

eleven40seven

fall 2007





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# 3

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...one cannot be  
happy in exile or in  
oblivion. One cannot  
always be a stranger.  
I want to return  
to my homeland,  
make all my loved  
ones happy. I see no  
further than this.

~ Albert Camus

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## Editor's Note

When I look at the front cover selected for this issue of *eleven-40seven*—"Don't Look" by Andrew Young—I see panic in the boy looking out the window. We get neither his face nor his reflection, but we see that he is distraught. He might be caught, alone, and looking for a sense of direction. The photograph's double exposure adds another dimension to the figure. It makes me feel that he isn't fully defined or maybe he's living a double life.

The picture's sense of alienation runs through this issue's selections as well. In "Trout" by Jenna Hockema, we see a protagonist who is very knowledgeable about fish but refuses to dissect any living creatures. The protagonist also has a disability that causes him to be outside of society. He doesn't communicate like most people, nor can he look anyone in the eye. He feels a sense of panic, associating his emotions toward Charlie with the trout that hangs on Charlie's wall. Similar feelings of alienation run through Jeramey Kraatz's essay, "The Strangest Heroes of All." Here the speaker struggles with being gay in west Texas: a feat within itself. The speaker connects the feelings of alienation and being stuck in the closet to the way X-Men feel when they discover that they have a secret power. Because society has a hard time accepting them, the mutants feel ashamed of their powers when they shouldn't at all.

One source of alienation is misunderstanding. People are afraid of what they don't fully understand and rather than changing their perspective, they turn their heads and snub anyone involved. A short story that grapples with this idea is "My Little Beauty" by Summer Russell. Nobody seems to understand the abusive relationship her female protagonist has gotten herself into. She has found ways to be complacent in her situation and might enjoy it to an extent. Abusive relationships are difficult to leave, and this protagonist has found a way to accept her predicament even though the readers cannot understand why the girl won't leave.

The most profound illustration of the theme of alienation is found on the back cover, another photograph by Andrew Young called "Paradox." It takes the eye a while to realize that beneath the burnt face and chest of the boy there is a universe. It reminds me that it takes a lot of digging to really understand someone's inner self. Also, it often takes force or violence to reveal the universe hiding within. The characters in the three stories mentioned are built upon layers and it is the reader's job to dig and pry to figure out what they hide under their normal dispositions.

Katy Garrison

P.S.

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# Jenna Hockema

## Trout

The mouth hung open like a giant cavern, its tiny glass eyes staring vacantly at the opposite wall, glaring at the diplomas and framed photos that dotted it. Perfectly pointed teeth lined up side by side in its mouth like little white triangles.

"Look at me."

The body was hard and cold, silver and shiny like a morgue tabletop, with two thin stripes of watery color. The green was at the top, speckled with a darker pigment of yellow. The red followed, just under the belly so you had to slide down in the armchair to see it, the pinkish rosy line stretching from the tail all the way to the throat.

Charlie's voice came out calm and fluid, like water, the syllables seemed to run out of his mouth, down his navy blue sport coat and crisp white button down, evaporating into the stillness of the room.

I had refused to go to class. At first I thought he would be angry with me and yell, so I just sat there with my hands holding my head, my fingers clamped so tightly around the edges of my ears so that my fingernails left little half moons of raw flesh on the outside of my neck. But he didn't, and he didn't give me detention or assign me lines either.

He smiled at me shyly, brushed his shaggy auburn hair out of his eyes, and started to talk to me about fishing, probably because he saw me

staring at his trout. His voice was calming to me, it was not the deep thundering metallic boom I heard over the speaker system at assembly in the chapel every morning, but a soft one, like warm butter, spoken quietly and thoughtfully, deep and reassuring, but with a lighthearted boyish lilt.

I could feel my muscles loosening, my rigid posture dissipating into a relaxed sprawl in the stuffed leather chair across from his desk. As I moved, the cushion deflated, causing a faint whooshing sound to fill the air. The frigid saltiness of

the Atlantic stung my bare feet as I envisioned myself walking along the shore of his summer home with him, fishing pole in hand, stumbling on the rocks that hid under the sand that rubbed the soles of my feet raw and cracking the tough skin like sandpaper.

The landscape became fuzzy before fading, the wind snapping dryly against my chapped face before being smothered back into the warm softness of the office. I dug my legs into the chair tightly, sinking in further, wanting to feel the wriggling stickiness of the trout in my hands as he caught it, to look into its eyes and have the power to give it freedom.

I wanted to feel the anguish of the slight solemn boy as he watched the trout flop to its death on the boat deck, its small lips moving soundlessly, its gills flapping wildly for air. The tears streamed down the boy's face and onto his neck as the fins on the tail ceased to make that wild scratching sound against the wood. His brothers whoop and holler, punching him on the arm and slapping him on the butt. The biggest catch of the summer, the best one they have seen on the Cape all year. They stop in mid-sentence and are shocked to see him crawling to the edge of the dock, gagging and retching with so much intensity that his back muscles stand out taught against his summer browned skin, the veins in his neck pulsing and thumping frantically as a steady stream of vomit erupts, landing in the ocean with a hollow flop.

He used the same towel that was used to gut the fish to wipe the tears and bitterness of the vomit from his face and mouth, the mess mopped clean with salt water except for the faint dry spatters of the insides of the trout on his face and pastel fishing shirt.

"Mr. Hawkins..." I paused. My voice sounded strange to me. Shaky, disoriented, and in a daze. My mouth felt dry and made it hard to swallow comfortably. There were things I wanted to tell him. I wanted to tell him I was sorry that I couldn't stand to be in my biology class where we were cutting open frogs and fish and rats. I felt the overwhelming urge to connect with him, and knowing that I never could gave me a feeling that I would recognize later as despair.

