

Janus Staff

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Table of Contents

Poetry:

- pg. 1 Masturbating Mindframes
- pg. 3 Blue River Man
- pg. 5 Anthem
- pg. 6 Hope
- pg. 7 Inspiration
- pg. 8 Land-Locked
- pg. 9 For You
- pg. 10 Hold On
- pg. 11 Chaos
- pg. 11 Fountain of Youth
- pg. 12 Just Like a Rose
- pg. 13 Sweet Tart
- pg. 14 My Name is Freedom

Graphics:

pgs. 15-30

Prose:

- pg. 31 The Root of All Evil
- pg. 41 Breaking the Habit
- pg. 44 Father's Love
- pg. 47 Alumni Week
- pg. 50 Losing Son
- pg. 51 No Pressure, Right?
- pg. 53 Small Mercies
- pg. 55 Musings of an Emptied Soul
- pg. 57 Eunique
- pg. 59 Just Business

1st place
Masturbating Mindframes
Dean Moran

I'm masturbating mindframes
Getting off, Get it off, get it off-
My mind.
My multiple personalities are always arguing
Sometimes...
They have kinky make up sex
Sometimes it hurts my head.
They like Bondage.
The shame gets them both off the same way,
Shame that deep down,
everyone enjoys.

I'm synchronizing sunsets.
I wish I could live in the culture of the east,
On the beaches of the west.
And swim till my arms and legs don't work
And drown in the surf.
Sleep with the fishes.
With no memories of the seperated earth

I'm sure of the apocalypse.
Hope is spiraling in technological bliss,
And the only time anyone really cares,
Is when another natural disaster hits.

Can you blame god for drowning New Orleans?
Can you blame Bush for talking about mass destruction?
Can you really trust in the education the government's funded?
Can you believe in love?
Can you believe in science?
Can you believe we came from nothing?
Can I just have faith in something?

Yellow Church's always have the best music,
But once it's over it's hard to use it.

I Lose it.
For once in your god-fearing life,
Be a man!

But It's not the way I was taught.
It's the way that I am.

White sand always comes from the bluest oceans,
The best lies always come from the truest notions.
The best of us sometimes get caught up in time,
Trying to believe reason could never exist without rhyme.

-Divine-

A state of mind that makes everything less.
Calling beautiful passion,
Illegitimate sex.
Now the waves of the west are on Eastern shores.
Centuries of cultures are gone.
Centuries of cultures were wrong.
And centuries from now a new day will come.
After the wars are all one,
Culture will be just a myth.

But my mind has always been in perfect time.
And my personalities can live peacefully-
On the right and left side.
But every once in a while,
When one gets out of line,
They have kinky sex,
Just to get it off my mind.

So I'm masturbating mindframes.

2nd Place

Blue River Man
Jordan Bitticks

Six o'clock in late September,
The sun hangs low and bright in a cornflower sky.

Missouri countryside unravels before me,
Ancient forests fields of amber and rye.

I left my light behind in Old St. Louie;
From a hundred miles it's so hard to see him shine.
Wish he was here with me on this antique highway
Rolling over hills and flowered valleys growing wild
Growing wild...

One day we'll just keep on driving
'Till we're found in some lost mountain town
In the spring behind our house we'll wash our tired feet
Head home hand in hand 'neath a autumn canopy

I know where I need to be now

I know where I belong

Could be, could be Missouri

Colorado, maybe Oregon.

Anywhere it don't really matter, no

Just as long

As that blue river, that blue river man

Has got me in his arms.

Six o'clock in late September,

The sun hangs low and bright in a cornflower sky.

Missouri countryside unravels before me,

Ancient forests fields of amber and rye.

3rd place

Anthem
Colin Wallace

O how I miss my childhood, those days of old
I can feel their numbness, those days are so cold
if I were to paint you a picture of the past, what would it resemble
A Monet? A Marc? O those days they make me tremble
Desensitize my memory, make me forget
Don't make me scream indecencies I might regret

Some may think my childhood was sad, don't get me wrong
These things I speak of were my best memories, they made me strong
Many were not as lucky as I, to live this life of pain
To have a childhood without sacrifice is a childhood in vain

Now I grow tall, my roots run deep
Never will I regret my past, never will I weep
Keep your love and affection, they give me no strength
Never did I strive for them, I went to no great length
Deep in my soul grows a passion no man can equal
So stay hidden behind the smile of two-faced cheery people

When I need your help, I'll come to you
But don't wait up expecting me, it will be no day soon
Some things in life cannot be bought and sold
You can put no price on the man I am and the story I've told

You live your life, and I'll live mine
We'll see who stands the test of time

Hope
Melissa Hirner

Hope, it's a positive outlook.
When others think you've had enough,
You stand firm and prove them wrong.

Hope, it's beautiful.
It causes us to dream.
It is the sparkle in our eyes.

Hope, it's never lost.
It is what keeps all of us together.
Without hope we would fall apart.

Hope, it's a harbor.
Within it we remain safe from the rocks.
Without it we would be lost.

Hope, it's free you just need to grab on.
By grabbing hope you can elude the darkness.
With hope you can take on tomorrow.

Hope....it's a second chance.

Inspiration*Intoxication*Vibration*Elation
Jordan Bitticks

Patchouli oil and sandalwood perfume
Beaded curtains and a jade statuette.
I paint by number--green and gold and wild blooms
Shroud of silk, we lovers share a tête-à-tête.

Our dreamy heads filled with sweet heavy smoke
Through the haze I draw my inspiration.
You--my muse-- offer me another token
The patron saint of authors is named John.

I am soft pine and you are steel wound string
Together we create a violin
Making melody is no simple thing
But denying our music would be sin

High on you and musical vibration
You stir in me a sense of pure elation.

Land-Locked
Rachael Nolting

I want to take you
No geography involved
Sound and emotion, shadow and heat
Using nothing but words
Can you feel it?
Hi.

Reluctance
Heard, in the way you twitch your hand
Ramblings, seen
Feel it, feet shuffling
Dragging, dragging
Do you even know where you're headed?
Bye?

Communicate all you want
I hear, listen
To more than the words, the tone
The physical expressions
You say so much, without speaking once
Don't go without even knowing where to!
Stay

Heat, light, jerky motion
Quick, calculated, methodical
Act!
The potential I see in you
I blush.
Gone again
Damn.

Too shy
My words are so damn beautiful
If I but had the courage to share them
Just between us
To taste your reply
Sense it in every pore
Caught yet again
Fuck. My. Life.

a tribute of sorts to a younger sister, following in her sister's footsteps

For you
Kathryn Leetch

From first to fifth position we move
our feet pointed perfect
our arms in their place
structure and poise are for what we aim.

For the creating of this dance
we thank Louis X-I-V
Mastins and Subligny
To the "Marie's" of the eighteenth century

I see where I came from
and I see where you're going,
far.

As you move in perfection
remember those before you
who changed this dance we love
in so many ways.

Classically on point
twirling and swirling
vicariously moving about on stage.
Performing.

I see where I came from
I see where you're going,
Far.

Adrenaline rushing
heart pumping
beat thumping.
Expression.

I see where I came from
I see where you're going,
far.

I see where I came from
And I see where you are.
Ballerina.

Hold On
Melissa Hirner

Let friends go and you'll find yourself alone.
Hold on to them, and they will make the bad times better.
Lose faith and life becomes meaningless
Hold on to it, and it will cause you to believe in the impossible.
Let your dreams go and they become just a memory of what
could've been.
Hold on to them, and they will come true.
Lose love and the world becomes a boring place.
Hold on to it, and it will lift you higher than ever before.
Let life go and you lose everything.
Hold on to it and it will embrace you back.
Lose all hope and your world will seem meaningless.
Hold on to it and every moment is worth living to the fullest.

Chaos
Wallace Colin

Let's take a dive, just you and me
Let's take a deep dive, deep out into the sea
There's little to think about or see that far out into the
sea
Perhaps we could get lost in the nothingness, you and
me
Look North, East, South and West, I assure you, there's
nothing to see
Just don't look down, whatever you do, it's chaos under
the sea.

