



oxbow writing project

University of Nebraska - Omaha



Time Revisited

2010 Summer Institute
Anthology

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Forward

By Gigi Brignoni

I look at a blank page
Wondering what words will paint the canvas
Of my ideas
Will it be a romantic thought?
Will it be surreal?
Will it be fictional?
What colors will I use?
Azure for my sad mood
Crimson for passionate thoughts
Scarlet for angry thoughts
Pink for hope
White for innocence
What words represent those emotions?
I look at a blank page and wonder
Who am I writing for
Why am I writing
What ideas will emerge out of me
I am a promising artist
Experimenting with vocabulary
Massaging ideas
Painting a blank canvas
Creatively
With no pre-conceived notion
Of what will be
But knowing that it is
What it needs to be
For Me.



Authors Colaboradores

Janet Larson
Gigi Brignoni
Mary Jane Agan
John Deeney



Bloom

By Janet Larson

With the glistening lights hanging overhead and the soft summer breeze drifting through the doors, I heard the thud of bass, giggles of anxious young women, and smelled the unmistakable scent of butter cream frosting. It was wedding season at the epicenter of our country, Grand Island, Nebraska. Out of the corner of my eyes, I noticed the lime green and pink lantern lights perfectly strung between the exposed beams, interweaving with their white Christmas light counterparts. The ambiance is perfect for Chris and Kati's reception, I thought to myself.

A dark-haired, lanky man was sliding to and fro on the dance floor making moves to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" when I heard the music pause. Dace, the DJ, was changing things up and I anticipated a traditional dance between the bride and her father or the wedding party stomping to the beat of Garth Brook's "I've Got Friends in Low Places." I had discovered earlier that this DJ was a good friend of Jon, the person responsible for my attendance at this event. They were "techies" together, constantly learning the latest and greatest technologies like I-Phone 4, 3G networks, and the rest of those acronyms that evade my own comprehension. Dace's voice boomed through the microphone, "Come on ladies! Don't be shy!" coupled with Beyonce's now infamous tune "All the single ladies." The combination of his orders and the background tune could only mean one thing: bouquet toss.

Finally, our eyes were meeting again after endless hours of separation between the wedding and reception. Jon's chocolate brown pupils melted every inch of me, just like the first time, so many years ago. At the age of fourteen, I was dressed in a metallic silver gown, knee length, with ties at the back. I had woven my hair into a French braid because there were no resources to have it done professionally. Here I was fifteen years later, once again in a knee-length gown and a quick hair fix, just polished enough to be a step above business casual. His eyes fixed on mine. They pulled at me from every direction. His finger directed me to the dance floor, but his eyes never moved. Plastered to mine, engaging me as if we were having a conversation with no words, just senses traveling through my veins like wildfire. I just had to comply, who could resist those deep, wise eyes? Reluctantly, yet inquisitively, I shuffled onto the dance floor.

Smells lingering from the pulled barbeque pork sandwiches and not-so-tasteful creamy potatoes still filled my nostrils. On each side, family members and friends of the bride and groom looked on, waiting for this moment that was tradition to them, but was so much more to me. Did they have any idea that the world as I knew it was shifting beneath me?

I was in limbo. Where should I be? Anxiety boiled over as I felt the whole room dissecting me, my history. My heartbeat raced, beads of sweat developed on the inside of my palms, and questions of the onlookers poured into my brain. "Who is the woman dressed in the strawberry-colored dress with the matching sandals? Isn't that the same dress that Kate, from Jon & Kate Plus 8, wore on that magazine cover? Are the two girls

hers? She has to be married then, right? How can she possibly be an appropriate candidate for the bouquet toss?" I could have sworn I heard someone say, "She shouldn't be out there." That does it! I am darting off this dance floor right now. Forget the romance. Forget the passion. This is no place for someone my age. Wait a second. I am twenty-eight years old. When did I decide that happiness was no longer an option? True, I am divorced. Some call me broken or lost and family members claim that I have built walls to block them out. All collectively creating this image of a "woe-is-me," divorced, single mother. But, why? My stream of consciousness was interrupted by more commotion.

Kati, draped in her snow white, ballroom gown, was never the athletic type. She was a spectator, not a participant in sporting events. As she arched her right arm overhead, you could tell. A bouquet of Gerber daisies cinched together with transparent, almost metallic white ribbon descending from each side appeared to be a mile in the air, out of reach. It reminded me of the peak of a mountain, not that I had ever been on one. The "mountain-proposal" dream escaped from reality like freshly baked chocolate chip cookies escape into the stomachs of ravenous children. The dream of being atop a mountain, gathered in Jon's steady arms, with snow glistening beneath our feet, clouds of breath passing between us, diminished nine years ago. It does not matter why, but it is gone, departed. I gave myself a moment to think about the mountain, the peak where my past and future would have all been different.

"Five, Four, Three, Two...AHHHH!" Shriill screams from women aging from four to forty-four rang through my ears bringing me back to present. The lights cast a shadow of my silhouette against the grainy wood floor. It seemed to glow beneath me and reflect all of the happiness, worry, and reminiscent thoughts that were flooding my core. Just a few steps ahead, my daughter, Sophie, was peering toward the ceiling. What did she find so intriguing above her? Her sea blues eyes were methodically scanning the area above her. Something was flying. The bright, Gerber-daisy bouquet sailed toward her outstretched arms. She waited like a young outfielder learning his place in a baseball game, stationary. The bouquet bounced off her cusped fingers and continued in motion, backward. It twisted and turned, seemingly on a journey much like my own, unsure of its place. I looked into my own hands, a band of iridescent titanium wrapping around each ring finger, a constant reminder of the two true loves in my life, Penelope and Sophie. Creases resembling the roots of a tree traveled up my palm to join with fingers marked by hard labor, motherhood, and so many more untold stories. In this moment, the story revealed by my hands continued. Gracefully landing between the two hands I so keenly observed was a bridal bouquet.

My eyes shot up to take in the world around me. Immediately, Kati rushed over to hug and congratulate me, though I felt nothing. Her arms were like thin air around me, not embracing or pressing into my freckled skin. Although my eyes moved from object to object, I couldn't focus. I had one thing on my mind. Him. The person who makes me forget my lists, remember what it's like to be completely absorbed in a moment of time, feel confident and strong. Him. This is a safe place to be in right now, I thought. Devoid of any judgments by those around me, I feel home in this moment.

As if the microphone were the voice of God bringing together lost souls, I heard, “Jon, you have to kiss her!” Flashes from all angles held my attention until my eyes locked with his. With a style I knew all too well, he strutted toward me, confidence radiating all around him. His smile danced with my eyes, shiny white teeth with two faint dimples gracing each side of his sun-baked face consumed all of my energies. Immediately, he wrapped his long arms around my waist and rested his hand at the small of my back. His fingers strummed along my spine while his eyes engaged every last bit of me. Slowly, he angled his head toward my right. I could feel him bend his knees like he always had, a six foot five inch stature had always required it when put alongside my five foot eight inch frame. His breath held a familiar scent, Martini Rossi Asti. Lips just inches from my own, his chocolate brown eyes vanished, leaving an all-consuming sensation unlike any other. Fact. I was and had always been irrevocably in love with him.

In that moment, my world changed. My daughters observed the kind of love I wish for them to experience at least once in their lifetimes. The love that transcends time, ever present, not judging. Pure joy swept over me for the first time in years. I was in the moment. I wasn't preoccupied, as I often am, with my lists, my past, my future, my goals. I was simply me, just me.

Maybe there is a reason why I never caught a bridal bouquet before. Surely I had attended enough weddings that the odds were in my favor, but maybe that's not it. Maybe it was because it was my time. My moment. My release from the walls I had built around me over the past decade. It was my time to bloom.

One Not So Ordinary Evening

By Gigi Brignoni

The loving couple held hands as they walked toward the Pedestrian Bridge near the Missouri River. He, a civil engineer, pointed out how high the river was that evening. "I have never seen it so high!" he exclaimed.

She, a university professor, noticed that the river's current flowed quickly. "Look how fast the river is moving!"

"This is why boaters don't go out on days like this. There is too much debris that would interfere with their navigation."

"The river is as high as the floating deck. I guess it can't go any higher"

"Oh yes, it can, it could cover the deck."

