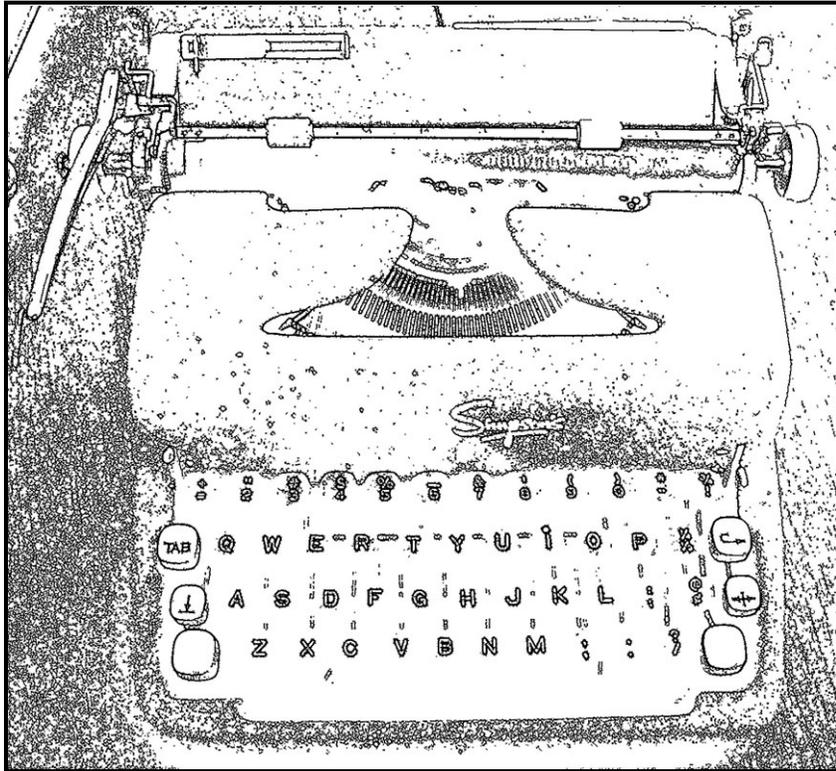


a Mixed Bag of Bones

stories



volume two

Mixed Bag of Bones

managing editor

Valerie (Poulin) Bean

editor

Valerie (Poulin) Bean

layout designer

Valerie (Poulin) Bean

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We also acknowledge the online space provided to our contributing writers at People, Places, and Things, where some of these pieces were reprinted online. At one time, you could have read them for free as blog entries at www.durhamregion.com.

A special thank you to Claire Robson who got it early on.

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Welcome to volume two of *Mixed Bag*. This time around there is more fiction, pieces from our blog, and those published elsewhere. Initially, we'd written much-to-do about trying to strike a balance between creative writing and corporate writing as we were trying to make our way through an "art and business don't mix" lifestyle, but we replaced those items. At long last, we think we've finally found a way for those otherwise lousy roommates to co-exist.



When (and if) I find my writing trade and my writing aspirations in direct conflict, I will leave the full-time workforce (yet again) and dedicate time to my neglected love.

In the meantime, enjoy these pieces, we're sure you'll agree that the words of G.K. Chesterton best suit this issue: "A good novel tells us the truth about its hero; but a bad novel tells us the truth about its author."

As always, *Mixed Bag* tells you the truth about its writer.

Valerie

It doesn't take much to piss me off. I'm in a constant state of irritation.

How to Discourage a Budding Poet

Early on, I displayed an unusually intense fascination with keys. The interest was so great, that my intended career path was that of secretary—a solid career choice for a young girl in the early 1970s.

Besides, I was too chunky to be a dancer, too short to be a model, and too shy to be an actress. Then, sometime in my mid-teens I discovered poetry. This was not good news. Poets are inherently poor.

To discourage me, my mother sent my first poem (enclosed) to my aunt shortly after I wrote it and didn't see the poem until I was in my 30s. The poem, written in 1975 on my mother's manual typewriter from Sears, offered advice by listing seven ways in which a child can irritate her mother.

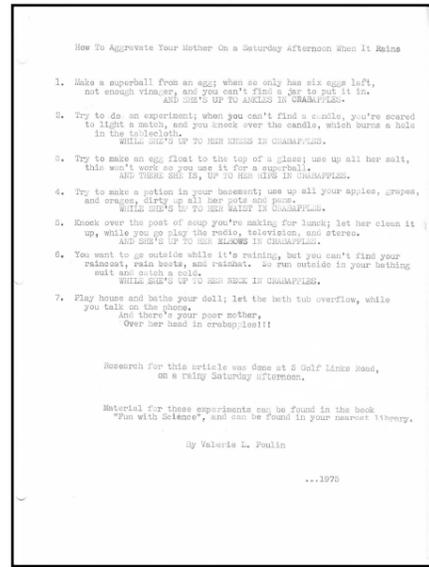
You could say that this was my first attempt at creative non-fiction.

At the age of 11, I came up with only seven ways to irritate mom, but, there were, of course, many more, which increased exponentially with puberty. The marginally fictionalized account of the boredom of a rainy day and a young girl's attempt to follow her mother's instructions of finding "something to do" wasn't a masterpiece, but it was my first significant piece of writing.

The writing was significant for a couple of reasons: It contains minimal typographical errors, it is numbered (an eye to a technical writing profession in the future, perhaps), and it includes a bibliography, though not in the standardized format. For a first attempt, the poem wasn't bad, especially for a kid with limited heartbreak and Bell Jar incidents to draw on.

It so impressed my mother that it disappeared from my possession for 21 years—solid encouragement to any aspiring poet.

For a time, I pushed aside my love of writing poetry and opted for a career in business instead.



How to Aggravate Your Mother on a Saturday Afternoon When It Rains

1. Make a superball from an egg; when she only has six eggs left, not enough vinegar, and you can't find a jar to put it in.

AND SHE'S UP TO ANKLES IN CRABAPPLES.

2. Try to do an experiment; when you can't find a candle, you're too scared to light a match, and you knock over the candle, which burns a hole in the tablecloth.

AND SHE'S UP TO HER KNEES IN CRABAPPLES.

3. Try to make an egg float to the top of a glass; use up all her salt, this won't work so you use it for a superball.

AND THERE SHE IS, UP TO HER HIPS IN CRABAPPLES.