Fountain of Youth
Jordan Bitticks

Time sneaks by like a clever tactful cat
It cannot care where you've been or want to go
With obdurate pace you burn to combat
It tends to dissolve just when you need it most.

Life is an intricate oriental rug
Woven from the finest wool in India.
Left unnoticed it garners dirt and dust.
So give in to love, sublime idea.

In the depths of some forbidden well
Slumbers the ancient secret of youth
It can't be caught--nor is it a thing to sell.
True love thrills and warms a soul like sweet vermouth.

With this at heart escape reality
Basque in splendor of immortality.

Just like a Rose
Melissa Hirner

You stand by me no matter the danger;
Brave my storms and calm my anger.

You're my hope when I can't find my way,
And you make me smile at the end of the day.

You're my best friend when the darkness comes,
And you light up my world brighter than the sun.

You love me with all your heart,
And from my life you'll never part.

Just like a rose, beautiful and strong
You are my life, my joy and my song.

Sweet Tart
Dean Moran

Sucking and straining,
Trying to maintain endurance.
Overwhelming me now
With it's pungency,
Something is...
Filling my eyes...
Liquid saline cries,
My brains connection to the visual...
world is blurring...
Oh no!
Unbearable!

...

.....

.....!

I bite into the sweetness!
This process stirs memories,
Familiar to me,
Artificially and sugary you.

Bitter and vivid by day,
Becomes vaguely beautiful at night.

Sour memories of you,
Turn sweet in my dreams.
The unavoidable moisture returns,
Tears this time...
I think...
You are still on my mind.

My name is Freedom
Colin Wallace

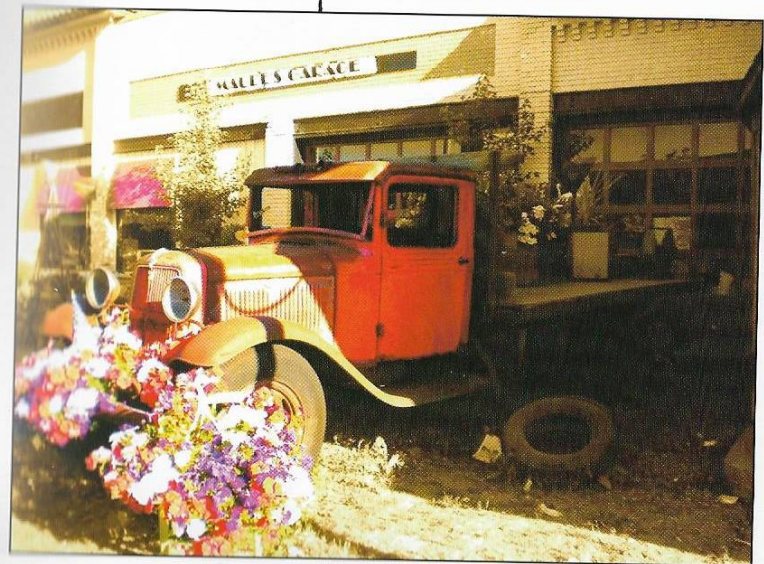
Hello, my name is Freedom.
I am the mind once respected, the light once protected.
Injected, projected, and subjected in the fabric of time.
I am the milk that once consoled and nurtured you.
That milk has now spoiled and boiled over the melting pot
we so cherish.
So join me, protectors of the free world, and let us perish.