With that, they continued their walk towards the Pedestrian Bridge each taking turns pointing out long branches, and floating objects that were being carried south on the Missouri River. Still holding hands, she noticed that little children walked past them in bathing suits. "Why do they wear bathing suits?" she wondered. A wailing cry from a 3-year-old girl caught her attention. The little girl kept on crying as her dad carried her back towards the car. "Do that again, Daddy!" insisted the slightly older sister who walked behind them. "That was funny!" she added. The loving couple took note of them and continued on their journey to the bridge that connects Omaha to Council Bluffs.

They strolled past the teepee frame and the engineered water marsh that represented Native American life in Nebraska. "There needs to be more," she thought as the loving couple walked by.

Moving on closer to the bridge laughter and squeals filled the air. The playful fountain squirted water sporadically toward the sky while young children shrieked and romped around in it. "So, that's why they were wearing bathing suits," recalling the young girls that they passed earlier. She loves when she knows the why of things.

The loving couple was quite a sight. He measured six feet tall while she is 1½ inches shy of 5 feet. Years ago, when they started dating, she was concerned about their height difference. Do we look like Mutt and Jeff? Will people stare at us and wonder what he sees in such a short woman? She recalled that she would notice couples that resembled their height difference and observed that the tall men usually listened to the short women. Did the short women intentionally assert themselves due to the demure stature? It's been two years and that is not an issue any longer. They just fit well together and would fit well if they were both the same height.

The suspension bridge is aesthetically pleasing and as the loving couple entered the ramp, she remarked how she wanted to continue on to Iowa. He joked and said that it was at the halfway point of the bridge. She did not believe him. When they stopped to look over the railing, they observed from a different vantage point how quickly the river's current was moving. "I feel the bridge swaying," he said. "Let's keep going," she answered.

Two feet later, he mentioned that they just crossed into Iowa and it was at the top of the bridge. She did not believe him, and said, "We are in Iowa when we touch land." "But we did cross over into Iowa, the bridge's deck states the border." So they walked on, holding hands. He wonders why she doubts him. She insists that it is not Iowa if they are not on land.

The different passersby intrigue her. Little children are pushing heavy strollers. The loving couple remembered a time when strollers were not that heavy. "They must be safer." "I bet they cost at least \$100," he remarked. "They probably cost \$150," she added. "Where was the last place I saw a lot of sturdy strollers?" he wondered aloud. "It was when you were at the Henry Doorly Zoo," she reminded him. At that instant, she recalled the last time she visited the aquarium exhibit at the zoo, trapped among families with strollers, realizing that Sunday afternoons were not good days to enjoy the zoo as a wandering adult. "Those are big strollers," she added.

They walked the bridge to the Iowa land's side of the river and she remarked that it was okay to turn back and he enthusiastically agreed. "We've been in Iowa for a long time before we got here," he commented. "No, we haven't. I didn't see any markers indicating that", she argued. "What will you bet if I am right?" "An iced coffee." "What kind of bet is that?" he retorted. "That's what I want you to get me," she jokingly said. "Well, I want a beer!" he declared. And, so they walked. He won the bet. There is a line on the bridge where the borders of Nebraska and Iowa are marked. She believed it because she saw it and understood why he thought that crossing the bridge back to the Iowa indicator was enough.

They laughed at her mistake and he smiled thinking of his reward. They retraced their steps toward Nebraska noticing once again the diversity of the people who crossed the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge. One father, they spotted, had a very lightweight stroller, the type they both used in the 1980s. Ironically, the father carried the baby while pushing the stroller. Was the stroller not sturdy enough to carefully push the baby along? Then, in a second, the toddler was on her two feet walking and pushing the empty stroller. "That makes more sense," remarked the better male half of the loving couple.

They reached the end of the Bob Kerrey Bridge. The fountain was spurting water. She mentioned how if she were a young mom, she would probably play in the fountain, too. He ever so cleverly negotiated their return trip through the fountain's circle without getting wet. "What daredevils we are!" she thought as she secretly enjoyed the detour. She did not comment aloud because he won the wager and he didn't need more validation. It was what she thought at that time but she does not really believe that.

Their spontaneous trip to the Bob Kerrey Pedestrian Bridge ended, yet the evening did not end as they headed towards Upstream Bar and Restaurant in the Old Market to cash in on the bet.

Gone – Flash Fiction – John Deeney

He didn't know when he would see them again. It was an unwanted, unfamiliar feeling. He didn't want to be apart; removed from their everyday lives. He wanted to wake them in the morning, tell them he loved them. He longed to prepare breakfast alongside his wife, sharing the bizarre dreams they each had throughout the night. He wanted to place his hands upon her hips and take in the smell of her hair, an accumulation of the lavender shampoo applied the previous morning, the clinging smell of last night's Italian dinner, and sweat from a morning jog. He wanted to answer the questions of his inquisitive children as they picked at their pancakes with sticky hands.

It was his mistake that left him here now, alone in the dark loft of an equally lonely coffee shop. His mind reeled. Why had he done it? His always patient, forever composed way had betrayed him, had led him to act in a way he once thought impossible.

When would he see them again? He knew the answer to his question. The reassurance of others, the promises they made to him, meant nothing. They were wrong, misled. Regardless of his envy for their point of view, he knew his own answer to the question, and he couldn't escape its finality.

Why Are They Taking My Daddy

Why are they taking my daddy away, did he do something wrong,
Is he a criminal, did he killed someone or robbed a bank.
Why are they taking my daddy away, did he do something wrong,
Did he forget to pay a ticket fine, or was it because he littered
Why are they taking my daddy away, did he do something wrong,
Was he driving drunk, or did he passed a red light,
Why are they taking my daddy away, did he do something wrong.
My daddy is a kind and loving man, how can this be happening to him
My daddy is considerate of all others, and cares for his family,
How can this be! They are taking him away from me.
My daddy is a hard worker, sometimes working late at night
My mommy says he is the love of her life.
Why are they taking my daddy away, did he do something wrong.
It is because he is an immigrant, an illegal immigrant they say,
But aren't we all immigrants, then why is this happening to me.
What will I do when he is gone!

Mary Jane Agan

Her Life

By Janet Larson

She adored him.

She dated him.

She wanted him.

She married him.

She despised him.

She divorced him.

She forgave him.

She befriended him.

She loved him.

She remarried him.

I Am

By Janet Larson

I am from bare, gaping cabinets.
Dirty walls and dust-covered floors.
Rooms overflowing with paper of all
kinds, dingy empty boxes, tattered
clothing.
So much to be offered, yet
nothingness.

I am from a large family,
Always a forgotten piece of a larger
puzzle,
Third-child syndrome, not the oldest
or youngest, just a "tweener."
"No money for this. No time for
that."

I am from muddy cornfields and
blood-covered hands,
Picking tassels and destroying weeds,
who are just like me, hoping for
survival, yet somehow out of place.
I am from dark, dew-filled mornings.
Buttermilk pancakes piled high with
butter oozing into crevices, hot syrup
cascading like Niagara Falls.
"39! ORDER UP!" forcing me to dash
with half smiles to and from the
kitchen, all the while remembering
my bare cabinets.

I am from sweltering hot
summertime.
Booming firecrackers, the garden
that never happened, a dangerous
tree house.

Trips to Ace Hardware to buy nails
and a grass-colored John Deere
tractor sprinkler in hopes of
surprising my parents for their June
11th anniversary.

I am from broken dreams of white
wedding gowns and mountain peaks.
A place marked with hoping, wishing,
wanting, but replaced with achieving,
moving on.

I am from a new home.
Filled with bright faces, young and
old, achievements—certifications and
degrees, and friends and mentors
who appreciate my gifts, they tell me
so.

Recognition coupled with sincerity
warms my heart.
Gushing in and mending the holes
left behind by bare cabinets, broken
dreams, and nonexistent gardens.

I am from a new home,
A place of happiness.
I matter. I fit.

Summer – Series of Haiku – John Deeney

Running through the mist
Screeching with joy and laughter
Sprinkler on the lawn

Water fight, okay?
Okay, bring it on big boy
You best start running

My turn to get you
Let me spray you on the head
Oh my God, that's cold

Here comes Mom and G
Spray them when they come over
Now! Get em, get em

Make him stop spraying
I'm serious, you will pay
No loving for you or Want to sleep alone?