"Charlie. Call me that." He smiled, his mouth parting slightly to show a row of perfectly straight teeth, the skin around the edges of his eyes crinkling. I knew he wanted me to look at him but I didn't. I don't like looking people in the eye. My mother says it makes me look like a criminal, and she also

uses the word shift. I do not feel like a criminal and I do not want to hurt or kill anyone. I wonder when I will.

Charlie stood up with me and walked close enough so I could see the faint stubble on his chin, the thickness of his eyelashes. He pressed his body against mine, his arms enveloping me stiffly and he was so close his breath hit my neck when he exhaled, making my skin prickle. This startled me, because I don't like people being this close to me, and I didn't know what to do but stand there and try not to move. I stared at the trout and studied the markings again.

*Oncorhynchus mykiss*. Native to tributaries of the Pacific Ocean, Asia, and North America. Diet consists of smaller fish, insects, crayfish, and other crustaceans. Not endangered, and not to be confused with the Steel head or Ocean trout.

He pulled away, clapped me on the shoulder, and told me that it was okay, I didn't have to go to Biology tomorrow, that I could sit with him instead.

I could not stop thinking about the story and the fish all night. I thought of the hug, and of the way his muscles tightened and put pressure against me in a way that made me feel safe and made me sad when it stopped. The landscapes in my head dissolved and melted, and I saw nothing, thought nothing, and was filled with warmth

*His voice came out thin and brittle, the words falling out awkwardly as they hit the desk and booklet.*

in my belly, something spreading and tingling everywhere inside of me, my feet going numb, my legs twitching, a tiny moan drifting into the side of my pillow as my whole body went stiff, then pooled out like liquid and was still.

My boxers clung to my crotch and inner thigh, the warm stickiness of it feeling slightly comforting against the cold sweatiness that I was covered in. I lay still for a long time, listening to the deep panting of my own breathing, and trying my hardest to understand, dwelling drowsy calmness that paralyzed my body, and knowing that it was all I would ever feel.

I did not stay the next day. My hands shook as I sat slumped in the chair, my eyes tied to the floor. He put his hands on top of mine, and the discomfort and delight of the closeness made my pants fit tighter, the new friction of them against me make me squeeze his hand tighter. Charlie looked down at the other

hand resting on my lap and his face changed, his eyes narrowing and his cheeks turning red. Wordlessly, he withdrew a packet from his desk, letting go of my hand, pushing the light purple booklet across the desk towards me.

His voice came out thin and brittle, the words falling out awkwardly as they hit the desk and booklet. He told me that I could take a test outside in the waiting room, that his secretary would watch me, and when I was done with it I didn't ever have to take Biology again, that I could take college physics instead. He didn't ask me to look at him, and I'm sure he thought that I was shifty and a criminal and that I was trouble because of it.

I am not shifty and I am not a criminal and I wanted to take the test and be done with this Serious Business and never have to come back again, so I raised up my head and stared directly into his eyes. This surprised him in a way that made him forget to look at me funny and for eighteen seconds Charlie looked at me, and I noticed that his eyes are a deep green like mine, and I felt like how everyone in the world must feel.

But because I did not like it and because I was not, I looked away and turned to the trout, remembering every detail of its known existence, wishing it was closer so I could put my hand on its silvery silky scales, stroke its marble pupils, and try to bring the life back into him.



Sarah Dozier

Stamp



# Sarah Champion

## FLASH FICTION #1

4:30 on a Wednesday afternoon. "Worry-free-Wednesday."

Oh shit I think I missed my turn. Oh wait, Becca is just bogarting again. It's fine it's fine. The sky looks really gray today. Gray today gray today gray today. I'm hungry, where is that Chex Mix. Oh my god I love Chex Mix.

"I'm hungry." Becca looks at me as if I am miles away. Then she jumps up so fast I thought she was flying. I bet she was flying. If anyone could fly, it'd be Becca. I went skydiving once. That was so awesome.

It's getting hard to see the TV. Oh man that's hilarious. I love "That 70's Show." Becca comes back from the kitchen and hands me a plastic bag. I take a look and it looks like dried up sunflowers, or maybe dried up roses, all smushed together. I bet they're from one of those health shops. Becca is into all that health nut shit. God I'm starving. These taste pretty sick. But man I'm starving.

After I finished I tossed the empty baggy on the table.

"Holy shit! You ate all of em!!!"

"Yeah man, I was starving."

As we round the corner I am mesmerized at how awesome it is that they invented cars that transform into hovercrafts. Becca is driving on water. Hovering on water. That's so cool that her dad bought her a hovercraft. We see a garden gnome playing on the side of the road with a soccer ball, so we pick him up and take him on our trip.

Yellow matter custard, dripping from a dead dog's eye.

We finally got to the grocery store. I think it took us all night. The garden gnome won't stop crying, and he's starting to smell. Nonetheless we invite him into the grocery store with us. He



was really happy in the toy aisle so we told him we'd be back in a bit and left him there while we went and got some beer.

On our way back from Germany we found the garden gnome playing with some GI Joe's in Toys R' Us. We ask him if he wants to go home. I guess he did because he looked really happy when he got in the car with us.

Home. Man am I exhausted. I hope I don't miss class tomorrow.

Oh my god my brain is thinking so fast. So fast so fast so fast.

My bed looks so big. It's like the blob at camp. I run and jump on it.

I think I've been jumping all night.

Experts, textperts, choking smokers, don't you think the joker laughs at youuuu.

I wake up with a headache and feeling dizzy

.  
Who the hell is crying? What the hell time is it?! I walk out to the living room. WHAT THE FUCK! Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god. "Becca! BECCA!!! REFUCKINGBECCA there's a there's a kid, there's a kid in our living room!!!!"

"Shut up, you're not funny, my head hurts, and turn off the TV."

