

A midsummer night's dream

It's your first Gordon conference. You've milled around at Logan Airport with hundreds of other scientists and scrambled onto the big green buses. You've made the compulsory stop at the New Hampshire State Liquor store and watched scientists you've idolized buy two fifths of Jack Daniels that they plan to finish by Thursday night. You've checked in at the school that looks like a minimum security prison where your meeting is being held and put your bag in the room where mosquitoes the size of humming birds will attack you for the next five nights. Now it's time for the opening social. You walk across the green of the baseball diamond, as the evening sun lights up the tall white New England steeple in the distance. You grab a cold beer, courtesy of a friendly biotech company, and settle back to watch the action.

Because this is 1995. The year when journals stopped sending out measly letters of acceptance, and started sending out medals on ribbons instead. No need to read the letter from *Cell* or *Nature* to see if your paper made it. Just shake the envelope and see if it jingles. And of course, since it's science and more is better, the editors made it retroactive. So now you're waiting for the big guns to walk in behind the rows of medals on their chests. In academia the medals are on sweatshirts and T-shirts instead of dress tunics, and the learned feet are shod in running shoes or high-tops, instead of riding boots. But the interactions amongst their bearers are just as tense as those of generals on the eve of battle. You can watch famous eyes scanning famous chests, and wondering "Do they have more

than I do?". And see precocious graduate students with their own row of medals sizing up prospective post-doctoral mentors by their glitter and being sized up in return.

Everyone waits for that rarest of moments, the arrival of an editor. No buses or jangling medals for them. Instead they arrive in a refined automobile, sport an impeccably unadorned tweed jacket, and luxuriate in the awed hush that greets their entry. Could Napoleon surrounded by the fawning royalty of Europe have looked any finer than an editor flocked by National Academy members and Friends of the Right Sort?

Later, in the bar, there'll be war stories. You'll listen quietly at an adjoining table, as luminaries retell tales that won or lost them medals and recount stratagems that outflanked editors and reviewers. "Remember when I listed Bloggs in the acknowledgments on the original manuscript to keep him from reviewing our discovery of bubblyomuctase? The swine would have found an excuse to reject it, reproduced our data, and rushed out a paper. When *Organ* accepted it, I just cut Bloggs' name out on the page proofs." You'll hear prospective collaborators haggle over who will be the last author and receive the largest medal, and you'll remember that the names of generals live on long after their soldiers are forgotten.

In dark corners conservatives drink straight scotch and bemoan the loss of innocence. In their heyday, they pursued the burning light of knowledge with no thought for glory, and fought their battles clean and hard. Embittered, they drink to the eternal truths and deplore the triumph of salesmanship over scholarship. They've melted their metals down and turned them into centrifuge rotors, and sewn the ribbons together to make velvets for

replica plating. Lord knows, some of them might even force their students to make up their own buffers for restriction enzyme digests.

With other youngsters you'll discuss the medals themselves. Everyone agrees on the Holy Trinity (apologies to my hosts!). But what comes next depends on what you do and where you live. *Neuron* battles *JCB* in a war of apples and oranges. Europe champions *EMBO J.*; Americans root for *MCB*. And then there's aesthetics. If purple is your favorite color, the mauve of the *PNAS* medal will get lost on your shirt, but *MBOC's* green will stand out splendidly. As the night goes on you'll watch collectors barter for medals they never earned. "A *BBRC* and an *NAR*, for your *Chromosoma*." "If you'll give me your *Anal. Biochem.* for this *BBA*." "Done". More sacrilegious still, you'll see the high rollers bet medals on the outcome of pool games with their friends. And in these days, when funding decisions are made by simply counting the medals on the chests in conference photographs, that's risky business.

Finally, the bar closes. You realize you've had one too many beers and reel for bed. On the other side of the paper-thin wall, you hear the thirty-nine distinct clinks as your neighbor carefully rests each medal on the bedside table. You switch the light off, and hear the first mosquito drone closer and closer. As you brace yourself in the silence before the bite, thunderous applause jerks you awake and reality slaps you like a rejection letter. You're not in New Hampshire, you're slumped in a back row seat at the department's weekly seminar — and you've slept though the whole thing again!

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My Word is a new column in which Andrew Murray and Cori Bargmann (and guests) will write on contemporary issues in science. Responses will be welcomed by the Editor.