

Write Action Poetry and Prose Contest, 2009

winning poem by J. Kates, Fitzwilliam, NH.

Opening Chorus

And through it all,
while we waited for the ship to arrive
with a black sail or a white sail,
while we made our own kind of love
in the morning and buried
our dead before nightfall,
the hair on our heads kept growing,
and our fingernails,
and without thinking
we cut them back, inch by inch,
and fell into bed again, or ditched
square holes in the lengthening shadow,
or stared unavailing at the silent horizon
while the hair on our heads kept growing
and our nails dug
into our hollow hands.

Youth category poetry winner: Colin Seifert

re-

Re-wind. Look back.

See time flowing in re-verse.

Re-view and see

this lost time is not a curse.

Re-set the clocks,

find something you re-gret.

Re-do that time

see that nothing's over yet.

Re-start, re-new,

the end has just begun,

re-write stories,

everybody's having fun.

Re-claim what's lost.

Bring the future to the past.

Re-script your life,

make it something that will last.

Re-learn your facts,
see that nothing's set in stone.

Re-phrase your words,
make them something all your own.

Re-shoot the world,
everybody is the class.

Re-joice, new earth,
and the old is fading fast.

Re-light this life,
hold it like a newborn ember,
Re-born, the flames,
grasp it tight, and
re-member

First place prose winner:

Orion Rising In A Neighboring Sky

By Susan Johnson

It was the usual cast of characters pondering the ways of the world over coffee and pie at Miss Belle's Diner when Junior Taylor came home from the war.

Pivoting on a counter stool, Bud Smith, hands moving wildly in the air, was bent forward regaling the four men in the booth across from him with an improbable story of how his truck took flight before landing in a tree when the door opened. Looking over his shoulder, he stopped in mid-gesture.

"Well, hey Junior welcome home," he said spinning off the stool as the other men rose in greeting.

With blonde hair down to his shoulders, torn jeans and a peace sign stenciled on the back of his fatigue jacket, Junior did not look like the other Otisville boys who had returned from war with their short hair cuts and shiny combat ribbons perched on their uniforms. Junior lowered his head in acknowledgment of the men but his averted gaze made them sit back down without speaking

On his 17th birthday Junior placed the barrel of a 12-gauge shotgun against his father's left ear and told the drunken fool to sign his enlistment papers or he would blow his damn head off. His old man complied and the next day Junior stepped on a bus and started a journey that would take him first to Fort Bragg and four months later to the heat and chaos of Southeast Asia.

During the first of Junior's his three tours of duty in Vietnam his father died. He did not ask for leave to go home for the funeral. In fact, Junior did not come home until the day he stepped into Belle's diner.

Junior left Otisville a boy and, if based only on his appearance, returned a boy. His build was still slight, his freckled face still as fresh and smooth as it had been almost four years earlier. But if you looked at him more than casually, if you looked at him more than once, there was no boy left in Junior's eyes. He was three months shy of his 21st birthday.

Hearing Junior's name, Belle rushed from the kitchen wiping first her hands and then the tears in her eyes to greet him with a hug around his neck. He had a smile for her, the only person in Otisville to have written him while he was away fighting for the American dream and its dreamers.

"I thank you for your packages," Junior said clearing his throat. "I was every man's favorite friend when your cookies arrived."

"Oh honey, welcome home. I am so glad to see you," Belle said, cutting thick slices of pie for him. "After your daddy died we tried to clean up the old place, washed and packed the linens in your mama's cedar chest, so I expect the house to be habitable but pretty darn dirty. You might want to stay with me and my cousin Anna tonight and we'll go up tomorrow to see what needs to be done."

Forcing a friendly expression onto his face, Junior turned down Belle's offer of help. He told her he had called the electric company to turn on the juice at the house, bought bags of groceries at the A&P in Bennington and figured he'd just go and check out the old place. He would see everyone later, he said, but did not mean it.

Junior stopped his new Ford pick-up at the end of the dirt driveway of the four-room house where he grew up. He sat with the window open sniffing the fresh June air. It was a mean little house, listing to one side, a few asphalt shingles lying on the ground. But the yard, even with its wild and unruly grass, was beautiful to him. The crab tree his mother had planted the year he was born was white with bloom. And at the corners of the house, standing sentry, were lilac bushes filled with deep purple flowers. He closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and knowing it could not be, he nevertheless wished his mother alive and standing at the door, her hair the color of his pulled back in a ponytail, her arms open with delight. For Junior had returned home fully understanding the finality of death.

Junior spent the first weeks of his civilian life scouring the house until there was no dirt, no smudges, no signs of his father left. He hauled out his father's clothes, then his favorite chair and finally his bed and set them on fire back beyond the prickly bushes.

Naked, he scythed the yard back down to lawn, forked up the garden, cut wood and cleaned the debris from long-neglected flowerbeds. He burned what he could of the junk in the yard and hauled the rest down to the dump. He did not go to the diner or the general store, instead traveling over the mountain to Bennington to buy what he needed.

