The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

— William Carlos Williams
We would like to thank:
Mr. Delp, Therese Zielinski, Ms. Oomen, Jaamil, Susan and Luke, and all the writers and visual artists who took the time to submit their work.
Sincerely,
Anna, Mamie, and Drew
The Red Wheelbarrow
Late Spring '01
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Michael Delp
Kurt Vonnegut stole my beginning. I guess he didn’t steal it exactly. He did come up with it in the first place. But that doesn’t change the fact that I would like to begin this way:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

Now, doesn’t that just grab you? That is a kick-ass opening line, a hand reaching out from a still pool of water and yanking unsuspecting waders down into the deep. And I can’t have it.

When I really start to think about how much beginnings matter, I can actually feel my mind boggling. The first sentence can determine the entire success or failure of the product of years of dedication. Say some guy ducks into Borders to get out of the rain and starts browsing the shelves. If he picks up your book, turns to page 1, and reads, “Welcome to the world of mid-March tax returns”, you’re toast. He’s not even going to bother putting the book back in the right place, he’s going to drop it and sprint for the door. There’s even an annual contest to come up with the world’s worst beginning. I follow the competition closely because I fear that someone will enter one of mine and win. Every time a sentence isn’t mine, I celebrate.

Of course, a successful beginning is often a subjective decision. Therefore, I try to begin all my essays with a phrase that has universal appeal, such as, “Springtime, Tom Hanks, puppies, ice cream.” Most people like at least one of those things. As for the others, they’re the minority, and
therefore wrong and unimportant, and possibly Communists. I've also developed a scientific ratings system to determine the likability factor of my beginnings. First, I select a random group of people from the sample wallpaper aisle in Home Depot to serve as my sponsor group. Then I read them several beginnings, which they rate on a 1 to 10 basis. Interestingly, my results show that most Americans like sentences that contain the words, "eggshell white" or "beige."

Once I've found the right beginning, I figure, the rest should just flow naturally. People will devour my work cover to cover. I've just got to figure out how to get to all the great opening lines before everybody else beats me to it. It's like the space race, only the consequences of our literary future are at stake. Honestly, my own future is looking kind of grim. My openings are defiantly mediocre, and the other writers out there just keep churning them out. I'm never going to catch up. Damn Kurt Vonnegut.
At Home

New York City, 2000
Meredith Marder

At eighteen years old, there is no place where I am at home.

This summer I lived on the subway lines that connect Morningside Heights to the Upper East Side. The Times Square Station began to feel so familiar that I would run from the I/9 to the Grand Central Shuttle just to make it seem like my being there was important and the direction I was heading mine alone.

I lived on the Jitney connecting the city to the Hamptons. The grey and turquoise bus seats, the complimentary orange juice, the clinking of the stewardess collecting fares— I always felt rested after that ride.

Later, I lived on the greyhound routes between upstate New York and the city. There was a camaraderie between those of us that stayed on for the final destination— I was sure we would have gone anywhere that we took it.

Someday I will travel. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow; but someday I will go to those places I have always dreamed about. And when I'm there, I expect I'll be dreaming of Iowa. I'll be dreaming of cheeseburgers, the sticky ketchup between my fingers and across the seats of the Tempo. I'll think about corn rippling in the Iowa wind, dense fields of alfalfa and soybeans as far as the eye can see, and the flat interstate stretching for miles and miles across the only place I will ever truly call home.
between a hamburger and a cheeseburger. I hated both. I tried to reason with my parents, but they remained firm in their decision. Hamburger or cheeseburger. I hated Hardee’s because they always put too much ketchup and mustard on all of their sandwiches. When I explained this to my parents, they told me that I could just scrape it off. Scrape it off. When I was an adult, I was going to eat grilled cheese sandwiches and watch “Days of Our Lives” re-runs all day long. I would have a real job, like a ballerina or maybe an actress. I would never take my children on car trips, but if I did, I’d let them choose between more than only a ketchup hamburger or cheeseburger.

