

Gumming of Age in the Bronx

Jeanne Holtzman

Back in the days before my 12-year molars grew in, Chiclets were a mainstay of my candy regimen. Of course, they were not the only teeth-rotting treat in those days before fluoride treatments and sealants. I also greedily consumed Bonomo's Turkish Taffy, Jujubes, Junior Mints, Goobers, PEZ, Sno-Caps, Wax Bottles, and 3 varieties of starter cigarettes: red-tipped white candy, chocolate, and bubble gum. But I always came back to Chiclets.

Chiclets offered a full candy experience. You could peek through the crinkly cellophane window and see the shiny little white rectangles that clicked reassuringly inside the thin cardboard box. The first few crunchy bites released a minty-sweet explosion, but the shattered candy shell dissolved too quickly, and left you with the lamentably bland chewy center. I performed rigorous experiments, champing and chawing my way through long summer afternoons before I determined that chewing just one piece was too scanty, not taking up enough mouth-space to be gratifying, but two, or perhaps even three, pieces yielded a satisfying combination of mass, crunch and juice. Other excitable kids I knew chose to empty the entire twelve pieces into their mouths all at once in a giant, unwieldy wad, sugary spit escaping from their straining lips. When the box was empty, you had the fun of blowing into one end to make a cool buzzing sound, kind of like playing a comb. This was

and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living." Henri

especially satisfying when joining a box-blowing chorus in the movie theater during a sticky Saturday matinee of cartoons and continuous performances.

But there came a time when I stopped chewing Chiclets. It happened about the same time that Frankie Avalon sang shamelessly about a girl changing from bobby sox to stockings. When I lost my skate key for the last time, let my pink bounce-ball roll down the sewer without bothering to fish it out, and cut off my pony tail. When I started making mandatory monthly trips past the Sweet Shoppe to the drugstore and scuttling home hunched over the embarrassing bulky brown bag. The inevitable time came when I spit out the Chiclets and defiantly snapped my way into womanhood chewing Beech Nut Gum.

Babyish pastimes were replaced by the much more mature activity of walking the streets with my best friend in our adolescent uniforms.

While we didn't need to line up and pass muster in front of a drill sergeant, our regalia was nonetheless subject to rigorous standards. Hair was teased to a predetermined and ridiculous height using a metal rattail comb usually stolen from Woolworth's in a girlie rite of passage. Crop-dusting clouds of Breck hairspray rendered the structure immutable. Dark eyeliner rimmed the eyes in quasi-Egyptian style, with Erace applied under the eyes to camouflage any dark circles. In our regiment, pink lipstick was disdained and lips could be left unadorned, but for those aspiring to true bad girl status, Erace was applied to the lips for a look approaching the cadaveric. The face muscles were slackened into a mask of studied sullenness, too bored even for eye-rolling. Short shorts were topped with a matching shell top. Strapless pumps revealed as much toe cleavage as possible, and the shoe backs were smashed down to allow the required sulky foot dragging. The right hand held a perpetual portable radio up to the ear, and the left grasped a

Frederic Amiel ~S~ "If help and salvation are to come, they can only

wallet fat with captioned photos and stuffed with the mandatory package of gum.

But the insolent snapping and popping that was the hallmark of our new and sneering identities could never be performed with Chiclets. The gum that was *de rigueur* in the Bronx in 1961, was Beech Nut Gum. This was plain stick gum, in a soft wrapper. No candy coating, no cellophane window, no reassuring click. Just a soft shiny paper package of long thin stick gum, each piece wrapped in an enticing silver foil covered by a paper sleeve that pronounced the brand and could be folded into long chains. This wasn't a baby gum to stuff your mouth with or get stuck in your braids. It was a gum to get caught chewing in school. A taunt in the mouths of the cheap girls with their death stares. A gum with attitude.

It took determination and practice to meet the communal requirements of this army of adolescents. Passing algebra was a breeze compared to mastering the subtleties of hair-teasing, shoe-dragging and gum-snapping. The consequences of failing to fit in, of ineptly imitating the paradigm, were devastating. We knew this instinctively. We couldn't understand why the grown-ups couldn't see it. We wouldn't be caught dead chewing Chiclets. What we didn't really know was that Beech Nut gum was our transitional object, our blanke, our talisman, our mascot. With Beech Nut we could gnash our jaws against the hidden fears that lurked on this mass exodus that we were obligated to make, a journey that we rushed into as much as our chaotic bloodstreams drove us to it.