A Sailor



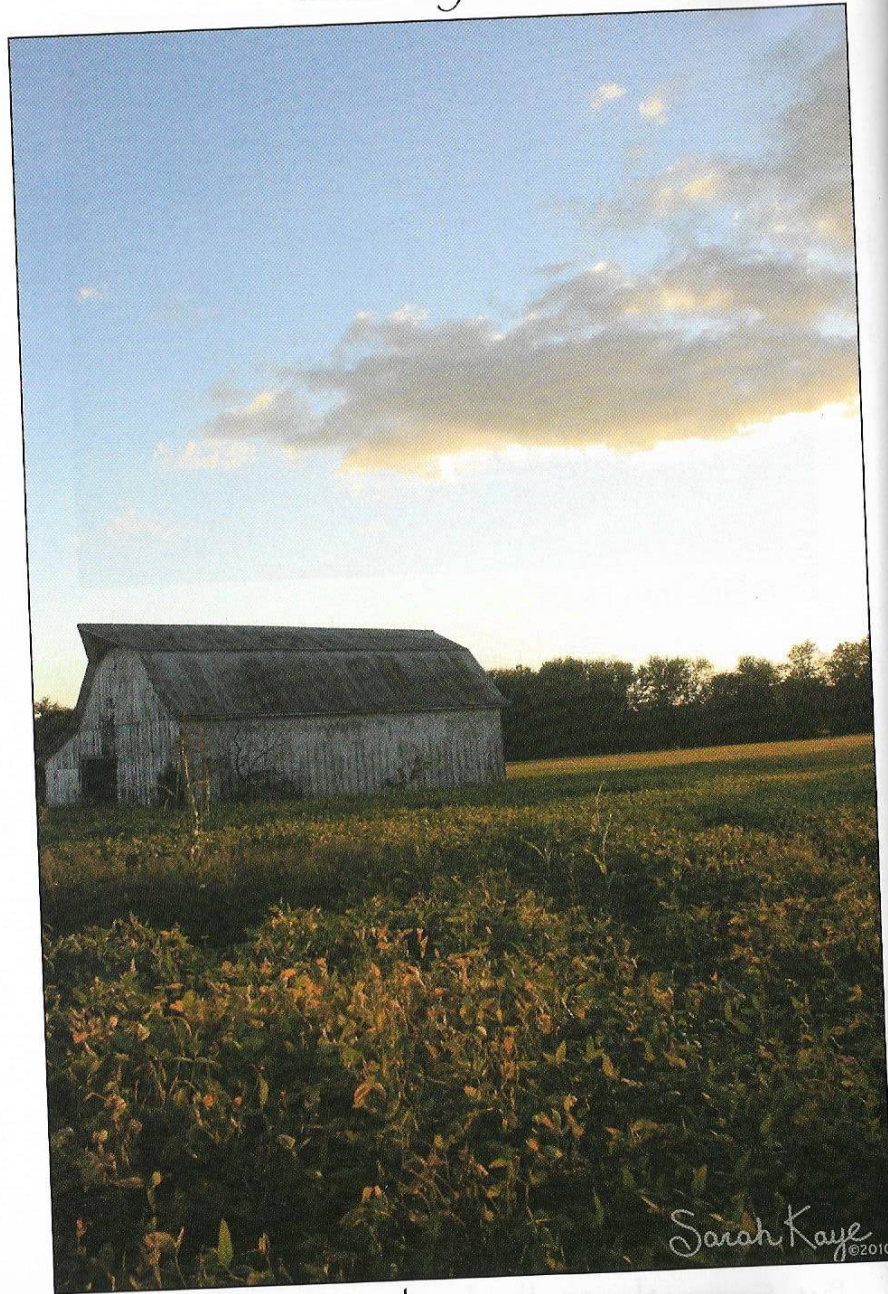
By: Su-min Han

2nd Place Winner;
Antique America



By: Samantha Hollenberg

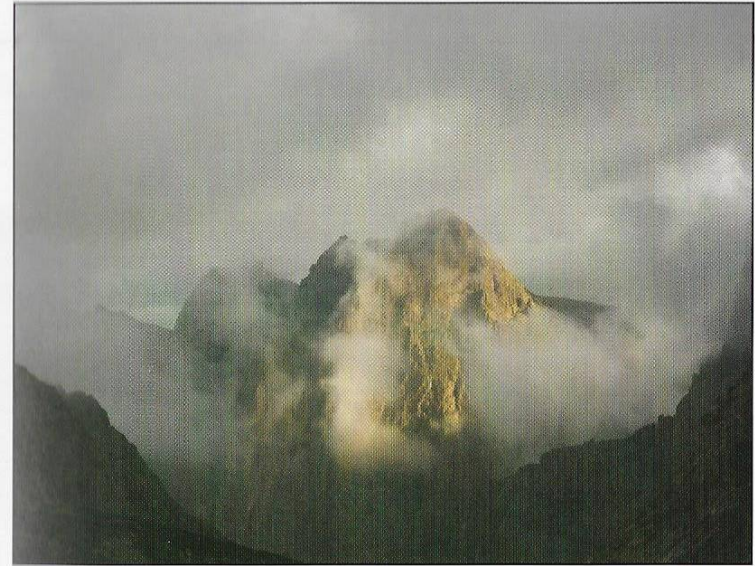
3rd Place Winner:
Country Life



By: Sarah Janisewski

Sarah Kaye
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Crystal Mountain



By: Karma Gurung

Enlightened Isle



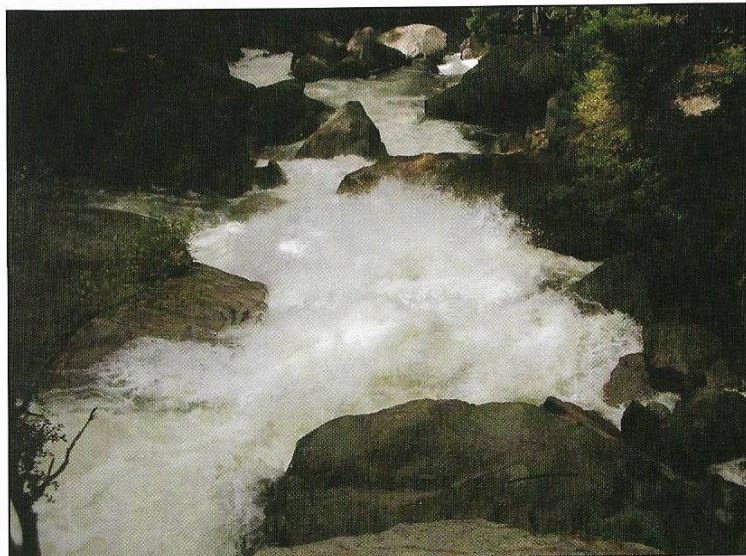
By: Samantha Hollenberg

Geothermal Grace



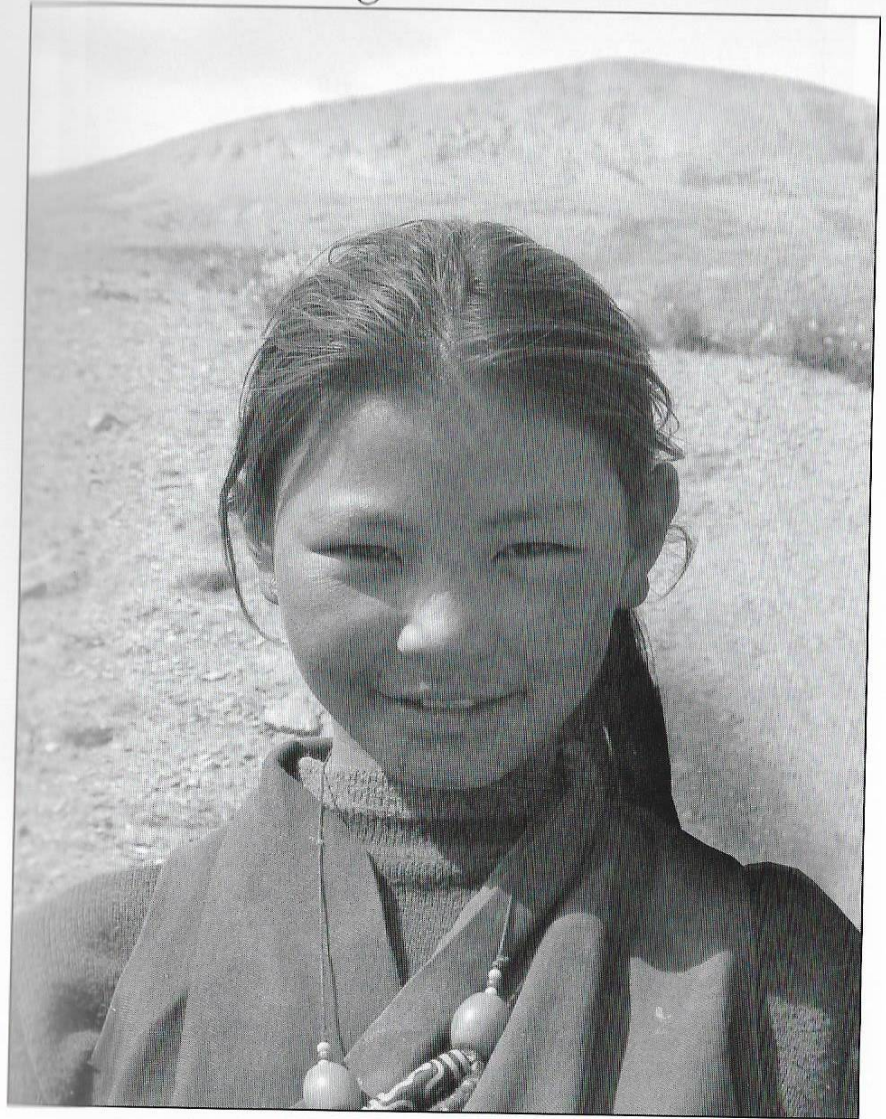
By: Samantha Hollenberg

It All Comes Down



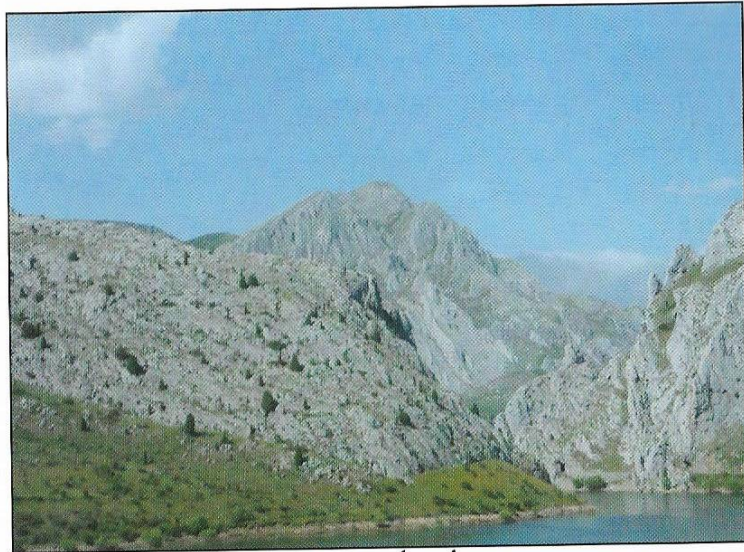
By: Flor Juarez

Himalayan Princess



By: Karma Gurung

Lakeside View



By: Matthew Westphal

Off the Map



By: Matthew Westphal

St. Peter Blesses Us



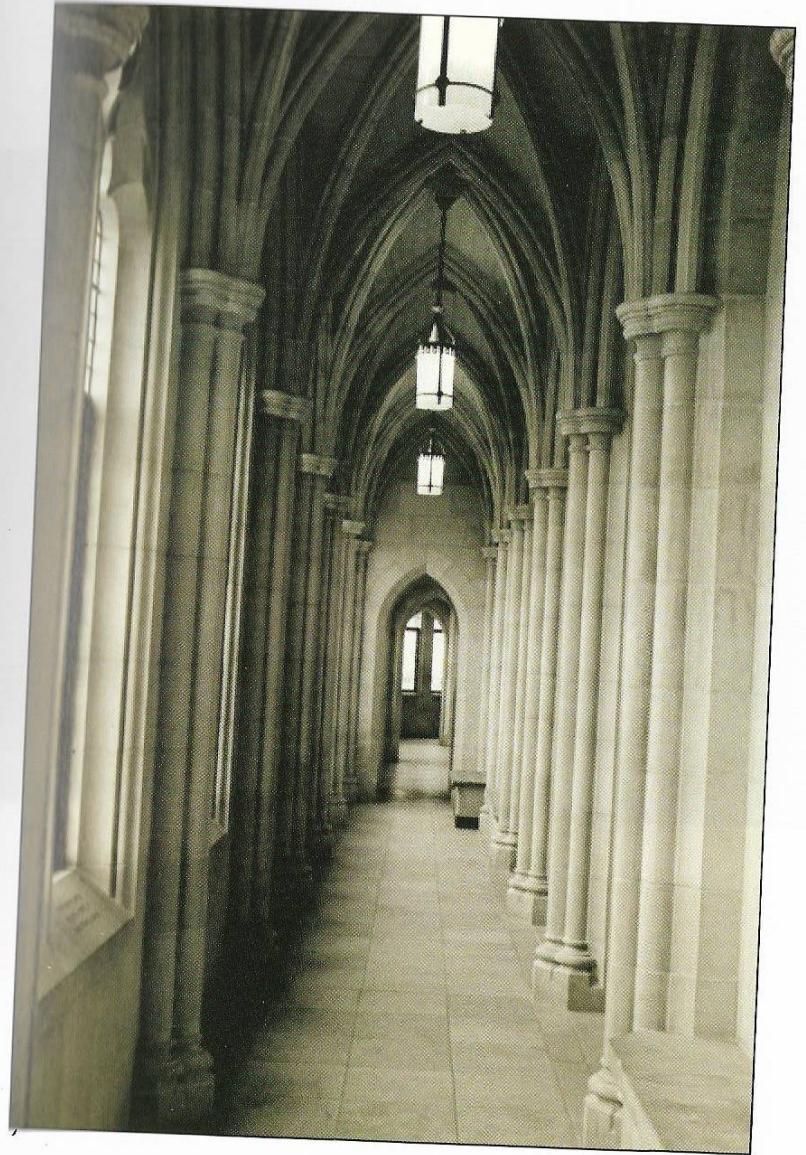
By: Gaurav Khanal

The Grand Corinthian Columns of Westminster



By: Gurav Khanal

The Pointed Arches



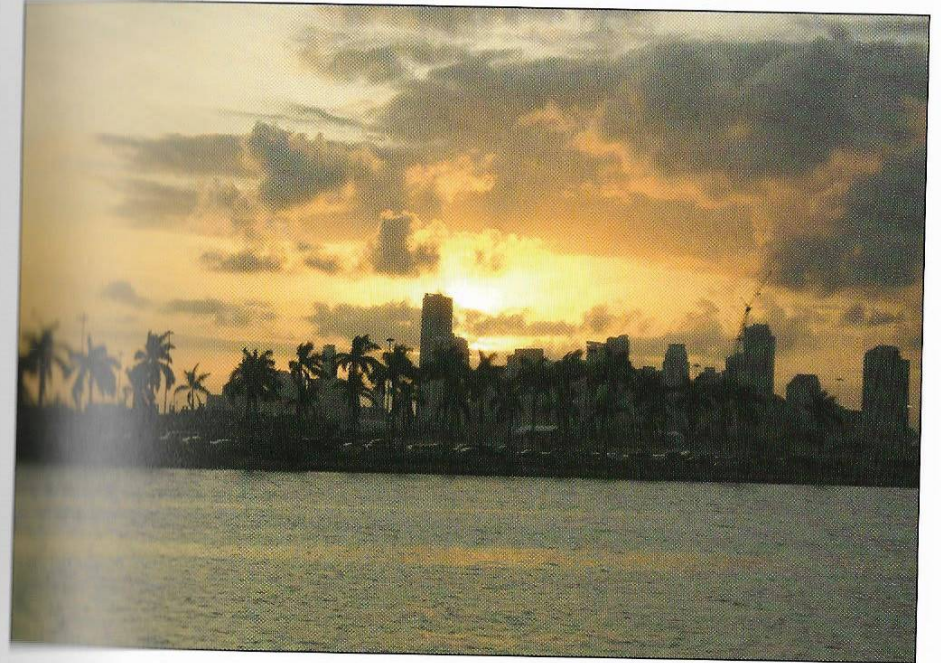
By: Gaurav Khanal

The English Garden



By: Gaurav Khanal