4. Try to make a potion in your basement; use up all your apples, grapes, and oranges, dirty up all her pots and pans.

WHILE SHE'S UP TO HER WAIST IN CRABAPPLES.

5. Knock over the pot of soup you're making for lunch; let her clean it up, while you go play the radio, television and stereo.

AND SHE'S UP TO HER ELBOWS IN CRABAPPLES.

6. You want to go outside while it's raining, but you can't find your raincoat, rain boots and hat, so run outside in your bathing suit and catch a cold.

WHILE SHE'S UP TO HER NECK IN CRABAPPLES.

7. Play house and bathe your doll; let the bathtub overflow, while you talk on the phone. And there's your poor mother...

OVER HER HEAD IN CRABAPPLES!!!

I Stood Up James Frey

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to make my meet-and-greet with James Frey at Indigo. A 3:30 p.m. job interview in Markham spilled over and into 5:00 p.m., which served only to prove that my long-winded answers need serious attention.

I've met published authors before and too often I find myself suddenly speechless despite rehearsing what I'll say when the line finally shortens and I am standing in front of said author.

This time, I said, would be different. I would ask a question or two, so that I could blog about the experience and have a quote, too. This time, I was prepared. I had friends email me questions; I selected a few that I knew I could ask with a straight face. With the remarks cut and pasted into one document, I printed a copy and slid the page beneath the covers of *A Million Little Pieces*.

But I never got to ask the questions, or meet the author. One of the best questions I got was from Nik, who said she would ask, "Why did you not tell Oprah to go fuck herself and walk off the stage??"

While Nik's comments illustrate how she would stand up for James Frey, I simply stood him up.

Next time. It's not as if he was expecting me.

A Green Frog with Yellow Eyes

I chose this frog because I knew that I would like the feel of it in my hands. It is plastic and malleable. I like things that bend to the will of my hands, that can be molded into one thing or another. I also like things that even with all the pressing and squeezing, refuse to change shape. This is the latter.

It's pliable, rubbery, it feels good in my hands, like clay when you first take out of the package. Someone may have owned this frog before, but now it's mine. The frog has light green skin and black spots. Sadly, it's missing a tongue. I wonder why it has yellow eyes, but I don't see a tongue. How will it tell me its story without a tongue?

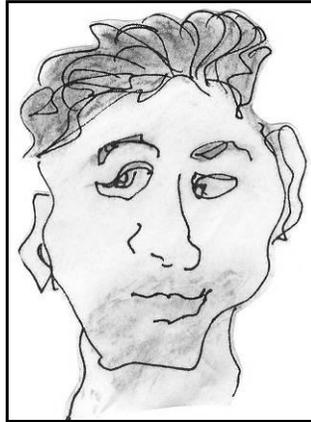
I pinch the frog's legs, the points of its feet are the only sharp places on it. It has a large belly, probably from eating too many mosquitoes.

"What the heck," this frog might say if I were to ask. "What the heck do you think you'd do if you hadn't a tongue with which to catch dinner?"

I have to eat other things and this isn't really much of a story is it? That's because I can't speak. It is the sound of your own voice putting words in my mouth that you hear. And if those are your words, how can you expect them to make sense? If you pretend that they are mine? I am without a tongue, but I still have eyes to see, so I watch what goes on around me. I listen to what is said about me, about others. I just don't repeat it. I ingest it all. And that's what gave me the belly. And if you don't believe my story, go next door.

Ask your neighbours if they haven't seen me around here, perched on the fire hydrant, or sitting low in the grass on the boulevard. Ask if they haven't caught me looking up from the sidewalk to their bedroom window because they have.

And oh, the stories I could tell you.



There is nothing more appealing to an employer than someone who is already employed. So, if you are looking for work get a job.

Style Guide

Abbreviations & Initialisms

Always refer to abbreviations (Eg.) and initialisms (CBC) as acronyms lest your colleagues believe that you are familiar with the ins and outs of the English language.

Acronyms

It's a cool word. And trendy! Use it as often as possible. And always use it incorrectly. See Abbreviations & Initialisms.

Capitalization

Capitalize all titles. Every department, every job title, every thing, all the time. Do not capitalize trademarks, such as Kleenex, and Coca-Cola as they are registered and we would then either owe them money. Always substitute cola beverage for P**** as we prefer Coke. Never give corporations the satisfaction by using ® to denote Registered or ™ to denote Trademark. Companies get enough free press.

Hyphenation

Hyphenations are out of date. For example, an out-of-date hyphenation rule is . . . They are passé in part because it is confusing to know and that makes it irrelevant. All words that used to be two were then hyphenated are now one word, regardless of the rants of linguists worldwide.

Exception: As always there is an exception for contemporary purposes and in this case it is the use of the hyphen in place of traditional punctuation. *See Punctuation.*

Footnotes, References, etc

Despite the reservations of your colleagues, please note that it is entirely acceptable to fill the bottom 1/3 of a page with a footnote. Please feel free to add bits of trivia as well as this makes for interesting reading of an otherwise dull document. Ensure that the reference is obscure, lest it fail to prompt conversation among the document's reviewers.

Style Guide *cont'd*

Punctuation

Really, in this txt msg age, punctuation is, like, so yesterday. Making your communication as unclear as possible is your goal. By doing this, the CYA becomes primary and perhaps the sole purpose of a written document.

To seem hip as well as clever, use quotation marks to emphasize your point. Italics are out of style and often overused. Quotation marks, however “show” the reader what you mean in a “more clearly” emphasized fashion. Besides, your readers will appreciate the variety.

Hyphens are decidedly in fashion, but only as use in separating thoughts in a sentence to show emphasis – such as in this example. They are no longer used for compound words. Compound words are old school.

Despite what you may have heard in the news, there is no such thing as a serial comma. They don't exist. The rule here is “three's a crowd.” Keep your commas in coupledom. For example, the writer was pessimistic about her talent, ability and chosen profession. Again, contemporary times calls for two, not three (or more!!), commas. Fans of the 1970s show “Laverne and Shirley” will recall that Laverne often enjoyed a glass milk and Pepsi. If she had cookies alongside, then she enjoyed cookies, milk and Pepsi. Not cookies, milk, and Pepsi.

Suspended hyphens. Always a challenge for those not in the know. Use to confuse.

