KITES:

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

Louis J. Meiman

Dr. Thomas M. Tammaro

Ball State University
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Spring Quarter
to my brother Ed,
whose idea I didn't steal
after all
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THE SUN, TETHERED

The kite jumped and twisted at the end of its string, far, far above the ground. It was a large kite, and strange. To those who name such things it was known as tetrahedral. To others it was a jumble of sticks formed into a four-sided pyramid, covered in places with a plastic fabric. A bright orange fabric like a school guard's raincoat or a highwayman's warning flag. In any case the kite was efficient, and it danced and fluttered high above the broken, hollow cornstalks of last summer's field, brushing the fringes of heavy grey clouds in an early-spring sky that ached for rain.

Jake sat just inside the open door of the meteorology department's station wagon with his arms folded and his jacket bunched against the chill. The wind was just a little too cold, when he sat out in it, so he had moved inside where he could stay warm, and listen to the radio to keep from getting bored as long as he could. Two months ago, trudging through the piled winter snows of the campus, it had not even seemed like a class project. Spring would come and he would fly a kite, like always. Only this kite would measure the wind, and he would use the measurements to write a paper.

"About that paper you assigned last Tuesday . . ."

"Yes."

"I was wondering, could we collect our own statistics?"

"If you had a weather balloon, yes, I suppose you could."
"I was thinking of a kite instead. I was going to focus on conditions closer to the ground. I figure I could hang the instruments inside a kite."

"Well, if you got the right kind of kite, I guess so, but it seems like a lot of extra trouble to me."

"Not really, I fly kites anyway. It's sort of a hobby."

"Go ahead, then, and if you change your mind you know where my office is."

Davidson had not seemed too excited about his idea, but then it was hard to get excited about anything in this weather, Jake thought. He climbed a weel-worn path in a mound of snow and started across the parking lot.

Orange, he decided. His kite would be orange, bright and glowing. He could see it now, with the grass just this side of turning green and the sky a warm blue, and his kite, orange and alone at the end of its string. He was ready to start building by the time he got back to his room, but it was two days before he could get all of the materials. Three days later it hung over his bed, the only place in the room where there was enough room for it. His roommate pointed out that it clashed with the blue walls. Jake waited for Spring.

He got the instruments on loan from the department, and even though with the new computer chips they were small and light, he found out that they would not fit exactly into the kite. Jake took the kite apart, replacing some of the sticks with new ones that were slightly longer. When he put it back together, the kite looked slightly lopsided, but he could tie the instruments securely in place. He hung it back up over his
"When are you gonna fly that thing, anyway?"
"Soon, I hope."
"When the weather clears up?"
"Yeah."
"That's a hell of a lot of work, just to get some information for a paper."
"Yeah, I know."
"Guess you can't back out now, though."
"No, not now."
"Oh, well. Hey, if anybody comes by for me, I'll be down at Linda's OK?"
"Sure."
"See you later."

The door closed. Jake sighed, and turned back to working on the rest of the research for his project. He had planned to get the local readings from the kite first, but the due date for the paper was approaching fast and the weather was still not good for kite flying. Jake needed four days of readings, that was all. Four consecutive days and the project would at last be finished. Outside the window, the rain looked like it was turning to sleet.

Jake settled back in the front seat, with the sounds of the radio drifting in and out, barely louder than the sigh of the wind. After hours and hours of sitting in the car, wandering around, taking readings, and occasionally jerking on the kite's string to make sure it stayed at the
right altitude, it was finally the fourth day. Even if a light rain started, he was going to leave it up, then at 4:30 he could bring it in for the last time.

Jake watched the kite, an orange flame buried in the soft grey sky. He felt like drifting off to sleep, but he did not trust the wind. He had learned that when flying kites a long time ago. Yesterday the wind had held steady most of the afternoon, but today it was stronger. The kite did not wait long. It began turning slow loops. Nothing serious, but enough to rouse Jake out of his seat and send him wandering over to the string. He grabbed it at shoulder height and pulled with just enough pressure to stop the looping. On the way back to the car, he stopped at the instruments to make sure the kite had not been losing altitude. He focused the eyepiece on the kite, checked the angle, and then ran his figures through his calculator twice. It was a little low, but still within the right range.