I left The Bronx when I was 16. Nearly four decades have passed, and I have long since forgotten my teasing comb and hairspray. I keep my shoes on my feet when I walk, and I rarely chew gum. But when I do chew, look out! Even though I try to be genteel and ladylike, my mouth cannot unlearn its adamant adolescent lessons. My gum pops and snaps with a defiance I

come from the children, for the children are the makers of men." Maria

have otherwise tirelessly tamed. It seems the old adage is true: You can take the girl out of the Bronx, but you can't take the Bronx out of the girl. Especially not out of the girl's mouth.

Graying in My Life

Michael Lee Johnson

Graying in
my life
growing old
like a stagnant
bucket of
rain water with moss
floating on the top —
Oh, it's not such
a bad deal,
except when
loneliness
catches you
chilled in the
middle of a sentence
by yourself —
ticking away
like an old grandfather clock,
hands stretched straight in the air
striking midnight
like a final
prayer.

Montessori ~S~ "One's age should be tranquil, as childhood should be

Guard Duty

Renie Burghardt

I was eleven when we arrived in the refugee camp in Austria, after having fled our war-torn country, Hungary, in 1947. The camp, located on the outskirts of a small town, was dismal, but at least our immediate needs were taken care of and we were grateful for that.

The people who ran the camp set up a school for the children and organized a scout group. Soon I was a Girl Scout and even went to a scout camp that summer, held in the beautiful Tyrol region of Austria.

The scout camp, located in the wooded mountains of Tyrol, was nicely set up. On one side of a clear, rushing creek were the tents for the girls and our troop leader, Mrs. Kovacs. On the other side, the boys and Mr. Kovacs, the other troop leader, were camping out. But we went for our meals on the boy's side and the nightly campfire was held there as well.

These campfires were always the highlight at the end of the day. We girls, with Mrs. Kovacs, would cross the little bridge that went over the creek and join the boys around the fire, singing songs, telling stories and playing games. All of us had a wonderful time beneath those beautiful, tall, whispering pine trees that covered the entire area.

To teach us courage and responsibility, I guess, our two troop leaders soon devised a plan. Every night, while the rest of the troop trekked across the bridge to the boys' side for the

playful. Hard work at either extremity of life seems out of place.

campfire, one girl would stay behind as the sole guard. This girl was given a whistle in the event she became scared or needed help of any kind, but other than that, she would be alone in the big dark pine woods for a couple of hours. If she blew the whistle, she would be heard and help would arrive within a few minutes, the leaders told us.

Most of the girls, at eleven and twelve years old, were not happy with this arrangement, but voiced their complaints only to each other about it. Nevertheless, the ones who got early turns seemed to do their job well, never once blowing the whistle while sitting in the dark for two hours. But the stories they told each other later, of strange noises coming from the pitch-black woods, frightened the dickens out of the girls who hadn't yet had a turn.

"I heard terrible grunting and I was sure a bear was coming to eat me," a girl named Anna told us as we lay in the tent that night. "So why didn't you blow the whistle?" I asked, chills running up and down my spine.

"Because I didn't want everyone to call me a chicken," Anna replied. "And I'm glad I didn't. The bear went away after a while. I'm lucky he wasn't hungry."

"I heard strange noises when I was on guard," another girl piped up. "It sounded like a woman crying. I even called out to her, but there was no answer. I decided it must have been a ghost and that she finally went on to haunt someone else. But Mrs. Kovacs said it was probably only an owl. I still think it was a ghost, though."

"I wonder if there are any wolves in these woods?" still another girl asked. "My turn is coming up soon."

"Mine, too," I said, "and I can tell you one thing: If I get scared, I will blow the whistle. I'd rather be called a chicken than be eaten by a bear!"

Thomas Arnold ~§~ "For God's sake give me the young man who has

So the following night, my turn to be the guard arrived. Mrs. Kovacs placed the whistle, hung on a long string, around my neck and handed me a flashlight.

“Remember, we’ll be just across the creek. If you get scared, blow the whistle,” she said, smiling at me. The other girls glanced back at me as they walked away, glad it wasn’t their turn. Then they were all gone.

I sat down on a campstool in front of my tent, my heart already pounding too fast, butterflies doing a jig in my stomach. I could see the campfire across the creek and hear the distant singing voices. Everything would be all right, I told myself, glancing uneasily around the now pitch-dark camp and woods. The other girls had survived their two hours as guards, and so would I.