Sometimes I worry about the kind of adult I’m going to be. I wonder if I’ll ever be able to provide for my future children in the way that I selfishly wish I would have been provided for, or if the urge to pack up and leave everything behind me will overwhelm me, threaten to consume my life. Maybe ten years later I’ll still find myself traveling down the same Wisconsin and Minnesota highways, Tracy Chapman moaning on the tape deck, kids in the backseat of the car complaining about their cheeseburgers, wanting money for a Snickers...and me, not knowing what to say when I reach into my pocket and can only come up with 35 cents. Or maybe I won’t remember riding in the backseat of the little Tempo, my parents silent in the front seat and our destination drawing nearer. My head pounding like it always did when I had been on the road for too long.

Leaving has become evident in all things that I do, dropping everything where it’s at and simply moving on. I have no tolerance for anything less than ideal, so I leave and search for something better. I order Chicken Stars instead of hamburgers when I go through the drive-thru at Hardee’s. I insist that my parents buy me plane tickets instead of driving the nine hours to pick me up. I apply to Eastern schools and Western schools until I realize that I am happy where I am. I am happy in Wisconsin. I am happy in Iowa. I am even happy on the road in Minnesota.

There are some things that I can’t deny no matter how hard I think that I want to. More than anything, I say, I wish I could leave Iowa for good. Head to New York City or Los Angeles and never come back. But I have never been to the East Coast; I have never been to the West Coast.
Scurvy
Kat Mandeville

Subtlety, a sucker for any girl with applesauce eyes, too eager to smash the apples himself. He eats her fruit without hands without fear without "bitch, your dreams taste better than mine, now crush." But subtlety does hold her down in apple juices watching her bathe, then lays out a towel and weeps for oranges in the next room as she dresses.

my life to the lives of my friends.
I constantly measure my life against my friends, the friends who have never worked a real job in their lives. The friends who spend summers sleeping until one in the afternoon and stay out late, getting drunk until the early morning hours. I've worked every summer since I was thirteen: babysitting, detasseling, cashiering at a grocery store, and later, selling clothing and doing inventory at Wal-Mart. Even worse are the friends who get to keep all the money from the part time jobs they work during the summer. I start to resent my parents because they're in the same situation that I am, but they're happy.

I can never really be happy because it seems like things are always unexpectedly happening to set us back, particularly with problem vehicles. It seems like just when things start to get better, we end up right where we started. Last summer, we were on a road between Carleton and the Twin Cities when the battery died in our Dodge Caravan. Unfortunately, we noticed the needle roaming dangerously above the lowest mark only as we drove through the roughest section of St. Paul. The van barely made it across the bridge, a few blocks away from a Goodyear station. They were missing the part they needed to repair the van, which had problems more serious than a leaky battery, so we had to stay in a hotel across the freeway for the night. We gathered pillows and sleeping bags from the trunk and all six of us walked eight blocks through part of the worst part of town. My parents stopped at a liquor warehouse and I stood outside, leaning against the sheet metal with my little brothers and sisters. I was seventeen years old and embarrassed beyond belief, especially when my parents tried to make the entire situation into a joke and my father took the old camcorder out of its case and filmed us as we walked to our hotel.