Stop spraying her bud
We won't do it anymore
Sorry about that

A Soccer Moment
By Gigi Brignoni

“These seats are great!”
“Nothing but the best for my honey.”
“How much did they cost you, dear?”
“Never you mind, sweetie. That’s not for you to know.”
“I can’t wait to see David playing forward again. It’s been years since he’s played soccer. I didn’t think he would ever make the U.S. team.”
“It’s like riding a bicycle. Once you learn how, you never forget.”
“But he’s on the U.S. soccer team. Most players never stop playing. David stopped playing for ten years. It’s a mystery to me.”
“Babe, you sure have a lot of questions today. Enjoy the moment.”
“Honey, there’s the popcorn vendor. I’d like some.”
“Okay. Over here – two popcorns.”
“Yes, sir. That will be 78 rand or 10 dollars US currency.”
“Well, popcorn sure has gone up in price!”
“What can you say? It is 2010 and we are at the World Cup.
BZZZZZZZZZZ BZZZZZZZZZZ BZZZZZZZZZZ
BZZZZZZZZZZ BZZZZZZZZZZ BZZZZZZZZZZ
“What did you say? I can’t hear you over the vuvuzela trumpets.”
“What did you say? My ears hurt.”
BZZZZZZZZZZ BZZZZZZZZZZ BZZZZZZZZZZ
“What did you say? I can’t hear you.”
“Look! Isn’t that David?”
USA USA USA USA USA USA
“What did you say?”

Language Learning in Cuernavaca, Mexico

By Mary Jane Agan

In 2001, I attended the Institute of Language Learning in Cuernavaca, Mexico to take a refresher class in Spanish. I was to be the second grade dual language teacher at the beginning of the new school year. It would be a challenge because I would have to write and teach the second grade curriculum in Spanish. In addition, I had only two years of teaching experience and no formal training in Spanish. Mrs. Cohn, the principal of Marrs Academy, was very understanding and reassured me that everything would be fine and that the school would provide me with the help and resources that I would need. As soon as the school year ended, I was on my way to Cuernavaca.

Cuernavaca was two hours away from the capital city of Mexico; to get there we went through many windy and mountainous roads. As we neared the town, I noticed a big greenish arch that had the words Cuernavaca written in big white letters. I was almost at my destination and that was a great feeling. Within a few minutes, the van stopped in front of a two-story red brick building with an ornate black iron gate and the words Institute of Language Learning written over its entry. Right next to the institute was something that resembled a make shift house. The walls constructed from pieces of cardboard boxes and the roof from slabs of tin formed the house. I noticed two small children playing out on the sidewalk. The children were dressed in tattered clothes, and barefooted with straggly hair. Could those children live in that place, I thought to myself? As I looked at the institute, at the beautiful brick structure and then at the walls of cardboard boxes I felt a knot in my stomach. How can such beauty be next to such primitive conditions?

A day at the institute was like a day in high school. Classes started at 8:00 a.m. and finished at 2:00 p.m. I had eight classes, which alternated every other day. On Monday, I had Spanish grammar, communication and writing. Afterwards, there was a thirty-minute break so that we could eat lunch. The afternoon was a large group session and we usually had speakers or an activity to work on. The next day, my schedule consisted of reading, speech, history and grammar.

One day when I arrived at the institute, I witnessed the most depressing scene of my life. There was water gushing out from the hydrant and running into the street. In the street was the family that lived next door with buckets in their hands. They were collecting the water that was running into the street. I asked Martha why they were doing that and she explained that the family did not always have running water. As I walked inside the institute, I felt tears well in my eyes. How can this be, I asked myself? That same day, I had to go to a different building for the communication class; I was on the second floor overlooking the place next door. I had a good view and observed how the family lived. There were dirt floors, pieces of tin that divided the area into rooms, and blankets covered a make shift door. My heart broke into a million pieces, how could this be? I thought. This was the turning point in my life, I knew at that very

moment that I would work extremely hard to give my students the best education possible. I would be an advocate for minorities and make sure that they get the same opportunities that everyone is entitled to. I was going to make a difference in their lives.

My Name – Free Verse Poem – John Deeney

John

Short, simple, common, with an h

Juan, Johann, Johnny Appleseed, John John the Piper's Son

Parents probably got it from the bible, but maybe Johnny Cash

There are lots of other Johns

But Deeney makes it unique

Deeney never comes out smooth, always repeated, How do you spell that?

Deeney is mostly Irish, as far as I know

I've never wished to have another name

I am John Deeney



Elizabeth Sandwich

Elizabeth Padomek
Kate Alseth
Beth Leach



A Tribute to the Untimely Departed

By Beth Leach

Who are you, soul, who dwells in frightened me?
It's only been a short while, but such powerful weeks
Who are you, soul, who I cannot rightly see?
It is your being, your essence, your love my heart seeks?

Like a soldier who returns home from a ceaseless war
My heart races with anticipation for your arrival
Like a soldier whose died unexpectedly forevermore
My heart is hereafter responsible for your survival

May day may day-the soldier screams, scared for his life
The day cannot come quickly enough for me to hold you
Shorts ring, man down, what's left is a wounded man's strife
Lifeless, dying, I pray you are not gone, soul departed too

Days pass by and unanswered questions arise
Will I be unconditionally loved? Will there be a connection?
Days pass by, and I can't help but surmise
Am I the mother of the soldier? Similar undying love and affection

If God enables you to be, safe from harm's way as this gift of mine
Forever to hold, forever to love, my soldier you'll be.
In God's time

I am From the Center

By Kate Alseth

I am from the center.
waiting for waves to come.

from "The Good Life"
where isolation makes us pure.

I am from the banks of the river.
Holding tight to your roots so not to be swept away

I am from the heart of the city,
as urban as it gets around here.

I am from independence
and calls from across the map serving as nightly tuck-ins.

I am from Irish Catholic guilt and traditions.
"Come give your grandma a hug"
"Oh, we don't do *that*."

I am from strong women,
of intellect and achievement.

I am from my grandmother's baking bowl,
and from plum trees and squawking grass between my fingers.

I am from muggy days in the grass,
acoustic guitars and a sense of community.

I am from music,
blaring rock clubs,
cozy jazz corners,
and sunset singer songwriters.

I am from the Land of the Lakes,

from campfire songs,
the call of the loon and midnight swims.

I am from fierce women with tender compassionate hearts.
from female camaraderie,
nights of laughter and heartache
and days of singing in the car and lunch by the lake.

I am from academia and exploration.
from stacks and stacks of books,
from students that teach me more about the world than I teach them.

I am from a hunger for knowledge, experience and understanding.

Gabriella Grace-

You will always be
My Sweet Baby Girl,
My Sweetpea....
"You are my sunshine..."

When I look at you today,
You no longer look like the itty-bitty baby we brought home,
So dependent and reliant
But you look like our little GIRL
So **IN**dependent, so free
Where has the time gone?

No longer do you just sit in your bouncy chair
But you run all around
Giggling as we chase after you!

No longer do you patiently have your diaper changed
You squiggle and squirm
And **YOU** have to throw the diaper away!

No longer do you eat the blah, blah baby food
But you feast on cheese **EVERYTHING** (a few other things, too)
Spitting out what you don't like, just to let us know

Where has this year gone?
I know there are so many more to come....

At the young age of 1,
As much as people hate to hear this when they're older:
You are your mother!
From sweaty feet
To a lover, cuddler, nurturer
To (at times) a short on patience little girl,
You are your mother!

Still, you always know how to make us laugh-
Like when you walk around with the wire trashcan on your head-
 Bumping into things here and there
Or when you sat **IN** the bottom kitchen drawer-
 just as innocent as can be
Even when you walk around with your purse and baby-
 already, as if you own the world
Your silly faces can really get us laughing-
 Like when you scrunch your nose
 grit your teeth
 and "shhh-shhh" in and out
 giggling in-between
 Also when you blow through your lips
 (and drool like crazy because you're having so much fun!)
All these, just to name a few...

I wonder...
What will your future hold?
A sport's star? (Basketball I hope!)
An accomplished doctor? Or a surgeon?
A teacher like Mommy?
Or a pharmacist like Daddy?
So much to choose from, the world is yours!