Spelling

Canadian, American, British. It doesn't really matter. Spell what you want how you want. Don't get caught up in this Canadian/American/UK spelling battle. If our federal and provincial governments use British spellings, then that is a sign for the private sector to do the opposite.

Don't bother to consult a dictionary when you can go online and get your answer in a jiffy.

Don't pause over whether there is *humour* in your office (as it is likely there is not). Don't get all tied in knots about the *colour* of the font, or the *cancelation* of a meeting. In the end, it gives those of us who read your work something to feel smug about.

Symbols and Abbreviations

Leave MS Word to its default setting, so that January 12th, 1964 shows that you've done your work using a word processing package instead of a manual typewriter, which of course would show the date as January 12, 1964.

Feel free to use i.e. and e.g. interchangeably. Few know Latin anyway and won't bother correcting it when they second guess their

grade school knowledge, which is applicable only to those who went to grade school in the 1950s.

My Family Vacation

When it comes to vacations, some of us enjoy a weeklong getaway with our life partners, while others escape for a couple of hours by inventing a last-minute appointments, or head out of town for a girls' weekend.

Last year I did something different. I took a vacation from my family.

Sure, a 12-month exile may be considered extreme therapy and it's unlikely a licensed professional would advise it, but When I found myself at odds, yet again, with my adult siblings and mother, I decided I needed a break.

I called the break a "vacation" because I returned from this year-long sabbatical feeling relaxed, refreshed, and ready to reconnect.

Besides, "estranged" has such an irrevocable sound to it.

::<>::

Friction began, as it sometimes does with a simple email, a misplaced word or its tone of it mistakenly construed by the reader as hypercritical.

After exchanging a couple of heated emails with one sibling, while the others followed along on their own copies, I could feel the energy building, my body ready to fight. I could actually feel my biochemistry changing as I banged out increasingly irrational responses to what I perceived as an attack. I was rapidly transforming, like one of those human to alien-reptilian creatures in a sci-fi movie.

My emotional energy charged to unprecedented voltage; it vibrated throughout my body. Amp'd-up on anger, I banged out a nasty comeback and declared my intention: I would be incommunicado for the next twelve months.

Nothing personal, I claimed. I just needed a break.

In a family made up of black sheep, I am the oddball.

Over the last decade, relationships with my sisters and mother were showing signs of strain. I'd noticed it, but ignored it. I continued to stay in touch; I'd fire off emails, with regularity, despite terse responses and make frequent telephone calls, even though they were met with mild intolerance. If I persisted, I reasoned, things would improve. After all, my lifestyle is different than my older siblings.

Our minor age differences aside (2, 4, and 5 years), the wider gap was our children, spaced 16-18 years apart, putting us at very different stages of life. This June, my son will graduate from grade six; in April, one sister became a grandmother.

This gap widened further when I decided to step out of the writer's closet.

Although I'd been hinting at my close-guarded secret for some time, the results of my "outing" were less than spectacular.

I made my announcement when my work was short-listed in a respected competition for small poetry collections. In receipt of \$50 cheque and on a high from my first poetry reading – all finalists were invited on stage for their troubles, to read from their work – I created several chapbooks and sent the handmade booklets to family members.

How surprised I was to discover that I failed to impress anyone with my achievement. This contest gave my work and me, by extension, merit and somehow I'd expected a reward for this and for bravely exiting the poet's cost.

Apparently, it had been no big deal to anyone, but me.

When I announced that I'd exchanged my corporate lifestyle for one of a freelancer, the reaction was the same.

Sure, they were happy for me, they said as much. But, where was the fanfare?

What's worse, a cutting remark "What's wrong with Val?" repeated to me in good humour, jogged loose something from my childhood.

After the birth of my son, my mother had told me what I felt all along – that I had been the odd kid. "I didn't know what to do with you," she said, "you were so different from the others." As if I needed to be reminded.

A few years later, when an email set me off, it was time to lay low.

If absence did indeed make the heart grow fonder, 365 days out to be just about enough time to thaw the cockles.

The distance of time allowed me time to reassess.

At first, I simply recuperated from withdrawal and guilt, but within the first three months, I settled into my self-exile. By the time four months rolled around, I decided it was time to dig deeper, to excavate to see if I could unearth the source of my irritation.

What was it about any of this that was so bothersome to me?

Early, on, I got the picture. I was 11 when my eldest sister left home, 13 when the next one left, and 20 when the third moved out. They didn't just move out of the house, they moved to different cities. I'd been pushed aside, left behind. Feelings of abandonment may have been at the root of my frustration, but that's standard-issue baby of the family stuff.



Now, after more than a decade of infrequent contact – two were raising kids, I was focused on a corporate career and hanging out in bars on weekends – I was pushing for their attention, again.

What I saw as commiserating, they may have heard as whining. What I meant as excitement about another publication credit, they could have read as bragging. My concept of connecting could be construed as being intrusive.

I discovered that I hadn't really been interested in day-to-day lives of my siblings as much as I been seeking their attention and approval.

They became stand-ins, too. I obligated them to support my every creative endeavour so that I didn't have to move outside my comfort zone. This dependency held me in place. I was ready to move forward. By setting aside my intense neediness, I found that my interest in their lives became genuine.

It also let me off the hook.

I no longer feel pressure to initiate contact. I'd somehow come to regard communication with my siblings as obligation. How could they not have felt it?

As the year wore on, I felt free from the emotional obligation I'd been holding on to for a long time. Because I initiated contact with almost militant frequency and intensity, I'd made it difficult to retreat.

Perhaps, if I'd left sooner, I could have done so graciously, instead of making an abrupt departure.

A year-long break brought a new view of things

Pushing for friendship and intimacy that doesn't exist is futile.

After I'd had a child, I somehow believed that childbirth gave me automatic entrance into my sisters' two-person clique. Acceptance with open arms. Not so.

In the past year, I learned to let go. I no longer feel as if I'm trying to force anyone into a relationship, as if I am chasing friendship.

Whatever the reasons are for their lack of interest, I knew I'd have to accept the situation for what it is, not begrudgingly, but truly accept it without analysis, without dejection, without judgment, and move on.

The commonality of our DNA doesn't mean we must share every minute detail of our daily lives with one another. After all, we live in three different cities, on two different continents. The average age of their children is 25; my child is 12.

No matter how much I wish things were different, these are facts: I have three sisters. We are not best of friends, we don't have to be. We are family and I love them.