I looked up above the towering pines, and saw the stars and a crescent moon in the sky. I inhaled the wonderful smell of the pines, I began to relax and feel quite good. This wasn’t so bad. In fact, it was nice to be alone in the quiet woods, I decided, and I began humming a little tune to entertain myself. Suddenly, I heard a noise. A very loud thump! Thump!

Then it stopped. “Who is there?” I called out. No reply. Then I heard a rustle, followed by more thumps. The noise was getting louder and louder. Again I called out. For a moment there was stillness followed by more thumps. Was my imagination playing tricks on me? I stood up, peered into the woods toward the noise and called out once more. This time the rustling became more frantic and the thumps became louder. There was something or someone out there. It was real, not my imagination and it was heading directly my way!

What if my friends were playing a trick? Would I be the only one to call for help and forever be known as “the chicken?” Resisting the urge to blow my whistle, I tried to think quickly. It couldn’t be a wolf, I thought right away. A wolf would sneak

brains enough to make a fool of himself!” Robert Louis Stevenson ~§~

up without all that noise. It had to be a bear and it was getting too close for comfort. I hugged the wall of the tent and stared deeply into the woods, the thump, thump, thump growing louder and getting closer. I could feel the vibration each thump commanded. Whatever was coming was large, larger than a small eleven year old girl could handle. It certainly wasn't a ghost, and must be bigger than even a bear.

As I raised the whistle to my lips, the huge thumper of the night came crashing into view and stopped right in front of me. I shined my flashlight on him.

"Snort! Snort!" went the thumper, bobbing his head.

"You're a horse!" I shrieked, spitting the whistle out of my mouth. "A big, giant horse! Hello there, boy. Where did you come from?" I held out my hand as I talked to him. The horse's muzzle touched my fingers gently. He snorted again. I reached up boldly and patted his head.

"There, there, boy. You must be lost or something. I'm sure they'll find your owner in the morning. Meanwhile, you can keep me company. I don't like to be alone in the dark and maybe you don't either," I said as I continued patting him. "Maybe my guardian angel sent you my way, just so I wouldn't be scared."

The horse snorted again. I wondered if I had something in the tent I could give him as a treat.

"You wait here. I'll be right back," I told him, creeping into the dark tent and feeling around for the box of Keks that I had saved. "Here. I think you'll like these, boy." Keks were a kind of cookie-cracker combination that was very popular in Austria at the time, and we had each received a packet in case we got hungry between meals.

The horse did, indeed, like the Keks, and wanted more and more. Soon my package was empty. I walked around the camp boldly now, my visitor behind me the entire time. Noises I heard no longer frightened me. After all, I had a guardian with me. I

"Old age is like everything else. To make a success of it, you've got to

was actually sorry to hear voices crossing the creek as the others were returning.

“Look Mrs. Kovacs, I had company tonight,” I called out to them. “So I wasn’t alone at all.”

“A horse! Look girls, Renie has a horse with her,” one of the girls shrieked excitedly as a whole bunch of them gathered around my companion and me.

“Where did he come from?” “I wonder whose horse he is?” “Weren’t you frightened when he showed up?” And many other questions followed. Mrs. Kovacs then blew the whistle, and her husband came running across the creek.

“He probably belongs to the farm nearby. We’ll check with the farmer in the morning,” Mr. Kovacs said, going back to get a rope. “We’ll tie him to a tree for tonight.”

The following morning, some boys went to the farm, and it turned out that the horse had gotten out of the fenced pasture, and galloped off through the woods. Until he found me, that is!

“I had a horse just like him in Hungary,” I told the farmer when he came to get my guardian companion. “I used to ride him all the time. Then we had to sell him because of the war.”

“Well,” he said, “you can come and ride Rudy while you’re here, anytime. He is pretty gentle and he seems to have taken a real liking to you.”

And that’s what I did. I went to ride Rudy several times before we went back to the refugee camp and all the other girls considered me the bravest of the guards for not blowing my whistle when I heard a thump in the pitch-dark night, in the pine woods of Tyrol.

start young.” Fred Astaire ~S~ “I refuse to admit that I am more

Poetry Floats

Jim Wilson

I am practicing write and release,
Lifting lines on the rising heat
Of winter's curling chimney smoke;
Laying words out an upstairs window
On a springtime zephyr;

Lofting themes tacked as summer kite tails
Flying to high cotton-cloud pillows while
The slick string slips through my fingers;
Linking fall writings to milkweed seeds,
Lint puffs, and down feathers.