I run drag Rebecca out of bed into the living room... a small blonde boy, with tears in his eyes, green overalls and a blue shirt, holds up an army figure and walks toward us... wanting a hug.

# Jeramey Kraatz

## The Strangest Heroes of All

*And now, prepare yourself for one of the most exciting reading experiences of your life! For you are about to enter the fascinating, unpredictable world of...The X-Men! - X-Men Issue #1*

I wish I had superpowers.

I wouldn't even be picky about which powers I had. Naturally, there are those attributes that I would value above others; given the choice between telepathy and super strength, I would choose the ability to read minds, hands down. But I'd settle for less, as it is often the case in comic books that it is not so much what you do but the fact that you can do it at all. The type of superpowers I would like to have is a subject that I have spent an alarming amount of time pondering. Flight or teleportation? Lasers or a healing factor? I have sat for hours discussing the logistics, the capabilities, the strengths, and the limitations of different abilities with my fellow superhero wannabes, creating fantastic illusions in my

mind of banding together to fight in the name of truth and justice. My sense of morality and the lines separating right from

*My morals wore capes; my sense of humanity wore spandex.*

wrong weren't learned for me in church or classroom, but rather they were drawn in inky outlines on the pages of comics and animated every Saturday morning on Fox Kids while I watched the Marvel Power Hour. My morals wore capes; my sense of humanity wore spandex. I would hear the synthesizer theme of the X-Men cartoon series from the kitchen and scramble, cereal in hand, to the TV, anxious to see what adventures lay ahead for my heroes, for my friends.

Decades before I caught sight of my role models on television, the first issue of the X-Men comic book series was released in September of 1963, the brainchild of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, two of Marvel Comics' most prolific creators. Together, Lee and Kirby created superheroes like Iron Man and the Fantastic Four who were not the pristine and squeaky-clean men and women in tights that the golden age of comic books had made popular. Their heroes were flawed, were faced with

issues like alcoholism and marital problems, and, as odd as it sounds, more human than comic book characters in the past. The X-Men were a team of teenage mutants, those blessed and cursed with special powers thanks to a naturally occurring evolutionary gene that set them apart from the rest of humanity. They banded together in a school under the guidance of their teacher, Professor Charles Xavier, whose vision was to create a world where mutants and humans could live together in peace. The idea of coexisting in harmony was the dream that would guide the X-Men over the next 40 years; the hope that one day they could live without fear of being persecuted for their differences.

The original five X-Men were not a testament to diversity. They were all white, upper-middle class teenagers with modest dress and conservative thought. It wasn't until the special issue "Giant Sized X-Men" #1 in 1975, created and written by Chris Claremont, that the X-Men series began to take on a more serious, worldly voice. The issue introduced five new mutants, including Storm, one of the first black superheroes, and Wolverine, the breakout character that would grow to be an icon for Marvel Comics. There was little expectance for Claremont's X-Men to be successful, since the series was operating under a looming threat of cancellation, but the issue was an overwhelming success. Claremont was put in control of writing for Marvel's mutants, and over the next decade turned it into one of the centerpieces of comic book culture. His stories were deeper, instilling the characters with raw, emotional personalities and raising bold, often controversial ideas about the nature of humanity and what exactly it meant to be a "hero." The success of Marvel's mutants resulted in countless spin-off comics, video games, movies, and, of course, a highly successful animated series.

The first issue of X-Men I read was in July of 1993, issue #22 of the second series (the original comic had been officially re-titled "Uncanny X-Men" in February of 1981). At that time, Wal-Mart carried a few comic book lines in the aisle next to the action figures in an effort to lure seven year olds, like myself, into begging their parents for 4 inch plastic molds of masked heroes and villains. It was my mother's idea to buy me the comic book, as I think she was wary of the R.L Stine Fear Street novels

*I was a stereotypical comic book geek, and I relished every aspect of the label.*

I had taken to reading at the time. Seeking a healthier subject than black magic and serial killers, my mom figured that comics represented a safer, more conventional source of literature for little boys.

Jumping into the middle of a comic book series is like beginning to watch a television show that has been running for decades with the same cast characters. The plots were confusing, the allusions referred to obscure issues originally published in the '70s, and the characters carried with them histories and personalities built over countless story arcs concerning love and death and the blurring lines of right and wrong. The family trees of the characters were extensive and overlapping, forests of past relationships and split personalities and alternate universes and timelines that meant that nothing was ever black and white or concrete. I continued reading, even though I didn't really know what was going on half of the time, because from page one I wanted to be a mutant, to be an X-Man. Over the next few years, I would collect not only X-Men comic books, but toys, bed sheets, bookmarks, novellas, cards, and encyclopedia's concerned specifically with characters from the X-Universe. By the age of 12, I could recite to anyone who asked the origin, powers, and a biographical sketch of the characters I had grown to love. I was a stereotypical comic book geek, and I relished every aspect of the label.

In my youth, the thing that drew me to the X-Men was the sense of family that I felt with them. I knew these people, was attuned to their hopes and fears. In my mind, I saw myself with them, hanging out at Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, training and honing in on the finer parts of our superpowers. I knew how I would interact with each individual team member, who would take me in as a mentor and who I would have a rocky relationship with until I inevitably wound up saving their life in the midst of battle. When I read conventional literature, I would always feel a little cheated as I closed the book, knowing that the story was over and that I would never know anything new about the characters or where their life took them after the final period was typed. But the X-Men promised to appear month after month with new adventures. I knew that even if a character I loved died, as many have throughout the series, that in true comic book form, they would come back to life 20 issues later, explaining that it was not them that was killed, but rather a clone from an alternate reality that had taken over his or her life as part of some convoluted, diabolical plot.

