sees of your history in place, too.

Snip, snap, crack.
He cuts through the last rib, pushes aside
muscle, steadies his hands against the steel table
to peer inside. A moment passes. He seems to be
considering this mess of organs, or something else.

He detaches organs from your motionless spine
two fingers peeling away arteries larynx, oesophagus,
diaphragm. One last nick and out come ligaments,
bladder, rectum.

His double-gloved hand feels the weight of each piece
of you. He places them, one-by-one, sticky and wet,
onto a scale. He measures you in ounces. Liver,
spleen, kidney.

He eyes your shape, notes how remarkably
similar it is to Elizabeth's, right down to the way
middle age rests comfortably around your mid-section.

III

To clear the images you pass to him, he thinks of Carlise and
his best pal, Donny. He remembers the night Donny
slapped his back while pressing a blue pill into his palm.
Donny claimed that his marital status made
an excellent calling card.
“Happy birthday, buddy,” Donny chuckled as he introduced
him to Viagra and Carlise.

It is said that each organ holds a memory. He know this
to be true. Hands, large and rough with scars from weekend shifts
at his father's butcher shop read the memories you store.

He presses deeper, his pickle-barrel chest pushes against
a blood-soaked apron, looking more like his father than he
would care to admit. His white label coat rubs against
your deadened hip as he fingers soft brunette waves of hair
that dip and swirl across your neck.

He holds your hand and sees how it once tapped mathematical
equations across a chalkboard. He watches white letters loop their way
across a smooth, black surface. He tastes the dust and knows that an x-ray
would reveal a decades-old fracture caused by a piano teacher,
a spinster who crowed about the evil of unpractised scales
and regularly resolved such wickedness with a ruler.

He sees how, much later, when arthritis set in
how your fingers ached at the memory of your
teacher's unsympathetic eyes. His arm tremors. He can feel
where malevolent cells took the left ovary.

This makes him
again recall his dead wife and he turns away.

IV

A shaky nub of chalk soaked red numbers the weight
of every part of you. The stench of intestines and bowels
at his back, too familiar to make him
fully wretch, a sensation that never quite leaves.

Your secrets betrayed to his hands.

V

Later tonight, he will think of your still body and the
story it told, but what it did not share is what he
thinks about most. Then the lights will dim and the music will chime
to signal the end of the entr'acte. He will escort his date into
the theatre and into the second half of Act ii.

This postcard story first appeared on [A Creative Way Out of Work](http://valeriebeanonline.biz)
<<http://valeriebeanonline.biz>>, July 24, 2010 under Postcard Stories category.

I AM NOT ONE FOR WORKPLACE MEETINGS. Some folks love them, I know. I loathe them. I get tired and cranky and edgy and itchy. Yes, itchy-scratchy like wearing a wet wool turtleneck in 24 degrees Celsius heat. Even after years of attending these dull get-togethers, I have not yet managed to find ways to remain engaged, interested, or participatory.

I do admit, however, that there are certain types of meetings that I do enjoy. You know what I mean, the kind that are purposeful; one with an agenda, one that requires a resolution, or outcome of some sort, a meeting that involves no more than five people.

One of the most memorable meetings I attended is probably better described as a work session with a co-worker. The two of us were to immediately come up with a training activity as directed by our manager (an inept chap whose management style was entertainingly laughable), but after two hours we were both frustrated and out of ideas. She had her way of doing things, I had mine, and neither our styles nor our ideas meshed, so we asked for more direction, brought in our boss's boss for clarification and took one more kick at the can. In the end, we found a solution to present at the afternoon team meeting. We agreed. Good. Just in time, too.

My colleague had a telephone appointment with her kid's daycare director, so we disconnected our laptops and packed up our markers and notepads. Admittedly, I am a little fuzzy on the next turn of events, but the keypad on conference phone became jammed. I ignored the mess of blue and grey cables snaking out of the router. I was smart enough not to mess with that setup. As it was, it had been a bit of a crap shoot finding the right cable to plug into my laptop when I arrived. The only solution I saw was to unplug the electrical cord and plug it back into the outlet, but that didn't work; I gave up and we headed back to our desks.