Gabriella Grace-

You will always be
My Sweet Baby Girl,
My Sweetpea....
"You are my sunshine..."

Love, Mommy
(Elizabeth Padomek)



In Our Write Mind

Pam Vap
Shari Hudson
Cheryl Goodwillie
Wilma Kuhlman



Those Boys

by Pam Vap

Those hulking, 17-year-old, high school
boys, really,
who crush their huge thighs
and muscled pecs into little plastic desks
arranged in temporarily neat rows,
those boys who require reminders
to write their names at the top of their paper,
those boys who practice their charming smiles
and silly flirtations with a graying teacher
in useless hope they will not suffer
the pangs of yet another essay, those boys
who look their teacher straight in the eye and lie
about missing homework, plagiarized papers,
and who made that whistling sound in the back row,
those boys who thwart every
carefully constructed lesson plan,
who text under their desks, stare out the door,
shove books, snap pencils, throw anything
and everything, whose crude remarks
upset and annoy adoring girls,
those boys
are the ones
I look forward to seeing
every day in my classroom.

A Land for You

By Shari Hudson

When I was a little girl, I had so many dreams
Of kings and queens and castles – and flowers all around

When I was a little girl, I had so many friends
The rabbits, squirrels, and lambs out back and the mermaids in the pond.

My dresses weren't so simple I was a princess, you know.
My prince was there to dance with me; he'll always be my beau.

Dream and believe....
Believe and dream...
They'll take you on your own journey
Or from a land you don't care to go
Hold on to your dreams – years may pass, it doesn't matter the time, you can always
reclaim your land.

When I was a little girl, I dreamed I held you tight.
Now I'm here and hold you close to love you ever more.
My Sweet Little Songbird – what do you dream?
What magic fancies will pass through your door?

Dream and believe....
Believe and dream...
They'll take you on your own journey
Or from a land you don't care to go
Hold on to your dreams – years may pass, it doesn't matter the time, you can always
reclaim your land.

Ally vs. Bystander

By Cheryl Goodwillie

Even the weather was perfect that night, pretty unusual in Nebraska. We were playing Omaha South in the finals of the state soccer championship. Lose? Impossible, we were ranked #1 in the state and 23-0. To tell the truth, I hadn't attended any of the games, I'm a band geek.

I don't know that much about soccer, I've never played it. Once in a while I'll watch my brother's games, so I know what a forward is and a defender and a midfielder, but I get confused about the rules. What is it with offside anyway? My dad tries to explain it, but he gives just too much information, and I really don't want to know so I tune him out.

I go to Lincoln East. We have the reputation of being a "snobby" school. I'm not gonna lie, there are some rich kids there. I guess maybe I'm one of them if you think in terms of the whole world, but then most people in the the United States are rich by the world's standards so I'm not really. I wore my favorite blue Lincoln East Football t-shirt. Soccer is called football in most countries so I figured it was close enough. My best friend, Emily, wore a Spartans t-shirt, shiny blue beads like people wear at MardiGras and dyed her hair blue. I love her, but sometimes she gets a little too excited.

Driving up to Omaha, Emily asked me, "Did you hear some people made green cards last night and are planning to throw them on the field if we win? Did anybody give you green cards?"

"Nobody gave any to me and I heard the administrators made everyone turn them in," I replied.

"I talked to a guy during last period who knows a senior who still had some in his pocket and he wasn't going to turn them in," Emily said.

The game started late, just after eight o'clock. Some students from South were wearing red caps and gowns. Their commencement ceremony had just finished at the old Omaha Civic Auditorium a couple blocks away from the stadium. One South player ran in wearing his gown right down to the field, then pulled it off revealing his soccer uniform underneath. How cool to graduate and play for the state title all in one day!

The South students chanted "Si, se puede!" throughout the game. I've had three years of Spanish so I know that means, "Yes, we can." Most South students are Latino and some of them are probably illegal immigrants. We have talked about the issue of immigration in my AP Government class. I see it both ways. Some people say illegal immigrants are taking jobs from Americans. On the other hand, do any Americans really want some of those jobs? A girl in my class said she heard about a guy who didn't know he was illegal because his parents came here when he was only two. When he graduated and tried to join the Marines he was deported. I think that's just wrong.

The game was kind of boring at first, so Emily and I walked to the concession stand to buy drinks. On the way back to our seats I saw some kids wearing green soccer uniforms with painted-on mustaches. They were probably fifth or sixth graders. I suppose

they came straight from a game of their own. Emily laughed and said, “Is that hilarious or what?” I didn't say anything, but I wondered if I would feel offended if I were from South.

Just as we got back to our seats, South scored. We were stunned. Could we possibly lose this game? A little while later, we scored too, so the game was tied 1-1 going into half time. Once the second half got started, things turned ugly. One South player was shown a yellow warning card. If a player gets two yellow cards, that's the same as a red card and the player is ejected. The team has to play one man down the rest of the game.

The student next to me laughed and said, “Hah! They should get shown a green card instead of a yellow card.”

It wasn't much later when one of our players got a second yellow card. So did a South player, so we both had to play one man down. We scored again and I started to breathe a little easier. As the time ran down, the announcer's voiced boomed over the loudspeaker, “To ensure the safety of players and spectators, no one is allowed on the field at the conclusion of the game.” Like that would stop us if we won. But with just three minutes left, South scored again! Time ran out with the score still 2-2. I didn't know what would happen next, but just then the announcer said there would be two ten-minute halves.

We scored three minutes into the overtime on an amazing kick from almost half way out that went just over the South goalie's hands as he fell backwards to the ground. The score was 3-2! And then, we scored again on a penalty kid with only a minute fourteen seconds left! As soon as the game ended, we rushed onto the field. The two teams and coaches lined up to shake hands. Students were running, jumping and yelling like first graders released at recess. Then I noticed the green cards floating to the ground around me. I stood still, near the goalie's box, wondering who had thrown the cards.

Did anyone else notice them? Did the South students and players know what they meant?

God, I'm sure they did. The South players stared at them for a minute and then turned their backs and left the field. I just stood there as another girl started picking them up. Kids swirled around us, still celebrating. Why wasn't I helping her pick those cards up? I wanted to help her but somehow I just couldn't.

Now, a month later, I'm still thinking about those cards. It turned out other people did notice them. Our school made the newspaper, the local news and even Fox news. What a way to get our twenty seconds of fame. In every class the next day we discussed intolerance, racism and harassment. We signed cards of apology. Some kids from both schools had breakfast together. We're supposed to meet next fall, too. But I keep asking myself...why didn't I help pick up those cards?

A Kid by Any Other Name

By Wilma Kuhlman

Wilma! What? Why?
Name sounded dull and ugly
Big and raw-boned
Probably steady and plodding.

Why, Mom? Why, Dad?
No nicknames for your kids?
Waldean – just as bad as Wilma
Karen – sounded musical and pretty
Which she was.

German roots.
Means protector, even resolute protector
Whatever that means
Who should I protect?

Wilma still sounded vacuous, like Boxer
Working harder and harder
Minimal player, never outstanding
Trying too hard!

I wanted cute and witty
Little and petite
Definitely dancing and running
Maybe spinning and jumping

The day came
Rudolph of Olympic fame
Mankiller, a woman prez
Wilmas, friends of friends

My world expanded
Wilma of perseverance and resolve
Of listening and learning
Distinctive –
 And maybe steady and plodding!

Where I'm From

By Shari Hudson

I am from the swaying cornfields
growing in fields of rich, black soil.
Where sitting down in the cool, damp dirt to cool off in the corn's shade also
meant no one could find me.
The long green ears of corn rustle in the faint breeze,
The sharp foliage tickle my ears with stories as I walk through the narrow rows.
Where the sweet corn-on-the-cob scent lingers in your nose
until Thanksgiving.
Water pours out from the endless stretch of irrigation pipe.

I am from calloused hands and bruised knees.
Where machetes were swung to chop sunflowers and weeds growing like giants
littering our fields.

I am from years of 4H picnics and watermelon seed spitting contests.
Softball and baseball games.
Summer camp.
Our attic is home to boxes and sacks of ribbons and trophies.

I am from the lake.
Young and determined to water-ski.
Brown as a nutmeg.
Weaving in and jumping out of the wake, determined to ski as fast as my
brothers.
Not wanting to leave because that meant having to wait for another rain to come
in order to put our work behind us for family fun.
Wishing for a house right there.