I can identify the exact moment when I decided that I was never going to grow up into the kind of adult that I knew, living from unreliable paycheck to unreliable paycheck, making light of the most bothersome of situations. I was nine years old. It was almost noon and I was driving in the car with my parents and two sisters back to Anamosa from our weekend in Duluth. We were making a stop in Forest Lake for lunch, but my parents decided that we were going to Hardee's and our meal choice was
every other month means a trip to Duluth or another to northern Wisconsin. I usually dread the road trips because for my family a road trip invariably means disaster. Several years ago we were riding up US Hwy 27 through Black River Falls. This particular road in western Wisconsin navigates through a terrain that alternates between steep hills and flat, low river valleys. We were driving several miles past Viroqua on one of the coldest nights of the year, our little car shuddering in the sharp winds, the heater wrenching in the sub-zero temperatures. A car seat took up half of the Tempo's backseat and spilled into the other so that there wasn't enough room for all of the four kids on the seat. My sister and I piled pillows and sleeping bags on the floor and we rode with our feet near the others head, crunched with barely enough room to move. I was almost asleep, huddled under the sleeping bag, when my dad suddenly jerked the car onto the side of the road. My parents pulled all four kids out of the backseat, barefoot and coatless. I was extremely disoriented at first, then noticed the hood of the car engulfed in flames. My father threw snow onto the hood of the car until it eventually died.

And there we were; huddled like a group of refugees, a little before midnight on an almost deserted highway. The occasional car passed, but no one stopped, they only stared. We ended up walking to a house about half a mile down the road. The older couple living there let us stay indoors and even offered us some canned ravioli and cheese puffs until the police came. The woman watched “Family Matters” and kept a running racist commentary and I fell asleep with my head on a grubby sweatshirt in my mother's lap, waiting for someone to tow the Tempo to a station.

The car fire threw off our plans for months. I remember eating egg noodles and Cream of Chicken soup nearly every night until we recovered financially. Yet writing it down makes it seem somehow worse than it ever was at the time. I liked noodles. I didn’t mind eating them every day. We didn’t have any money, but I was young enough not to know there were people who ate salmon and capers every night, who went to the grocery store without an exact list. I had never met someone who alternated nights between the country club and Sentry World. I lived in the middle of the country, miles away from school, so I never really had a chance to compare.

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Elegy on Paul Celan
Peter Kuras

Those of us who carry on breathing and eating and drinking and playing through those innumerable variations now have one less distraction to ease the solemn monotony of waking and chewing and pissing and thinking and we walk with a little more sadness weighing us down now that you've chosen to go. You backwards but beloved Orpheus, you.
Good Riddance to Rubbish
Liz John

There once was an old woman who cleaned what plumbers fix. Sinks, toilets, bathtubs, anything with pipes and water. She was listed in the phone book and people called her up to scrub their showers and chrome fixtures. All the housewives considered her a "find." She walked around with red knuckles and a stiff back, mumbling about mildew and dirt. She had concocted her own formulas for dissolving stubborn soap scum, and the dirty water swirling down the drain always made her smile.

The big-shot black suits in spotless skyscrapers came up with a plan to rid the country of dependants and misfits. They found out about the woman through somebody's wife. "Chrome fixtures indeed!" they snorted, never having battled mildew themselves. "Why, she's a drain on the economy! An incompetent, a freak!" They made plans for her removal.

They showed up at her next job, scrubbing out a private jacuzzi in the home of a multi-millionaire. She was in the middle of it, on her hands and knees with acres of blue tile surrounding her, half of it clean and half dirty. She muttered to herself as the men approached, but kept on scrubbing. They formed a ring around the tub and clasped their hands behind their backs in a polished manner. One man climbed down into the jacuzzi and slipped on the old woman's cleaner. As he got to his feet a dirty word left his mouth, and she turned and grinned at him.

"Aye," she said, "it's me own special poison for soap scum. Enough of it'd get rid of the lot of ye." The man sneered at her and went over to the drain. He bent down and pulled out a shining tool with a red light at the end, which cut through the metal coating on the drain sharply. He pulled the top off the drain and left it open, a gaping hole in the middle of the tile. The rest of the men stepped down into the jacuzzi and slipped on the old woman's cleaner. As he got to his feet a dirty word left his mouth, and she turned and grinned at him.