Things got exciting when IT personnel were dispatched to third floor, our floor

By the time I arrived at my cubicle, across the office floor, the network had crashed. Some folks lost connection immediately, while others were losing their connections as I docked my laptop in its workstation.

I was giddy with the thought that our afternoon meeting would be cancelled.

Then things really got exciting. The IT techs were dispatched to the third floor. They buzzed from cubicle to cubicle checking the identifying number on each workstation's telecommunications jack. I chatted with one of the guys. I followed him for a bit asking him questions. Without a connection to the LAN, I was unable to work. And without work, I bore easily. And when I get bored, I tend to chat.

He told me that the network went down. I told him about the conference phone. He whipped out his BlackBerry like a gun from its holster and rapidly thumbed notes into Remedy.

As the morning turned to afternoon and the afternoon dragged on, I spent time chatting with folks as we waited out the hours until our team meeting.

In the meantime, I continued my conversation with a different techie, talking through the events and summarizing our actions as if rehearsing for a court date. After all, the network was down in two locations—ours and the office building where executives and senior management team worked. There would be some pissed off people.

One of the sales administrators whose system was still working looked up the Remedy ticket. An unauthorized disconnection of a conference call was stated as the cause.

The IT guy showed me the problem. My colleague had pulled the cable from her laptop and plugged it back into the router on the table creating a switching loop, or a bridge loop, or whatever, apparently confusing the network.

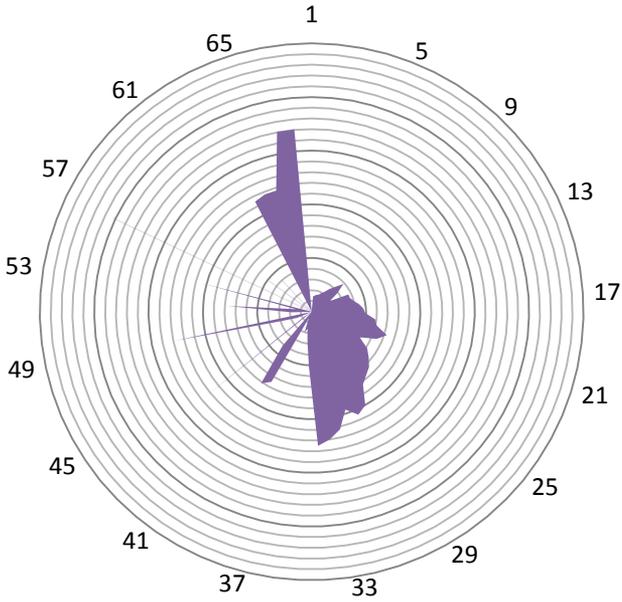
While my colleague was quick to deny her involvement, I readily accepted responsibility. Bringing down the computer network of a national company in not one, but two head office locations gives me renegade cache, even if only as an accessory after the fact.

While not every meeting can have an outcome as dramatic as this, here's to hoping

This essay first appeared August 1, 2011 on [Another Writing Project](http://valeriebeanonline.net/blog), <<http://valeriebeanonline.net/blog>>, under the Column category.

Artist's Statement

The Vortex of Annual Earnings at Six O'Clock



Salary, Revenue, Income: Third Quarter Report 1977–2011.

Therapy for Corporate Employees Defined

In the vein of arm-chair therapy, I would like to offer suggestions to individuals who are unable to handle on-the-job responsibilities. To those who are overwhelmed by the pressures to perform, and to those who are just plain fed up with their work environment, these therapies are for you.

While this type of therapy is primarily focussed on healing office workers—from mailroom clerk to payroll processor to corporate executive—the therapy is malleable enough to be modified for workers in different industries and businesses.