I was aware of the general immortality of comic book characters, but that did not stop me from mourning the loss of Professor Xavier in X-Men #41. As a 10 year old, I threw myself onto the couch of my living room, and wept for hours when Xavier's time-traveling son mistakenly impaled him with a telekinetic sword. I begged my parents to allow me to fly to New York for the mock funeral Marvel was throwing in his honor (a fantastic publicity stunt) and was crushed to find that they refused. I buried myself in my pillow, wailing about the death of his dream. Professor X was the one constant, infallible voice of reason throughout the forty years of the series, so what were the X-Men to do without him? And what was I to do? He was the mentor of the X-Men, their father figure, and therefore he had been mine too.

I was on the cusp of puberty, about to enter the sixth grade when the Marvel universe trembled with the repercussions of Xavier's death. I knew he would be returning at the end of the storyline, in all actuality a mere five

*When puberty hit, my budding sexuality led me astray; pulling me in a direction I didn't fully comprehend.*

months later, but I made a conscious decision that this would be a good time to put away childish things and abandon my fictional family (after seeing my reaction to a fictional character's death, my parents also felt that maybe it was a good idea to take a break from the Marvel Universe). I stopped buying comic books on a regular basis, picking them up a few times a year to see what my friends were doing, never really forgetting about them completely. I would buy the odd action figure that caught my eye as I roamed the toy aisle, and when I got a credit card at 18 and discovered the wonders of eBay, I bought a bootleg DVD set of the entire animated series; all 76 episodes. In my room, I kept the poster of Gambit, my favorite X-Man, hanging above my bed. Tattered and beginning to fade, the print hangs above my sleeping head to this day, watching over me, a symbol of the dreams of my youth, the elaborate scenarios of wonder that I would place myself in, wishing that I was born into their world.

*Have you tried not being a mutant? - Iceman's mother, X2*

The themes presented within the pages of the X-Men comics were something that I did not give much thought to in my youth. To me it was simple; most humans didn't like mutants, but the X-Men were bigger than that and fought against the evil-doers that sought to destroy humanity. It wasn't until I was a freshman in college, as I retreated to my hometown for the winter break, that these underlying messages really began to surface for me and present themselves for what they really were. I was driving myself crazy in Odessa during the break, the longest I had been back in my hometown since I moved 300 miles away for school, and I was struck with a sense of ennui and restlessness that I was not familiar with. While returning our faux Christmas tree to the attic sometime in January, I spied a familiar green Rubbermaid storage bin in the corner. I made my way to it, stepping carefully on the floor beams as to not end up falling through the ceiling and into the dining room, and blew the dust from the top of box in order to read what I already knew was written on the duct tape that crowned the bin: "Jer's Comics." A smile crept across my face, and for a moment I was again 10 years old. I lugged the box down the attic stairs, overjoyed at the prospect of reading and reminiscing for an afternoon. I was in an awkward stage of my life, unsure of my identity, not certain of where I considered my home, and what I really needed was a sense of familiarity, to be told that I was safe.

That winter I was 19, and my foundations were slowly starting to fall down around me. As a teenager growing up in West Texas, I, along with every other adolescent, wanted nothing more than to fit in, trying to conform to the conservative, moral individual that the region loves to raise. But that had always been a problem with me, no matter how many friends I had or how popular I was with my peers. When puberty hit, my budding sexuality led me astray, pulling me in a direction I didn't fully comprehend. I watched as my friends began to couple off in the naïve relationships everyone goes through in their early teens and realized that the person that really captured my affection was my best friend Ben. I told myself that he was just my good friend, that I was confusing the sense of brotherhood I had with him in my head. This was a one time thing, a phase, and like all things it would pass. I learned to repress such thoughts during the day, indulging them only in those fleeting moments before sleep, and even then unable to wake from lurid dreams without a heavy sense of guilt. I grew older and those feelings didn't

change; if anything, they became more unavoidable, Ben giving way to Adriel whom I forgot about when I met Blake; all friends who were unaware of the turmoil they were causing within me. Even in the scarce moments that I would feel at peace with these feelings, in the back of my mind I still clung to the idea that one morning I would wake up and be normal, waiting for the day that my thoughts would change.

I found that Northstar, an important player in the Marvel universe, revealed his homosexuality in March of 1992 and went on to become a fervent supporter of gay and mutant rights.

My high school years represented a rigorous inner-conflict. I argued with myself, struggled with my feelings as I strove to live up to the person I thought I was supposed to be. I dated girls, fooled around with them, told them that I loved them and broke their hearts after a few weeks. And I did love them, as I love my sister and my family, trying desperately to amplify that connection into something more. I was incapable of keeping these relationships for any substantial length of time, because from the onset I was counting down the days until they would be over, dreaming up reasons I would have for ending them. My moves were all calculated in public, everything I said or did was screened in advance, all in the name of creating a version of me that I thought others would deem acceptable. But when you hate who you are, you can only be miserable trying to be someone else. If I tried hard enough, I could change. And that's how I felt when I left for college: I was going to a new place, and I could create the person that I wanted to be, despite how I really felt.

It wasn't long after I moved away that I snapped, exhausted from years of trying to be someone else (a few of my friends now refer to this period of time as "that November that Jeramey went crazy and we couldn't figure out why"). I slowly began to accept the fact that I was gay, an event that coincided with my first introduction to final exams and my return to Odessa, a place that had always made me feel out of place. I was silently going out of my mind by the time I found the old box of comics. My room in Odessa was the draftiest in the house, and I sat in the middle of my floor (my favorite spot to read) wrapped in a blanket featuring cartoon astronauts and aliens as I sorted



through the stack of comics and graphic novels and stories that had been transposed into book-form for casual readers under the age of 12.