Iowa
Rachel Ryan

I've never traveled beyond the states bordering Iowa, the places I can count on one hand, plus Michigan and the little corners of Canada and Indiana. I have spent twelve years in Iowa, a state where there is absolutely nothing, outside of myself and my family, to entertain me. It is quite possible something is missing from my life because I've never gone swimming in the Pacific Ocean, have never seen the Catskill Mountains, a yucca plant, or even ventured into the outskirts of the tundra. But I also know I cannot possibly ask my family to fly to Seattle just so that I can eat in the restaurant at the top of the Space Needle. I can't ask them to drive down to Florida so I can sunbathe in Key West and take pictures of trips across the Everglades. I can't make a pilgrimage to the border between Texas and Mexico or even tour the Alamo. I've already asked my parents and my family for more than what should be enough.

I could write an essay full of poetic descriptions about driving through Iowa; deep and meaningful paragraphs about seed corn rippling in the westerly winds, dense fields of alfalfa and soybeans as far as the eye can see, and the flat interstates stretching for miles and miles. I could even tell you that here in Iowa, we see the world differently, that family values rise to the surface amidst the world's evils. But to describe Iowa in such a way would be to affirm every stereotype it has ever been assigned. If I spend sentences trying to capture the way this place makes me feel, the way that I act while I'm in the only place I have ever felt comfortable, it will become something completely glamorized and probably not at all true. I only know that when I am in Iowa, things are clearer and simpler than they are anywhere else. Sometimes I think it has something to do with the landscape itself, the way the fields stretch in all directions, treeless, without clutter. But most likely I would feel just as passionately about my state if I lived in Idaho or South Carolina. But I don't. I live in Iowa. And for that simple reason, I will always be in love with my state.

I have no extended family in Iowa, and since my parents still suffer from a kind of homesickness when they're living in a state by ourselves,
“Everybody has that thing where they need to look one way but they come out looking another way and that’s what people observe.” — Diane Arbus

**Teenage Couple on Hudson Street, N.Y.C. 1963**
Lauren Bornschein

They’re going to have sex you know. This boy here is real excited about it. He’s looking around making sure everyone sees his arm around her. He wants to nail her like a carnival prize. And she’s looking into the camera. She’s feeling awfully sexy. She’s feeling ready for it, after all she’s got a nice dress on, he’s wearing nice shoes, and they’ve both got on pea coats. It’s perfect or enough, she thinks, because nothing is perfect. She already knows this. Arbus took this photograph on a Sunday and these two are supposed to be in church, but it’s 1963, and they’ve discovered a new religion. They’ve discovered rock’n’roll, and they really believe it’s going to make the world a better place. Because when something leads to sex, isn’t that a good thing? They’re kids, that’s why Arbus wanted them standing this way together. The boy did it better than Arbus thought he could, his trying-to-be-a-man-ness. He walked with it, he wore it, his outfit well coordinated but awkward, tie fresh under his collar. And her, how thankful Arbus must have been for this girl’s scandalous attempt at sophistication. She got them in the moment, right before it was all going to begin.

![Image of a photograph of a teenage couple](image)

The men stepped back to admire their handiwork in the neat black hole. As they moved away one of them slipped on the cleaner, then another and another. They toppled over like so many dominoes until all the black suits lay prone in the middle of the multi-millionaire's jacuzzi, the woman’s cleaner eating the soap scum out from under them. It smelled acrid and yet sweet and left sticky marks on their immaculate suits. It seemed to crawl underneath the fabric and into their skin, so that by the time they picked themselves up and got in their black cars they all felt very, very dirty.
Weightless
Jaime Delp

And I am amazed again
at what words, sometimes,
can not do.
I am amazed again at how often they land,
too light or too heavy,
miles away
from where the unspeakable is happening;
in the dusty light of the Cafe
the night the sax player hyperventilated,
desiring something ingrained so deeply
he couldn't blow it out,
but tried
until the room spun one last time
and he found himself
palming the wood-grained floor.