Adlerian Therapy. This type of therapy provides life coaching. As such, it is not available in the workplace where life is non-existent.

Behaviour Therapy. Learn more desired behaviours: techies learn social skills, make-believe management specific to project management. This therapy is based on belief that we are products of our environment and that abnormal behaviour is “a direct result of defective learning.” How do we counteract defective learning? Two negatives make a positive.

Existential Therapy. This style of therapy best serves such ground-level employees as mailroom staff. Studies show mailroom staff are 30% more likely to be marijuana smokers and therefore more open to the philosophical roots of this type of therapy. For example, bicycle couriers and high school teachers are quick to adopt this practice and other types of experiential therapies.

Gestalt Therapy. This style of therapy requires participants to accept responsibility it is highly valuable to managerial level employees and executive heads, seemingly developed with these staffers in mind, but pushed to front-line staff. You know the saying . . . trucks roll downhill!

Person-centered Therapy. Not generally accepted as useful therapy in the workplace because it does not support self-sufficient and/or independent behaviour.

Rational-emotive and cognitive-behavioural therapy. Imagery techniques used to confront irrational beliefs in reaction to negative events and the theoretical framework of REBT makes for useful workplace therapy. However, it tends to deaden staff meetings.

Reality therapy. Strictly for upper-echelon types, such as CEO's, presidents, senior vice-presidents. Some practitioners think of this as "shock therapy" without the voltage. That is, tours to the wickets of front-line employees and past the desks of various low-lying workers place participants face-to-face with the working class.

Transactional Analysis. Ideal for anyone in finance, accounting, or data entry positions. Of particular interest to types of who tend to fall asleep counting sheep and wake up amortizing mortgages and/or values of mutual fund investments. Also useful for software programmers and other mathematical sorts.



It's not difficult to impersonate a talent agent.

One just needs a sense of entitlement, a mean streak, and a haughty attitude towards actors and casting directors.

I am fairly certain you can pull it off.

Misery and I Love Company

I WILL FOREVER BE FASCINATED by behaviour in the workplace, and of the workplace.

Personally, I continue to expose other people to my misery by accepting long-term writing assignments with companies that insist on treating me like an employee. I chose contract work to avoid being treated like an employee.

I don't want to attend mandatory meetings, or work 9-5, 8-4, or any of the other designated shifts, or create a homestead out of a cubicle. Like all contract workers, consultants, and freelancers, I enjoy the freedom of creating my own work hours and working from home on occasion. But, these sorts of freedoms are getting hard to come by.

Over the past decade, employers simply got tired of freewheeling workers, and returned to keeping a watchful eye on employees be it permanent or temporary. To do this, companies had to restrict the hiring of real contractors and hire full-time, temporary employees.

I'd always found managers and co-workers skeptical of the work-from-home routine. Likely, because they were really taking a mental health day when they claimed to be working at home. Whereas, contractors have little choice but to produce work. Results have to be evident. Invoices are often scoured for padded hours.

Perhaps they had been burned one too many times by self-employed who did not remit taxes, so now they insist on adding workers to payroll so that EI and CPP are deducted, but must tack on 4% vacation pay (they are still off the hook when it comes to extended health benefits).

I am not sure that I like this new business model.

For one, because I am on payroll, I am no longer self-employed and therefore I forgo the awesome perk of tax-deductible expenses (hair, gas, a portion of household utility expenses). Plus, I am expected to be in the office. In the office!! Every day! All day! It's exhausting.

I became a contractor to avoid this very thing. Sure, I shouldered months of unemployment without a financial safety net, but it was worth it. So were the weekends that I had to work, so that I could do errands during the work week when traffic eased and stores were virtually vacant. At one point, at the height of my contracting, I could take months-long breaks between contracts because they were so lucrative. Now, the hourly rates have dropped. And the demand to be a regular employee has surged.