I am from family get-togethers.
Three generations gathered 'round.
Grandma's turkey on the table and Hawaiian Punch stains on the carpet.
The familiar scents of my grandma bring tears to my eyes and a smile to my
face (Winstons, lemon drops and Andes mints).

I am from burnt hamburgers and corn on the cob.
I am from test batches of Devil's Food cake and Wilma's No-Bake Chocolate
cookies.
I am from lemon poppy seed bread.
I am from pumpkin pie and good dark chocolate.

Looking back
I see the depth of my trail
We soak it in and carry on
One never really leaves.

One Book

By Pam Vap

“I ain’t gonna read no book,” Josh scoffed aloud and crossed his arms over his dirty, over-sized t-shirt. His chopped blonde hair hung down over his eyes.

“You have to, or you’re not going to pass,” another classmate said.

“Well, I hate to read and I ain’t gonna read.” Josh reiterated.

Unfortunately, this is not an atypical conversation in my classroom. I believe reading is a wonderful opportunity to grow, discover the world, gain wisdom and insight—and have fun, too. So as a high school teacher in the public school system, I am disheartened by many students’ reluctance to read. I was not surprised to see that some students would resist. And I was especially not surprised to hear Josh’s proclamation.

I had just announced that one of our English assignments for the first quarter was to read a novel of your choice. As Josh’s English teacher, I was privy to his test scores and realized that he read at barely a third grade level. Consequently, I perceived his comments as a tactic to avoid the embarrassment of not being able to read. For the moment, I decided to ignore him.

When I met Josh, he lived above the town bar with his often absent mother. He ran the streets at night and at seventeen years old he had been in and out of court so often that the sheriff in our small town knew he was one of “those hoodlums” to keep his eye on. There were many days when Josh missed school. I often wondered if he simply showed up on days he was hungry or needed a safe place to sleep. Although he could barely read or write, this lack of academic prowess was certainly not one of his reasons for his wandering into the school building.

During the week that followed, the students in my classroom were busy choosing the books they would read. I considered how I could help Josh. On a whim, I brought some of my son's cast-off clothing, and because I wasn't sure how he would feel about this, I hesitantly stuffed the clean clothes into his locker. On top of the items, I put a *Hank, the Cowdog* book (reading level 4) with a note for Josh to come see me.

Josh never mentioned the clothes, nor did I, but the next day he wore one of the shirts to school. Later that week he stopped by after school to ask me what it was that I wanted to see him about. He had heard me mention previously that my oldest son was a college baseball pitcher. I shared with Josh that my son had always liked to read a series called *Hank, the Cowdog*, and I asked him if he had found the book in his locker. Somehow I convinced him to let me read him the first chapter. The book was hilarious and we couldn't help laughing. With some coaxing, Josh haltingly read a page to me. Then I read another page, and surprisingly, he agreed to read another page, too.

He never took the book out of the classroom, but each day when it was time to read Josh would pick it up from off of my desk. Eventually, the boys in class noticed.

“Hey, I love *Hank, the Cowdog!*”

“Where'd you get that book, Josh?”

“Has anyone read *Hank and the Case of the Hooking Bull?* That one was soooo funny.”

“Yeah, I read that one. But it wasn't as good as *Hank and the Case of the Midnight Rustler.*”

“Remember those two dumb coyotes. What were their names?”

“Um...they’re called Rip and Snort.” Josh joined in the discussion and told about the chapter that he had just finished reading. The boys hooted and noisily reminisced about all the “Hank stories” they could remember reading.

Josh read slowly. Sometimes he and I would read together by taking turns reading aloud. Before long, he was one of the first to grab his book when it was time to read and I’d catch him chuckling out loud as he sat at his desk, head bent over the pages. After weeks of plugging along, he finally reached the last chapter.

The next part of our assignment was to write a letter to the author. In crooked print Josh wrote:

Dear Mr. Erickson,

I liked your book. This is the only book I have ever read.

Sincerely, Josh

The author did not write back, but I still have a copy of the letter. Josh didn’t graduate from high school. Last time I heard about him, he was in prison for robbery. I don’t know if he reads anything now. I don’t know if reading a book made any difference to him. But being a part of Josh’s reading a book has made all the difference to me.

Schooling Ms. Calhoun

By Wilma Kuhlman

Oxbow Writing Project, 2010

I couldn't believe my eyes when I arrived at Willow Elementary School, **my** school, very early that quiet spring morning. I was the first one in the school building, generally my MO. I think more clearly in the early morning. However, that calm was shattered when I walked through the door. My fifth-grade classroom lay tattered and torn in all the wrong places. Library books, writing journals, student chairs and tables, as well as critter cages - well basically everything - lay like a dreadful modern sculpture piled in the hallway. At first I assumed the whole school had suffered from this vandalism, but the pile contained only my school treasures! I recognized it all, which meant only my room had been vandalized/ravaged! Could this really be happening to me - teacher of the year and mother of two successful adult children?

Thinking back to the words I'd heard from Shawn's angry father the day before, I wondered if it was possible he was responsible for the mess. As I began slowly picking up the pieces, some of which were torn or broken beyond repair, I mentally replayed our conversation from yesterday. ***

Shawn was one of my students who chose to come into the classroom early rather than stand outside with all the other students. We'd agreed that was fine if I didn't have a meeting. Then the door would be locked. I was startled when the tanned, muscular frame of Shawn's father, Leonard, appeared in the classroom doorway at the beginning of the day. I was more startled when he began by ordering Shawn to go home. Then Leonard turned to me. Yelling and pointing, he'd shouted, "I want to see you in the office, RIGHT NOW!"

"I have students coming in right away. I won't be able to come talk right now. What do you need?" Even though my alerted nerves weren't cooperating, I worked to maintain calm and professionalism.

"You can't scare me with any old sheriff! I didn't do nothin' wrong, and I don't want my kid in this class any more." To Shawn, who had not yet gone home as ordered, he shouted again, "Get out! Go home! Don't come back here again."

Shawn had sheepishly walked out of the room. I don't remember seeing a noticeable expression on his face - not fear nor triumph - as he walked, red-faced from the room. I noticed him stop and start to turn once before he left, but that was it. I wasn't exactly sure why I was connected to the sheriff, though. ***

As I worked to reassemble salvageable books and furniture, colleagues started arriving, and in stunned silence began to help me pick up.

"Have you called the police? We should leave this for them to see." Typical of Lois.

Our principal was gone to a conference, so it was up to us, me, really. "I just don't want to mess up the whole day for students. And if Shawn's dad is responsible, I don't want to give him reason to keep Shawn out of school. Give it some time. It's just my stuff, and most of it is going to be OK." My intuitive conviction grew that the sheriff's officers would make the situation even worse because I was fairly sure that Leonard and/or Shawn had been largely responsible for the mess. I didn't want to give

the power to whoever had decided to punish me by violently invading my space. I wondered if I was making the right decision.

Shawn's dad, wearing untucked blue work shirt and backwards baseball cap, was back before lunch, once again to accuse me of interfering in his home life and trying to scare him, and in this case, hiding his son.

"Where is Shawn? Where are you hiding him?" The lanky man's voice was accusing and full of rage. "When I got home yesterday, he wasn't there. Where is he?"

"I have no idea. Hasn't he been home all night? Where could he have gone? Oh my gosh, he's only eleven!"

"You're not telling me anything, lady! I know how old he is. And no, he never got home. And I know he isn't here – I checked that out real good last night. Then I spent all morning checking at everybody's places! Everybody's but your house, that is!" His eyes glinted as he talked, almost a grinning, menacing glint. That answered my question about his involvement in last night's room ransacking. ***

I assumed I knew part of the reason why Leonard was so angry and had made reference yesterday to the sheriff. I knew what had started the snowball, and I'd heard rumors about the aftermath. Shawn was not a belligerent student who was frequently in trouble. He didn't distract or disturb others when they were trying to work. He didn't do poor academic work. The problem was, Shawn didn't do any schoolwork at all. He even fell asleep in class a few times. I'd attempted engaging Shawn with math objects and unusual writing opportunities. One word to describe him was lethargic.

The sheriff incident had resulted from a visit with a child welfare agent who came to our school, expressly to talk about Shawn.