As I have tried again and again
to say something of first love,
mine or anybody else's,
the way we go in looking straight ahead
and come out looking backwards,
as if love was something always in front
or always behind us.
Each time the words have come out
spinning,
able to carry the full weight
of that first weightless desire.

the lightning from last night
turned me on again and now i can breathe
Corrina Collins

instead of writing a sex poem
i ate an apple: golden and not half as tasty as it looked
but an apple still, and for that i was grateful

instead of telephoning or carving your name
into one of my extremities i went for a walk
and discovered the path of a snail:
out of the lake dragging its tiny calcium-house
through the sand to a bed of seaweed
where it turned around and went back to bed
in the water

instead of building a paper castle
out of photographs of you i decided not to smoke cigarettes
anymore, to cut back on dairy products

instead of lying in sleep
dreaming of you and the stratosphere,
you on the stratosphere,
of you as the stratosphere,
i dreamed of moss and cedar-
my home in the trees

and tomorrow morning i am
hoping it rains so the cement
turns liquid and i can
walk on water
Don't listen to the sound of cameras snapping pictures of the names above the handprints immortalized in stone.

And, if you find yourself lost in her flashing lights, you must stop and lay under the purple jacaranda trees covering the rocky cliffs.

There, you must become what has been. You have to take in one breath of warm, salty air, then descend as a petal, caught in the light, drifting down from the clouds.

Suffocation Ghazal
Zimbria Bibb

'Suffocation through Journalism' is my intended college major. Neatly packaged social taboos are what I plan to sell.

In the backseat of the Toyota, my sister hoards Skittles until one blocks her esophagus. The whites of her eyes exposed; my father screams because he's afraid to let her go.

Some underlying force continues to submerge my body underwater, afraid that the air will stain me like sin. I pray to Poseidon for fins and gills.

Shielded behind a designer t-shirt, my heart and stomach make an exchange. They decide to act together in order to prevent me from plunging.

Breathing is like chanting to Buddha, rhythmically aligned and focused. My doctor says that I breathe through my mouth rather than my nose.
Musical Apes
Brenin Wertz-Roth

The record executives have decided they want an ape rock group. After many polls and several focus groups, they believe musical apes could be the next big thing. Apes all over the world are tested for musical aptitude and sent to scientific musical training camps.

Teaching music to apes is hard. The entire first group of instructors had to be sent away on emotional leave after the first month. All the apes want to do is smoke cigarettes and kiss the girl that brings them bananas. The executives are in despair. They are afraid there will be no musical apes. There is only one option — total mind control. Swedish scientists in secret labs have created headsets that can stimulate the brain to do almost anything.

There is no time to test the machines, the musical apes have their first concert tonight. The stadium is filled with thousands of pubescent girls flooding with deep sexual frustration. They are throwing their underwear onto the stage and screaming wildly. The apes are lead out by handlers and strapped into position, their headsets begin to hum with electricity. As the first chords are forced from the ape’s fingers, they look with wild, terrified eyes into the seething crowd that is screaming I love you.

How to Be a Tourist in California
Gilliam Jones

Your fingertips must play the wind as you move through the desert’s dry air. Put your feet on the dash and watch Route 66 appear shiny and wet in front of you. Bring your tongue to the hot surface of your lips and taste the salt water left by the wind.

You have to feel the warmth left by the chestnut children of the Kumeyaay who once played in the surf. Feel their laughter rise, and then fall, as it rolls past you on the lip of a wave.

You must smell the adobe bricks of long ago that still warm in the sun. Inhale the incense that once penetrated the coarse robes of quiet-footed men in the Old Town Mission.
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“Aye,” she said, “it’s me own special poison for soap scum. Enough of it’d get rid of the lot of ye.” The man sneered at her and went over to the drain. He bent down and pulled out a shining tool with a red light at the end, which cut through the metal coating on the drain sharply. He pulled the top off the drain and left it open, a gaping hole in the middle of the tile. The rest of the men stepped down into the jacuzzi and slipped on the old woman’s cleaner. As he got to his feet a dirty word left his mouth, and she turned and grinned at him.