I am now content to let them know I am here for them, that I think of them often, but that I will honour their space.

Originally published online at Womenbloom.com in May 2008.

Help! My Date's Messed Up

Dear Ms. Poulin,

Every time I write the date, such as April 10, 2007, MS Word automatically adds a “th” or “st” and it’s driving me crazy. I think that this is an acceptable date format if you live internationally, but I want to go with the Canadian standard How do I fix it?

Thx!

Confused

Dear Confused:

Open a MS Word document.

1. From **Tools** menu.
2. Select **Auto Correct**.
3. Click **Auto Format as You Type** tab.
4. Uncheck **Ordinals (1st) with superscript** option.

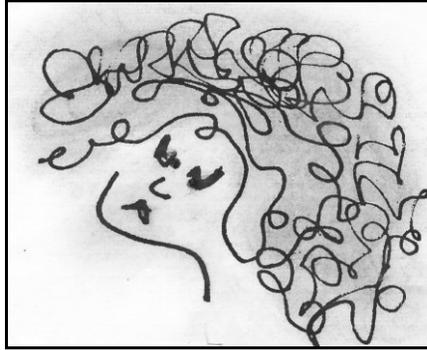
And to be certain:

5. Click **Auto Format** tab.
6. Uncheck **Ordinals (1st) with superscript** option.

Hope that helps.

My personal cosmetics-free credo:

I don't care, I don't have to look at me.



Unsolicited Advice

Unsolicited advice is something most people can do without. I am no exception. Yet, it seems this is the only type of advice most people can offer. Sadly, I am not exception. So, if you are a writer, I offer you this advice: successful screenwriters apply the maxim **enter late, exit early**.

I think we can all agree this advice holds for a Pampered Chef party.

Near and Complete Misses

Everyone has their brush with celebrity. Having worked at two different talent agencies four different times, I've had my fair share of run-ins with demanding individuals, but I was also lucky to meet interesting and talented artists, some of whom were fellow employees.

I was recently reminded by one of them of the opportunity we had to meet Bryan Adams on a video shoot. But first, we had to be submitted as Extras by the agents, then we needed to be hired by the casting director. It didn't happen.

As agency employees we were not allowed to be submitted for acting jobs (though I did do an episode of Decorating Challenge [7th season, eps. 207] with one of the agency's owners, for no money, and that seemed to meet the approval of the powers that were).



The casting breakdown (characters, ages, video theme) for his video "Open Road" had this description, for which we felt I was perfectly suited: "A woman described as 30ish to 40ish ... she is real, not modelly and has some meat on her, maybe even heavy set."

But as they say in the biz, the producer "went a different way."

If you've seen the video, you know this to be true.

Finding Your voice, then Pressing the Mute Button

Writers, we are told, spend years, sometimes decades trying to develop their "voice." While this is true, this part style, part voice, part persona, that the writer is seeking to develop, it is also true that the poet has a secondary voice to develop. It's the one he or she uses when performing in front of an audience.

Many writers read their stuff aloud when revising and this got me to thinking about most individuals can't stand the sound of their own voice. And while I understand this from the average person's point-of-view, it never occurred to me that those who spend time in front of the cameras would also disdain theirs.

A few weeks back the Barbara Walters told the gals on The View that she doesn't like her voice, or to hear her own voice. Last Friday Anderson Cooper subbed for Regis and referred to his "high, scratchy" voice.

I've spent some time with actors and performers, including voice-over artists and don't recall one of them making such a remark. Next time, I'll remember to ask.

I wish that I could ask one actress in particular.

Weeks after my boss and I did our stint on The Decorating Challenge a VHS cassette tape of our episode was delivered to our office. The following day, an actress who was covering our front desk while we searched for yet another receptionist/agents' assistant, asked me what I thought of my "performance."

I told her what I told everyone who'd asked about it, it's hard to watch yourself.

She asked me if it was "because of your weight?" I burst out laughing. If she meant to make me feel insecure about my appearance, she didn't realize that I'm just not into hair and makeup, at least, not from a vanity standpoint. (Ask any friend or neighbour who has unexpectedly stopped by to visit and witnessed this lack of concern with appearance.)

I qualified my answer. I looked her up and down, realizing that overweight actresses have it twice as hard, and explained that it was hard to listen to the sound of my own voice. Everything from the frequency, to its pitch, to the barrelling guffaw that I claim is my signature laugh was bothersome, so I watched the episode with the volume muted.

The Crazy Chick at Work series was originally a series of email exchanges I had with a close friend of mine while I was working as a “citation editor,” which is a resume pretense that loosely translates to “data entry clerk.”

A14 • METROPOLIS JOURNAL • MONDAY, OCTOBER 14, 2002

Driven to Madness by Workplace

Woman recovering after on-the-job “freak out”

Co-workers watch as woman tears through office

VALERIE POULIN
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Yesterday, a 38-year-old Pickering woman ran screaming from an office building and had to be sedated by paramedics. The worker has been apparently suffering from acute job stress.

The woman, identified by police as Alivree Bane, of no fixed business address, was working for a job placement agency and was on extended temporary assignment at a publishing firm, in Markham, where the incident took place.

The firm’s spokesperson refused comment; however, the victim’s co-workers said she was distraught by working conditions.

“She seemed particularly disturbed by the stench from the washroom,” said one worker. “She was always complaining about how bad the bathrooms smelled. I think she was going to call the Ministry of Health.”

John C. Burrock, a Manager of the Highest Redundancy at the Ministry, said their records showed no complaint had been launched about the so-called stinky loos.

The manager did, however, confirm that the Ministry had received a complaint about an infestation of black ants in the company’s cafeteria. “The matter is under consideration,” remarked Burrock, “so I’m not at liberty to proceed with a dialogue as it related to outside sources, especially in regards to the possible pending outcome.”

Both the managing editor and supervisor of the area expressed shock at the events of yesterday and said that Ms. Bane was one of their best workers.

“Productivity wise, she far exceeded our expected values for daily data entry competence,” said department supervisor Olivia Lungstead.

The department manager, Jim Schlenger was in agreement. “Agreed,” he said.

