

2012 Roger M. Jones Poetry Contest
Honorable Mention: Noam Samuel

B-Boy

They call it "chilling,"
but I can see the sweat on their forehead.
Arms and legs move to every quarter beat,
working magic with sleight of hand,
with sleight of foot, sleight of back and sleight of head.
We stand outside the circle, swaying slowly to the rhythm,
our arms stiff with fear to our sides;
legs dip in and retreat.
Titans of men and women,
their backs flow and spill on the floor;
they flash and burn in the darkness.
Our eyes follow them
and our legs yearn.

We come to this club to watch them as they
shed the years of working tables and
going back to school and hoping and dreaming,
of getting a job at a big company and finding out they
stopped caring.
We come down and watch them shed all they are,
let the sweat drip from their foreheads
as their hearts beat out of their chest,
so they can finally
chill.

Downtown

There are people who live inside the supermarket.
They shower every midnight
and talk in languages I've never heard,
saying things I never knew I wished to hear.

There's a cave under Main St,
leading to an abandoned farm
covered with the flowers that the girl with the umbrella
sells at the corner of State and Watson.

Every morning, just before dawn
a bearded man, maybe 200 years old
brings a stack of novels to a bookstore
and leaves them at the door.

There's a war between the cafés
on Liberty, and my morning cup of joe
is bathed in the blood of patriots.
Instructions to the front lines
are sent in morse code on bike racks.

Every night at a bar on Madison,
a man and a woman meet
and she reaches a hand to him
wishing to touch his cheek
but feels nothing.

At midnight he dissolves
and she returns to the supermarket,
hangs her umbrella
and dreams of normality.

The Structure and Interpretation of Computer Programmers

A computer is an appliance,
like a toaster or a TV,
that takes numbers
and turns them into other numbers
and it is through this repeated process of number-turning
that it creates the illusion
of understanding.

But our lives aren't numbers,
our lives aren't bits and bytes,
can't be verified correct by CRC checksums.
Our lives can't be divided into packets
and sent over TCP or UDP,
or encrypted with RSA.

A programmer is a person
who, like a musician,
takes lives, and turns them into numbers.

Because,
while $2+2$ can't model
the complexities of existence,
and the Gale-Shapely algorithm isn't really
how dating works,
we can make numbers into pictures,
into sounds and words and connections,
send our thoughts -- not over ethernet --
but to each other.

But I still see the numbers.
I, "software engineer" -- hah!
Engineer of concepts,
a machine that takes ideas
and draws charts on paper
and stays up all night
and fails
and rewrites
and then, one day, if it's lucky, finishes.

And that, kids,
is how software is born.
Not with a bang,
not with a whisper,
but with a conversation

because programming is too lonely and we
stay in coffee shops and
collaborate over the web and
tell one another of ruby and rails and node
and our latest and greatest project
just so we can hear each others' voices.

The keyboard beckons us
to try and change the world,
not like King or Kennedy or
Zuckerberg,
but like the guy who came up
with double-paned windows.
We yearn to make things that people will love to use,
but will settle for things that pay our rent.

And though we'll speak confidently,
and build castles of concepts
on the shoulders of giants
we all remember the day when
our giddy fingers pressed "run"
and the screen said,
not another's words,
not "Bad command or filename",
not the name of a game that
came on a colorful floppy disk.
All it said was
"Hello world",
and we stared at it in awe,
because those were the words --
our words --
the ones we had told it to say.

Passion

The sun ignites questions
on the edges of our lips and
we want to shout the answer but don't know how.
Our sweat adorns the ground like
fall's first rain and we
don't want to stop
until it's done.

And it's never done.

The embers in our eyes will
light the fire another day, we live
not from day to day but
glint to glint,
burst to burst,
eye to eye and breath always stopped because
the air that stands isn't worth breathing.

We wear our wounds as ornaments --
scrapes and burns and marks upon our skin from
forgotten helmets and skid marks on sidewalk. We
hear the fire in our blood whispering threats, it
want to devour us, leaving nothing but
drops of sweat and the embers of our eyes.

We build castles, not on air but
on sidewalks and in parking lots. We
nail beam to beam and saw and drill until
we can climb and feel the sun-warmed floorboards sway
beneath our feet, ready to tumble any second and
send us flying towards concrete. We
climb down, feet shaking and eyes gleaming
with fear.

At night the fire dies and,
carried by our feet, we
live in dreams of darkened streets and silent houses. They
speak to us in wary voices, weave us tales from
plastic bags and asphalt lots, from
weeds that grow between the cracks, and
we, dumbfounded children, listen with widened eyes
enwrapped in stories together
until the sunrise comes.

Ready To Break

Her feet move to a secret rhythm
tracing paths like veins along the sidewalk,
dancing to a rusty tune in a forgotten music box.
Each gear ticks, every wheel clangs and clamors,
and the song is
long
forgotten.

She could take the violin into her hands,
make it whine, an ugly duckling's voice,
but she won't. She doesn't need another's song.
She'll dance
to her own heartbeat.
She'll dance

to the sound of leaves being
swept
away
again.

But maybe a gear will snap;
Maybe a screw will fall out;
wheels will tumble onto the ground,
sing as they break and soar through the air,
and she doesn't know
what will
shake
free.