As Jake turned to climb back into the car he saw a rabbit, standing on its hind legs, paralyzed, watching him. Its ears barely twitched in the wind, and its front paws almost seemed to rest on the yellowed base of a broken cornstalk. Its feet, Jake slowly realized, must be very close to the place where he had anchored the spool of string. He flung his arms in the air and the rabbit skampered off down the old row of stalks, toward a distant barn. Seconds later there was a sputtering among the stalks, and Jake looked up to see his kite unreeling majestically into the distance. He leaped in the direction of the spool, his heavy boots grinding dried leaves into the mud, but the rabbit had kicked the rock away, and the spool spun on a stick that was slowly working its way out of the soft earth.
Jake heard the string jerk to an end, pulling the spool off the stick and skittering down the row. Then it lifted, miraculously free of the shards of the corn, and went following the kite into the air.

Jake lumbered after as best he could, thoughts of expensive equipment filling his mind, and the length of an entire field to go before the string would catch in the trees. His thoughts raced ahead of him, thoughts of kites lost on sunnier days, huge brightly-colored bits of paper with immense knotted rag tails that twisted and corkscrewed in the breeze. Of long hours spent on elaborate constructions that barely flew. Of climbing trees, and patches. Of mending sticks, and kites that rose again. Of running after rainbow kites soaring gloriously into wooded hills, and of falling, tumbling, and laughing with his brother, while the kites sailed out of view.

And Jake ran after the orange flame, forgetting the spool that dipped now and again to earth, slipping and sliding on the edge of balance, with his brother beside him, chasing a flame like the sun as the day grew warmer and brighter. Suddenly the spool caught, and Jake tripped beside it, grabbing hold of the string that tethered sun to earth. And he rose mud-covered and laughing, jerking on the string while the sun turned loops, sending it into dives and running, running to pull it up just before it crashed into the field. He made the sun spin and dance, arcing through the heavens, twisting and glowing, warm against the dark and the wind.

And Jake turned, to race to the other end of the field, to take the sun higher, into the clouds. And turning, Jake slipped, falling once more to the ground while the spool bounced out of his hand. Freed once again,
the kite rose on the gust that brought the rain, and Jake lay laughing, watching the sun soaring off into the wooded hills, gloriously.
FOR MY KITE (THAT NEVER HAD A STRING)

I hung my kite up
   high in a museum,
   said the old man,
And they called it art.
   A thing of silks and stick.
O it was grand!
   and complex
   its many panels stretched
   with the hues of God
   hung there
       among the blank white
   walls.

(They even gave it
   a piece of the sky
   And the sun ablaze
   on that afternoon
   burned down on my kite
   the pattern
       of the skylight
   bars.)

They talked about it and banners
   and the other things they
   hung there in that room
   that day
Those who came to
   the luncheon unveiling
   (no black ties)
And you could see the dust flying in the sunbeams.

0, I laughed the next morning and read the newspaper about new acquisitions and Mrs. Emma Willcox, hostess.

That was more than two years ago it seems.
I'll bet there's no one there now

Museums aren't for crowds only dust.

I saw a boy yesterday who looked in need of something to do with a March afternoon. I wanted to steal into the museum and take down my kite -- Not so much for the boy as for the kite. I'd give it to him and let him give it to the sky.

But it's hung high in a museum and no one's there And they call it art.
WHAT KITES ARE FOR

The character wanders on stage. He appears to be in his late twenties to early thirties, wearing jeans and a zipped-up windbreaker. He carries a seven-foot tall kite made of a shiny silver material. He also carries a large wooden box with a crank in one side. A piece of fishing line leads from a hole in the top of the box to the kite. The stage is bare.

Sure, I've lost kites before. Oh, not all of them. When I was little I only lost about half, but I wasn't trying then. I'm doing better now, though. I've lost every kite I've owned in the last five years, except this one. I've had a little trouble with it. It's not as if I haven't been trying; today's the seventeenth time I've flown it, but the wind and the clouds just weren't right -- haven't been right yet -- they will be someday though, I think.

He begins untying the string from the kite.

It used to be a lot easier to lose kites. I remember when I was a boy: you'd use that cotton string, and if it got wet or had a weak spot and there was a gust of wind, it'd snap right in two. But this nylon stuff, it doesn't break; it has to come loose.