I will float them to you all,
Whomever, whenever, wherever,
And you open them in your time
To read and recite
Till their season is done,

Never knowing me;
Never knowing that I am watching you
From the crack in the closet door universal,
Feeling pleased and planning to float
Verse after verse to you – as our seasons change.

than 52, even if that makes my children illegitimate.” Lady Nancy

Poppy, Floppy Football Shoes

Doug Sellers

Football became my passion during my high school years as a Wylie Bulldog. The first year I played started off with a bang. The coach came into the classroom and said, “Today you will get your equipment. Check it and quickly suit out.” He then dismissed us to go to the gym.

I got my suit but had no cleated football shoes. I went through all the boxes of equipment in the gym and finally found a pair of shoes about four sizes too big. I sat down on a bench and put them on. The laces pulled up tight and made the shoes look really long and narrow. The pointed toes stuck straight up. I walked across the gym floor, and those oversized shoes popped and flopped with each step.

We played our first game the next week on a grassy field at Fair Park Stadium. Pride took hold of our Wylie football team. We ran and played like professionals – we thought. Those shoes of mine flopped and popped all over the field with every step I took. I caught passes and made two touchdowns as I went floppity-pop and poppity-flop across the field.

I caught a pass that thrilled one of the Bulldogs’ fans. He called the Coach over to the bleachers and said, “Here’s \$10, Coach. Get that boy a pair of shoes.”

Back in the gym, Coach called me over. I felt nervous, afraid I had done something wrong. He said, “Doug, one of the fans noticed your shoes floppin’ and poppin’ all over the field. Here

Astor ~\$~ “Aging seems to be the only available way to live a long

is \$10 he gave me to give to you so you could get you a good pair of cleated shoes.”

I took the \$10 to Mackey’s Sport Shop the next day and bought a pair of shoes that fit my feet. They cost \$9.95. That tickled me good. I felt like I could really play ball now for my Wylie High School Bulldogs.

I proudly kept those shoes until I went into the U. S. Air Force in 1952. Mom and Dad moved during the four years I spent in the military service. I returned home to find both my shoes and two letter jackets gone, but I still have the memories.

Matron

Carole Creekmore

They tricked me into this box –
Dull walls of wrinkles and shadows,
Comfortable elastic waist and roomy seat.

Displayed, but shut up and out,
Seen, but not with their herd –
Only hands free to cook-clean-pay.

Can’t find a key or combination –
Can’t even find any air holes.
Someone is going to pay!

life.” Daniel Francois Esprit Auber ~S~ “Age will not be defied.”

Borland in the Breeze

Ginny Greene

Most everybody remembers the writer James Michener. But, Hal Borland? His work captivated busy, rushing readers decades ago. His descriptions of the nature he loved made readers feel they were walking alongside him as he pointed out a frog on a lily pad, or a wedge of migrating geese, or an approaching rainstorm.

There may be a few octogenarians who remember the heyday of the man and his writing, but not many. The people who know him best in this century are the high school students who have studied *When The Legends Die* in a lit class. Hal Borland wrote that book and many others. In addition to all his books, several of them for young people, Hal wrote for newspapers and magazines.

Harold Glen Borland came into this world on the prairies of Nebraska on May 14, 1900, and left it from the picturesque fields of Connecticut in 1978. He came into my life through the thousands of words he left lying around on paper. The first selections I found at the library were from his unsigned nature column, one he wrote without a byline for each Sunday's *New York Times*.

His passion ran to describing and defending nature. It led him to commentaries on conservation and preservation and awards from societies. He reviewed Aldo Leopold's book *Sand County Almanac*, commenting on the author's poetic approach

Francis Bacon ~§~ "Those whom the gods love grow young." Oscar

to his conservation philosophy, “This book looks as harmless as a toy glass pistol filled with colored candy. It turns out to be a .45 automatic fully loaded.”

And then there’s the way he expressed his faultless logic. “You can’t be suspicious of a tree....”

His collection has led him to be variously classified as a nature writer, an editorialist, a writer in the tradition of a daily almanac, an outdoor writer, a writer of rural America. He, himself, called his columns outdoor editorials.

His motive was simply to write about what he loved. He pitched his idea to the *New York Times* editor because he felt so strongly that city dwellers needed a few minutes to decompress, and a chance to stop and reflect. The essays brought green thoughts to calm those who lived among concrete and high rises. Through his columns, readers sat with him one Sunday on a porch in the warmth of a spring sun, watching a bee bumble past. The next week they walked a sodden path covered with wet leaves, or bent over a busy bug, or watched leaves fall orange and rust and red from a tree. They heard birds chirp, watched wildflowers emerge from the soil, and stood near critters nesting, foraging, raising their young.