Sunset of Florida



By: Su-min Han

1st Place Winner:
Shadowing Nature



By: Matthew Antone

Switzerland of Thailand



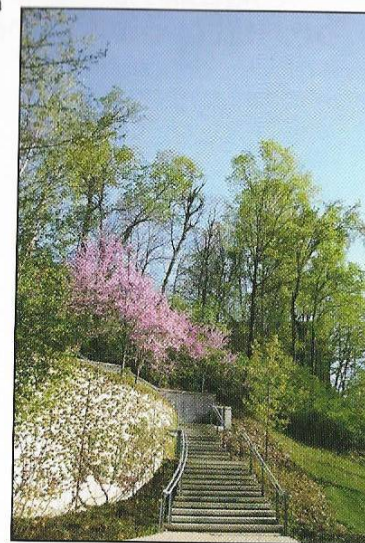
By: Wimalin Chalernporn

Sleepy Grass



By: Sarah Janisewski

Steps of Greener Shades



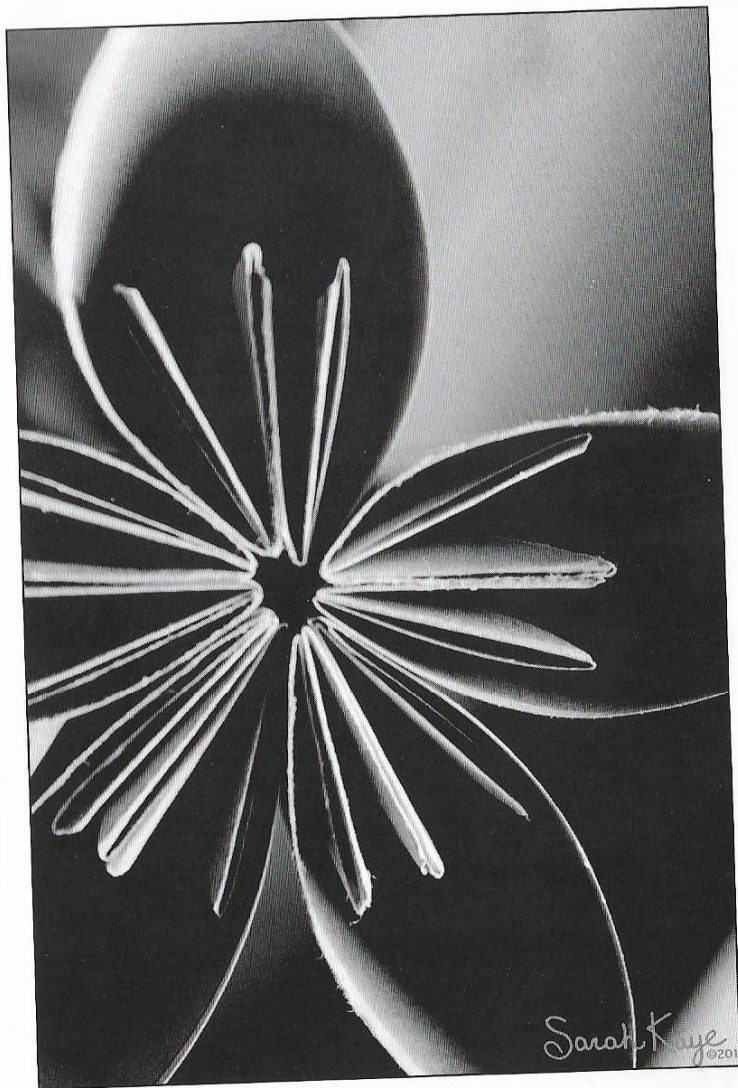
By: Matthew Antone

Twilight Vigilance



By: Samantah Hollenberg

The Beauty of Paper



By: Sarah Janisewski

The Root of all Evil

By: Zach Williams

1st place prose

My name is Rowan Nelson and I'm really not a bad person. I donate to charity, I help my neighbors with their problems, I try to make sure my purchases are Green... I mean sure, I'm not the best person in the world, but I can say without feeling like I am putting myself on a pedestal that I am an overall nicer person than fully half of the human population. I will admit that dealing with the things that have been thrown my way has made me a little bit sour in my old age, but I don't feel I can really be blamed for that.