He polished wood and windows to a sparkle, dumped a couple of gallons of bleach in the toilet and in the claw foot tub leaving it for days before he tackled cleaning the porcelain, and laid shelf paper in the newly painted kitchen cabinets. The only thing he left in his parents' room was his mother's cedar chest where he found, at the bottom, below worn sheets and towels, a delicately embroidered linen tablecloth yellow with age. He washed the cloth by hand, letting it dry smooth on the grass before covering the kitchen table, a blue glass vase filled with flowers placed in the center.

In the afternoon he would sleep in his new hammock strung between two maple trees or in his single bed on sheets dried crisp by the mountain air, a picture of Ted Williams above his head. Then, in the dark of night, Junior walked silently through the woods, along the paths of his childhood, down into town, past families silhouetted in lighted windows as bedside lamps were shut off one by one. He took careful steps, always on guard, always at the ready.

At the first blush of red in the eastern sky Junior would return home exhausted from his night's duty, climb into bed, waking within a few hours to the terrible screaming in his ears.

Occasionally men from the Francis Jones Post 54 of the American Legion came to his door bringing with them baked goods that their wives had made and six packs of beer. They would come ready to talk of war. Junior would stand mute as they spoke until they became uncomfortable in his silence and would find reason to leave. Junior poured the beer down the sink.

Around mid-July, the hippies moved into the old Franklin place, just above where Junior lived. Residents were amazed by the arrival of the newcomers not because of their peculiar ways, dress or choice of smoking product; they had read about that in Life Magazine. What was amazing to them was that anyone not born in Otisville would be fool enough to actually choose to live in such a sorry-ass town where the sun rose later and set earlier than any place in Vermont. But come they did and the sound of their laughter, carried on notes of their omnipresent music, flowed down and bathed Junior in gentleness. He added the farm to his nightly patrol.

"Oh damn, oh goddamn Richard Nixon, damn General Westmoreland" he heard the voice of a woman mutter in despair one morning while he was cutting roses from the bushes that ran riot along the edges of the yard. With a bunch of peach-

colored roses in his hand, he walked down the driveway to the sound of the soft cursing.

There in the middle of the road, stood a young woman, a girl really, barefoot, beautiful in a long flowered dress, holding a torn brown paper bag. A loaf of bread, a smashed bottle of milk, three packs of smokes and a candy bar lay in the dirt.

"Hey," she said grinning at Junior with delight. "How did you know roses are my favorite flowers?"

With an awkward flourish he presented her the flowers, taking the bag from her hand and gathered up the groceries from the road, kicking the glass into the ditch. He gestured with his head, a tentative, questioning smile on his face and started back up his driveway. Holding the bouquet roses in front of her like a bride, the girl followed, skipping to match his stride.

First place prose youth category: Marty Cain of Marlboro, Vt

Closet Runner

In the back of the closet, Riley Stanton found an old pair of Nike running flats that were still encrusted in mud. He held them up. They were white with red stripes, and the black swish was coming off the side of one of the shoes. The spikes on the bottom were very worn down, and they looked like they had never been removed from the shoes. "Dad!" Riley yelled. "Where did these come from?"

"What?" his father called back from the other room. "Have you found the shirt yet?" He walked over to where Riley was kneeling by the closet. After his son had claimed that the 80s were coming back, Jim Stanton had told him to look in his closet since he had a Talking Heads tour shirt back there somewhere. "Did you find the shirt?" he asked again.

"Not yet. Are these yours?" he handed the shoes to his father.

"Those?" He scratched his beard and squinted, holding the shoes up to his eyes. "Oh yeah, those are mine. Yeah, I wore those when I did cross country in high school."

"*You were a runner?*" Riley started laughing. Considering all the stories his father had told him once he was of age—"the last month of school where he had showed up for class baked every day," the one about "taking acid during the assembly," or how one time the principal "found the bong he kept in his locker"—the image of his father in shorts, a jersey, and running shoes seemed pretty comical.

His father laughed and continued to stroke his beard. He adjusted his glasses. "Yeah, believe it or not, I did it during my senior year... My buddy John and I thought it would be pretty funny if we joined the cross country team so we could get high and run in the woods. 'Course, I actually turned out being pretty good at it."

"You were?" Riley shook his head. "I don't believe you! *My* father, the same guy who spent all of his youth surfing and smoking joints was good at *high school* sports?"

His father shrugged. "I mean, yeah, I had some natural ability as a runner. I guess I didn't really try that hard during the practices, but I ended up doing okay in the meets anyway... 'Course, my buddies and I were high during some of them. So I probably don't even remember right..."

But it was a lie. Right then in his mind, Jim Stanton, the father of Riley, was standing on the starting line once again. 10:27 AM. Saturday, October 16, 1982.

