Judges’ Commentary on “Between Frequencies”

by

Kevin Progar

“Between Frequencies” received an Honorable Mention in the University of Pittsburgh’s 2008/09 Composition Program Writing Contest

With ideas about “the shifting nature of the self” from John Edgar Wideman’s essay “Our Time” in mind, Kevin Progar was asked to represent himself by looking critically at how “specific people, moments, events, or experiences” have affected his development. In “Between Frequencies,” Progar explores certain workplace encounters that, unexpectedly, led him to new ways of understanding himself and the world. What starts out in the essay as a way to make ends meet—working at a small town feed store—turns out to be the very experience that shakes the narrator from his apathy.

In a style reminiscent of Jack Kerouac and many of the Beat writers, Progar mixes bursts of dialogue with revealing description to develop distinct voices and characters:

John’s eyes lit up, just the same as I picture a good MALL SANTA reacting to a child’s wish list. I knew his jaw was just as excited and there was FAT TO BE CHEWED. “Well, well, well... Mr. Expert, you ever ‘eard a feller by the name of AL HIRT?” This approach to conversation is what I was then beginning to respect and today absolutely respected about John. If someone says something to his interest he is going to have a conversation about it. In the feed store, he’d try to talk about things, which he knew nothing of and repeat what he heard to keep someone else talking about any given subject another day. Some feat considering the diversity that came through the door, everyone from hippy organic vegetable farmers surfing 1960, to CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIAN PIG FARMERS RIDING REVELATION, to trucker with pack of mutts hollering HELLO, to racial bourgeoisie with thoroughbred race horses bidding farewell and every demographic in between showed up some day or another—kind of like Christian Radio. John possessed the most amazing potential for communication. Fortunately, unlike the clientele, I knew what I was in for and what I was up against.
Through experimentation with various font styles, “Between Frequencies” also draws attention to the materiality of language and the affective qualities of document design:

Old CAYMAN was fuming and looking at me next to the stereo, “I feel bad for you, young feller, never growing up in an age when this country was actual a beckon to the world—you know—something ta be proud of. Shit that’s a why I enlisted for ‘Nam. Taken down the communists and all. Yes Sir! No draft needed here. But now I look back and wonder what the hell was wrong with me. If only I woulda known what would become of what I was fighting for...hew... I woulda went to Canada with all dem sissies.” See whereas John would throw around information he did comprehend, CAYMAN would just make it all up. He wasn’t going on as fictitiously here as I’d heard him do in the past, but I couldn’t help but be reminded of that in this moment. “Tell me something, young feller,” CAYMAN’s aside brought me back to the moment, “Do you even know half the things that are wrong with this here country, of ours?”

Kevin Progar’s narrative essay earned an Honorable Mention for its imaginative efforts to bring complex characters to life on the page. By story’s end, the previously apathetic narrator is uncertain, yet also reflective and hopeful:

I was rattled, unsure of everything. The news didn’t help, but then again it did... I felt my mind and character re-emerging from under my DAZE. And it was all thanks to CHEWING THE FAT with these types of characters.... I had changed the channel today; maybe tomorrow I’d turn another corner. I was tired. All I felt was the soreness of a hard day’s work as I laid back, an emerging man on the couch.