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Rachel Ryan

I’ve never traveled beyond the states bordering Iowa, the places I can count on one hand, plus Michigan and the little corners of Canada and Indiana. I have spent twelve years in Iowa, a state where there is absolutely nothing, outside of myself and my family, to entertain me. It is quite possible something is missing from my life because I’ve never went swimming in the Pacific Ocean, have never seen the Catskill Mountains, a yucca plant, or even ventured into the outskirts of the tundra. But I also know I cannot possibly ask my family to fly to Seattle just so that I can eat in the restaurant at the top of the Space Needle. I can’t ask them to drive down to Florida so I can sunbathe in Key West and take pictures of traipses across the Everglades. I can’t make a pilgrimage to the border between Texas and Mexico or even tour the Alamo. I’ve already asked my parents and my family for more than what should be enough.

I could write an essay full of poetic descriptions about driving through Iowa; deep and meaningful paragraphs about seed corn rippling in the westerly winds, dense fields of alfalfa and soybeans as far as the eye can see, and the flat interstates stretching for miles and miles. I could even tell you that here in Iowa, we see the world differently, that family values rise to the surface amidst the world’s evils. But to describe Iowa in such a way would be to affirm every stereotype it has ever been assigned. If I spend sentences trying to capture the way this place makes me feel, the way that I act while I’m in the only place I have ever felt comfortable, it will become something completely glamorized and probably not at all true. I only know that when I am in Iowa, things are clearer and simpler than they are anywhere else. Sometimes I think it has something to do with the landscape itself, the way the fields stretch in all directions, treeless, without clutter. But most likely I would feel just as passionately about my state if I lived in Idaho or South Carolina. But I don’t. I live in Iowa. And for that simple reason, I will always be in love with my state.

I have no extended family in Iowa, and since my parents still suffer from a kind of homesickness when we’re living in a state by ourselves,
every other month means a trip to Duluth or another to northern Wisconsin. I usually dread the road trips because for my family a road trip invariably means disaster. Several years ago we were riding up US Hwy 27 through Black River Falls. This particular road in western Wisconsin navigates through a terrain that alternates between steep hills and flat, low river valleys. We were driving several miles past Viroqua on one of the coldest nights of the year, our little car shuddering in the sharp winds, the heater wrenching in the sub-zero temperatures. A car seat took up half of the Tempo’s backseat and spilled into the other so that there wasn’t enough room for all of the four kids on the seat. My sister and I piled pillows and sleeping bags on the floor and we rode with our feet near the others head, crunched with barely enough room to move. I was almost asleep, huddled under a sleeping bag, when my dad suddenly jerked the car onto the side of the road. My parents pulled all four kids out of the backseat, barefoot and coatless. I was extremely disoriented at first, then noticed the hood of the car engulfed in flames. My father threw snow onto the hood of the car until it eventually died.

And there we were; huddled like a group of refugees, a little before midnight on an almost deserted highway. The occasional car passed, but no one stopped, they only stared. We ended up walking to a house about half a mile down the road. The older couple living there let us stay indoors and even offered us some canned ravioli and cheese puffs until the police came. The woman watched “Family Matters” and kept a running racist commentary and I fell asleep with my head on a grubby sweatshirt in my mother’s lap, waiting for someone to tow the Tempo to a station.