I only mention this to keep the following narration in the proper context. It is important to keep in mind that if at any time I take a mean-spirited action it is more likely than not that I have been pushed to that point.

The tree was a gnarled old thing. Even on a good day it was hard to tell it was still alive. Brittle, flaking bark, sparse leaves, deep gouges here and there, etc. etc. etc. It was so bad I've never actually been sure what kind it was. It looked old as far back as I can remember, which is quite a few years now, and time was not kind to it. The kids of the neighborhood in every generation would play on it with the thoughtless destruction only children and psychopaths can seem to manage.

The tree stood at the corner of a vacant lot adjacent to my family's (and now my) property, just barely a few inches outside our jurisdiction; I can absolutely guarantee that if it had grown only a little bit closer to our property that it would have been hacked down at the first opportunity. The lot had become a sort of unofficial playground for the children even before I was born. I say it was unofficial because no one ever felt like organizing it into a true playground or taking responsibility for what happened in it. The lot contains several other, more pleasant, trees as well.

Even as a child I didn't like being around that tree. It always seemed like some kind of monster out of a storybook, just waiting to gobble up careless kids. The accidents that tended to happen around it confirmed my fears. Branches would break, sending anyone perching on it tumbling to a fate of scraped knees and bruising, twigs would poke eyes, roots would trip feet, and children who were otherwise extremely sure-footed and confident would become lumbering oafs as likely to fall on their faces as they

were to walk normally. On one memorable occasion one of its heavier branches broke off and killed a dog that was sitting under it. The few times that I was convinced/dragged to play in the lot I would attempt to get my compatriots to remain in the space furthest away from the tree where its foul influence seemed minimal.

This trend persisted as I continued growing and (I would argue) maturing. When my friends and I mindlessly thumbed our nose at authority and smoked cigarettes in the lot, I would pick spots with views that obstructed the tree. Even when my whole life revolved around having a "bad" image I knew that there was a level of "bad"ness that I dared not aspire to.

Just to clarify, I do not hate trees in general. In fact, I rather enjoy sitting under them and reading a book or having lunch. No, my hatred is much more focused. It is just this one tree that I loathe; the feeling is not extended to the rest of the arboreal population. Most of the problems in my life are a result of that tree. One moment in particular has helped to shape the less pleasant part of my existence. I must have been somewhere around eleven or twelve at the time; old enough to generally understand what was in my best interest, but not yet old enough to master my defiance of my own best interests. My friends had managed to convince me that being dared to do something somehow made you required to perform the dared action.

Said dare was simple in theory even if not in practice. I was to climb to the very top branch of the tree everyone knew I was somewhat afraid of. I was reluctant at first, but when my comrades began representing me as flapping my arms and clucking, my course of action was clearly set.

I looked up at the tree for a while, trying to pass off all of the things I had seen it do as luck and nothing more. I was largely unsuccessful, but when my friends started the clucking again, I could do nothing but begin climbing, no matter how much it went against the grain. I made it to the first set of branches with no problems. My friends watched me in silence. I had always suspected that they too were a bit wary of the tree, but my suspicions had been unconfirmed up until that moment. Under normal circumstances they would be flippantly disparaging me and each other or complaining about the chores their taskmaster parents had set for them. Not at that moment, though.

they were fixated on my progress.

I made it to the second set of branches also without difficulty. I was extremely surprised- the gnarled, crooked branches actually made for pretty good hand holds. I know now that it was only a trick to draw me in.

Most of the ordeal passed without incident. I pumped a fist in the air when as I reached my other hand up to touch the very last branch. That was when I heard a creak directly underneath my feet. I looked down. There was a crack near the base of the branch. I could only form my mouth into an O of shock when it suddenly gave way under my weight.

My fall to the earth couldn't have taken more than a few seconds, but they were the longest few seconds of my life. There was a sharp pain in my leg, and suddenly I was flipped around so I was looking at the sky. I could hear snapping and crackling around me as I continued my way down to the ground through more branches. A burning sensation in my side informed me that I had briefly scraped against the bark, drawing a line of fire along my torso. That particular pain didn't keep my attention for very long, however. In instant later my body met the ground with a heavy THUD and my lungs were suddenly extremely empty. I lay there gasping as my friends surely looked on in shock. I managed to twist my head to see if I was right even as I heaved my diaphragm. I was right; they were utterly stumped as to what to do in this situation.

I looked down to survey the damage, and my leg immediately drew my attention. It was stuck at an odd angle, a little too far to the right. It was nothing extreme like you see in the movies, but still incredibly noticeable; especially to the person who had familiarized himself with it for around twelve years. Following from this, I feel my somewhat hysterical reaction was justified. I screamed rather loudly as the implications of my leg's angle hit me. Apparently this jerked at least a few of my compatriots into action, as the next thing I knew I was being dragged along the ground, desperately begging them to, "Oh god be careful of my leeeeeeeeg!" I told you all of that so that I could tell you this.

I'd been coexisting semi-peacefully with the tree for a number of years despite what it had done to me. My life had never really been the same after that incident. The fall had damaged the growth plate within that leg, causing extreme stunting to occur. This caused me to grow distant from many of my friends whom I

could no longer keep up with which, in turn, helped to cause my grades to start slipping as I was far too busy engaging in self-pity or coming up with excuses about why my work wasn't done. Such poor study habits all but guaranteed my denial to a quality higher education, severely limiting my capacity to branch out beyond hometown jobs.

As I've grown older I've noticed more subtle things that the tree manages to infect with its presence. The view from my kitchen window would otherwise be an idyllic snapshot of nature; as it is, it is just a hard look at the mortality of all things. During the fall, the few leaves on it always seem to blow over to my yard. Its roots are raised just enough to foul up lawnmower blades. It allows nests to be built by the loudest birds known to man on the branches directly facing my house. You get the idea. The tree has not given up tormenting me, although the quality of the harassment has gone down sharply. I was foolish, and had allowed myself to fall into a false sense of security.

I sat on my porch just looking at it, sometimes rubbing my knee absently. The thought had crossed my mind several times that I must have been going insane to stand sentry against a tree. It made me feel better though, like I was actually contributing something to society. It was around Christmastime in the morning, so I was nicely bundled up in my favorite coat and gloves.

There were carolers walking down the street towards my house; their timbre was off, but the songs still had their intended effect, making me sappy with nostalgia. This pleasant sensation was somewhat dulled by the fact that I saw that their path would take them past the lot with the tree. It rarely actually hurt anyone, but one could never be too careful.

I was content to watch them warily, on the lookout for anything the tricky old thing might pull. My fears were realized almost instantaneously. Just as the youngest caroler walked under the outermost hanging branch I saw it twinge, sending a sympathetic reaction down the length of my bad leg.

I leapt to my feet, yelling incomprehensibly at the group, my mouth unable to keep up with the frantic warnings my brain was sending to it. As I was focused on shouting a warning I temporarily forgot the limits put upon me by my old injury and stumbled forward a few steps.

All I got for my Samaritan act were looks of bewilderment

and pity. Poor old coot, the looks said Can't handle the way the world's changed.

I shot an angry glance at the tree. I was no stranger to making a fool of myself, but it never really got any easier. I waved the group off, still keeping a close eye on that branch. I wouldn't put it past it to try something once my guard was lowered. I made a mental note to write the morning's incident down in the log book I kept to keep track of the tree's indiscretions. I realize how odd that must sound, but here's the way I see it. If I am correct and the tree is up to something nefarious, it will be good to have a record of it. If not, I figure it's not the worst hobby in the world.