It was the state meet, the last meet of the season, and the gun was about to go off. John leaned over and whispered into Jim's ear, "This is it, man. The last meet. Then we're *done* with this shit forever. God I'm so sick of these meets. I'm sick of *running*. A week from today we'll be waking up with a hangover, not standing in the rain before a goddam race." John laughed to himself.

They certainly were standing in the rain. When Jim woke up that morning, he was tempted to play sick after he looked out the window and saw the rain coming down in torrents. At the start, there was a 100-foot long line of runners who were all standing in mud up to their ankles. Some were doing jumping jacks, struggling to maintain a good body temperature. Other stretched compulsively, and others simply stood, waiting for the meet to be over so they could go home and take a hot shower. Jim shivered and hugged himself in an attempt to stay warm.

"Man, I wish I hadn't smoked that joint in the woods during the girl's race," said John with a laugh. "Are you glad you didn't? I heard this course is really ridiculous, so let's hope I don't get lost!"

Jim shrugged. Since it was his last race ever, he suddenly had a desire to run faster than he ever had before. He wasn't sure why—he had never been a terribly competitive person, but now his heart was pounding and his fists were clenched. It was almost time. Jim wondered how he would maintain traction in the ankle-deep mud, even with the half-inch spikes he had put in his shoes. The starter raised the gun. "SET!" he yelled. Jim's heart was pumping even harder now, and it felt like time was frozen as he waited for the gun to go off. Jim suddenly remembered his coach cornering him after the last race. "Stanton," he said. "I realize you're a senior and this is your first and last season of cross country, but I really

think you got something. You got the natural ability—the body, the form. I wish you could just get some goddam focus. Stop screwing around with your dumb friends and stay up in the pocket during practices, and you could be great."

Jim walked away grumbling, cursing his coach for calling his friends dumb, and promising himself, *I'm not focusing on this jock shit.*

He had maintained the same attitude the whole bus ride up to the state meet, even half an hour before his race. But when Jim realized that the finish line signified the end of the race *and* the season, he figured, *Why not?*

And here he is now. His beady eyes stare straight forward. His arms are frozen and ready. The gun is in the air. Jim inhales and chews on his lip for a moment, but then stops. The rain drips from his brow.

BANG.

And he is gone. John practically starts the race in a jog, but Jim is already up at the front, leading the stampede of runners through the mud. Another top runner from Jim's team glances at him in surprise, but Jim doesn't even notice. The runners reach a corner up ahead. The trail grows progressively narrow. Jim's coach is standing on the sidelines.

"YEAH STANTON YEAH! WAY TO HUSTLE WAY TO HUSTLE!"

Hustle, Jim thought to himself. Hustle? God I hate that word. Makes me feel like I'm playing goddam football. But there's no time for this now. Breathe swing arms big stride rhythm. Rhythm. Gotta have that rhythm.

A hill is on the horizon, and soon Jim is leading the pack, his quadriceps aching, phlegm filling up his throat. He spits on the ground angrily, remembering a practice a week ago where everyone was supposed to do hill sprints but John and Jim had jogged the entire time, not even breaking a sweat.

Dammit, Jim thought. *Dammit! Why didn't I run harder then? Why!* His body is on fire as he tries to compensate for a season of weak practices. But he is still in the lead. About halfway through the race, the course turns to downhill, and Jim's inner monologue seems to shut off, his calves going numb as he charges down the hill into the dark trees, doing his best not to slip in the mud or gravel.

Eventually, Jim doesn't feel anything, just a burning sensation.

He can see the finish line up ahead. There's Coach on the sidelines again.

"COME ON STANTON COME ON YEAH YEAH THIS IS IT THE END OF HIGH SCHOOL AND KEEP YOUR LEAD KEEP THAT GODDAM LE-"

The words were all meaningless, at least to Jim. There is the finish line. All thoughts of surfing, beer, beach parties, girls, 4-foot bongos, *gone*. There is only one thing.

Finish the race. Finish the motherfucking race.

He reaches for the finish line. In first place, in first place Jim Stanton the kid who used to party and not give a shit about running and now here is the finish line and he is in pain going to win but in pain and oh my god this is it the end and where is his future going will he go back to old ways or live a champion forever reaching for the finish line reaching for that goddam finish line and here it finally is.

Years later, Jim was sitting on a couch at a party, high as a kite, wondering where life would take him next. Someone handed him a mostly-empty handle of vodka. "Man you want to finish this? I'm gonna throw up if I drink any more."

Jim chugged it down as fast as he could. The guy nodded his head. "Finish that shit. Always gotta finish. Always gotta finish."

And there Jim is again, trying to finish, reaching, everything around him feeling silent, empty, cold. He crosses the line. First place. First place. Everyone screaming. But now it's over.

Jim Stanton handed the shoes back to his son. "Yeah," he said.
"Believe it or not, I used to be a cross country runner."

Riley shook his head. "But I don't get it. All those years I ran cross country in high school... And now I'm running in college, and you never *told me* that you ran cross country?"

His father shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah... But I've never missed a single one of your races, have I?"