The car fire threw off our plans for months. I remember eating egg noodles and Cream of Chicken soup nearly every night until we recovered financially. Yet writing it down makes it seem somehow worse than it ever was at the time. I liked noodles. I didn’t mind eating them every day. We didn’t have any money, but I was young enough not to know there were people who ate salmon and capers every night, who went to the grocery store without an exact list. I had never met someone who alternated nights between the country club and Sentry World. I lived in the middle of the country, miles away from school, so I never really had a chance to compare

Elegy on Paul Celan
Peter Kuras

Those of us who carry on breathing and eating and drinking and playing through those innumerable variations now have one less distraction to ease the solemn monotony of waking and chewing and pissing and thinking and we walk with a little more sadness weighing us down now that you’ve chosen to go. You backwards but beloved Orpheus, you.
Scurvy
Kat Mandeville

Subtlety, a sucker for any girl with applesauce eyes,
too eager to smash the apples himself.
He eats her fruit without hands without fear without
"bitch, your dreams taste better than mine, now crush."
But subtlety does hold her down in apple juices
watching her bathe, then lays out a towel
and weeps for oranges in the next room
as she dresses.

I constantly measure my life against my friends, the friends who
have never worked a real job in their lives. The friends who spend summers
sleeping until one in the afternoon and stay out late, getting drunk until the
early morning hours. I’ve worked every summer since I was thirteen: baby-
sitting, detasseling, cashing at a grocery store, and later, selling clothing
and doing inventory at Wal-Mart. Even worse are the friends who get to
keep all the money from the part time jobs they work during the summer. I
start to resent my parents because they’re in the same situation that I am,
but they’re happy.

I can never really be happy because it seems like things are always
unexpectedly happening to set us back, particularly with problem vehicles.
It seems like just when things start to get better, we end up right where we
started. Last summer, we were on a road between Carleton and the Twin
Cities when the battery died in our Dodge Caravan. Unfortunately, we
noticed the needle roaming dangerously above the lowest mark only as we
drove through the roughest section of St. Paul. The van barely made it
across the bridge, a few blocks away from a Goodyear station. They were
missing the part they needed to repair the van, which had problems more
serious than a leaky battery, so we had to stay in a hotel across the freeway
for the night. We gathered pillows and sleeping bags from the trunk and all
six of us walked eight blocks through part of the worst part of town. My
parents stopped at a liquor warehouse and I stood outside, leaning against
the sheet metal with my little brothers and sisters. I was seventeen years old
and embarrassed beyond belief, especially when my parents tried to make
the entire situation into a joke and my father took the old camcorder out of
its case and filmed us as we walked to our hotel.

I can identify the exact moment when I decided that I was never
going to grow up into the kind of adult that I knew, living from unreliable
paycheck to unreliable paycheck, making light of the most bothersome of
situations. I was nine years old. It was almost noon and I was driving in
the car with my parents and two sisters back to Anamosa from our weekend
in Duluth. We were making a stop in Forest Lake for lunch, but my
parents decided that we were going to Hardee’s and our meal choice was
my life to the lives of my friends.
between a hamburger and a cheeseburger. I hated both. I tried to reason with my parents, but they remained firm in their decision. Hamburger or cheeseburger. I hated Hardee's because they always put too much ketchup and mustard on all of their sandwiches. When I explained this to my parents, they told me that I could just scrape it off. Scrape it off! When I was an adult, I was going to eat grilled cheese sandwiches and watch "Days of Our Lives" re-runs all day long. I would have a real job, like a ballerina or maybe an actress. I would never take my children on car trips, but if I did, I'd let them choose between more than only a ketchup hamburger or cheeseburger.

Sometimes I worry about the kind of adult I'm going to be. I wonder if I'll ever be able to provide for my future children in the way that I selfishly wish I would have been provided for, or if the urge to pack up and leave everything behind me will overwhelm me, threaten to consume my life. Maybe ten years later I'll still find myself traveling down the same Wisconsin and Minnesota highways, Tracy Chapman moaning on the tape deck, kids in the backseat of the car complaining about their cheeseburgers, wanting money for a Snickers...and me, not knowing what to say when I reach into my pocket and can only come up with 35 cents. Or maybe I won't remember riding in the backseat of the little Tempo, my parents silent in the front seat and our destination drawing nearer. My head pounding like it always did when I had been on the road for too long.