Hal Borland’s popular column was enjoyed by readers from 1941 to just before he passed away in 1978. Imagine that, now, in this world of hard news, limited space, and rushed readers. No city editor could be coerced to publish such work. Many people considered his column a breath of fresh air in the sooty, noisy midst of New York City.

Some of Hal Borland’s 37 years of columns are preserved in a book titled *Sundial of the Seasons*, published in 1964. There is a reformatted sequel, though, for these days. His work is said to read like the weather blogs on the internet. These are written by people who, like me, never knew the writer. Nice to know there’s a bit of Borland in the ether.

Wilde ~§~ “Youth has no age.” Pablo Picasso ~§~ “Old wood best to

Mourning Elvis *Betty Wilson Beamguard*

They start with the Elvis hype
a week before the anniversary of his death,
show aging fans, female of course,
sobbing at his grave,
twisting soggy tissues,
their faces distorted in grief.

Give it a rest. It's been thirty years,
I say as I watch The Early Show.

A few days later, I gaze at the screen
from the bathroom doorway,
transfixed with toothbrush immobile
as they interview Elvis's first love.

She speaks of their innocent kisses;
I dissolve into tears, my lower lip quivering
as I lament their fame-crushed romance
and the loss of my own first love.

burn, old wine to drink, old friends to trust, and old authors to read."

Cruel Time

Andrea Zamarripa Theisen

Time has no sense of civility:
it marches on relentlessly,
leaves furrowed tracks upon my face.
Of my sweet youth, there's not a trace.
It stomped my skin with hobnailed boots;
turned it to jelly, and everything droops!
My once-full lips no longer sin
and long, black hairs sprout on my chin.
My wobbly legs refuse to dance;
my drain pipes balk. (Could I need Depends?)
My joints protest when I try to walk
and conversation is a matter of luck.
You see, I forget what I started to say,
'cause cobwebs in my brain get in the way.
Any hair that's left is thin and gray
and for all those Big Macs, I've started to pay.
I'm not quite as tall; I've begun to shrink;
my teeth in a glass sit next to the sink.
Time's taking my eyesight just for spite;
while my hearing has flown into the night.
But the vilest deed Time keeps trying to do,
is to snuff out my beautiful memories of you.

Francis Bacon ~§~ "The secret to staying young is to live honestly,

Stolen Hymnals

Kerín Riley-Bishop

On the second shelf of the hall closet, in the home I share with my mate and our children, is an old hymnal. It was taken from the forward pew of a Presbyterian Church in Southern California. Quite by accident actually, but unfortunately, and hysterically, a common occurrence for my mother and me.

Perhaps Mom was a closet kleptomaniac; perhaps she so enjoyed song time that she wanted to cherish it through the week. Perhaps it was nothing more than a mother's instinct to gather everything from recently-occupied child space, making certain nothing was left behind.

Whatever the reason, we often found, tucked beneath her arm after the service, a hymnal. Most often, we discovered the "theft" before we got too far, and with blushing cheeks Mom would return the hymnal to its cubby, or sometimes directly to the pastor with an impish apology. I would stand next to her, shaking my head, laughing and giving the chastising look which said 'Mother! Stealing from a church!'

A typical Sunday after church services went something like this:

"Mom," I would ask, "What's that under your arm?"

Mother would look at me, eyes wide, toss her hands up, laugh out loud, and trek back into the sanctuary. This "tradition" began when I was nine, continued through my teens and into my early 20's.

eat slowly, and lie about your age." Lucille Ball ~§~ "Old age is the

Sometimes I got a jump on things. I would hold the hymnal during worship, or if Mom managed to pry it from me, I'd be sure to lift it gently back out of her hands at the end of the service, and calmly slide it back into the nook where it would be able to wait safely for the next parishioner. I always threw Mom a stern glance which said, 'It's wrong to steal a hymnal, Mother.' But, despite my admonishments and withering looks, more often than not, we found a hymnal tucked under her arm at the end of the service.

One winter morning we arrived home after church to find that a hymnal had hitched a ride. Mother and I stared horrified at the brown book with gold writing resting in the back seat with our coats and church programs. I was beside myself! Mother had really done it this time! She stole! From church!

