

2008

## Imagi-Nation

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### Recommended Citation

Wagner, John, "Imagi-Nation" (2008). *Student Writing Awards*. 6.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/swa/6>

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For as long as I can remember I was constantly in my own little world. This was the case for most of my childhood and, well, is still the case to this day. While it may be more of a mental state these days, it was literal as I was growing up. This literal, physical world was my own backyard. I had a backyard worth boasting about; a backyard so inspiring that William Wordsworth himself would pump out a poem in five minutes or less. All right, so that might be a bit of an embellishment, especially considering he would have been turned off by the highway and all the noise that came with it, but it was beautiful nonetheless!

This backyard was so breathtaking that it often played with my imagination, and in turn my imagination played with it. I always had some role playing story going through my head. One day I was a pirate who just landed on some strange land full of chickens and turkeys, because, well, my family did have chickens and turkeys, so I had to make them fit in with the story somehow. This made perfect sense in my head as a young boy. All pirates wash ashore in Iowa -- the nearest ocean is only 1,000-some miles away from the fields of Iowa!

The next day I might have been Robin Hood travelling through the great Sherwood Forest. However, there really wasn't a forest in my backyard, more of a small wooded area complete with trees, weeds, wildflowers, catnip, and even raspberries. And I was no real outlaw. The only thing I might have been hiding from was the call of my mother telling me to come back inside the house. I never

wanted to because when I entered the house it was back to the real world, at least what I envisioned as the real world. In the house there was really no imaginary world to be thought up. If I wanted to get lost in an imaginary world I probably would have just played my brother's Nintendo Entertainment System, but Sherwood Forest was so much more fun! My father thought the same thing as a child, except I guess he never had to choose between Nintendo or a small wooded area.

My father grew up in the same backyard. In the woody area, he and his friend built a small cabin. He was fourteen at the time and his clubhouse endured the elements for a long while; it was built in 1956 and finally collapsed in the late '90s. It was still standing when I was a small boy, but was rotted and worn down. The tin roof was collapsing in, and there was moss growing all around the house. Inside, the carpet was deteriorating and replaced with raccoon and possum droppings. While I never stepped foot inside the now-grotesque cabin, it still managed to be a part of the story I was creating in my head. It was never my hideout, though, because my hideout had class.

My hideout was the old camper sitting in my backyard. It was one of those lovely '70s-era white campers with the intentional rusty orange stripes emblazoned on the sides. It was sitting in my backyard because it could. There were no nosey neighbors to pry into our personal life. If one had a small run down camper out back no one seemed to care. This camper held everything a young boy needed: plastic swords, rubber band guns, fruit snacks, you name it.

This is where I hid from the imaginary villains I thought up and it was also where I could retreat from what I thought was the real world.

Also behind my house was a gigantic honey locust tree. It was either already there when my grandfather moved to the area or else he planted it. No one really knows, but I like to think of my grandfather planting it. He attached to one of its sturdy branches a tire swing that he constructed; the kind where the tire laid horizontal with three ropes supporting it. I spent countless hours on this swing being pushed by my grandfather. He got as much fun out of it as I did. My grandfather was a tall man, thin as can be. He was the spitting image of Abraham Lincoln, if he put on his fake beard and top hat that is. After he gave me a mighty push I would look back at him and he'd be grinning from ear to ear. It was the best when he would give me the underdog pushes. He'd grab the tire, run while pushing me, and continue to run under the swing. I thought of him as invincible since he was able to do all this in his old age.

On one beautiful spring evening in April I was being pushed on the tire swing by my father for a change. He told me that my grandparents were going out to eat and wondered if I wanted to go with them. I declined because I was having too much fun on the tire swing. I should have gone with them, though, because that night was the last time I would ever see my grandfather. Later that night, maybe early next morning, my grandfather collapsed, dead of a heart attack. I thought this was unthinkable. My grandfather, dead? This was the first death I went through in my life and from then on things never felt the same.

I was just finishing 4<sup>th</sup> grade when my grandfather passed away. I was still young and would have much more to experience in my life. Life was never again some imaginary, innocent world. It was real. I like to think that this is when I truly entered the *real* real world. I still imagined things and played out back, but I didn't take it as seriously as before. I also didn't use the tire swing as much after my grandfather died. My father pushed me on occasion, but there was just something about those underdogs that my grandfather did that made it special. Instead of using the tire swing as an actual swing, I used it as more of a chair. I would sit there and think away the world, giving myself the occasional push with my legs.

-- John Wagner