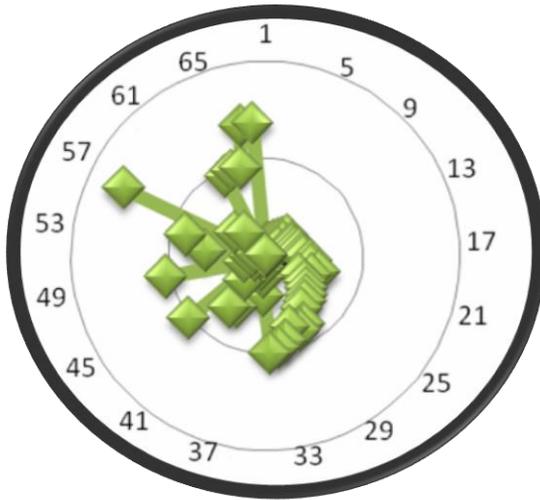
So. This is my new normal.

Still. It is short-term. Six months. 120 days. Not much time to get done what I've been tasked to do by my employer. The good news is that if I am expected to behave as a regular employee, I work only between the hours of nine and five o'clock with breaks. And there's little need to rush toward my deadlines.

On second thought, maybe I could get used to this.

Artist's Statement

On the Clock: Annual Earnings



Salary, Revenue, Income: Third Quarter Report 1977–2010.

Lies I like to Tell

In a discussion with my teenage son about the moral wrongness of lying, he asked if there is ever any time when it's okay to lie. I said, yes. On Twitter.

Lies I tell about my boss

- : Dear Boss: Try fire prevention, instead of fire fighting.
- : I started thinking of HST as tipping the Harper government for its excellent service. To show my gratitude, I just left \$5.20 with Staples.
- : With a futile effort in improvement, frustration reigns and productivity wanes. I keep telling my boss this, but he doesn't believe me.
- : Knowledge misapplied. My boss' modus operandi.
- : My boss's boss unknowingly quoted me back to me. Has he been using my words as his own, again?
- : Dear Boss: Don't mistake an engaging personality for good management skills.
- : Everybody wants to be boss; nobody wants to lead.
- : Is it true that "teamwork divides the task and doubles the success"? Uh, no. Mgmt doubles the workload and reduces the chance of success.
- : *Another* coworker shared with me a good idea she'd heard; does my boss steal *all* my ideas. Can it be considered stealing?
- : My boss does not have ADHD as he purports; he's just bored by my conversation. That makes two of us.
- : It's Friday. My boss is out of the office again today, time to get busy on my screenplay.

General lies, specific lies

- : Is it boring in here, or is it just me?
- : I heard the term "grumpy office worker" today and realized its aptness to me.
- : I guess it makes sense that front-line bank employees would pass the buck.
- : Suitcase is packed. Definitely over 50# limit. Must be all the Golden Retriever dog hair.
- : I've found socks taken hostage by fitted sheets and held captive in underwear, leaving me to wonder where my cutlery is disappearing to.
- : A small press rejected my poetry ms in 21 days! I think it's probably best to quickly confirm my stuff is shit than to remain deluded in its (and my!) promise and potential.
- : Per cbc.ca/news/work 45% of Canadians were highly satisfied with their jobs in 2001. Me? I am 45% dissatisfied with my job 100% of the time.
- : One year less a day. Restructured for third time before one year anniversary. Q: Where will the madness end? Answer: With my resignation.

