

2015 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Essay Category

First Place (tie): “*Green Bike vs. Climate Change*,” by Amber Dimond

I am saving polar bears. Sure, a lot of people may think they are saving polar bears. There are the activists, the photographers, the videographers... One might tirelessly broadcast images of emaciated specimens pawing pathetically at bear-safe dumpsters. Another might *lobby for change*, which sounds very helpful. And a third might spend his energies fighting the dark kind of lobbyists, who, I assume, *lobby for sameness*. Then there are the Prius-owners. All are commendable foot soldiers, warring against the melt of arctic ice. I, however, have risen through the ranks. I bought a bicycle.

According to www.bcairquality.ca, a gasoline automobile needs to expel 329.8 grams of greenhouse gasses and 1.2 grams of “smog-forming pollutants” to haul me exactly one kilometer. One kilometer equals approximately 0.621371 miles. So a commute of 10 miles a day, 5 days a week, 52 weeks a year would be roughly equal to dead polar bears. This fall, I finally accepted that these grim statistics afforded me no other option: I had to commute via bicycle.

Armed with my unassailable reasoning, I confronted my family and announced my decision. My younger brother, sprawled out across the full length of the couch, looked away from his tablet long enough to throw me a suspicious, unsurprised squint. He readjusted himself and resumed his ever-inscrutable technological activities. “Cyclists are always getting hit,” he grumbled.

“Ha! I knew you would say that! It just so happens,” I paused for impact, “fatalities per million hours of exposure for biking is .26, compared to .47 for driving and 1.53 for living, according to usnews.com. So bike riding is almost two times safer than driving and 6 times safer than having been born.” I basked in my triumph.

“That’s in hours of exposure,” he calmly retorted, not bothering to look away from his tablet this time. “What are the statistics for units of distance?”

“Why does it matter?” I asked cautiously.

“Because it takes longer to get somewhere on a bike than it does in a car. You might be safer riding a bike for an hour than driving for an hour, but that doesn’t mean the same 10 mile commute isn’t more dangerous on a bike. So what are the numbers for fatalities per mile?”

I scowled. Logan was possibly the only rational, prudent, mature 21-year-old male I had ever known. A true aberration from nature. He also completed three more years of math than I did.

I begrudgingly sat down, grabbed my laptop and found my way back to the article on usnews.com.

“Fatalities per billions of kilometers traveled...” I mumbled, as I waded through the deflation of my argument. “It says bicycle fatalities are 11 times as high as car occupant fatalities... However! Pedestrian fatalities are 36 times higher than car occupant fatalities. Ergo, bikes are more than three times safer than walking. This actually makes me feel even better. Because look at the flip side. Riding a bike instead of a car means I’m never going to hit anyone else. So as far as total risk to life, it’s a net gain.” I casually leaned back in my chair to give the impression that

I had crafted a more compelling case than I actually had. Logan peaked over the top of his tablet and dully lifted an eyebrow.

“Is this about the polar bears?” asked Taylor, my littlest sister. At 14, she melded the dueling characteristics of a credulous fledgling and a jaded skeptic.

They knew this was not my first venture into the role of animal savior. By age 4, I realized that the word “chicken” which referred to the majestic bird and the word “chicken” which referred to my nuggets were not just homonyms. After this gruesome revelation, I made the difficult decision to banish all chicken from my diet. The only way my parents convinced me to reconsider was by assuring me that the chickens we ate were mean and deserved to die. As the years went by, I grew more and more doubtful that every chicken I ate was demonstrably deserving of the death penalty. By 12, I recommitted to a meat free lifestyle. Over 10 years later, I’m still buying tofu and boiling seytan.

Along the way, other injustices railed at my conscience. Why buy eggs brought into the world by abused hens barely surviving in the confines of a factory farm when I could buy them from an old lady with a chicken coop? Is it fair to ask orangutans to sacrifice their lives to the palm oil industry so I can buy cheap cookies with an everlasting shelf life? Why ship tomatoes dozens of miles when I can grow them in a bucket in the back yard? Do flies really need to be swatted? One by one, I eliminated, transitioned, and renounced, saving fuzzy lives with every step. Now it was the polar bears’ turn.

I looked at Taylor, put my laptop down, and stood.