We decided extra bulk from the coats had masked the book. Mom assured me we would return the hymnal the following Sunday. One week turned into two, then three, four. Months went by, the hymnal waited to be returned, and every Sunday, we came home from church to see it on the table next to the door...where we would not be able to forget it. It was a very patient hymnal, waiting serenely to return to its rightful place among the other hymnals. I am sure if it could have, it would have laughed at us, forgetful mother and daughter, leaving week after week without it, returning to see that we'd left it behind again. It was the first thing we saw when we opened the door. Once the hymnal made it into the car, but we forgot to take it inside the church, so it rode around in the back seat for awhile.

Weeks and months progressed into years. The hymnal became family. We moved several times, packing and unpacking the hymnal, eventually placing it next to our favorites on the bookshelf. *Hymns for the Family of God* found new friends in *Cuffy Bear* and *Cress Delahanty*.

verdict of life." Amelia E. Barr ~S~ "I will never be an old man. To

After years of cross-country moving, the birth of my son, and a few bad relationships, I finally found someone perfect for me and settled into a sweet life in a quiet town near my mother. She had faithfully kept for me all the boxes of my youth and collections acquired on my journey.

One day, we brought all the boxes home from storage and I began the teary process of sorting through my boxed-up past. I opened each container carefully for two reasons: I am terrified of spiders and imagined hordes of them jumping out at me for disturbing them, and I didn't remember what all I had packed away, and didn't want to break anything.

One particular box held, among other memories, a baby doll from my grandmother, an article my father had written on metaphysics so many years ago, a tiny newspaper clipping of my father's death announcement, a pink porcelain treasure box with a unicorn on the lid which I had received for my eighth birthday, and...the hymnal. I smiled, remembering how many times we had tried not to leave with it, and how many times we had tried to return it. I began thumbing through its pages, recognizing old songs I had loved, humming quietly to myself and even singing a few lines of my favorites.

Church is no longer a part of my life, but it is part of the past which formed me, and there are memories of those times I hold dear. Sundays were for my mother and me. Sunday was the day we set aside to share together. The hymnal is a reminder of who I was and how I became the woman I am. It is a reminder of old trucks with holes in the floorboards, icy winter days, and no heater; of warm pie and cocoa at the diner after services ended; of living on twenty-six acres by the river; the smell of apple orchards at harvest time. So many memories just by glancing at the hymnal in the hallway.

me, old age is always 15 years older than I am." Bernard M. Baruch

*Jane**brenda wise byrd*

There's a little girl inside of me,
Her name is Brenda Jane.
And she can skate and climb a tree,
And she plays in the rain.

She doesn't have arthritis,
Her fingers are all straight,
And she can run and play all day.
At night she doesn't ache.

She can read a book all afternoon,
Escape to distant lands,
Where she might be most anything.
Her head is full of plans.

And then I see the mirror!
Oh, my, where did she go?
Just what has happened to her?
I'm sure I do not know!

She can't be gone. It isn't fair.
How quickly time does fly.
My hair is gray, my fingers bent,
I ache so I could cry.

~\$~ *"Youth is not a question of years: one is young or old from birth."*

But just in case she's still around,
I'll put this red hat on
And do the things that she would do.
My heart is still her home.

For Aunt Marie who still calls me "Brenda Jane."

Carol Lee Turns 60 and I Miss Remembering the Day

Karen Neuberg

She's still my wild
pony, neighing over Brooklyn
sidewalks, though I haven't seen or heard from her
for almost 50 years. Daddy called
her "carrot top" for reasons
obvious to anyone. I miss our pairing
in third grade to stand before the class and tell
stories we made up on the spot about boys
with shiny wagons, red as her hair, faster
than flying horses, but only in their minds.
They never saw her gallop down the block
oblivious in make-believe.
The day she moved to Roanoke
was my first broken heart.

Natalie Clifford Barney ~§~ "We grow neither better or worse as we

Building Blocks

Kerin Riley-Bishop

I am five.
Today I walked to the grocery store by myself.
I met a friend on the way home.
We walked and talked the five blocks back to the apartments
where he lives too.
Mom got upset when I waved at a man as we left the
driveway tonight.
“Who is that!?”
I hear something in her voice I don't recognize at first.
“My friend.”
I tell her we walked home from the grocery store together.
I recognize the tone now. Mom is scared.
Some men do not have good intentions.