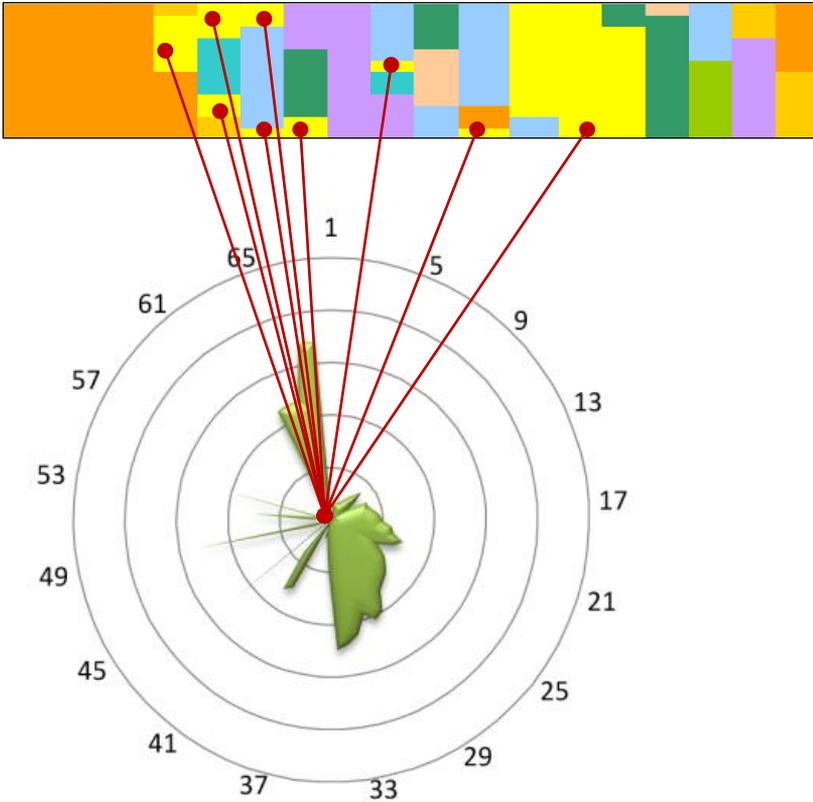
- : In a recent job interview, asked to describe current work environment, I said “retail laziness meets corporate head office.” Not surprisingly, I was nixed from the list of potential candidates.
- : Retiring from <http://www.durhamregion.typepad.com/people>. Without my blog, it’s like I don’t even exist.
- : A co-worker told me that he used to suffer from low self-esteem at the office; he says after working with me its thru the roof.
- : It’s weird. I don’t feel like it with my blog, but with Twitter, I feel like I’m being followed.
- : How sad that I can Google my given name and find a handful of Valerie Poulins with better careers than I have.
- : After three weeks of recovery, colleagues tell me they are disappointed I don’t have a cast, crutch, or scaring to prove seriousness of car accident.
- : Three times my doctor told me how “lucky” I was to not have been injured more gravely. I maintain that luck would have been *avoiding* the accident.

Things I may, or may not have fabricated

- : What a treat: a Swingline PowerEase, a “reduced effort” stapler. Great. I’d like to also order a “reduced effort” cubicle.
- : Even I am irritated by my arrogant habit of interrupting.
- : What’s better than a bossless Friday?

Artist's Statement

Each block of colour measures time spent working in a cubicle, or a home office, for someone else, except the yellow blocks which represent the chunks of time dedicated to writing projects full time. The corresponding graph illustrates the writer's income during these creative stop-overs.



Salary, Revenue, Income: Third Quarter Report 1994–2010.

Bad Writing, Well Written

In the mid-1990s before Y2K stole everyone's attention, seminars and workshops were popular. Every time another corporate initiative was announced, so was another boring seminar. This many years later, I have been thinking about launching a series of training sessions of my own.

In the workshops, lectures, and seminars of my imagination, I facilitate these series of talks, wearing colourful scarves and pacing the stage with my hands clasped in unnatural ways. After all, these are the hallmarks of any professional speaker.

Here are course details and expected learner outcomes.

Cliché as Cliché is Cliché

This session explores metaphors—and their use and misuse. Cliché users can rejoice in the news that the backlash against non-cliché use has caused clichés to become fashionable once again. You can go back to “burning the midnight oil” to show it's a game of “survival of the fittest.” Learn to “talk shop” and impress peers: prove that “time is money” by clearly stating your cliché. Learn to create you own. Bring paper, a writing implement, and your sense of humour.

