

2007 Adult Essay Contest Winner, Amy Blum

The air was swirling with scents of Evergreen, Pine, fern, the Sequoia, by the harsh, dry smell of granite, and of dirt that had sparsely been touched by trampling little hiking boots. At our final campsite on day 7, these smells stepped into a tango with burning campfires and propane stoves and the body odor of our fellow resting and weary backpackers.

On past backpacking trips, when the day was done I always set down my pack and listened to the birds, to the wind rustling through the leaves and branches that stretched miles above my head. I'd look widely at the vast, naked world that was so accepting of my presence, and I breathed in the life around me.

It was only through the powers of assumption and past experience that I understood the dance of smells and sights around me then, and deep within my mind I was smiling with gratitude, feeling comforted by the raw earthy aromas that nature's home provided. It was at that moment, however, when we set our backpacks down and unloaded our exhaustion, that my senses of the outside world failed me – failed me with gusto – and instead of taking in my environment through a long, satisfying inhale, my body let itself out. Blood began to trickle, blocking any chances I had to sniff and smell sweet Mother Earth; it came down the left nostril first but was quickly joined by the right one. I felt the subtle cool wetness as it escaped my nose and I hoped it was just my allergies catching up to me. But my hope was abruptly dismantled when I touched my finger to my upper lip then saw the sweaty red color wiped across it. It was my third bloody nose in two days.

Moreover, I regret to say that I could not sense the breeze that worked its way through the foliage, although I knew it was there. My skin, along with my nose, was distracted. It was focused on an invading army of welts and hives thanks to the switchback trail being overrun with thorny, poisonous bushes a mile or more deep back up the trail. My body ached and burned and itched as a result, and my nose was still bleeding.

The women with me – four brave teens and three courageous adults – dropped their loads and cheered at the day's successes. I sensed their pride, or maybe I assumed it, but I couldn't see their faces, for my own eyes were suddenly clouded and watery. I squeezed my eyelids in hope of clarity, but it prompted salty tears to release down my cheeks, only to pause at the corner of my mouth to where the blood from my nose also streamed. The only luxury of the moment was that I was able to wipe it all away with the cuff of my shirt in one swift and embarrassed motion.

The experience felt foreign to me, I was entirely out of my element. I was supposed to be the strong and sturdy one, the experienced one, the one who laughingly mocked and danced around blisters and fatigue and the typical challenges in the backcountry. I couldn't explain myself, so I tilted my cap down to cover up the confused emotion pouring down my face.

One of the girls sitting across from me, Marisol, who was bearing six blisters on her feet and had encountered her greatest fear of rattlesnakes a *mere* three times, took notice of my coy behavior. "Amy! Are you okay?!"

Two days earlier I woke up before anyone's alarms on their wrist watches went off. I had tucked my own watch somewhere deep into my sleeping bag and I didn't much care to dig it out just to know the time. As everyone slept, I crawled out of my tent and silently walked away from our huddle of bare necessities. One hundred yards away a swift stream was escaping Lake Vernon and racing

south towards Hetch Hetchy. I walked with it, escaping with it as the morning sun just barely touched the western mountain tips.

I stopped a quarter mile down the way; without my watch I was afraid I'd get too far away when everyone else woke up, eager to go, and panicking about my disappearance. I was far enough away that I couldn't see our campsite but I could still sense all the girls dreaming.

At the river's rocky edge I sat and listened to the water moving, permanently in transition. I smiled inward and breathed easily as I thanked the Earth for the moment. Miles and miles away from civilization, 8,000 feet above sea level, I was all alone, expect of course for the company of little wild, yellow daisies poking through the bed of stone. All alone.

Somehow, still, I felt it wasn't enough. I felt burdened by the moment's limitations because I knew I'd very soon walk back to the tents to check on the girls, to set up the stoves for some oatmeal and hot chocolate, and continue a day with seven uniquely strange, bounding, and estrogen brimming women. The moment to myself was simply not enough to renew me the way I begged to be renewed. I asked myself, "If being this far away doesn't satisfy, what does it take?"

One week earlier my mom called me from Michigan. I was walking through a crowded festival in San Francisco when her voice shook through the airwaves. "Hi, Sweetheart. Your... your... your grandma passed this morning."

My grandma had cancer throughout her body, and had fought it for ten years. My family, all still in Michigan, was expecting her departure, but who is ever really prepared for such a thing?

"We'll probably have her funeral on Friday," my mother whispered in between her cries and pauses for breath. Friday was the day I planned to leave for the BCM trip.

"What am I supposed to do, Mom?"

"Stay in California," she told me, "you have to be there for the girls. That's what your grandma would have wanted."

So I cried. And the tears met at the corner of my mouth, diluting the dirty blood that my nose emitted, and I wiped it all away with the cuff of my shirt in one swift and embarrassed motion.

"Amy! Are you okay?!"

I shook my head to the right and the left – no – then hung my head a little lower.

All the other girls steered their attention to me.

"Awe! Amy!!" Their adolescent voices reached out to me. They could see my state: I was swollen with hives, bleeding, salting the earth with my tears, and they knew I was deep in my mourning.

It was then that I became the child and the young girls morphed away from their own discomfort, their barely worn hiking shoes, their fresh angst, insecurity, and fear. They reached out to me wholeheartedly with comforting smiles, saying, "Oh! Amy!! It'll be okay!"

Through my clouded eyes, I looked back at the girls. Within the Evergreen and Pine, the warm sun, the breeze, four inexperienced teens forgot themselves and stretched pure concern and care to me – an anonymous adult in a delicate form. The other adults watched silently, perhaps in awe of the situation.

I raised my cap a bit more and let them all see the raw emotion streaming out of me. They witnessed my tears and blood, uninhibited. Life never felt so real. So I laughed, and the unbreakable girls, the women - las potras - laughed, too.

The next day we set back towards Hetch Hetchy Dam and to our old, civilized lives. As we neared the dam our group broke out in song... we echoed each other, "Flee! (Flee!) Flee, fly! (Flee, fly!) Flee, fly, mosquito! (Flee, fly, mosquito!) Oh no no, no more mosquitoes!" and we smiled in unison.

Then through the dark tunnel in the mountain that led to the end, with the dam straight ahead of us, we laughed and screamed and stepped toward the light.

It was what I needed to be renewed. It was a rebirth for all of us.

Eight women set out into the woods as crazed individuals, separated by fears and worries, histories, and heavy, heavy backpacks. At the end of a week we walked out of the woods together as a new family of horses; we nayed at our past insecurities, and we endured everything we could thanks to life, nature, and a whole lot of wisdom.

My personal perspective of my first BCM trip started off painted by loss and separation. But I've never felt as lucky as I did when I ended the trip with the other girls' fresh paint added to my view, colored with love and purity, strength and honest openness.

At the other end of the dam, I took off my pack, breathed in and smelled the air swirling with scents, I heard the birds and the wind, and I saw the girls sensing the same things. We shook our heads and we laughed.