I sat in that spot for hours, my back aching, pouring over stories I knew by heart and reintroducing myself to friends I had long since neglected. I was accustomed to putting myself into the action of the stories, fighting alongside the X-Men to save innocent bystanders or a city or the world. But it wasn't the action that jumped out at me this time, but rather the meaning behind it. The subtext of the material allowed me to draw new parallels, connections that were more realistic and applicable, especially at that point in my life. Mutants became aware of their powers in their early teens, a gift of puberty that they were not expecting. There were those few who were excited about their gifts, at the prospect of power and uniqueness, but for the most part the discovery that you were a mutant resulted in self-hatred and denial. These teenagers were hiding what they viewed as flaws, would conceal their true identities from their friends and family in a desperate attempt to seem normal. Bobby Drake had the power to freeze the moisture in the air and turn into an ice-form. A mob broke into his home and beat him, all while I was trying to keep my eyes off anyone with XY chromosomes. Warren Worthington III, Angel, possessed giant white wings protruding from his back which he kept folded and belted to his torso so he could wear normal clothes over them. Meanwhile, I was trying to think of legitimate answers to the question "Have you met any nice girls at school?"

As I read on, the analytical skills I had worked at mastering in my English classes took hold, and I began to see the X-Men series for what it had transformed into during the mid 70's: a cry for social equality. I read everything in my box, but I wasn't satisfied. I blew a large portion of my Christmas money at the local comic book shop buying back-issues and hardbound collections of some of the most famous X-Stories. Their fight had always been my fight as well, but now on an entirely new level. Countless instances throughout the history of the X-Men can be viewed as criticism concerning race, gender, and anyone considered to be a minority, but I focused on what was closer to me at the time, what I could really relate to.

*The X-Men are hated, feared and despised collectively by humanity for no other reason than that they are mutants. So what we have here, intended or not, is a book that is about racism, bigotry and prejudice.*

- Chris Claremont, 1982

By the following summer, the summer of 2005, I was reading the two main X-Titles every month, and I was dating a boy (the first male I had ever had a relationship with) named John who lived in Midland, Odessa's sister city 15 miles to the east. Midland was home to the only comic book store that had survived in West Texas, and was little more than a cramped room scarcely larger than a garage. It was also eternally hot. The owner of the store would always try and sell me cell phone service when I went inside, so I avoided the nuisance by making John pick up my comics every other Wednesday. Late at night when I couldn't sleep, I read over online databases that warehoused thousands of facts or summarized comic book issues, studying the history and continuity of the X-Men. I found that Northstar, an important player in the Marvel Universe, revealed his homosexuality in March of 1992 and went on to become a fervent supporter of gay and mutant rights. Mutant hate crimes in comics seemed to coincide with major stories of gay bashings and racial bigotry. Political movements such as the "Genetic Purity Act" which made it illegal for mutants or those who were suspected of being capable of producing mutant children to reproduce

seemed appalling but  
*Murders broke out across* outlandish until compared  
*the country, the killing* to the actual political  
*of mutants in the name* bans keeping gays from  
*of God.* marrying. I discovered  
that in 1992 the Legacy  
Virus was introduced

to the X-Men series, a disease that devastated the mutant population. The disease seemed to only afflict those with the mythical X-Gene, but was later found to affect humans as well; a clear reference to the AIDS epidemic and its connotation as a "homosexual disease" during the '80s.

When the Legacy Virus broke out, it was heralded by many humans as a plague sent by God to wipe out sinners: mutants and their supporters. This was an idea I was all too familiar with having grown up where there was a church, or two, on every corner. One stereotype of West Texans is that they are a God-fearing, conservative bunch, a population more concerned with whether or not the mayor is in church on Sunday than what he is going to do about gang violence on the south side of town. For many people, this label rings true in Odessa. My family raised me in the Baptist church. We had a good, Southern preacher who spoke passionately, sweat pouring from

his brow as he gulped at the water glass at the podium before raising his hands to the sky and calling for a collective amen. Nightcrawler, a teleporting X-Man, has the smell of brimstone about him whenever he uses his powers, but I first learned of brimstone in reference to God's wrath during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. I was raised in a church that focused on the damning power of Sin, the countless things I was doing that made me an abomination and disappointment to God. I remember wanting to crawl away from the sanctuary when I was 15 and Brother Earnest, our faithful preacher, was appalled by the introduction of any number of gay characters into the mass media. He damned them, and any who found their presence entertaining. My family sat stoic. My father agreed wholeheartedly. As a 20 year old, I would sit at the dinner table as he, unaware of the finer points of my personal life, explained to a friend of mine that if any member of his family had turned out to be gay, he would have stripped them of the Kraatz name; would cut them off financially and emotionally. A closet liberal, my mother was apathetic, as she was just biding her time until the sermon was over and we could all return home and lounge around for the afternoon. My sister doodled on the program.

The X-Men have faced some of the same religious struggles, fighting to find redemption in a sect whose "come one, come all" policy has shifting boundaries. In *God Loves, Man Kills*, a graphic novel published in 1982, the reader is introduced to one of the most disturbing villains in the X-Men's history: the Reverend William Stryker. An articulate televangelist, Stryker's religious crusade against mutants began as the same simple label of sin I had heard many times in my youth, but grew into something more. Before long, coliseums full of people were gathered, hanging on his every whim. Murders broke out across the country, the killing of mutants in the name of God. Mutants were a curse, a blight on the land, and the righteous would not inherit the kingdom of heaven until the sinners were wiped out. He was a messenger of the Lord, and his message was one that played to one of the most common traits of humanity, the fear of the unknown, of change and the alien. Stryker and his "Purifiers" murdered many mutants, regardless of their age or gender, before being stopped by the X-Men, as one could expect. But his ideas, his piercing resolve against those born differently jumps out at me from time to time as I watch the news. Reflections of his ideas echo in the preaching of religious fanatics throughout the world, but don't watered-down versions

of his notions trickle down into our everyday society as well?  
And if this is true, where are the X-Men when we need them?