But I lost the first kite I ever had. Yeah, I was five, I think or four. I remember I'd just gotten this one. It was all blue and orange and it had this picture of an airplane on it. It was a big airplane, you know. It was about six stories tall and had windows in the wings, twelve jet engines. Like what they thought 1980 was gonna look like back in 1930.
Anyway, I got this thing, and the very next day I wanted to fly it 'cause it was my dad's day off, and my mom was never gonna take me out to fly a kite. So it was windy and cold and it was raining, but as soon as the rain stopped I started saying, you know, "Dad, can we fly it now?" So we took it out in the back yard and got it up, and about five minutes later it gets loose -- I forget how -- and we started chasing it. We lived in this subdivision way out by the G.E. plant -- you know, General Electric -- so we had to get in the car because it was going pretty fast, and the damn kite blew right out over this plant. My dad talked to the guard at the gate, but he wouldn't let us in to look for it. I remember dad had told me it was too windy, and if the kite got loose not to cry, but all I could think of was my new airplane kite over there at this factory where it was all dirty and grey and they did god knows what to things . . . . I cried anyway.

I still fly 'em though. It's my hobby. My wife Jan thinks it's kind of strange sometimes. At least that's what she says. "Don't you think it's a little strange, a man your age flying kites?" As if I should think it was strange. Anyway, I pointed out a lot of stranger hobbies a man my age could have picked up, and she shut up for a while. But I saw in the paper one day:

Dear Abby,

My husband is thirty-two years old, and he still flies kites. Not just in spring, but almost every weekend during the summer. Sometimes he even flies them in the winter. He traded in our new car for a rusty, used station wagon to haul kites in. I don't know what to do. Every weekend that the weather is good, he is gone. -- ON A STRING IN OHIO

Well, I had a good idea who that one was from. Abby said:
Dear String,

You should be glad that it's only kites that he is running away with. These days there are a lot of other things that can get a man high. Come to think of it, why don't you go with him sometime. Otherwise, someday he might tell you to go fly a kite by yourself.

I liked that so much that I cut it out and taped it right to the refrigerator door. It disappeared right after I put it up, and I never saw it again. Jan never mentioned it. She just glared at me for about two days.

She was kind of upset when I sold the Datsun. It was just too small, what with the kites and the string and all, so I got a seventy-three Ford Country Squire. And it didn't start to rust until after we got it. She said it makes us look like we've got six kids and a collie dog. It's great for holding kites, though. [laughs] I had this one fish kite. It was from Japan. That baby was nine-and-a-half feet long. I took it to the park one afternoon. I think it was Saturday... no, it must have been when I was off on Tuesdays 'cause there was hardly anybody there. Anyway, I finally got the thing up. You know those fish kites; they're just wind socks, so they don't fly at an angle like a regular kite. [He uses his hands to show the angles.] They have to fly parallel to the wind, so I got down at the bottom of this hill and caught this thing in an updraft, so it was kind of going up the side of this hill, about five or ten feet off the ground. And there was this road going around the side of the hill, and whenever a car would come along, they'd see this nine-and-a-half foot fish swimming up over the road at them and they'd slow down and stare. So anyway, after a while the wind got real strong and pulled the reel of string out of my hand just as this one car came around the hill, and this nine-and-a-half foot fish floated right in front of their windshield
They kind of ran off the road. And I was running up the hill after the kite but it floated right over the top. So this big guy gets out of this little Honda and starts giving me all this about who the hell was I, and what the hell was I doing flying kites, and this was dangerous, and he could have been killed. He was bigger than me, and so I said I was sorry and eventually he got back in his car and drove off. The funny thing is that the string must have been caught on his bumper, 'cause when he drove off about twenty seconds later my fish comes floating up over the top of the hill again. [laughs] It was great. This little blue Honda being chased by this nine-and-a-half foot Japanese fish. And when the guy saw it he speeded up to try to get it to tear loose, but it didn't. So I just stood on top of that hill and watched them, and the last I saw they went around this other hill and they were still being chased. I laughed ... Oh god.

When I got home Jan asked me the same question as always. "Where's the kite?" And I say, "I lost it." And she says, "Again?" See, she just doesn't understand. I know it took me a long time to figure it out, but I did it on my own. I've explained it to her, and she still doesn't get it. See, that's what kites are for. I used to think you were supposed to keep them forever, or at least for a long time, but after I lost so many I started to figure it all out. You're supposed to lose them after a while. It's, it's only natural. I mean, what good are they if they just sit around? They're supposed to fly. That's what I let them do.