"What can you tell me about Shawn Dibler," the woman who had introduced herself as Ms. Jennings had asked. "Is he a problem? We received a call last night from a concerned neighbor. The woman's concerns were rather vague, but we always follow up to assure children are safe."

I'd been candid. "Shawn hasn't been a problem behaviorally at all. But I am concerned about his lethargy and lack of involvement in class. He's really hard to motivate and seems really tired all of the time. I've not contacted anyone because his behaviors are not alarming – just challenging. He does come into the room early each morning to sit and occasionally do little odd jobs for me."

Evidently when Ms. Jennings attempted to visit Shawn's home, Leonard was hostile and shut the door in her face. I understand she'd then asked the sheriff to come check and Leonard even threatened to get out his shotgun. I'm not sure of that final resolution, but those events seemed to precipitate hostilities toward me. I wonder what Ms. Jennings might have said. ***

My musings were interrupted when Leonard once again challenged me to confess that I wanted Shawn out of his home. "I don't know why you think I'm not a good enough dad for Shawn. I bet you think because Dee is alcoholic and there's no mom at home for Shawn, that he'd be better off with a woman... maybe even someone like you? What did you promise him, anyway?"

"I truly don't understand what you are trying to imply," I noted coolly. "Do you think I'm hiding Shawn somewhere? Why would I do something like that? That's absurd!"

I was frightened, and I wasn't even sure why. Last night I had gone home as usual after I had almost everything ready for the next day's classes. I'd not seen nor heard anything unusual, but now I kept having an uneasy feeling about Shawn. Where was he? What might he have done? I cared for all of my students, and Shawn was no exception. His dad had shared some background in a short, frank talk at Open House on the second day of school. ***

When I introduced myself to Mr. Dibler, he asked me to call him Leonard. "Shawn's a chip off the old block! I was so poor when I grew up, I didn't always know if I'd get to eat at night. But I got out of there, got married and got the education I needed to be a mechanical engineer! I can say I'm pretty pleased about that."

I'd agreed! "What an outstanding success story. Congratulations. So is Shawn your only child?"

"Yeah. That marriage didn't work out so good. We drank too much, and even after Shawn was born we drank and yelled and blamed each other for just about everything. That's when we lived in the city. But Dee was, is I guess, an alcoholic, and always needed her vodka! When I quit drinking 'cause I was so worried about Shawn, she just couldn't do it. He was only four, but we had to get away. We aren't married any more." His voice dropped at the end with what seemed like a touch of sadness. I nodded appreciatively.

"Even when Dee was dead drunk in bed, I'd come home and find Shawn had just built a new bridge or garage or some other type building from his millions of Legos. I got a real kick out of seeing how well he could figure out the way to put those pieces together and make them look like something that could work."

"Thank you for loving your son so much!" I felt admiration for this man's resolve and courage. ***

So I'd encouraged Shawn's creativity in class. Twice he had figured out what he wanted to write and wrote a couple of sentences – a big success for Shawn. He was more likely to attempt a math problem, too, if he could just draw it first. Drawing was essentially the only way I got him to participate in anything academic. That was when he was awake, or at least willing to let me know he was awake. He was so adept at faking sleep, I just didn't know at times.

Confrontation was never my strength, and it showed now. My flight or fight instinct was definitely in flight mode. Before I closed the door to my classroom, I gave a parting recommendation. "I suggest you talk to the sheriff to help you search for Shawn. If I can help in any way, please let me know."

"You'll be the one facing the sheriff at YOUR house, if I have anything to say about it," Leonard threatened! "I expect that's where we'll find Shawn!"

My final comments belied my apprehension. "You are welcome to come to my house and check that out."

As promised, Leonard appeared with the sheriff only half an hour after I arrived home from school. Since I live eight miles from school in a small farmhouse, I wasn't worried. Alone since my husband had died suddenly last year from a heart attack, I was proud of the groomed, spacious yard and neat home I kept. I opened the door to them and invited them to make themselves at home. Again, though, the growing sense of dread was threatening to take total control of my being. Keeping calm was not getting any easier.

“We’re not here on a social call, Ms. Calhoun! I have a search warrant, and I expect full cooperation.”

“I’m sorry,” I choked out. “What are you searching for?”

“Ha!” blurted Leonard. “You think I don’t know that you’ve got Shawn hidden out here on this snug little place? I should have looked here right away. I know your type. You think you’re God’s gift to kids, and you lured Shawn here to be your little boy, now that you’re all alone. But we’ll find him, and you’ll get what’s coming to you.”

“You’ll need to stay right here, Ma’am,” said a deputy who I hadn’t seen before. He took my arm and guided me into the living room and had me sit on the couch and wait! Waiting is excruciating for me in friendly situations. Hostile does me in!

One hour and thirty-six minutes later, I heard footsteps on my porch. Through the door came Leonard, the sheriff, and Shawn! Stunned, I rose to greet him, but Deputy Finch sat me down, hard!

“Ms. Calhoun, you have the right to remain silent, the right to an attorney, and the right to an appointed attorney if you cannot afford to pay for your own.”

And so I write as I wait for my first visit with that attorney. It may not be early morning, but it helps me think more clearly and makes this jail cell go away – if only for a little bit.

Fort Atkinson

By Cheryl Goodwillie

Caleb shaded his eyes as he glanced at the broad river to the east. The early morning fog was lifting and the sun glinted brightly off the water. Most of it only knee deep, the river stretched for three miles in front of him. The sounds of bullfrogs in the marsh mingled with the sounds of soldiers marching above and behind him on the parade ground. The white washed wooden fort towered over the river valley one hundred feet below. The famous explorers Lewis and Clark had named this place the Council Bluff. The fort was home to Caleb, his father had been ordered there with the Sixth Infantry over four years ago. Papa was a soldier, but also a blacksmith. He was a big man, almost six feet tall and strong. His mama, almost impossibly tiny, worked as a laundress for the regiment scrubbing soldier's overalls. Her left black eye hidden beneath a bonnet told the story of the night before.

Caleb turned his attention back to the corn he was weeding this morning. He knew better than to speak to Mama about it. When Papa drank rum he usually got angry. Soldiers weren't allowed rum every day, but Papa sometimes traded drink for work in the blacksmith shop. After a night's drinking, Papa found fault with most anything she did. The family had traveled from Plattsburgh, New York, to the Louisiana Territory in 1819, into a land hundreds of miles past St. Louis, where no white people had ever lived. Caleb had been ten years old then and loved fishing every day in the rivers as they traveled. The soldiers floated down the Hudson River to New York City on keelboats and then on to Philadelphia. Families trailed behind the soldiers in wagons. The soldiers marched to Pittsburgh, then took to keelboats again to float down the Ohio River. They rested briefly at the village of Cincinnati, before continuing on to St. Louis.

The last leg of the journey up the Missouri had been the hardest. The river was often so shallow that the men had to pull the keelboats with ropes, just as Lewis and Clark's men had done fifteen years before. They stopped at the very place William Clark had recommended would make a fine site for a fort. Unfortunately they did not arrive until the middle of September, too late to plant. The soldiers were directed to build a fort, called the Cantonment Missouri.

That winter had been very hard, there was not enough food and many people died, including Caleb's younger sister, Eliza. She had complained of tender gums in her mouth and then lost some teeth. She grew pale and thin and tired all the time. Mama tried taking her to the surgeon but he saw to the soldiers first. Finally Eliza was too tired to get up from her pallet on the floor and died one morning in January. Mama didn't speak for a week after Eliza died.

Now Mama dropped the carrots into the woven basket and stretched, always averting her bruised eye from Caleb's gaze. "I'm finished now, Caleb. Help me up the steps and then you'd best get to the shop and help your papa." Up the steep stairs they climbed, finally reaching the trap door into the barracks above. Caleb helped her through the door just as the band struck up "Molly Put the Kettle On" that signaled the soldiers' breakfast.



KSDA

Sue Anderson
Kelly Welsh
Dorothy Chambers
Ashley Cavalieri

Lawn Mower

By Kelly Welsh

“Are you going to finish over here?” brought me back to the moment. Dad was standing on the other side of the driveway, pointing to where I had just mowed.

“What?” came my annoyed response.

“Are you going to finish over here? You missed some.”

“Yeah—I’ll get it in a second.”