Catchphrases and Buzzwords

Learn to master the basics, best uses, and most effective way of speaking jargon to confuse and distract others from your incompetence. Designed specifically for younger employees and striving to reach the next rung on the ladder, this seminar is also helpful to those moving from jobs in mid-sized firms to careers in larger corporations. If you need to dazzle peers, or convince project managers that you know more than you do, this seminar is for you!

It is strongly recommended that participants first experience the Cliché workshop before joining this session/group.

Correcting Political Correctness

~~Corporate players will find this session fun! Learn how to address issues with a bold approach. A round table discussion by experts - corporate bigwigs and left-winged social authorities, the pros and cons of reversing the trend of over-correcting. Lively discussion and a Q&A session follows the debate.~~

Gossip Warehousing

Psychologists assure us that gossip is a necessary form of communication. It is essential to our status-conscious culture in networking, for influence, and social alliances. In this session, we discuss how to root out information and identify its usefulness. Learners will recognize the types of tidbits to pass on, which to discard, and understand what retention period provides for their best return on investment. Added bonus: tips on keeping your enemies closer.

Coffee Station/ Kitchenette Talk

Find out how to avoid office goof, or run into the office hottie. Learn techniques for gaining an upper-hand with the office braggart, make small talk with LAN-weenies, and learn how to spend extra time refilling your water bottle in order to eavesdrop on coworkers' conversations. Advance your comeback skills through role-playing and impromptu dialogue. Bring your favourite stories to exchange with other participants. And bring a mug or other drinking vessel. Beverages will be served.

A version of this piece was submitted to a mentor in what turned out to be a short-lived relationship, who commented on its ineffective humour, wrote about how "The Onion" does it better, and included a list of more than a dozen books that I ought read, presumably before continuing to write another word. The piece is not hilarious, it's not edgy sarcastic, and it's not really all that funny, but I decided to send it for publication. Why? Because, as Matt Damon's character Will said in *Good Will Hunting* about his choice of a wrench when his abusive father laid out a belt, a stick, and a wrench and asked him to choose: "Cause fuck him, that's why."

Signs

DO YOU BELIEVE IN SIGNS? I DO.

On days when I am feeling pessimistic, I dismiss non-tangible experiences, but on most days I am on the lookout for metaphorical symbols in the events of my life. And I probably spend more time than I should analyzing these events for deeper meaning.

Take for example a recent job contract. After delays in the hiring process, I started work. It was apparent that my daily commute was going to be miserable, even by a patient person's standards. Transport by GO bus required a 20-minute walk to/from the bus stop, so I tried driving to work. Even in the midst of summer month's traffic was hideous. On the main roads, there was congestion, volume, construction. On the Macdonald-Cartier Freeway, there were arrogant drivers passing on the right, cutting in from exit lanes. Everywhere, there were inexperienced drivers driving too fast, following too closely. And signalling for a lane change, or turn, seemed a relic, a nicety of the past.

All that frustration aside, the Monday to Friday commute wasn't the worst of it. Not yet, at least.

First, there was this:

The second day on the job I discovered the company did not allow flex-time. This was strictly a 9-5 gig. Except, of course, for the unpaid overtime you were expected to work—start work before nine, eat at your desk, stay after five.

By day three, four meetings into my new gig, I was unhappy and knew this wouldn't last.

The day after I received my second pay cheque, I'd decided it was time to go, but not before getting a case of mild whiplash trying to avoid a horrendous car accident on the 401.

Forget the 90-day wait, the inflexible work hours, or the parking ticket, it took a strike of lightning to get my attention.

I could say that it really started with a parking ticket. At a discounted, pay-within-seven-days, \$39 was no small fee for overlooking the park-and-pay rules, but because the ticket came during the interview stage, it was a reminder for me to pay attention to details.

Let's recount the earliest signs:

- : Day 1. Apply for job.
- : Day 42. Attend interview.
- : Day 60. Start reference check.
- : Day 72. End reference check.
- : Day 77. Verbal offer.
- : Day 78. Written offer.
- : Day 92. First day on the job.