I am thirty-five.
Last week my child rode his bike to the convenience store,
his grandfather following in the truck.
My son never walked to the grocery store by himself
at the age of five, or otherwise.
The world is crueler today than when I was a child.
But I am trying to soften
for over the years I have learned:
Some men are heroes.

get old, but more like ourselves.” May L. Becker ~S~ “But though our

What Would Dolly Parton Do?

Thelma Zirkelbach

What Would Dolly Parton Do?

This week my vacuum cleaner died. It was thirty years old, about 120 in vacuum cleaner years, and it had served me well.

I don't know much about vacuum cleaners; in fact, I'm not too fond of them. They signify work. If I had to choose my favorite appliance, it would be a microwave oven. Quick, easy dinners when I'm feeling lazy. Baked potatoes in minutes, not the hour they used to take.

Despite my disinterest in vacuums, I know the name Oreck. Which goes to show the importance of advertising.

I headed to the Oreck store, where a pleasant young man greeted me. I told him I wanted an upright vacuum. "You've come to the right place," he said, grabbed a bag of what looked like feathers and sprinkled some on the carpet and some on the tile floor. Next he dumped a cereal-like substance over them and ground it into the carpet with his heel. He pushed a vacuum toward me and said, "Now, see how easy it is to clean up."

Wow! The vacuum was light, it was easy to move. All the mess disappeared like magic. I was sold.

"We have two models," the salesman said. "This one is hypo-allergenic and comes with a ten-year warranty. This has a twenty-one year warranty, and it's HEPA." He explained HEPA meant even more allergenic than hypo-allergenic. I was impressed, but the twenty-one year warranty seemed a bit over-

outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day." 2

the-top. I'm seventy-two, and I doubt I'll be worrying about the carpets in twenty-one years. Besides, the other model cost \$200 less. Easy choice.

Oreck was having a special, which meant they threw in a canister and a free iron. What a deal. I whipped out my credit card and signed up.

"Now," the salesman said, "what color would you like? We have two. Black and red."

Black. Sleek, elegant. A color that belongs in a Park Avenue penthouse.

Red. Who would buy a red vacuum? Dolly Parton?

I stared at the two models, then pointed automatically toward the black.

My hand stilled. Why not choose something out of character, something a little wild? I can't say I'm exactly colorless, but I've always been reticent, a bit staid. I relied on my outgoing husband for support in social situations. But I'm alone now. Perhaps this is the time to reinvent myself, to lead a more vivid life...starting small. It's too late to make myself into a red hot mama, but I could be a red hot vacuumer. The Crimson Granny. Miss Scarlett...in the Living Room...with a Vacuum Cleaner.

"I'll take that one," I said and proudly hauled my sassy new vacuum out to my car.

One Small Step

July 20, 1969

Arlene Mason

I grew up in Seattle, but spent my summers languishing on the banks of the Skagit River in Washington with my parents, as they fished. We spent many weeks camping and fishing with several other people. None had any children, so I was usually left alone with my dog. Together, Missy and I would run through the tall grass and listen to Rock on my big transistor radio.

One day, one of the people who had a camper invited everyone in to watch something on her 9-inch television. By this time I hadn't watched television for over a month; this was going to be a treat. Well, it would have been if there hadn't been ten women in the tiny smoke-filled camper. It was hot and the smell of stale smoke was stifling.

She turned on the television and adjusted the aerial to get the best picture possible. Though it was flecked with static, we could clearly see the cratered surface of the moon. No one breathed as the lunar lander gently settled into the dust. Everyone let out a sigh of relief when it was over.

As we walked back to our campsite, my mother spoke for the first time since we witnessed the landing. "I got a lump in my throat just watching that," she said.

I nodded and never gave it another thought. I did not know I had witnessed something extraordinary.

There's actually no explanation for my affection for them." Owen J.

Remnants

Lyn Messersmith

My grandson has been to the dump.
It's a family ritual; each generation's
version of an archeological dig.
Ancestral prizes are piled on the porch;
symbols of people this child never knew,
or wouldn't recognize without the wrinkles.

The two brothers are here.
This boy bears both their names.
Some faded red tobacco tins
tell tales on Dad. And the
whiskey flask that was
witness to my uncle's life and death.

Containers from nail polish and
perfume mark Mom's last stand
before giving in to washboard,
churn, and rolling pin. Shards
of her best dishes, and surely
a shattered dream or two.

Here are rusty bits of barbed wire
that fenced my grandfolks in.
Blue spackled tin plates and cups,
water keg, wagon wheel hub,

McClain ~§~ "After all, life hasn't much to offer except youth and I

and a cracked crock with no cork,
made to hold moonshine.