*"Are arbitrary labels more important than the way we live our lives, what we're supposed to be more important than what we actually are?" - Cyclops, God Loves, Man Kills*

By the spring of 2006, I was once again a proverbial encyclopedia of X-Knowledge, buying around 5 comic books a week and having an impeccable ability to recall the most trivial of facts from the course of X-Men history. When my sophomore year roommate was bored, he would ask me simple questions

I hear stories of friends cut out like "Does Cyclops have a brother?" of the lives of their families and an hour later and children disowned by I would still be in their parents because of the middle of my answer. I continued the way they were born... to look for the messages of equality and questions raised

by Marvel comics; accustomed to the bouts of self-centeredness, I have always appreciated things that seemingly spoke directly to me. In "Astonishing X-Men #1," released in the summer of 2004, it was revealed that a cure had been developed for the mutant gene. Thousands of mutants jumped at the chance to become normal, to finally blend in with the status quo. Even some of the X-Men that I so trusted asked themselves if they'd be happier living a life that seemed so temptingly easier. I was appalled by those weak enough to submit to other people's ideas of normalcy, was angered that someone would give away what I had always so desperately longed for. I questioned myself as well. I was genetically determined to stand somewhat outside of the perceived norms presented in the world I was born into, but if the choice were mine, would I keep it that way? I like to think that I would, that I am proud of who I am, that I am happy with myself, and that I have the integrity to not change myself to fit into a society rather than rise up and promote change in the society itself. But then again, I state that knowing that there is probably no chance that I will ever be faced with that decision.

The third X-Men movie, X3, centers on the issue of the mutant cure. It features Magneto, the first and most dangerous of the X-Men's foes, standing before a crowd of mutants

proclaiming, "They want to cure us? I say we are the cure." From the first issue in 1963, Magneto has acted as a foil to Xavier's vision of a peaceful future, certain that humans will never accept mutants into society and therefore should be destroyed. He preaches that they, the humans, will never really accept mutants, that every step toward equality spurs those who would have them destroyed. I often find myself tempted by Magneto's eloquent monologues and cries for mutants to rise up against the oppressive powers. In the X-Men movies, Magneto is appropriately played by Sir Ian McKellen, a gay actor and public supporter of homosexual rights, first drawn to the X-Men movies because of their allusions to discrimination based on race and sexual orientation. In X2, a teenage Iceman comes out to his family, for the first time explaining to them that he is a mutant. The director of the film and McKellen worked to make this mirror what it is like for gay teens to come out to their parents, a way to present the situation to an audience of predominately straight, red blooded American males who undoubtedly find themselves on Iceman's side, not realizing the underlying implications of the scene. This is the sort of cleverness that breeds hope within a culture so seemingly on the cusp of gaining the simple right to marry. If society can support and love a population of mutants on screen, shouldn't they be just as accepting in real life? But every time this question is raised in my mind, I can't help but think of all of the movies I have seen and all of the books I have read in which I find myself siding with the bad guys, if only for the sake of knowing that after the final frames roll or that last period is placed, the consequences are not ones that I will have to deal with in the real world.

I wish I had superpowers.

But I don't. And while I have always tried to believe whole-heartedly in Professor Xavier's dream of a harmonious existence between humans and mutants, there are those sinking occasions, fleeting moments of uncertainty that I find myself wondering if Magneto is right. I hear stories of friends cut out of the lives of their families and children disowned by their parents because of the way they were born, and I wonder what they will do without Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters to run to. I learn of murders and beatings and inhuman oppression, and I search the sky for someone in tights or a cape. I turn off the TV or put down the newspaper and sit idly by straining to hear a synthesizer in the distance heralding the arrival of

my costumed friends who have come to promote equality and peace. But the X-Men are not coming, and I don't know that I can do their job for them. For more than a decade I have dreamed of rising up with my fellow mutants and fighting in the name of justice and freedom, and now that I finally find myself in that position, I can't help thinking that the world would be much easier to change if I had metal claws or the power to control the weather.

# Diana Dunigan

## *unbelievable*

We are unstable,  
Like chemicals reacting,  
Every atom  
Strongly attracting.

We are unreliable,  
Like electrified lightning.  
With every touch,  
I feel our love heightening.

We are uncertain,  
Like colors in the sky.  
When we are together,  
I feel our bonds tie.

We are undone,  
Like chains on the ground.  
Our love is full of passion,  
Enough to astound.





# Jeremy Pessoa

## Candide: Chapter 1

In Backlot C, Studio 36 of Warner Bros. Studios dwelled a young man named Candide, who was of the kindest and most tender disposition. Though himself uncertain of his lineage, the old studio maintenance men believed Candide to be the son of Sam Warner's sister by a reputable and upstanding Burbank crack dealer, whom she refused to marry on account of his agnostic secular beliefs and habitual knuckle-cracking.

Sam Warner was one of the most powerful tycoons in Hollywood, for he ruled several fake towns and cities within his grand studio. The elaborate false buildings that lined the fake streets of Warner's replica cities were generally erected

*She was greatly admired for her ability to push aside all inhibitions and eat for the love and pure sport of it.*

in the most prudently economical fashion; with three walls and a roof, the fourth walls being somehow never accounted for. The few buildings that did feature a fourth wall were often used to store Warner's immeasurable wealth of lighting and production equipment. Candide couldn't remember ever seeing a cloudy day at Warner Studios, for on the east side of Backlot C was raised an enormous drywall upon which was painted the most magnificent clear, blue sky he'd ever seen.

Sam Warner's wife was known for having an unbridled love affair with all things edible and for destroying the calibration of many a bathroom scale. She was greatly admired for her ability to push aside all inhibitions and eat for the love and pure sport of it. Nevertheless, she was a very chaste woman, sleeping only with A-list actors whose films grossed more than a \$100 million. Cunegonde, her daughter, was bright, fleshy, sought-after, and seventeen-years-old. Dustin Hoffman was the wise old sage of Backlot C, and young Candide took all his lessons to heart, meditating on them day and night.