Leaving has become evident in all things that I do, dropping everything where it's at and simply moving on. I have no tolerance for anything less than ideal, so I leave and search for something better. I order Chicken Stars instead of hamburgers when I go through the drive-thru at Hardee's. I insist that my parents buy me plane tickets instead of driving the nine hours to pick me up. I apply to Eastern schools and Western schools until I realize that I am happy where I am. I am happy in Wisconsin. I am happy in Iowa. I am even happy on the road in Minnesota.

There are some things that I can't deny no matter how hard I think that I want to. More than anything, I say, I wish I could leave Iowa for good. Head to New York City or Los Angeles and never come back. But I have never been to the East Coast; I have never been to the West Coast.
At Home

*New York City, 2000*

Meredith Marder

At eighteen years old, there is no place where I am at home.

This summer I lived on the subway lines that connect Morningside Heights to the Upper East Side. The Times Square Station began to feel so familiar that I would run from the I/9 to the Grand Central Shuttle just to make it seem like my being there was important and the direction I was heading mine alone.

I lived on the Jitney connecting the city to the Hamptons. The grey and turquoise bus seats, the complimentary orange juice, the clinking of the stewardess collecting fares—I always felt rested after that ride.

Later, I lived on the greyhound routes between upstate New York and the city. There was a camaraderie between those of us that stayed on for the final destination—I was sure we would have gone anywhere that we took it.

Someday I will travel. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow; but someday I will go to those places I have always dreamed about. And when I’m there, I expect I’ll be dreaming of Iowa. I’ll be dreaming of cheeseburgers, the sticky ketchup between my fingers and across the seats of the Tempo. I’ll think about corn rippling in the Iowa wind, dense fields of alfalfa and soybeans as far as the eye can see, and the flat interstate stretching for miles and miles across the only place I will ever truly call home.
therefore wrong and unimportant, and possibly Communists. I've also developed a scientific ratings system to determine the likability factor of my beginnings. First, I select a random group of people from the sample wallpaper aisle in Home Depot to serve as my sponsor group. Then I read them several beginnings, which they rate on a 1 to 10 basis. Interestingly, my results show that most Americans like sentences that contain the words, “eggshell white” or “beige.”

Once I've found the right beginning, I figure, the rest should just flow naturally. People will devour my work cover to cover. I've just got to figure out how to get to all the great opening lines before everybody else beats me to it. It's like the space race, only the consequences of our literary future are at stake. Honestly, my own future is looking kind of grim. My openings are defiantly mediocre, and the other writers out there just keep churning them out. I'm never going to catch up. Damn Kurt Vonnegut.
Kurt Vonnegut stole my beginning. I guess he didn’t steal it exactly. He did come up with it in the first place. But that doesn’t change the fact that I would like to begin this way:

Listen:

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.

Now, doesn’t that just grab you? That is a kick-ass opening line, a hand reaching out from a still pool of water and yanking unsuspecting waders down into the deep. And I can’t have it.

When I really start to think about how much beginnings matter, I can actually feel my mind bogging. The first sentence can determine the entire success or failure of the product of years of dedication. Say some guy ducks into Borders to get out of the rain and starts browsing the shelves. If he picks up your book, turns to page 1, and reads, “Welcome to the world of mid-March tax returns”, you’re toast. He’s not even going to bother putting the book back in the right place, he’s going to drop it and sprint for the door. There’s even an annual contest to come up with the world’s worst beginning. I follow the competition closely because I fear that someone will enter one of mine and win. Every time a sentence isn’t mine, I celebrate.

Of course, a successful beginning is often a subjective decision. Therefore, I try to begin all my essays with a phrase that has universal appeal, such as, “Springtime, Tom Hanks, puppies, ice cream.” Most people like at least one of those things. As for the others, they’re the minority, and
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Sincerely,
Anna, Mamie, and Drew
The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow

 glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

— William Carlos Williams