The problem now was the restructuring shake-up, and with that I was expected to behave as an employee. That is, I was expected to attend frequent and wasteful meetings, each lunch at my desk, arrive before nine, and leave after five. I was to work in a confined space, sit in an uncomfortable chair, and work with a smaller than average computer monitor. Ergonomic is not a familiar word to the folks running the Canadian operation of this insurance company.

Then three, successive signs appeared. The kind that catch your attention.

- : Lighting strike.
- : Parking ticket.
- : 401 car crash.

At first, I attributed the dislike for my new temporary, full-time job down to the hours, the commute, the change from my old habits (work from home days, self-made hours, 25-minute drive to the office), but a rainy day in late July changed things.

Road signs provide direction, restrict our speed, and mark our progress in distance.

I could hear the thunder in the distance, but the downpour began suddenly. It rolled in quickly and I was caught one-third of the distance between my house and the bus stop. I turned around and headed doubled back home, lighting strikes lit up the morning sky around me, and as I stood waiting at a red traffic light, thunder clapped, and a few hundred feet from where I was standing, embers shot across the sidewalk. I walked over to the driver of car waiting for the light to turn green and pleaded for a ride home.

From that day on, I drove to work. And continued to drive for two more weeks, until I received a second \$69.75 parking ticket. This time for not placing my \$15 parking receipt face-up. The ticket would be discounted to \$39 if paid within seven days.

In the weeks that led up to this, I had been thinking about the considerable expense to get to and from work, how the 9-5 hours nixed my public transportation option, and I was looking for something, as sign, that this job wasn't the fit I thought it would be.

And as it happens, the sign was loud and clear.

The day after the parking ticket, I was semi-involved in a collision between two cars that flew across three lanes of traffic clipping the bumper of a small truck in front of me. I slammed on my brakes: From 100 km/h to zero in seconds. The vehicular carnage was ugly, and a reminder of the danger of my daily highway drive.

I was shaken. I gave my name and phone number to the OPP officer and headed home to recover. A mild case of whiplash was already working its way through my neck and shoulders.

If these symbols of patience and change and disruption were not enough to convince me, the frequency at which they occurred was. The job was not for me, I knew it early on. If I had been honest with myself, I was uncomfortable from the get-go, but I stuck with the process, even turning down other interviews, and one other job offer, because this gig promised great experience. Experience that would look good on my resume.

But in the end, the experience did not fulfill its promise. It only served to illustrate—in three very clear instances—that I ought to pay closer attention to subtle signs, too. That way, heavily built incidents, like crashing cars, are unnecessary.

This article originally appeared August 29, 2011 at [Another Writing Project](http://anotherwritingproject.com)
<<http://valeriebeanonline.net/blog>> posted under the Column category.

BECAUSE SHE IS MATHEMATICALLY DAFT, **Valerie (Poulin) Bean** likes to collect numbers in her biography. She has published 34 print articles, 12 online essays, 40 poems, 400 or so blog postings, and one magazine cover story, receiving contributor's copies, promotional trade, or cash as payment for her work.

In a year-long project (2010-2011), **Valerie Bean** posted more than 100 creative writing pieces—creative non-fiction, poetry, short fiction—and essays online at [A Creative Way Out of Work](#). In May 2011, she launched [Another Writing Project](#), where she writes a weekly, online column. Less regularly, she is editor for [Minor.Hockey.Life](#), a website for minor hockey parents.

Valerie Poulin is currently working on a collection of short stories, a decade-old screenplay, and a fifth poetry chapbook. She self-published a series of fictional letters online, a sort of electronic novella, a chapbook of inspirational/self-help/feel-good essays, and a best-selling book for actors.

vpoulin abandons few projects and is always at work on fiction, creative non-fiction, and personal essay projects. She often writes about her dissatisfying day jobs simply because she spends more time within a cubicle than without one.