Hoffman was known for teaching a ridiculously sensible theory of determinism-optimism. He nobly proved that there can't possibly be a consequence exclusive of a reason and that in the best of all possible worlds Warner's studio was the best

of all studios and his wife the best of all wives. It's painfully obvious, said Hoffman that things couldn't be any other way, because since everything is made to meet a purpose, everything inevitably meets the utmost purpose. For instance: ears were designed to support the Bluetooth headset, for this reason we have Bluetooth headsets. Feet, as you can see, were meant to be protected and warmed, and so we have Ugg boots. Trees were made to be carved and fashioned to build studios with; hence Warner has an excellent studio, for the biggest tycoon in Hollywood should have the best studio; and since the coca plant was made to be snorted, we sniff lines all year round. Therefore, anyone who says everything is well is speaking foolishness; he should say everything is for the best.

Candide understood this well; for he found himself strongly attracted to Cunegonde's beauty, though he never worked up the nerve to tell her. He determined that next to being born Sam Warner, was the pleasure of being Cunegonde; the next seeing her everyday, and the last learning from Dustin Hoffman, the supreme thinker in Hollywood and accordingly the whole universe.

Once, when Cunegonde was walking through Studio 21 on the set of *Finding Neverland*, she caught glance of Dustin Hoffman in Wendy's bed, honoring Kate Winslet with a lesson in experimental physics that she wouldn't soon forget. Cunegonde, possessing an insatiable curiosity for new knowledge, observed with bated breath as the experiments were vigorously repeated; she saw Hoffman's adequate motivation, studied both reason and consequence, and returned to Studio 36 aching for knowledge and wishing she might be the adequate motivation of Candide, and vice versa. Upon her return home, Cunegonde met Candide and her face flushed; Candide's flushed too. While she greeted him in a shy and hesitant manner, Candide suffered the sad misfortune of opening his mouth, for nothing but idiocy came forth from it. The following day, as everyone dispersed from a production meeting concerning Finding Neverland, Cunegonde and Candide discovered themselves very alone; Cunegonde dropped her cell-phone, Candide picked it up; she took his hand rather naively, he kissed her hand rather naively with significant exuberance and passion; their lips locked, their eyes were opened, their knees shook and quivered, their hands explored each other's bodies. Sam Warner returning for a fountain pen he had forgotten, observing the couple's reason and consequence, proceeded to drive Candide from his

studio with a swift kick in the ass. Cunegonde fainted; when she came to, her mother bitch-slapped her; and everything was bewilderment in the most splendid and wonderful of all possible studios.

# Emily Stanislaw

## Two True Voice Complications

My baby will be black  
And I will feed him sun so he will be blacker

Cotton row curls of endless smile  
Cooing on my back, like a blue jay  
Not black like a masquerade  
But black like a sunbeam

"Unholy bond, raising monkeys with your front teeth  
Dismiss your soul, it is already damned"

We will be criticized  
We will be condemned  
for loving each other

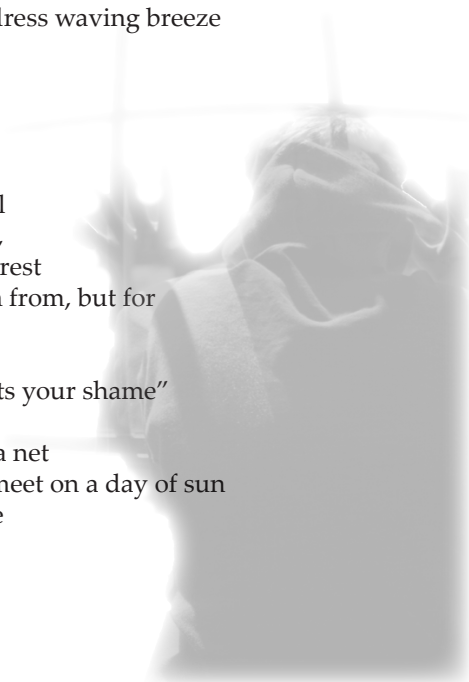
In his dreams, he is me  
A girl in bluebonnet dress waving breeze

He calls to me  
In my dreams  
I am him

Tarnished brown steel  
transcending, pulling,  
running naked in a forest  
my baby does not run from, but for

"Music of a demon,  
how you dance depicts your shame"

Caught butterflies in a net  
We breathe until we meet on a day of sun  
Then, we begin to live



# Summer Russell

## My Little Beauty

That odd growl sinks in as you crush me close. A wince approaches, and then I relax.

I've learned that it goes easier when I relax—like a rabbit caught up in the jaws of a wolf. I am not so fragile as these rare moments approaching tenderness. Never complain. I've learned that, too.

An hour passes. You sleep fitfully, and I lie on my side to watch you. Rabbit's heart thrumming away in my ears. For a time, long ago, I had starved for the sharp cries and rough caresses, the angry badge of your affection in dark streaks along my neck. They were hard-won victories in a strange new game. I wonder now what prize I had expected.

Rising, I creep over shadowed piles of discarded clothing and pass through a tremble of moonlight on the bedroom floor. Your cavernous breathing stalks me down the hall, fading only with the rattle of the faltering kitchen lamp. In the tepid gloom, I slake my throat's rawness and stare at a vase adorning the countertop.

Last year's Valentine has dropped its bourbon petals on the yellowed linoleum; that single ticket of yours to one last chance. I swore that by the time it died, my decision would be made. Now the leaves are all but skeletons that whisper behind my back as I return to bed and you.