Temporary employees suggested the company’s misuse of the English language pushed the former Compliance and Tax Administrator over the edge. Specifically, the use of “prior history” and “later history” in the organization’s proprietary software. She was said to have been debating the severity of

“I nearly barfed from the exhaust fumes and the washroom tang was foul.”

suspected language abuse with a co-worker when she finally “snapped.”

Witnesses allege the woman was “rambling on” about erosion of the English language by corporations and in particular, software programmers, when the overly pedantic woman “flipped out” and she stomped back to her desk, clutching a handful of her colleague’s hair.

Back at her cubicle Bane smashed a printer, punched her computer monitor and then whipped downstairs to the lunch room where she attempted to tip over a vending machine before stomping out of the building. Once outside, she attacked a sign in which auxiliary verbs “may” and “be” had been misapplied as a transitive verb. When paramedics arrived on the scene they found the woman holding her bleeding head and screaming about sign-painters not knowing the difference between “expressing possibility” and its adverbial cousin “perhaps.”

Witnesses also said the woman grumbled about “those geniuses at Microsoft” who can’t distinguish between UK and Canadian spelling, “but somehow found time to program a handful of synonyms for sexual climax.”

Later, the unemployed writer told police that she could not understand why she has not been able to get a job in her field of expertise. She also said that she hoped “the publicity would show prospective employers how much I care about the English language. By the way,” she added, “I am definitely open to job offers.”

Ms. Bane is recovering at the Hospital for Sick People.

Valerie Poulin is a freelance writer who, when not churning out overpriced verbs and corporate jargon, tends to her creative writing habit.

Bane says her health rapidly deteriorated while assigned to a firm she dubbed, “publishing ghetto” and “an intellectual sweatshop.”

Woman Stable 'Madness'

After Work

Woman stable after on-the-job “freak out”

Can't see what the big deal is

VALERIE POULIN
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Liv Bane is recovering at the Hospital for Sick People following an incident at her workplace. The former collections clerk was held for observation after receiving minor cuts and bruises in a violent outburst at her workplace Friday. Police are considering laying charges.

Bane, 37, had been working as a temporary employee at Legal-Eeeeze Data, Inc., a software developer in Canada's "Hi-Tech Capital" where the incident occurred.

The temperamental worker says she suffered from sciatica and numb extremities from sitting for prolonged periods on a broken steno chair and claims her health rapidly deteriorated while assigned to the firm she dubbed, "a publishing ghetto" and an "intellectual sweatshop."

Several of the temporary workers who sat nearby confirm that the former estate administrator had hives on her face that were likely caused by the excessive dust in the building's ventilation system. "It was like a beard, man," said an unidentified woman, "they were gross."

"I nearly barfed from the exhaust fumes and the washroom tang was foul," said the citation editor. "The broads in this office must be on a special diet of cauliflower and Brussels sprouts."

Things had gone badly right for Ms. Bane from the start when she was apparently scolded for tampering with her computer's desktop settings. By changing date and time option from its U.S. default to a preferred Canadian format, she caused her computer to crash each time she downloaded daily files from the company's database in Duluth, Minnesota.

When Bane was asked to comment on the investigation, she said, "If I were president of the company I would lift the ban on conversation. And if I was sleeping with the president, I mean, if I were still sleeping with him, I would make sure there was free coffee for everyone, not just permanent employees."

"Oh yeah," she continued, "and I'd put yummy little Vachon cakes in the vending machines."

Bane's co-worker Misha Orycyk disagrees. "I don't think that's true," she said, but refused to elaborate.

According to close friends, the former deli clerk and meat wrapper immediately disliked her assignment and referred to the American-owned company as "a tomb of spiritual death."

Problems at work, it seems, were vast and varied for Ms. Bane. In an interview conducted in her hospital room, the flirtatious brunette said her lack of ability to conform to the company's dress code was also a challenge. According to company literature, the dress code at Legal-Eeeeze is standard business casual, but Bane once wore a Nickelback tank top with spaghetti straps.

"I had to sneak past the boss and speedwalk the hallways to avoid employees," she laughingly told us. "Eventually, that one chick from accounting caught up to me. She grabbed me by the shoulder and warned me not to wear a shirt with a logo, or Chad Kroeger's face, splashed across my breasts. But I think she was really turned on by the fact that I wasn't wearing a bra." Adding, "I self-published a book once, you know."

The 32-year-old woman's prognosis is unclear and her doctors at the Hospital for Sick People refused to comment on her condition; however, Bane insists she is healthy and ready to return to "that stupid temp job." and has thoughtfully tacked an updated resume to her medical chart.

Legal-Eeeeze was trying to recover several weeks' worth of files at the time Bane was taken to hospital.

The unmarried woman is expected to recover fully.

Valerie Poulin is a freelance writer and poet who often disguises herself as a technical writer to nab work in the financial services industry.

Letters to the Editor

Workplace Unsafe

Re: Driven to Madness by Workplace

What's next, metal detectors and police officers on site? We've already read too many stories of employees "losing it." I have no sympathy for Aliveree Bane's "freak out." If all employees were as violent and dangerous as Ms. Bane, offices will become no safer than our schools.

Hal Johnston, Toronto

Workplace Unsafe

Re: Driven to Madness by Workplace

Aliveree Bane person needs professional help. This woman is a menace to her co-workers and a danger to her self. I hope she gets help soon.

Lorraine Miller, Jasper

Workplace Unsafe

Re: Driven to Madness by Workplace

On-the-job stress is common. Everyone needs to let off a little steam.

Name Withheld

'Madness' in Workplace Common

Re: Woman Stable After Work 'Madness'

Work-related stress leave is at an all time high. About one out of every 100 people in the workplace suffers from illness. This statistic does not hold true for the technology sector, however. Our statistical data proves that of the 250 employees the IFS counselled last year, more than 80% were temporary or contract workers and almost half were classified as belonging to the technology industry. As a result, in a field where there is nearly 65% unemployment and 75% of employees are either contract or temporary employees, 60% of those counselled were either employed or formerly employed in the technology industry. It's time to fix this.

Rita Station, Spokesperson,

Institute for Stress, Red Deer

'Madness' in Workplace Common

Re: Woman Stable After Work 'Madness'

My heart goes out to Liv Bane. She deserves better. We're rooting for you, Livee!

Laura Melnychuk, Thunder Bay

A Survival Guide for Parents

I spent most of the late morning and early afternoon with a friend of mine and her three-month-old baby. My son turns 12 this week.

