

Standing in Line for Pac Man

by Adam Strong

Looking back through the folds of time, through the awkward years, cruising past the weighted memories that trigger the deeper reflections, lie the core memories, the hard facts: where you lived, the people you lived with, the people you loved.

The nineteen eighties seems like such a long time ago by comparison, it's as if I were in the eighties talking about how important the sixties were. I am that age now, and eighties fashion statements are once again in vogue. It's amazing to realize now, after joining the ranks of the work force, getting past the layoffs and the disappointments, the let downs that I didn't make forty thousand dollars a year when the dot com revolution was in full swing, and you could mine for gold, using the grand tool metal detector. It's hard to think now, imagine that there was a time when I played carefree without care, or worry, even if I didn't know it at the time.

But before college, before high school, before junior high school, there were the elementary days, before popularity contests, struggles with bullies, there existed a time when days lasted long, hours seemed like days. And the hum of the Atari 2600, though it felt like an empty box provided hours of entertainment, following the exploits of an eight bit man magnified by the RGB tubes of our new television set, set in wood.

Sitting on the couch when we got cable television, on that first day. Pressing buttons that sounded like the slap that your attention span would take as you made your way through the twenty, thirty, forty channels. As you grew older, the amount of channels grew larger, the box grew and matured with the technology as you had your growth spurt, grew tiny hairs on your chin, crashed into the garbage cans while you practiced parallel parking with your dad.

“No, to the left, the left! That's the right.” He'd laugh after that, a full, bellowed laugh that caught you off guard, Dad wasn't supposed to have a laugh like this, a laugh that said “your'e taking your life too seriously”.

And afterwards, flipping through the channels, on the new LED remote control. You didn't have to worry about that cord anymore, no. Watching MTV all day when you were sick was like a gateway to your life would be like five years in the future. You could see yourself as a new wave weirdo in college, even though you couldn't handle it. You could see yourself being ironic, wasting your life away, because everyone knew you could do so much better.

And you did do that, between mowing the lawn, between the silent talks at the dinner table, waiting for your little sister to spill the milk, while your parents spoke in tongues about things that didn't matter to you. It was important for these things to happen, but not to you, not here not at age 14 when there was a huge, dark world of responsibility, where you couldn't ride your skateboard off of a slight embankment, you couldn't swing really high in that leather seat until the pink horizon line was looming below you, you were so high in the air you were higher than the horizon line, and you could see the houses way off in the distance, see adults living their lives, probably speaking in more tongues you couldn't understand, but while you were in the air, before the prickle of grass tickled your ankle and you tumbled delightfully to the ground.

There was no pain then, in the air, you didn't ever want to come down, and you spent hours flinging yourself in the air, waiting for the release to come, for your mom to come calling. You'd just moved there, and Miami was like a giant carnival ride, scary, unfamiliar and occasionally quite nauseating.

When the report card came, and you were found out, they discovered that you spent most days drifting off to that hot, enormous world of your own imagination, staring at the creative posters in the classroom until they flowed, had motion, and you weren't just looking at a picture, but at a real life moorage, and you were on the boat in the virgin islands, talking about how you'd one

day make it when the teacher called on you, and you didn't know the first thing about phylums. At night you'd sob over your inability to memorize all of the classifications, you knew you'd let people down, you'd have already let someone down, when you failed like that.

But you push those out of your mind, gently, like the way you'd start the swing up, start that motion up all over again, watching the tops of houses bob up and down, in tune to the soundtrack that was always playing in your head.

That chrome colored boombox, with the one speaker, that seemed so large, like it would envelop the whole thing, and the grey led display.

"I hear the secrets that you keep, when your talking in your sleep" And the bass in that song, the bass guitarist, he must have really known what he was doing to the teenagers, that meshed so perfectly with the synthesizers that sounded so otherworldly, so beyond sci fi, like the future was already here, and we were living it, taping the Top 40 radio show, playing air guitar and not having any shame in the world.

You amused yourself for hours in this way, dreaming up the stories that would take place around these songs. You'd create imaginary rock bands on paper, you named groups, albums, career trajectories, you stayed up until two am, drawing the panels of your comic book, with illustrations so dark, everything was black and white, with very little grey or shading.

You lived in that world, which peaked on the swing, up in the air, when you were on your bike, sailing through the neighborhood, that ever present highway right there, a highway with dense underbrush, and the wind was always cool, and December felt cold even if it was only 68 degrees.

The Miami Dolphin games gave you a ticket into a whole other world; feathered haircuts, mullets, and beards everywhere the eye could see. You'd talk down there in your seat, with all the adults standing up, looking at the wrinkled creases in the Sergio Valentis jeans.

You don't feel so young anymore when you look back on this one moment, at one of history's greatest football games. And when you saw the game on TV, at the gym twenty three years later, and the players were all there, you thought back to the Topps football cards, placed neatly, with care, in your notebook, the red one that used to house the Dungeon and Dragon modules.

That brought you back, to when you reached your peak, every other day on the swing, and the rush of air as you got there, gradually swinging, swinging towards the pink sky that was growing darker every year. Every year, it felt a little out of place, and you grew older and burrowed, in the fichus tree down the street, had miniature air raids while he played bad metal like Judas Priest.

Everyone had a pool, with green algae on the screens. Plants were everywhere, and drugs too, but we were too young. The jokes were everywhere. "It's always snowing in Miami", you grew older and realized that the two cars stopped together, handing over the briefcase wasn't a government sponsored thing, no siree.

Riding your bike, towards the arcade, to that strange Interzone where teenagers and little kids like you co mingled. But you never would last long. There was something sinister in the way that the fluorescents would shine on teen's faces, making them look ghostly and empty.

And it was empty, it was hailed as a phenomenon, video games, arcade games, people were standing in line to play Pac Man. Standing in line, can you imagine that?

But you never did, because your days were spent outside, kicking a soccer ball around until dark, when you'd take one last swing, one last look out across the rooftops to the fading sun, the twilight of your carefree days. There'd be rougher times ahead, puberty, the awkward years, when you weren't a cute little kid, and you weren't anywhere close to being an adult. You'd try on many roles since then, most of them insincere, but years later, now, sitting here it's only then you realize how that little smell of the grass, the dirt on your shins, the mosquito sound as they flew off, and the day leaving,

the night arriving, and the pink turning to dark where a few miles away ghosts lined up in front of flashing lights to play a game where a yellow man ate white pellets and chased skirts made of ones and zeroes.