I felt 15 again, and it made me crabby. Fifteen and mowing the grass with the Inspector General standing over my shoulder ready to point out every mistake. Except I am not 15—I am 45 years old, and it is MY yard this time and MY lawn and what difference does it make if I leave some...damn. He’s right.

I laugh, and I smile as I look at Dad. He is smiling back. “I used to tell your brother, it has a 24” mowing deck, not a 26.” I laugh again—it was me he used tell that to along with a 1000 other directions on how to do everything correctly.

Growing up in a Navy family meant that we turned to Mom as our primary parent. She gave us permission to leave the house, signed any school papers, bandaged our scrapes—she was both mom and dad to us. Dad was home on weekends or gone on a ship somewhere for months at a time. When he was around, it was easy to circumvent him for Mom. Dad retired, as I became a teenager. In the move back to Nebraska, I think we both lost our identities for a while.

I floundered my way through middle and high school and found I couldn’t talk to either parent. Dad struggled with a new business and new structure. Life at home did not run like life on a ship, and this created tension for everyone. A house with five kids, two bathrooms, and one phone made life complicated. Dad worked long hours, and some times a second job, to make ends meet. Mom started working full time and more household duties fell to me as my older siblings took jobs and went to college. There were no “boy or girl” chores in our house—only chores and everyone had to pitch in.

It was late spring of my freshman year of high school when Dad came home from work with a surprise for me—a brand new, shiny red, self-propelled Snapper lawn mower. Mowing the lawn was now my official chore. Dad showed me how to check the gas and the oil, how to empty the bag, and I was on my way.

I hated mowing the lawn. I would put it off until the dog was barely visible (we had a black lab). I would wait until the last 20 minutes before my parents got home to mow (of course, this was also the hottest time of the day). My parents and I would argue and fight over why I had to mow the lawn. No matter what I did or said, I would be back out there mowing, but I didn’t have to care how it looked. Emptying the bag only after it become obvious the bag was full by the trail of thick, wet grass clippings. If there was anything I deemed to be “gross,” I would mow around it—dog poop, a dead bird. When I finished, the yard looked like our hair when my mom tried to trim our bangs—nothing was even, and there were large tufts of long grass all over the place. I didn’t care—I had the mowed yard, and I was done for the week.

Except I was not done. Dad would come home and, after an argument, I would be back out there fixing my mistakes. Here would come the same old instructions—“A job worth doing, is a job worth doing right, the first time.” “A job isn’t done, until it is all done.” And my favorite, “Do it right the first time, and there won’t be a second time.” I

felt angry and stupid as I re-mowed the yard making sure I emptied the bag properly so I didn't leave a trail.

Now in my own yard, I carefully finished the section so I wouldn't leave any missed blades of grass. I paused for a moment to look at Dad cleaning scattered grass clippings off the driveway. He was right—he was always right, and for that I was thankful. As much as I fought it, I had learned so much from him. He didn't just teach me to mow the yard, he taught me to have pride in whatever I did—no matter how trivial or insignificant it seemed. Dad is not a man of shortcuts, and that is his legacy.

I looked over the yard. It looked perfect in the fading sunlight, and I was finally grateful for the gift of a lawnmower.

Where I'm From

By Dorothy Chambers

I'm from Arkansas, but relocated to Omaha when I was five, but thinking back...

Where I'm from in Pine Bluff, I rode on the running board of my father's car a little ways to the corner, when I was only four years old.

Where I'm from there were mock Tom Thumb weddings, family reunions, and barbecues.

Vaguely, I remember living in Pine Bluff with my family, but traveling to visit relatives in New Edinburg, Arkansas is more vivid because...

In New Edinburg, bathing was in a tin tub and hair was sometimes washed in fresh rain water, but the worst part was using the outhouse.

Drinking water and water for other uses were drawn from a deep well and I can remember the screeching sound that the pulley made as the pail was being drawn up.

Where I'm from I fed the tiny piglets from my glass baby doll bottle for amusement,

Where I'm from the only light was from a kerosene lamp and sweet potatoes were baked in the fireplace under red hot sizzling coals.

Where I'm from the food was always delectable and mouth watering with fresh grown ripe fruits and vegetables, home cured meats, and homemade vanilla ice cream.

Where I'm from fried frog legs were served for breakfast and I ate some, until I discovered it wasn't chicken,

Where I'm from I heard that Uncle Sam drafted people into the Army. "Uncle Sam, can you let Brother come home from the Army?" I pleaded with the cousin that everyone called Uncle Sam because I thought he was the one they were talking about. I was disappointed to find out that he wasn't the one.

I wanted Brother to come home because I loved him so much. I was afraid because I heard the older folks talking about men being killed. A year later, Brother arrived home from Germany.

Where I'm from pop was called soda water and ice boxes were used to keep food cold.

Where I'm from I thought the children were brave running around the farm barefooted and not afraid of stepping on snakes or thorns.

Where I'm from the mosquitoes and ticks tried to fill up on eating you.

Where I'm from the air is filled with the sweet smelling fragrances of gardenias, honey suckles, and crepe jesters all around the yard.

Where I'm from there were cousins galore and relatives all over the place.

Where I'm from big trucks would stop in front of the house, and Aunt Bertha would shop for food staples, like flavors, flour, sugar, and etc. Of course, there were candy bars for the children.

Where I'm from the church and the cemetery were up the gravel road from Aunt Bertha's home. My Grandparents and many relatives were buried there.

Where I'm from a two week vacation in New Edinburg was over too soon and you were saying good-bye to Aunt Bertha and all the relatives. As we all held hands to pray before leaving, I noticed that the adults had tears in their eyes.

The Balloon

It sat lurking in the hallway for three whole months before starting to begin its haunt. It watched the house dwellers go up and down the stairs every day waiting... waiting for its opportunity to sneak. Finally, the moment had arrived. It drifted cautiously out of its nook into the stair hallway. It had view now of the rooms the humans had been busily going in and out of all these days and months while it had sat waiting. There were three rooms and a bathroom in view. No people to be seen, however. They had all departed for their daily outside activities. Another time then. Back it crept into the safety of its ceiling alcove as it plotted its plan for the house dweller's return.

When they entered, the humans suspected nothing, noticed nothing. They had long forgotten about the Happy Birthday balloon that had floated to the too-high-to-reach part of the ceiling in the stairway. Every once in awhile one of them would notice the balloon and commented on how long lived it was. Most helium-filled Mylar balloons last a few weeks, not a few months. No one suspected anything... no one except the cats- or the hairy house-dwellers as the balloon called them. They spent many hours watching the balloon, daring it to dip down from the safety of its ceiling home. Its beautiful white ribbon was oh so tempting to cat eyes. The balloon knew better, and waited for the opportunity when the cats would not be around. One night, the perfect opportunity arose. The balloon was ready.

Ashley Cavalieri

The summer storm rolls in with blackened skies.
The forceful rain drives
the white chickens
beside the red wheelbarrow
into their shed.
There is no peace, no comfort, no renewal.

Caught,
like Ned Merrill in the gazebo,
unprepared,
ignoring the signs,
unwilling to act until
it's too late.

But,
is it too late?
Given one more chance,
will you take it
or
waste it, yet again?

The storm passes—
leaving behind broken branches,
withered leaves,
puddles in the manicured lawn,
and
unanswered questions.

Kelly Welsh

Spoolies
By Sue Anderson

I am from pink rubber Spoolies and emerald green Prell,

and I am from a small one-bedroom bungalow with a dirt floor in the basement;
I am from my grandmother's pink peonies next door.

I am from opening presents on Christmas morning – but not until we'd brushed our
teeth and hair, blonde hair from Albert and Berta.

From never tell a lie and always respect your elders.

I am from church twice on Sunday and once midweek, from summer camp meetings,
from invitations, re-dedications and benedictions.

I am from St. Louis, from Scotch-Irish stock borne out of the Ozark hills,
from collard greens and corn bread and sweet tea.

From the perennial tale of grandma's glass pitcher up for bids at her farm sale in the
front yard after grandpa died; from Aunt Annie's elaborate scheme to make sure I got
it and that her own sister didn't.

I am from worn manila envelopes filled with black and white Easter Sunday faces
squinting against the sun, black patent Mary-Janes, white cotton gloves, and a white
straw hat

Crowning a head full of blonde Spoolie curls.