“Yes,” I answered in a steady voice. “It’s about the polar bears.” One week later, I was the hopeful owner of a pale green Schwinn cruiser.

In my mind, I saw myself effortlessly whizzing from destination to destination. I mapped out the safest routes to work, to school, to the grocery store, and to the library. I went on amazon.com and filled my cart with reflective gear, bike locks, bells, and a basket capable of holding 15 pounds of textbooks.

My plan felt completely natural and serene, almost inevitable. I loved bike riding. I had always loved bike riding, since the moment the training wheels came off and my dad let go of the handlebars. When I was seven, my family went on vacation to Mackinac Island. Riding around the island felt like eight miles of sailing on the wind. And when the rest of my family turned in their bikes to the rental shop, I just kept sailing for another eight miles. Granted, this was because I became separated from my parents due to the opaque quality of a horse’s gaskins. But when the police finally found me, I still felt like I could ride forever.

However, I eventually fell out of the habit of riding my bike. When I did use it, I discovered that attempting to change gears caused the derailleur to catapult my bike chain towards the mesosphere. The guard had fallen off of the chainring, which then shredded any jeans that came near it. Whole summers would come and die while my old bike hung from hooks on the garage ceiling.

All of that was behind me. Polar bears and my pale green cruiser joined forces to innervate the fallow part of my brain that craved bike riding. The morning after I brought my new bike home, I strapped on my helmet and knew exactly where I was going to go: to the end of Peck Road.

The west end of Peck road is composed of one hill after another. Growing up, this was always my default destination. It was right by our house and we knew everyone on the street, the Strachans, the Shanks, the Scotts, the Barnharts, the Lowns...everyone. Some summers, I rode up and down those hills every day, letting the dip from the last hill propel me up the next. I

would intermittently stop at a house and ask if anyone wanted to play. They never did, which was always a relief because neither did I. I just wanted a reason to ride my bike down Peck Road.

That was the feeling I was going to resurrect.

I found myself standing at the top of the first hill with my new bike underneath me. I put my foot on the left pedal and I was sailing again. The next hill approached and I sped up, building all the momentum I would need to float to the top. I waited for all of the old sensations to wash over me in a torrent. They didn't. Then my storehouse of momentum fizzled out half way up the hill. I started pedaling harder, throwing all of my weight into each downward push. Acid started gnawing away at the individual muscle fibers in my legs. As I neared the top, I felt a familiar swelling closing in around my airways. Which meant the first voyage was over. I walked my bike back home to get an inhaler.

I didn't attempt Peck again for weeks. But I also didn't abandon my mission. Everyday, the neighbors saw my bike and I crookedly schlep around the block, the jittery effects of albuterol bubbling through my veins. The old sensations never flooded back. However, they did sprinkle. They were raindrops falling here and there and almost always catching me by surprise. Slowly, my muscles didn't notice the inclines and my lungs didn't notice the cold. Then one day, a particularly potent raindrop fell on my shoulder. It was a familiar need. A need to go fast. I was ready to go down Peck again.

Perhaps I haven't single handedly blocked access to tar sands or immobilized every Volkswagen. Perhaps the videographers are getting more done than me. My green bike hasn't replaced the car in the driveway. All of the meditation, remembrance, and sentiment I can muster won't erase my carbon footprint. I still feel like I have risen through the ranks. Because if I ever want to go to the Strachans' house, that's 530.76 grams of greenhouse gasses the polar bears don't have to worry about.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

What an enjoyable piece! As a reader, I'm drawn by this writer's persona: a smart, funny, self-deprecating, somewhat nerdy (all that data) person, trying to do the right thing. I'd like a different title: it's not the bike vs. climate change; it's the bike in the context of climate change (although that's not a title). Also, I didn't think the rain drops in the second last paragraph worked.

*Catherine Frerichs is retired after many years of teaching writing, literature, and other humanities courses at Glen Oaks Community College, Albion College, and, most recently, Grand Valley State University. She is the author of *Desires of the Heart: A Daughter Remembers Her Missionary Parents* (Cold River Studio, 2010), in which she uses her parents' letters, journals, and other research to write about her parents' 40 years of working in Papua New Guinea and the costs to their children. Currently, she is working on a book that explores her relationship with her three Sudanese children whom she foster-parented for seven years and who have remained her children.*