I'd forgotten what it's like to have fragmented conversations, but it didn't take long to find our rhythm and cobble our thoughts into mini-updates and bite-sized laughs. Despite the gap in our children's ages, my friend Heather and I have much in common, in addition to our 20-year friendship. Our kinship bonds us, but so do our differences: Where I am barely capable, she's an amazing cook; where I can't remember year-to-year which perennials to buy Victoria Day weekend, she is a terrific gardener. She is also one of the brightest people I know. Rather, she's one of those gals with a perfect mix of book smarts and common sense. So, naturally, she's also a great conversationalist.

When I returned home, I found an email message from Andrea, a regular guest blogger, and was immediately reminded of the vast difference in the stages of concerns of a new mother and the concerns of a mother of teens.



A similar conversation with another mother at my podiatrist's office reminded me that I had much to learn about raising a teenager and that perhaps, I'm not as prepared as I think, or pretend to be.

Already, my baby book updates have been replaced with lectures. Concerns about ouchies were long ago replaced with concerns about helmet-free, in-line skating. Preoccupation with development milestones became preoccupation with what the kids are getting into at the mall, the movies, a pool party. Unsupervised kids in fast food restaurant play areas seem like, well, child's play, when compared to unsupervised teens hosting house parties. From kiddie meltdown to hormonal volcano.

This year, we've experienced pre-teen dances, girlfriends, arguments and disagreements between friends, missed curfews, backtalk that is beyond, and we've now introduced door-slamming as a form of rebellion in our house.

Years ago, I turned in my edition of "What to Expect When You're Expecting" for *It's Not Fair: Jeremy Spencer's Parents Let Him Stay Up All Night*.

It is time now for ***Raising Teenagers: A Parent's Survival Guide***.

Or, how about *Bootcamp or Band Camp? How to Raise a Responsible Teen*, but if things get really hairy I'm going for ***The Hell-Raising Truth About Raising a Hell-raising Teen***, or even (but only if absolutely necessary), ***Tough Teens: How to Break Your Teen's Spirit without Breaking the Law***.

A Technical Writer's Journal

March 31

While enjoying a cigarette and glass of Merlot one evening it occurred to me: I'd had a good 18-month break, it was time to return to corporate contract writing.

April 16

Another new writing contract, another messed up project. What else is new? I started a new job today. It's a technical writing contract. People seem okay. This go 'round, we've got a couple of newbies – a retired appliance salesman (if you can believe it) with a couple of courses under his belt and a disgruntled, former software developer.

The aspiring PhD dude left after just four days. Off to Oxford, he is.

All in all, there are five of us on this project. Misery loves company. And so many meetings. I can't tell you where because I am contractually obligated to keep my mouth shut.

April 17

The perks, well, the one perquisite is free chips made by the plant down the street. The drag is there are rules to eating the chips. You must consume all product on the premises. The appliance salesman takes home two a day.

People bother me. It's nothing specific about people. It's not specific people, not even specific types of people. It's people. That's right, all people. But today is a new day. Today, those that bother me are specific people.

April 19

Everyone at the intermediary is super friendly and the support staff seems competent. It's nice to note that unlike the crotchety tech writer, not all of us on this project have our left-brained marching orders.

April 22

These employees are angry. I mean they are freaks!! There's not a normal one in the bunch. These are five of the angriest women I have ever met and they are all jammed together in this tiny room processing payroll. And this project manager...yikes! He doesn't know his "ism" from his "ity."

The only satisfaction I have is to know that I am creating documentation to give to their job successors, while these ladies are job hunting all over southern Ontario.

April 23

To the project manager who believes he can write better, faster, and without complaint (or at least with fewer bitch sessions than technical writers). To that individual, I say, I know what you mean: I brush and floss my teeth regularly; I think I'd make a great dentist.

April 24

My writing assignment had me sitting beside embittered employees who had restructured. I was to simply sit beside them while they did their work and write down, in detail what they did. I logged-on my laptop, typed the instructions, and handed them to the person who would be replacing the employee. This is hardly a harmonious environment.

I am gathering information for been who have, in effect, been fired supplying me with a new bio line:

Valerie Poulin recently worked on a technical writing assignment for an outsourcing company and spent her summer writing them out of their jobs.

You know who I'd like to write out of a job? A newspaper intern.

April 27

Re: White ink. I wrote to H today about the gal I suspect of copying my work. I told H how I fixed her little red wagon.

I put a stack of blank pages on my desk and when I returned from lunch and found her snooping around my desk, I explained how I've been printing highly-sensitive and confidential documents with white ink, per the client's request.

The client was known to be fussy and employees resistant to project and our presence, so the request didn't seem out of line. I convincingly shrugged off her surprise and later overheard her sharing this little tidbit of "classified information" in the lunchroom.

}:-() [that's my monkey face]

Imagine the possibilities! Next time you have a deadline, turn in bunch of blank pages, save running heads and footers, and suggest that the content is highly confidential and printed in white ink.

H must have been really busy today because I didn't hear back from her. Maybe she's busy binding blank pages together to turn in to her supervisor.

Gleaming Towers of Finance: Through a Poet's Eyes

For almost 20 years, I've worked in the financial district in downtown Toronto and for more than half that, I commuted 40-minute GO train ride to Union Station. Day after day, I stood at the corner of Front at Bay Streets where 14,000 windows, coated with layers of 24 karat gold, of the Royal Bank glimmer on sunny days, yet I rarely took in the length of them.

On a warm summer day in 2003, I left the office to meet up with a small television production crew setting up to film poet Duke Redbird for a series pilot.

When an uncooperative hotdog vendor temporarily stalled production, I made small talk with the renowned poet. The conversation would have been different in I had done a little research on Gary James Richardson. I would not have asked him about his growing up in an adoptive family after his mother died trying to save her six children from a house fire. I would not have asked about his Irish and Ojibway heritage, or about his name change, or about his earlier life living rough on the streets.



I would have, however, asked about his lifetime of work as an activist, an artist, actor, and filmmaker. I would have asked what brought him to writing, specifically to poetry. I managed only one question on the subject. It was something about process and in reply, Duke placed his fingertips of his thumbs against his forefingers together to create a rectangular gap and held it up to frame the gleaming skyscrapers.

Viewing only a small portion of the twin gold buildings reflecting in the mid-day sun, Redbird said I ought to try looking at something familiar in a different way.

