

# ***Journal of Ordinary Thought*** **LOST IN DARKNESS** **Spring 2002**

*JOT* Writers on Home, Housing, and Homelessness

With transcript excerpts from the Lakefront SRO Oral History Project

Cover art, "Woman at the Bridge," by [Tony Fitzpatrick](#).

Photography by [John Brooks](#).

Introduction by Laura Washington.

The following are a few of the pieces that were featured on WBEZ's "848."



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## INTRODUCTION

"Lost in Darkness" speaks to the voices never heard, the stories never told. The voices of those with no guarantee of hearth and home.

Books on housing usually don't make the best-seller lists. Housing isn't "sexy," as the marketing mavens might say. You won't hear these stories in the late-night monologues of Letterman or Leno.

But many of us are just a couple of paychecks away from the street. Recent studies have confirmed it: Twenty-first Century Chicago faces an alarming crisis—a severe shortage of affordable housing.

Why has the worthy goal of providing decent housing for all been so elusive? It's not for lack of trying. Over the last half-century, the ideas and energy of our policymakers, researchers and activists have vanquished many enemies: legalized segregation, restrictive covenants, block busting, real estate redlining. And they have created community-friendly efforts like FHA and Fannie Mae.

But it seems we're losing ground. New bugaboos have emerged: predatory lenders, payday loans, gentrification, insurance redlining, and an unprecedented but under-funded plan to transform public housing in Chicago, to name a few. But we don't talk to the people who have run out of paychecks. The poor, people of color, immigrants, who live in crisis every day. The so-called experts, the officials and the media, rarely seek their counsel. If they did, they would hear from the "Section 8 mother" looking for the landlord who will take not just her precious dollars, but also her priceless children, and give her more than just four walls in return. Like security. Some respect.

No one asks the homeless—the human beings who shuffle, invisible, through half-lives of bus shelters, viaducts and abandoned basements. Even their most meager wants—a hot cup of coffee, or a night of unbroken sleep—fall on deaf ears.

Their voices had been "Lost in Darkness." But now they are found, and they are in these pages:

From the "projects," speaks Pat Guy's "Merry," a Southern expatriate with a 6th grade education:

"Married an alcoholic  
And  
She stayed  
Moved into the projects  
And  
She stayed  
Had four babies there  
And she stayed

"Been on the fifth floor  
Since '68  
One of her babies died in her arms"

The two little girls in Virdajean Towns-Collins' poignant "Lateral Moves" who secretly shuttle, hand-in-hand, with mother, from tenement to tenement, always just one step ahead of a raging and abusive father:

"Mother would pack quicker than a cat can wink his eye, and that's exactly what she did the next time he left the house. Her method of 'packing' was to spread out a cover on the floor, and grab whatever was in sight: clothes, pots, a complete cross mixture of items, as not to require everything be replaced."

These and many more voices emerge from "Lost in Darkness." They shed light and hope on the challenges of housing and the homeless. It's time to listen.

*Laura S. Washington, a board member of the Neighborhood Writing Alliance, is editor and publisher emerita of The Chicago Reporter, and a columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times.*

## **ALL THIS AND NOTHING**

**Tashana Jones**

As I enter this place I call my own  
I realize it's very spacious, very in-depth  
It excites me, I can't help myself

I have all these new walls  
I have all these beautiful new hardwood floors  
I have all these new cabinets  
I have a nice new remodeled kitchen  
I have my own place to give me peace of mind

I have so many things, so many things I can't name  
Others wish they had what I have

This place I call my own is owned by someone else  
The new walls I adore, I temporarily use, owned by someone else  
The beautiful new hardwood floors, I walk  
on them at someone else's price, renting  
The new cabinets and kitchen, I am borrowing them and  
keeping them occupied for my time being here

I say again, boy, aren't I lucky  
I have all these things, but all I have is nothing  
I have all this nothing, nothing I can call my own

**CLARK AND ROSCOE**  
**Susan House**

I was waiting for a friend at the corner of Clark and Roscoe. It was cold and he was late. My back hurt, so I sat on the steps of a nearby closed store and tucked my backpack between my feet, pulled my poncho tightly around me, and wrapped my long scarf once over my head and twice around my neck.

People strolled past as I looked north and south, not sure of the direction he'd be coming from. No one paid any attention to me until one couple stopped at the corner and looked back. They held a whispered conversation punctuated with glances my way. I was wondering if I knew them from somewhere when the man came over and held out a dollar bill.

"No, but thanks anyway," I said, surprised.

"Take it," he said. "We want you to have it." His eyes didn't meet mine.

They thought I was a homeless woman! My cheeks flamed and my entire body shook. "No, no, really," I stammered, but he dropped the dollar in front of me and ran back to the woman. I didn't want that dollar. I hated that they thought I needed their charity. I wanted to cry. I wanted to hide my face, to shrink into the shadows of the doorway, but when I looked up again, they were standing directly in front of me.

"Do you need help?" the woman asked. "Should we call the police?"

"No, no, don't do that." I desperately wanted the awful episode to be over. "I'm okay, I'm okay." With concern and pity mingled in her face, she pressed that damned dollar bill into my palm then she and her boyfriend walked away, still whispering and glancing back at me while I tried to disappear into the dark, while that money burned my soul.

**To read the other thought-provoking works in this issue, click [here](#) to order your copy now.**