I remember when I was about nine. It was getting to be spring and the wind was strong and steady, and like every year I was getting this fever
like I had to fly a kite. So I asked my mom and there wasn't anything in
the house to make a kite with. No paper big enough, or cloth, at least that
she would let me use. "You'll only lose it anyway." I remember she said
that. So finally I found some good sized sticks out in the yard, and I
got my mom to give me some aluminum foil, and I crimped it together and
made this kite. And I thought it was great, because it was shiny silver,
and I'd never seen a kite that color before. So it was getting late in the
afternoon and my brother and I, we'd got a tail of rags on it -- I guess my
brother was about seven then -- and we were going out to fly it when my
dad came home. He looked at it and said, "You all can't fly that. What if
it catches on some electrical wires? You could be killed." That got us
kind of scared, so we put it down in the basement with the rest of our toys,
and I never did get to fly it.

In a way I was kind of glad, because if I didn't fly it I was never
gonna lose it, and I didn't want to lose it because I'd made it myself.
I'd never really made a kite myself before. But when I was making it I
could just see it up there, way up high, flashing and dancing in the wind,
up in the sky. Blue and silver; those have always been my favorite colors.
Yeah, and then it could just fly away, over a hill or something, so I'd
never know what happened. I'd never see it caught in a tree or anything.
Of course, then I didn't think of it getting away, I just thought of it up
there, tugging at the end of my string, where I could haul it in whenever
I wanted. But when we were cleaning up one day a couple of years later
my mom found it, and it was all dusty and kind of crumpled, and she said,
"You don't want this old thing, do you?" And she broke the sticks and
rolled the foil up in a ball, just like she'd baked a ham in it or something. And she never even waited for me to answer ....

Anyway, after that I didn't fly kites for a long time. At least not as much as I used to. I guess part of it was that I was growing up and part of it was that it was easier to let the kites lie around until they were thrown away or I forgot them than it was to see them get away from me. I didn't like the idea of something that I'd made or touched loose on its own where I could never have it again .... Oh, I don't know.

Sometimes I'd watch my friends fly their kites ... and I'd watch them lose their kites. Sometimes they'd let me help fly ... and sometimes I'd help lose them. Accidentally, of course, but they still didn't like it too much.

[He picks up the kite again.]

I guess I didn't really fly a kite again until a couple of days after my brother died .... That was about eight years ago, now .... [smiles and chuckles] Come to think of it, I lost that one too.

This is my latest project, though. I've been working on it for quite a while. See, I watched this show one night on PBS -- Jan thinks that watching PBS is strange sometimes too -- and they were talking about weather patterns, I forget what show it was on. Anyway, they started talking about the Jet Stream. It's this belt of wind that circles the earth about six or eight miles up, and it blows about a hundred miles an hour. So I saw this and thought, wouldn't it be great to get a kite high enough to get caught in that. I figure it could blow around for months, maybe even years. So I built this kite. And this box has ten miles of
nylon fishing line in it. Hundred pound test. I don't want it to break until I'm ready for it to. See, this box is fixed so that the string doesn't tangle when I reel it out or in. And I've checked all the knots where the string had to be tied together five times to make sure they won't come loose, except one. The last one. When the kite gets up high enough so that the last knot goes out, then it will be seven miles up, and I figure that should be high enough. I think I'll know when it hits the Jet Stream. Oh, I know I won't be able to see it anymore. I'll probably have lost sight of it a long time before. But I'll be able to feel it out at the end of my string, and all of a sudden it'll start to pull real fast when it catches up there. And then, before I even know it, the last knot will slip through my fingers, and the wind will be pulling so hard that the knot will work itself loose, just like it's supposed to. Then the string in may hand will drop. And I'll know that my kite's gone. And I'll know that it's not mine anymore, but I'll know where it is, up above the trees and the power lines and even the clouds. Flying over the world, the whole world, always in the sun. Flashing and dancing . . . Blue and silver . . . . .

[There is a long pause. He eventually comes back to earth.]

I almost had it today -- almost. But the wind started to die down. I didn't think it could stay up there with the wind like that. If the winds are strong enough, maybe tomorrow, but I think it's supposed to rain. I could try next Thursday, I have the day off. Maybe it'll be right then. If it's just not too cloudy. [sighs] I sure hope it's right, someday.

As he starts to make his plans for his next attempt at flying the kite, he prepares to go, and the lights fade gradually to black.