The crew continued to move equipment – black boxes of camera lenses, cables, audio gear – while Duke looked and I stared at the south tower; my eyes drifted to his shoulder-length white hair that framed his brown skin. It lay on his shoulders against a black turtleneck where the turquoise and silver jewellery made a striking statement. Just as I considered that this poet was also a performer, he turned to me and recited his poem *The Beaver*.

It was a year or more later before I read his work in an anthology *Native Poetry in Canada* and another few years before I discovered some of his history.

Now, I walk past familiar buildings and sites and try to pay closer attention to their details. Once, for a couple of minutes I saw office buildings through the eyes of a distinguished and talented poet. Its lesson was a valuable gift, not just for this writer to pay attention, but to engage in life because it's possible to see something special even in two skyscrapers of finance.

A Daily Fix

The Zen Birdfeeder is a weblog that I love to visit. The images are spectacular.

It's an easier way to get my nature fix than by lugging around The ROM Field Guide to Birds of Ontario.

The ease with which one can do many errands on the way to/from work are one of the reasons I enjoy working downtown Toronto. The sheer number of stores in the PATH concourse allows me to drop into stores of all kinds to pick up cosmetics, or birthday cards, or drop off film, my shoes for a shine, all before settling into the cube-farm for the day.

You can walk for miles and never have to step outside during inclement weather (read: winter).

Bookstores and music stores are my favourite ones to nip into before or after work. (Unlike clothing stores, customers browsing for books and CDs are largely ignored as there seems a je nais se lack of sales quotas for store employees).

On this particular day, I'm running a little late for work, but I'm a contractor and well, we have our own schedules to keep. This is one of the reasons we are widely disliked by permanent employees. (There are many other valid reasons.)

I pull to the right and disengage from the crowd teeming through the tunnels and into a bookstore.

Inside, I wander aimlessly up and down the aisles, waiting for a book to call out to me.

On this day, I soon find myself in front of a row of Phil McGraws grinning at me from the self-help shelf section of a book store. There are no less than 12 Dr. Phils mocking my inability to exist in a self-actualized state.

Before I know it, I've picked out a book and I'm heading to the office where I'll sneak a few minutes to look at my new purchase before I grab a coffee and get down to pretending to work.

As I exit the store and step on the escalator (WALK left, STAND right), the irony of my purchase hits me. I've just spent \$26.99, plus GST, on a book to see what I should be able to see when I look out my back window. The book's author lives in my hometown where I was able to do just that.

I clutch my bird book and enter the elevator at FCP pretending that I am a cheerful, interesting, person on her way to a cheerful, interesting job.

I pretend to be anyone, but who I am: an unsuccessful freelance writer captured and constrained to a cubicle. My only freedom is the freedom to occasionally spout catch-phrases at passing employees.

For now, I pass time reading my new book.

10 Things I Learned Today: An E-mail Response

From: “Valerie Poulin” <vlpoulin@sympatico.ca>

To: “HJ” <hojo@hotmail.com>

Subject: 10 Things I Learned Today

Date: June 18, 2005 10:46 AM

Yes, and I was thinking of adding “internationally published poet” to my résumé in hopes of upping my hourly rate. To answer some of your questions . . .

1. Time sheet creation is up to you. Make it in fancy, annoying font.
2. I guess Roberto will introduce to the Company his version of QA. Should be quite a shock to the project managers to know that such a thing as quality assurance exists. The emerging writers are easy to spot – all wide-eyed and eager – a nice contrast to the dopey-looking payroll processors.
3. Rob quit? I heard he was fired.
4. Did you say he left to be a missionary, or a mercenary?
5. My work wardrobe now consists of two pairs of slacks and three blouses. I did, however, buy new sandals. The sandals were steal at \$10. No, I need a \$45 pedicure.
6. I’ll watch out for her.
7. Every task a payroll processor does is a process, according to the Company. We could debate this for all eternity and these fools just wouldn’t get it. Let it ride.
8. Yes, your Project Manager is nice. He’s handsome, too!
9. I know, I know. There’s opportunity for continued work here, but it’s only been two months and I’m already tired of them. And I’m tired of Roberto. It takes him three weeks to pay my monthly invoices.
10. I’m envious that you have an office. And, well, maybe a little impressed.
11. No one knows me, or my team. We are made to wear invisibility cloaks.
12. This Brianna character is the bane of my existence on this project.
13. Bastard!



*I believe that my reputation
in financial services has been permanently tattered. Good.*

Words: A Given Sentence

Excerpts from an Email Message

Your to-do list versus my ta-dah list (thanks Julia Cameron).

If you are in any way competitive, think about this: In the time that you first came up with an idea, I have published nine poems accepted for publication (and submitted to twice that number of publications), taken three writing course, met with two writers-in-residence, and attended one poetry bootcamp.

Since May 2003, I have rewritten a screenplay, drafted a novella-sized manuscript, placed 2nd in an artwork competition, been published in an anthology, had three non-fiction articles published (with two more on hold for future issues), connected with two script story editors, a freelance editor, and created four chapbooks of poetry.

I have revised and updated my self-published book, sold another 203 copies, performed a poetry reading as a runner-up in a respected contest, and appeared on one television show. I have worked on contract for five different companies, including two talent agencies, increasing my hourly rate from \$23 to \$60.

In the time you shared with me your concept for a television show, I've attended 165 hockey games, missed another 41, gone to a handful of practises, and been present at a dozen or more team fundraising and social events.

I could go on . . . my first pedicure, my seventh parent-teacher interview, a car repair, a tax reassessment, but I think that you get the overstated point.

Now, get on with it.

Latin for Losers: Nolite Carborundum Bastardes

There's a Latin saying "nolite carborundum bastardes." Loosely translated, it means "don't the bastards get you down" and it applies directly to any form of management.

Nolite carborundum bastardes

What breeds contempt?	Project managers. Consultants.
What is thicker than water?	The methodology behind a project's reasonability/business case.
What "springs eternal?"	Hope that a project plan is forthcoming. Hope that good news, which always travels in pairs – goodnews+badnews – because work expands to fill the time available for its completion.
What is stranger than fiction?	My ability to earn an income based on my inability to care about the work I do. My resume. Management's ability to be ineffective. A manager's capacity to insult my profession.
What is the best policy?	Keeping freelance technical writers out of the supply cabinet.