You are half-wild, even while you sleep. I remember falling for the glint in your teeth, the murderous power in your arms. The hell-hot glance that

burned me down to nothing. I knew nothing of gentling a wild creature, but I thought my love would be what tamed you. In my lunatic heart each embrace became a victory, until the urge to kill and consume had mostly left you.

But a wild thing forgets, I tell myself, and cannot be faulted. The wolf leaves the rabbit in a corner now and then—wide-eyed, shaking, mostly dead—not knowing how he hurts what

he only meant to play with for a while. The rabbit that wants to survive just learns to run faster, or hide better. Or she learns to go limp and play dead until the wolf lets go.

That's how I get by, and most nights that's okay. I have a few well-meaning friends who tell me there's more to be afraid of than bruises and scratches with a guy like you. They say I should get out before I wind up in the emergency room.

But I stay, because somehow I need you, half-wild as you are. Another night will come and find me waiting in a tremble of silver. A snarling black shadow will loom in the doorway and bound across the room. I will see your eyes, yellow as the flash of the full moon and barely human, and hope not to smell blood on your breath. And I will think:

They have no idea.



# Eric Fisher Stone

*In Special Ed: 1998-2001*

That egg-white room  
Was brimming with youths

Mad as jackals,  
Angry as birds in boxes.  
And howling like hyenas,  
The boys declared war on pillars,  
Buildings, mountains-  
Anything taller than themselves,  
They vowed to break. One boy  
Smoked a blunt in class  
And let the gray wisps from its embers  
Slowly finger the air.  
Another sliced his arm with a shard of glass  
Until his defiant limb soaked red.  
Still another orated Nietzschean manifestos  
And declared himself the pinnacle of self-mastery.  
They became my friends  
In the time of rage when we were a pack of wolves  
Wailing from our throats with hatred at that world  
Which splayed us from our mothers' love

By making us monsters to be discarded  
In special education classes.  
In our battle against God,  
One of us might have said like King Henry, "We few, we happy few,  
We band of brothers, this life is our feast of Crispian:  
We will die in arms."



# Andrew Young

## Caesura

I could tell where we were going just by the way he slung me over his shoulder. The bow was loose in my case and it kept chipping my precious finish, repetitiously bouncing off my body. He didn't care enough to place it next to me more carefully the way the others did. He didn't take care of me.

When we arrived for our last recital I could hear the others starting to pull the bows across their partners. The sound was intoxicating, the warm, individual notes blending together in a cacophony of mismatched music. I could feel the anticipation, the way the notes would shiver through my strings, the tension pulling me together. I had not anticipated today being the last time we would play together.

I remember the first day we met. He was shy, uncertain about how he could perform. Who was it that suggested he use me for the rest of his time in high school? I don't remember. It must have been somebody important, somebody who really knew what they were talking about because we were perfect for each other. He was young and impressionable, I was old and experienced. I knew my way around the bush, where he should place his fingers, how fast or slow he should pull the bow,

all to the advancement of my own experience. I could feel the music come out of my skin, vibrating inside of me, shifting from my neck to my body, exploding out of my grain. It was an experience I could seldom tap when being played by him. I tried to him, helping as much as I could, but he never listened.

I felt the light hit my finish as he yanked my case open. We began our practice as usual. It seemed to go very well, at least with him playing as he usually did. I loved the slow build-up in the beginning, the melody slowly turning over deep inside of me. I loved the way the notes reached their peak, picking up speed as if to ward off that somber tone, only to suggest the finale where the battle was supposed to be won. He always played it fine until the very end when I could feel the notes trip

up inside of me, stumbling out of my body only to die as quickly as they met the air. He couldn't pull the bow fast enough, he thought it was his fingers, but I knew that it was that damned bow. He never truly won the piece over. Someone knocked on the door, it was time.

When we got up on stage, the bow wasn't tightened but the piano had already started playing. He should have stopped to tighten it. The first note started inaudibly low, no one in the audience could sense it, but I knew it was coming. It ran down my neck, struggling through the dense wood of the finger board. I could feel it grow in punctuation as it grew nearer to my belly, but once it was inside of me I knew we had trouble. It came out as a dissonant squelch--too much rosin. I had seen that coming from the start. It was a dance, play it like a dance! I felt as though I was going to explode, but my body lay stiff in his hands, unable to reproduce such an emotion. The notes stumbled out of my body becoming short and stiff as the phrase continued into the second half of the piece. He began to rush into the crescendos, his nervousness taking over. The piece picked up into a kind of jog, the dreadful bow squeaking as he pulled it across my strings. I could feel the hair on the bow chaff as the notes struggled to pick themselves up, their tone dying before they were able to reach the audience. We began to pick up speed. We were approaching the end of the piece; we could still pull it off.

I braced myself for the finale. I could feel his hands tense on my neck, gripping the strings much too hard. The piano began to pick up speed, but he was going too fast and the pianist was struggling just to keep up. We were no longer working together, he and I. The notes began to stumble, tripping over each other as they broke free from my sound holes. We were approaching the last few bars very fast. I listened for the piano, but it had stopped all together. The music was pouring out of my body, ripping apart the grain in my wood. Instead of the beautiful timbre that each note should have carried, the music was raspy and harsh, as painful for the audience as it was for me. The last three notes, standing apart from each other with their triumphant pauses, were jammed together, forced to share the same final moment in time when everything fell apart. I felt a lurch as the bow tripped over my finger board, ending the piece with a giant rip between the melodies that had preceded the moment and the exhausted silence that followed the performance: our final caesura, our break in the music.

# Kelli Trapnell

## For Porter

Strange  
how death  
if it is not yours  
to bear  
is turned into  
the latest  
gossip, which we'd  
rather it had been  
in the first place.  
An exciting adventure,  
not a departure.



a c k n o w l e d g e m e n t s

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There is only one way left to escape the alienation  
of present day society: to retreat ahead of it.

~ Roland Barthes