For Madison
By Kelly Welsh

I'm sorry.
You can't go with me today.
I have to go to school.

You hang your head,
Walk slowly back into the house.
One last look, pleading, hopeful.

I wish you could go with me.
You don't care where we go—
You just want to ride.

When I do say yes, you
Bounce into the garage
Running in circles
Until I open the door
So you can jump into
The backseat only to
Hurdle into the front.

Bracing your feet on the door,
You poke your head out
The open window
The breeze pushing your usually
Pointy ears back,
Ready for the leap

As the car picks up speed,
Suddenly
Whoosh—you fly out into the world,
swooping on the currents,
Going wherever the wind takes you.

I quickly lose sight of you.
I must drive, paying attention to the traffic.
Responsibilities and commitments
Keep me belted to the seat.
I want to fly with you.

Suddenly, you are back.
Your fur rumpled, your eyes sparkling, Smiling, content and satisfied.
You touch my hand
Thanking me for the ride
As you curl up for a nap
In the seat next to me.

When Less Can Be More

By Sue Anderson

“May I help you?” she asks from behind the reception desk in the school’s main office.

I identify myself and explain that I am here to observe Kari Brown’s 11th grade American literature class and that Kari is expecting me. She glances at the clock and says Kari is in her planning area, then phones to let her know that I have arrived.

“Kari will be sending a student here in a few minutes to take you to her class,” she says.

I take a seat in the office to wait and wonder how much I’m going to be able to see in a class that will last only 40 minutes, what Kari has described as a “short mod.” Remembering my own days as a high school teacher I recall how the first five minutes of every class were usually spent trying to get students to settle down and the last five minutes were spent trying to keep them engaged as they watched the clock counting down the minutes until the bell. If the same is true for Kari, I predict, that will leave only 30 minutes. I am a bit skeptical about how much I’ll actually be able to see in the way of teaching and learning in this short mod.

Kari’s high school has long operated on a 10-day cycle of classes that combines longer periods or modules with shorter “mods” to accommodate different purposes and strategies for instruction. In addition, there are class modules during which students can work independently.

Just then a student walks into the office, heading straight for me. “Are you here for Mrs. Brown’s class?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m Hayley. Mrs. Brown sent me to get you. It’s a little confusing to get there from here.”

As we begin walking a series of long halls that cut across the second floor of the building I make small talk with Hayley, asking her if she is in Mrs. Brown’s 11th grade American literature class. “I was last semester,” she says, “but this semester my schedule didn’t work out so I have to take it at another time. I was really bummed about that.”

“And why is that?” I ask. “Well, when I first was in Mrs. Brown’s class I didn’t really like English that much, especially writing. But I kept working and Mrs. B has you write a lot. So I got better.”

“So, would you say you like English more now than before?”

“Yeh, absolutely,” she says. “I’m actually thinking about majoring in it in college.”

We finally end up at a wide-open space that looks like a combination media center and teacher planning area. It is occupied by a hundred or so students who are sitting at individual study carrels or in small groups at tables. Most are working on their own school-issued laptop computers.

Kari spots me from across the room and makes her way through the student tables and carrels.

“Great! You’re here. I’ve been on supervision here this period. This mod will be over in a couple of minutes.”

Just then I hear... not a bell, not a buzzer, but something more like a chime. Students begin closing their laptops, gathering their materials and moving toward the hallway. Kari explains that the next mod will begin in five minutes. As we walk to her classroom, she briefs me on what students will be doing today, using motifs they've identified in their reading of Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried, a novel about the physical and emotional burdens carried by those who lived through the Vietnam War. Students will associate these motifs, she explains, around a theme they will then use to develop a thesis statement. This thesis which will then be the basis of a literary analysis they will write as the final assignment for the unit.

Upon entering Kari's classroom I'm struck by how small it is, an interior room with no windows, furnished only with nine student tables arranged in three rows. A single table sits at the front of the room and serves as a teacher desk that Kari shares with another teacher who also teaches in this room.

"Jenny's going to be absent today, so you can sit in her seat," she explains, pointing me to a seat at the back of the room.

Students are entering the room now, among them a boy and a girl accompanied by another teacher. They take the seats nearest the door, and I infer that they are special education students and their teacher who co-teaches with Kari. As the other students arrive they notice the index cards Kari has placed on the table at the front of the room. They appear to know what to do, and they each take two cards before finding their seats. I hear the chime sound again signaling that the passing period is over.

Kari literally wastes no time.

"Everybody ready to go? Great! If you didn't pick up two cards, please do that now. Our warm-up for today is to write a definition of motif, based on what we learned yesterday, in your own words, on one of the cards. You've got two minutes. Go!"

While students are writing, Kari finishes writing the learning objective for the day on the board at the front of the room: I will analyze motifs in TTTC (The Things They Carried) using a 4-step process resulting in a theme statement.

"Okay, time's up," she says after two minutes. "Today we're going to be about coming up with a theme for your paper. The theme, remember, is what you'll need to be able to write your thesis statement." She points to the agenda on the board which lists the warm-up activity followed by Motif Analysis, Motif Assessment, and Connect Motif to Theme.

"Now take one minute and share your definitions with your table partner." She watches students as they do this. So do I, noticing that every student is engaged.

A minute later she says, "Okay, let's see what you've got. She calls on a girl sitting at the table next to me. Jenny reads her definition.

"Good job, Jenny. Great that you used the key work 'recurring'. Let's hear some more." She solicits responses from four more students, reminding them to think about the other characteristics of motifs they studied, 'tangible' and 'intangible.'"

"Alright," pointing to the objective for the day on the board, "today we want to walk out of here with each of you having the theme for your paper identified. Let's look at one the examples of motif from the TTTC text we studied yesterday." She flips on the LCD projector and projects a slide with highlighted text on a blank space of the wall at the front of the room. "Remember how we applied our definition of motif to this example? Let's see what you can do on your own today."

Kari is now walking through the room handing out 3-inch square sticky notes to each student.

“Pull out your TTTC books and turn to your reading assignment,” she says. “I want you to find a motif. Write it on your sticky note with the page number and whether it’s recurring, tangible or intangible and what theme it might connect to. Remember, this is the same activity you did yesterday in pairs.”

Students go right to work. One student raises his hand and asks if he can look at the sticky notes posted on the wall from the activity yesterday. Kari nods affirmatively, and he proceeds to the wall, which is dotted with numerous sticky notes from the previous day’s activity. As students work on this activity, Kari moves from table to table checking on students’ progress and giving them feedback to keep them moving toward the major objective for the class – identifying the theme about which they will write.

“You’re making good progress,” she announces to the whole class. “Remember our formula, motif plus author’s assertions equals theme. So don’t forget about what those assertions might be.” She continues around the room until she has visited with each student.

“Okay, now take five minutes, and on a second sticky note, compose a theme statement that incorporates the motif you’ve identified.” Again I notice that all students are writing. Kari continues to walk around the room as students work on this leg of the activity. She glances at her watch, keeping track of the time. Remarkably, we are now only 20 minutes into the period.

“Now,” she announces, “before I ask you to share your theme statements, please look them over for the word choice. Is it precise? And your fluency, does it flow? Take a minute to tweak it, if necessary.” She waits while students review their writing.

“Alright, now slide into groups of no more than three and share your theme statements. I don’t want you to critique each other’s work. I just want you to hear what everyone’s thinking about now.” Students begin sharing their ideas right away. I see some of them exchanging their sticky notes and others reading their own aloud. This sharing continues for about five or six minutes.

“Okay, folks,” she interrupts, “I really want to hear where you all are with this part.” She begins to call on each student, asking them to read or summarize their statement. She acknowledges and affirms their work and offers feedback for some who are still struggling. She continues until each student has shared.

“Now you each have a good start on your theme statement. Next time we’ll work on incorporating this into your thesis statement for your paper. Are we good to go? Now, copy your theme statement onto your second index card to keep and post your sticky note on the wall. See how our bank of ideas just keeps growing?”

As students finish this last portion of the activity, I hear the chime that signals the end of this mod. Leaving the room a few students stop to talk to Kari. I am still sitting at the back of the room thinking about how she and her students have packed more active learning into this short class period than I would have thought possible 40 minutes earlier. I’m reminded of the idea that less can be more.