The carolers decided to cross the street before they came to my house, but not before one of the young ones veered into the lot as he stared at me and tripped over an outstanding root. Skinned his knee, by the sounds of the wailing. The older ones kept giving me worrisome glances as they carried the whimpering child away from the crazy man. At least it got them away from that god damned tree.

My vigilance could not last the entire day, of course. I had work at the local grocery store as well as daily trips to the general store down the street for miscellaneous items I needed. I was taking my bagged items out of the trunk of my car after coming back from just such a trip when I saw Ash Zimmer mowing the vacant lot. It was a thankless job, doing lawn care for the city, so I made sure to wave to him whenever I saw him going about his work; especially when I saw him taking care of the lot. It was a dangerous job and it deserved at least a modicum of appreciation.

He waved back to me, temporarily taking his focus off of steering the mower around the numerous obstacles- mostly roots and fallen branches- that littered the ground of the lot. In the second that he was distracted the mower rolled over one of the tree's roots with a loud CLANG, followed swiftly by a THUNK. The lawn mower slowly rolled to a stop.

"Are you alright?" I called over.

His response wasn't immediate, but in the affirmative. He seemed to be distracted by something slightly to my left though. I turned to look to see a large shard of a lawn mower blade sticking out of the passenger side door of my car. My brain couldn't seem to possess the ability to process this new piece of information despite its obvious simplicity. Every time it got close it then had

to draw the conclusion that the tree had essentially shot my car. The absolute absurdity of that thought then sent my otherwise rational mind back to the start to try and think of another explanation that wasn't ridiculous.

When I was finally able to wrap my head around what had just happened, twin jets of rage expelled themselves through my nostrils as I clenched my eyes shut and pinched the bridge of my nose. I needed to calm myself down. I couldn't start ranting directly at a tree in public and broad daylight. That would be crazy. I wasn't crazy.

I took several deep breaths before opening my eyes again. It didn't help. Ash was looking at me, eyes utterly filled with concern. He was worried that I was going to lose it and start screaming at him or something. I knew it wasn't his fault. I had seen where the mower had been when my car was so savagely attacked. He needn't have worried for his own sake, although I can see how he could have interpreted my following actions differently.

I ripped the shard of metal out of my car door and launched myself forward, a snarl etching itself onto my features. Ash, presumably assuming that my aggression was aimed towards him, started tripping over himself in his haste to back away as apologies began spilling out of his mouth. I ran right past him and began hacking at the roots of tree, not caring who was around to see.

Eventually I realized I was doing more damage to my hands than I was to the tree as drops of blood began falling from my fingers, so I stopped. I tossed the shard of metal to the ground next to me and went inside to nurse my wounds.

The test was coming along nicely. I sat in my office in front of my cheap, obsolete computer. I call it my office, but it is really just an extra room that I had never really found another use for. It had a table and a chair, but that was about it as far as furniture went. Stacks of papers made a fortress around my computer. Unpaid bills, mostly. They have a tendency to build up while you're not looking.

Taking online courses wasn't going to solve all of my problems, but it was a first step. I needed something to do with my time other than dealing with it, and bettering myself seemed like a more worthy endeavor than taking up golf or doing crossword puzzles. Besides, it might even have helped get me above the grocery bagging job. I had just finished typing in a short answer

in the English section of the Final when I heard a rustling outside the window. I turned toward the window just in time to see absolutely nothing as the power went out. I think I blinked several times, but in my shock at this turn of events coupled with the darkness made it a little hard to tell.

I found myself standing in front of the window looking outside. One of the branches of the tree had gotten tangled in the power lines and knocked out my electricity. I didn't know when I had last saved.

I still didn't feel quite in control of my body as I walked downstairs and into my shoddy garage. I calmly shifted through the assorted junk that tends to build up in a garage until I found what I was looking for; the axe. I never really intended to use it; I just liked having it around, just in case. It had more of a heft than I remembered it having, but nothing I couldn't handle.

Weapon in hand, I walked into the cloudy winter evening. I wasted no time calmly making my way over to the tree.

I stopped to examine my opponent for a moment. It seemed appropriate to allow a little more calm before the storm. The tree hadn't changed much since my childhood. It was a little more worn down, but it had been so decrepit for so long that only close examination revealed any difference.

With a scream of primal rage, I raised the axe above my head. Even in the state I was in, I understood that I would be unlikely to actually kill the tree. This was only the catalyst.

The catalyst for what was something I was never able to find out. I was able to swing the blade into the side of the tree alright (and it was almighty satisfying, let me tell you) Upon trying to wrench it free, however, I found that it was pretty well stuck. I yanked on it a few times, but it just wouldn't budge. I wasn't about to let the tree take such a claim over my property, however, so I braced one foot against its trunk and pulled with all of my might.

The good news was the axe came free almost immediately. Unfortunately, I was not ready for such a sudden turn of events, which meant I was more concerned with keeping my balance than I was about how hard I was still swinging the axe.

As the weapon continued its arc over my head, I felt it suddenly lighten, quickly followed by the thunk of something heavy hitting something very solid. When I was sure I was steady on my feet, I turned around to see what had caused that sound.

I had quickly guessed that the head of the axe had flown off as soon as I felt the lightening in my hands. My guess had been correct. The head of the tool had struck a passerby in the head, knocking him down. There was quite a bit of blood seeping from the wound, and for a moment I thought I might have killed him. In my panic, my only idea was to rush over to the prone body and start shaking it violently back and forth, hoping to restore some vigor to it.

The man's eyes flew open. When they were able to focus on me, he reflexively dragged himself away, and began scrambling in the opposite direction. I attempted to explain the situation to him, but he only redoubled his efforts to escape.

It was fortunate that he was later very understanding of the whole thing and decided to not press charges, although he did ask that I pay his medical fees.

The wind was howling against the walls of my house. The assault had been going on for around an hour and a half and showed no signs of letting up. I was huddled in the basement, wondering and fearing whether or not the shoddy repairs to the house I had been able to afford over the years would hold up to an all-out attack by mother nature. The creaks and groans emanating around me did not improve my mood, nor did the fact that the power had been knocked out about forty-five minutes into the whole ordeal.

There was a crash of glass violently breaking somewhere upstairs. I debated the merits of braving the raging winds to see what was going on for a while before deciding that the house had survived longer than I had so far; there was no reason to expect it to come crashing down around my ears just yet.

I cautiously began climbing the stairs, pausing frequently to peer uselessly into the darkness, trying to pick out any small gleams that might signify broken glass on the stairs. I shivered. The strength of the wind took advantage of the small opening it had been given to great effect.

When I reached the landing, I squinted around, trying to get my bearings. It's strange how you can feel like you know your house like the back of your hand when you can see all of it, but as soon as someone hits the lights, you not only start stumbling around like an idiot, your shins also seem to suddenly gain magnetic properties for every single low edge in the area.

I took it tentative step by tentative step until I'd more or less walked around every room in the bottom floor. Must have been upstairs, then.

I repeated the process going up to the second floor as when I went up from the basement and was almost immediately rewarded by the crunch of glass underneath my feet as I reached the top. I felt around on the group for a few seconds before my palm came across what was assuredly the culprit.

The object was old and gnarled. If it weren't for all the melting snow, it would have been dusty and brittle. I didn't even have to go out on a limb to guess this: it was a branch. It was a branch from that fucking tree. First it had shot my car, now it was vandalizing my house. This would not stand. This was war.

I whipped my head toward the broken window, allowing the biting wind to sting my face. I rose to my feet, still clutching the offending branch.

Rage forced my legs to stride over to the steps and started pounding down them, two at a time. Normally, trying to do something so reckless would have left me a broken pile of agony at the bottom of the stairs, but fury had taken hold and would not allow my vengeance to be stayed by something as petty as gravity.