Narrow-necked green bottles
from when Coke was just a drink.
A cream separator spout, and
busted yellow Tonka toys,
from a generation of boys
separating my grandson and me.

My grandson's visit is over.
No doubt he should have been
required to return these remnants
to their resting place. Then again,
maybe not. Somehow it seems
too soon to quit this family reunion.

Creamed Spinach

Margaret Fieland

You claimed it was a fine old family recipe
invented by your Grandfather,
the one who owned the inn,
and that he called it
Potspinge
for Potatoes and Spinach.
Which was impossible
now that I think about it
since he only spoke Hungarian.

suppose for older people the love of youth in others." F. Scott Fitzgerald

Sugar

Yvonne Pearson

I can say your laugh crumbles
around me like a sugar cookie,
already devoured, I go on tasting.
I cannot speak of the saccharin laugh.
It is no substitute.
Sugaaaaaar. The word
stretched long and sweet
against the heat of your neck.
If our youth was spent preserving —
packing our smiles with salt
in sterilized jars —
let our ripeness now burst reckless
and fall where it may
for sugar is also food.
Let us spend the next twenty years
licking our fingers
know the sweet and the salt
of each other
let the grains of forgiveness
bring us past sixty into
the sweet flush of youth, we are
earth's more now than at twenty.
There is no substitute for sugar.

~\$~ "In youth we run into difficulties. In old age difficulties run into

The Wedding Bouquet

Karen Karlitz

“Fat, fat the water rat, fifty bullets in your cap,” my father sang, staring at my mother’s mid-section as she exited their old turquoise-and-white Chevrolet.

“Stop it already, Sidney,” my mother said, wrapping her stylish beige cape tightly around her. “No one’s laughing.” Especially not beautiful Rose, who had put on at least five pounds over the long winter. “I’ll lose it in a month.”

“You lost it a long time ago, Rosie.” My father was in a foul mood because of having to drive all the way to the Bronx for my cousin Marcy’s wedding. The people getting out of the Pontiac next to us watched my parents with interest, but my older sister Wendy and I were long past embarrassment over their endless arguing; any subject or perceived slight held potential for them.

Silently we walked toward the catering hall on the Grand Concourse where our Aunt Lily and Uncle Ed were throwing their only daughter and her betrothed, Stewart Baumgarten, a Saturday night affair. Ed, a worker at the Fulton Fish Market, and Lily, a part-time saleslady at Barricini’s candy shop, couldn’t afford the party, but went ahead with it anyway believing God would provide. Theirs was the side of the family that was religious, the side that hadn’t yet moved from their fourth floor Bronx walkup apartment, the side that valued a good education for their children ahead of a closet full of expensive clothing, the side that was looked down upon by my

us.” Josh Billings ~\$~ “Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be,

dashing family though such a sentiment was never publicly voiced.

“My father leered at my mother slyly and, like a schoolboy, began to taunt her again. “Fat, fat, the...”

“Shut up, Sidney, you sound like a moron,” Rose said, forcing a smile as the Goldman family made its entrance like reigning royalty into the large room.

Sidney wore a new suit that Rose insisted he buy. It was the meat of many of their recent arguments. Thinking it cost too much money – my father was pathologically frugal – he regularly threatened to return it. Wendy, a Rose clone who inherited my mother’s clothing gene, was a knock-out in a lavender silk minidress. That bit of DNA skipped my genetic blueprint and left me with a penchant for torn jeans and dirty sneakers, but for weeks Rose lectured me on the importance of wardrobe. She dragged me to her favorite shopping haunts and, when I couldn’t bear to try on another dress, got me to agree to a purple velvet mini.

Aunt Lily rushed over to us, her enormous girth clothed in navy blue satin, her sweet face bursting with happiness. “I was starting to get worried. I’m so glad you got here okay,” she said.

“You thought we wouldn’t?” Rose snapped. Just seeing her jumbo-sized sister made my mother edgier than usual, terrified as she was of becoming truly fat.

Lily let Rose’s ill humor pass, and hugged Wendy and me to her enormous breasts. “Come, you’re sitting next to us,” and she led us to a big, round table next to the dance floor. “I must go see how my Marcy’s doing. She’s so nervous, you wouldn’t believe.”

Rose sniffed the air in response. Sidney’s eyes darted about the room.

“Where the hell is the bar?” he asked.

The last of life, for which the first was made.” Robert Browning ~S~