A Wish List of Sorts | part a/z

in 2008, i resolve to ...

listen to leonard cohen recite his poem “fingerprints” while we drink red needles in the arizona dusk.

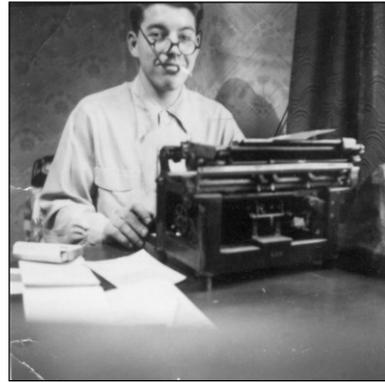
chat with margaret atwood over lunch about her creative writing process. i will call her peggy.

get interview tips from barbara walters.

discuss my past lives with shirley maclaine.

share a pitcher of margaritas with jimmy buffet.

write an article titled “in conversation with fran lebowitz”.



A Wish List of Sorts | part b/z

before i die at age 186, in 2150, i resolve to ...

travel the congo with a photojournalist and his crew.

ride a ferris wheel with helen mirren, in her hometown.

dance with michael buble to his song “everything.”

have my portrait taken by annie lebovitz.

study feminism with gloria steinam.

shoot craps with cher in las vegas

have a drink with uncle kracker in his favourite neighbourhood bar.

Guiding Principles of Daily Concourse Challenge

Indeed the daily commute falls under the heading of “rat race” and every 9-5er’s commuter to and from downtown Toronto becomes a daily race. The a.m. rush starts at Union Station and runs through the concourse that extends miles underground to homely cubicles in office towers linked by this walkway beneath the sidewalks.

My own foot race to work looked something like this:

With the occasional false start, I’d race down the stairs from the GO train platform and through the GO station.

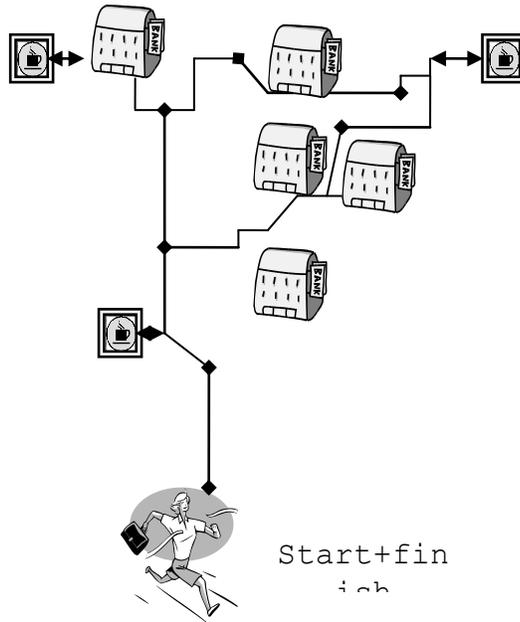
Next, I moved with the converging crowd through two sets of doors into TTC’s Union Station; exit, enter, exit, enter.

It was here, in this corridor that the opportunity for greatest gains were made. I’d lengthen my stride and dodge slower patrons, always passing on the left.

As a rule, the above move must always be performed with finesse, of course, and smooth transitions between faster and slower streams are optimal. Forbidden, but used by only the rudest of commuters is the slide-in-front and abrupt-cut-off move.

Speaking of rules of etiquette, while we cover these under separate cover in our “aide memoire” section, please keep in mind the following:

1. Not only is the above-noted frowned upon by other pedestrians, but run the risk of stepping on the back of an individual’s shoe, in which case a scowl and/or snarky comment is provided by the shoe’s owner.
2. Commuter points are always rewarded for holding open doors while passing through with murmured “thanks.” The door pass-off is akin to a relay race where a runner effectively passes-off the baton to the runner behind him with fluidity and ease. Here, the participant slides his/her palm along the door handle, or glass, to allow individual behind to pass through. Timing is imperative: you must remove your hand to allow the person behind to replace yours.
3. Participants are also rewarded with small smiles and silent nods for each “excuse me,” “pardon me,” and “thank you.”
4. Users of briefcases on wheels get what they deserve.



5. Ditto for large backpacks worn on commuter's back, or carried at foot-kicking level.
6. Obtain commuter gratitude in the form of silent deference by holding open a door with the same hand in which you are carrying a briefcase, purse or hot beverage.

Oh, the joy of arriving at your building and waiting at a bank of elevators knowing you've left the least possible amount of pedestrian carnage in your commuter wake.

Money talks...



but in my house it whispers.

|

----- Original Message -----

From: Valerie Bean [mailto:beanstock@sympatico.ca]

Sent: Tuesday, May 30, 2006 4:32 PM

To: M, E

Subject: okay, I swear

I cut out of work early today -- around 3:00 p.m. -- and as I stood at the lights waiting to cross at King and Bay streets, a guy passed by just as the pedestrian signal lit. From behind, the guy looked like George Clooney . . . I swear! I followed down Bay Street toward Union Station, to just past Wellington where he turned and strolled into BCE Place.

If Clooney is in town, I walked within panting distance. I stood behind him at a crosswalk where he waited for a traffic light (law-abider) and breathed in his ear. He looked into the sun and squinted. Do you think he was wincing from the garlic I had for lunch?

► ► ►

----- Original Message -----

From: M

To: Valerie Bean ; E

Sent: Wednesday, May 31, 2006 10:00 AM

Subject: RE: okay, I swear

It probably was George Clooney. We had a long lunch that day and he was taking a short walk before he got back in his limo. I came back to work. It was nice. Everything's good with George, just in case you were wondering how he was doing. He said he'd ring me up next time he's in town again. That George.

► ► ►

----- Original Message -----

From: E

To: M; Valerie Bean

Sent: Wednesday, May 31, 2006 12:59 PM

Subject: Re: okay, I swear

You're so lucky. I had to have lunch with Tom Selleck last week--what an old timer!

If you're talking to Mom, please get the scoop from about lawn cutting. I didn't get a chance to ask her - shall we keep on top of it or is Jay doing it? I do know she had Jay doing other yard work. Can you please confirm? I'm picking up the mail and will also hold with the newspapers.

Thanks. And next time you're chatting with George tell him I'm still tickled about the present he sent me!

E

end