When I reached the bottom of the staircase I immediately stalked to the front door, oblivious to the chair that barked against my shin.

A blast of frigid air greeted me as I stepped outside my house. I ignored it. Clad in nothing but my pajamas and a bath robe, I charged through the swirling snow. My feet almost immediately started to go numb.

Within moments I stood planted before my old enemy. Expletives I had never before even conceived of began spewing themselves from my mouth. My arm lashed out, breaking the branch against the trunk and sending vibrations up the length of my arm. I think I would have started throwing punches if an extreme gust of wind hadn't suddenly solicited a loud creak emanating from the wood in front of me.

I was rooted to the spot as the tree began to lean dangerously under the pressure of the storm. With a gunshot-like CRACK, it began to topple... right into the side of my house. I continued to stand there, transfixed, as the old thing crashed into my wall, punching a sizable hole into the upstairs hallway.

When I finally found the ability to move my legs I cautiously walked towards my fallen adversary. I stood directly underneath it and reached up to feel the cold, rough bark. The tree shifted, allowing itself to plummet about a foot and hit my head, knocking me out instantly.

No doubt many people who have read this account will expect that I became introspective following the tree's death; sad even. They might expect that I came to realize how much my own life and personality had become entwined with this tree and that without it I didn't really have all that much to live for.

These people have clearly not read close enough exactly what this tree has done to me. I'm glad it's dead. Now I have time to do other things- constructive things!- other than keeping watch on that damned thing. Sure, the hole in my house isn't exactly the greatest thing that's ever happened to me, nor was the frostbite that started to creep into my extremities by the time I was able to get myself to the hospital, but those are minor issues. Since the tree was on public property, I would be able to get reimbursed for all of it!

I just couldn't believe it. Even from beyond the goddamned grave, that cursed thing still won't let me have an ounce of peace! I'd kill it if it wasn't already dead! That's the joke isn't it you fucking thing?! You escaped! And I still have to deal with you!

I'm sorry about that. I sometimes get worked up.

I had very calmly gone into the City Hall to lay my claim for damages. The lady at the front desk smiled politely as I triumphantly regaled her with tales of the decades-long rivalry while she pulled up the information concerning the vacant lot.

The polite smile faltered slightly as she looked at the lot; I felt a tendril of dread worm its way into my stomach. What could be wrong? I had won, hadn't I? I had finally won!

The lady at the front desk showed me a picture of the lot; specifically, she drew my attention to the boundary between my property and the lot. I could only stare at it in silence for a while. The tree was slightly- ever so slightly!- across the line into my yard. Probably only a matter of inches, but it was there.

I think the lady noticed my face draining of color because she asked if I'd like to sit down or have a glass of water.

It is possible that I overreacted.

At the time, it seemed perfectly reasonable to pick up

the letter-opener on the desk and lunge across it, bellowing in fury. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world to bury the blade into the meat of the nice lady's arm and then attempt to strangle her. I couldn't quite understand why the other occupants of the office would drag me off her, so I attempted to defend myself. The police arrived not long after to take someone described as a "raving lunatic" into custody- a person who was me, much to my surprise. My victory- my triumph had been taken away from me. Why couldn't anyone see that?

Since it was my first real violent offense, I have been put to community service. What kind of community service? I think it's easy to guess.

I'm planting trees.

Breaking the Habit

By: Jennifer White

2nd place prose

The man who lived at number twenty-seven Carmen Drive took no notice of the holiday season. He walked, every late afternoon at the same time, down his suburb street and gave no attention to the rather elaborate decorations that covered every house and lawn he passed. He returned, at the end of his walk, to the only Spartan house on the block, perhaps in the development. After walking, every late afternoon at the same time, the man would allow himself one Bud Lite and, always sitting in the same chair, watch as one by one the streetlights flickered to life. He followed this routine day after day, regardless of whether it was the holiday season or not, but it was during the holiday season one year that something happened to change.

The man left his plain looking house at number twenty-seven Carmen Drive at the correct time. He walked, slowly but not slowly enough for it to be called an old man's shuffle, and observed the neighborhood's occupants going about their own routine. Everything was going according to the usual until, on the way back, he passed the new family.

They lived only a few houses down from number twenty-seven and he had watched them, a couple and their two teen aged children, from his front porch, unloading their belongings for hours

that autumn. The parents had clearly been stretched to the breaking point and the youngsters unhappy about moving, but they worked together to get the job done. Not having had any sort of family interaction for years himself, such exchanges interested him and he kept a close eye on the house. So it stood to reason that he would be the only person to spot that upstart kid from the next street over.

The boy, known for trouble, usually acted with more caution. The man scrutinizing him from the porch of number twenty-seven clearly witnessed Jack or Jake or Jason glance around in that guilty way kids have before reaching for something in the moving van. The man started yelling before he really understood what was going on.

"Hey! Kid, get away from that truck before I call the police!"

That was really all it took and it was nothing, which is what he told the family later. The mother had heard his shout from inside and apparently realized it meant something, mostly that the daughter on truck duty had temporarily abandoned said duty.

He didn't realize until later the consequences of his actions that day. It hit him the very next weekend. The doorbell for number twenty-seven Carmen Drive rang.

The man took a few moments to realize exactly what that sound was. And he took a few more moments maneuvering his way to the door. When he opened it, he fully expected to see the mailman or one of those religious salesmen, not two girls with a plate of baked goods.

"Hi, we thought you might like some of the cookies we made."

"We tried them, they're good, Mr. Johnson, I promise!"

He couldn't very well tell them no. The two girls were being polite and respectful, a rare combination in kids their age. Such behavior should be reinforced at all chances. This philosophy is how he found himself accepting cookies and other delicious home baked goods when the urge to make desserts came over Ms. and Ms. Adams. In return, he told them tales of his long gone army days. While his doctor was not particularly happy about the cookies, the man found himself smiling on occasion to the neighbors he passed on his afternoon walk. This was often followed by a scowl after said neighbor stared at him.

On this walk, the man refrained from such behavior but, spotting Mrs. Adams hanging garland on her mailbox, knew he should acknowledge the lady. And so he smiled briefly at his

neighbor in passing.

"Mr. Johnson! Hold on, I have something for you."

The man, surprised, found himself turning around during his late afternoon walk, a clear break in routine. Mrs. Adams, still holding a ridiculous length of greenery with one hand, reached into her coat pocket to pull out a colored piece of paper that matched the garland.

"We're having a small get together next week for our new friends in the neighborhood," she said, handing the paper to him. "We, especially the girls, would really love for you to come."

Shocked, he almost dropped the paper. Not being what he expected to hear, he glanced down to examine this thing in his hand, half expecting it to disappear. Cheerfully hand drawn symbols of the season mocked his confusion. He admitted he didn't understand and Mrs. Adams seemed to misunderstand him.

"Since their grandfather's death, the girls haven't been the same. But since we moved here and they befriended you... well, you've helped them deal with a great many issues I think. It would mean so much to them if you would come. If you want, Tony could come get you with the car."

Just as the man was protesting against her husband driving to a house three doors down when he proved he could walk five times that every late afternoon, one of the Ms Adams yelled that her mother had a phone call.

"I'll be right there!" The lady yelled back towards the front door. Turning back to me, she said "Great! I'll see you then!" And then she trotted up the short driveway and into the house, where her daughter had already disappeared. The man, left standing there unsure whether Mrs. Adams heard he wasn't coming, continued his disrupted routine.

A week later, having finished his walk, the man moved to the fridge for his Bud Lite, which he refused to give up regardless of what his doctor said about beer and his health. He paused at the counter to stare at the holiday colored invitation, dropped there on an identical trip to the fridge a week ago. For some reason unknown, the man found himself picking it up and rereading the red font proclaiming the celebration.

Next thing he knew, the man was heading out the front door. He placed the paper in his pocket as he donned the old worn army coat, just in case. He set off the reverse way of his late

afternoon route.

Back at number twenty-seven Carmen Drive, the garbage can stood waiting for an empty beer can.

Father's Love

By: Besjana Nikoci

Everything happened right in front of my eyes. His feet could no longer hold him steady as he tattered, even the solid mountains were shaky, moving in circles, beyond my eyes. On the very edge of that snaky, slender path, three meters away from dad, he slipped.

"Dad I am tired, carry me?"

"Only a few more minutes, big boy. We're almost there, come on."

Dad was holding two big bags full of apples and chestnuts from my grandma, given to us as usual on our yearly visit during the chestnut season.

"But dad I..."

The rest was lost to a roar that emanated from the fear hidden deep in the innocent soul of a child. That roar reached deep into my soul.

We had taken the old route, the one that my father has taken since he was a kid, - the route that he took to go to school for eight years of his life, the route he took at least twice a day to go to work until he got married. It was the route that his family always took, and the only route that brought back childhood memories. For the hundredth time, my dad told us:

"We used to always take this route; this was the only route. When I was young, we didn't have shoes like the ones you can buy so easily today. There was only one kind, gum shoes. Everybody wore the same. Winters were harder; the snow would get into our shoes and freeze our feet. They were so slippery, too, because they were made out of gum. So you can imagine how difficult it was, climbing up or going down this route, the only route that used to connect the village with the rest of the world." He loved to tell us about the old days when hardship was everyone's constant companion but brought these people closer together:

"Back then, everyone was the same" my dad told us repeatedly every time we walked the path reveling in nostalgia.

The shuffle of the fallen leaves, the hard sound of the stones skittering from that snaky path that clang barely to the mountain, caught my attention. All I saw was a chestnut tree and some herbs whose half exposed roots kept them from falling into the abyss. My glance froze at my brother. With his tiny hands, he clawed at the loose soil to keep himself from falling along with the stones rolling down that steep slope. The scream that roused from the throat of my four year old brother demanded help... but I was frozen in place. "Oh my God, noooo..." I thought half out loud and my thoughts gave way to a half formed scream. I was watching my brother slip away.

My dad tossed his bags away and on a blink of the eye, ran down the steep slope to the only possible barrier, a chestnut tree. Hooking his foot on the root of the tree, he reached out quickly to stop my brother from sledding further.

"Hold on" - he said to my brother, gesturing to a spiky shrub. My brother's hands closed around the shrub but released just as quickly, as he saw blood from his hand where spikes penetrated his skin.

"Wilson, you've got to hold that branch really tight, right now. I promise it will not hurt": my father said. His voice reassuring, his eyes imploring.

My brother said nothing. He reached out, grabbed the spiky branch and dragged himself inch by painful inch. Seconds later, though it seemed an eternity; my mother reached at and pulled my brother to her. He was safe and sound rapped in my mother's arms, but a crackling noise drew our attention back to the slope. The chestnut tree that supported my dad from falling had almost broken. For a moment I swore that the law of gravity had been suspended, that the force holding me to the earth had sake away. I run toward my father, screaming "Daaad;" and then, I felt my mothers' hand clinging to my shirt. My father's feet turned underneath him against the sandy soil and loose rocks flying everywhere, until last he reached my mother's hand. Finally, everyone was safe.

I had fallen on my butt, pressed against the rock. When I saw my father back on the path, I collapsed into quiet tears.

"Hey beautiful, it's ok. Everyone's fine, it was nothing."

He spoke so calmly, so softly, that for a moment I thought I had awakened from a bad dream. I still don't know why was I crying. Was it because everything had happened in front of my eyes?

Was it because I felt so helpless? Was it because until my father was safe I realized how hurt I was, after my mother had pushed me against the rock. I don't remember. I was so angry with myself, for my inaction.

My mother didn't cry. Her response was a prayer of Thanks – a prayer she repeated all the way to the point where my brother and sister awaited us.

"Heavenly Father"; I heard her say, again and again, "thank you for saving us."

My dad knew exactly what to do. He knew how terrifying it would be for my brother and me to face that abyss again. He knew we were miserable, that the edge of the cliff was the last place we ever wanted to be. And yet, he took both of us to the edge of that chasm, told us to look at the depth of that abyss. He told us to open our arms and scream our names as loudly as we could. He told us that if we do so, the mountains would respond. My fear and curiosity inseparable, pushed by curiosity, held back by fear, we walked gingerly to the edge of the cliff. Baby steps. We spread our arms, spread them wide like the wings of eagles and screamed our names. We were amused; I couldn't believe it. I could hear my voice coming back to me time and time again. The mountains were talking to me just like my dad said they would. I forgot to be afraid: My fear of heights slipped away; all I wanted was to hear my voice, coming back to me time and time again, as my brother and father had come back to me.

The water was freezing cold; just like always. It only got a little warmer during summer, but yet, it was too cold. Hours ago, the water in the river was snow in the mountains. Knowing that the water would never get warmer, my father never listened to my pleas to wait and swim after the water gets warmer. He poured water on my chest; he pulled my hand, "boom," I was in the freezing water. My entreaties and my screams unheard. I felt the water running over me and in a few seconds my body had gotten used to the cold. The only problem left was convincing my dad not to dunk me in the water again.

"Trust me, I will not let you go, I promise. Don't you trust me?" My father always asked this question. Every time I pleaded with him not to dunk me, he did, even though I begged him to wait. I wanted to trust him, I did trust him. He held me up on the surface the

of the water and told me to move my hands and feet all together at the same time. I did it several times, sure that I had learned how to swim. "You see dad," I called out, "I know how to swim" I said and before I finished I was bubbling underneath the water. He pulled me up and set me free again. He dipped me into the water time and time again until at last I was able to swim by myself. I still can't describe that feeling. Fear and joy were fused together; my excitement reached the sky, and unconsciously I had forgiven my dad "for lying" to me, for forcing me into the freezing water, for letting me sink.

He knew. He knew that if we would stand by the edge of the cliff again, if we would stay in the freezing water just a little longer, that we would be changed. He knew that we would have never experience joy until we braved the height of the cliff, until we braved the freezing water, so cold, so deep, so dark.

True enough, God created men in his own image. Thank you father, thank you for teaching us about life.

Isn't this how GOD is?

Alumni Week

By: Dean Moran

For 200 hundred years it's been this way.

We sing and dance in monkey suits.

We need them to pay,

But they spend it however they,

Please,

Please let us free of these puppet strings

-we sing-

We all want to succeed, but you hold it over our heads,

like it's cheese,

and we're mice,

We give you all our chips and let you roll the dice,

And you already got the cheese we need.

But we must earn it.

You get to plant the seed, and we each get to grow into

Big,

Powerful,

Trees,

Of pride?
 With Esteem?
 We grow into trees of greed, planting green right back into the
 pockets of
 Our supreme being,
 Our planter, Our provider,
 "The two star general himself...
 Mr. Barney Forsythe! "
 You gotta be kidding me right?
 I'll be paying loans until what time?!
 I should donate here why?!
 I've heard it before,
 "Here at Westminster College we try to live our mission,"
 "Here at Westminster, it's always been tradition..."
 Tradition for the sake of tradition is superstition.
 This superstition undermines our diversity
 Cramming our resumes,
 With opportunities,
 Internships, scholarships,
 Creating those partnerships,
 Cramming our resumes;
 Rigging the election,
 (For our own protection)
 A school that once had slaves in the 1850's,
 Denies an African student to lead S.G.A.,
 Who won the popular vote in year 2009!!
 Then they smile at my skintone?
 They want me to give back to my community?
 They want me to sing in the choir?
 With their harmonies?
 Join their fraternities?
 Bring in some more diversity?
 It doesn't make sense to me!
 I've never been to Sicily,
 Yeah...I'm dark,
 And I can Smile for the camera
 as it reflects "my" heart
 But diversity?
 I sing songs, and write poetry,

I give them all the heart I got in me,
 But none of you come to my meetings!
 Then when I get a voice on the microphone,
 You want me to preach about my home...
 Wait your talking about here?
 For real?
 I might look a bit exotic,
 And I'm not sure where I'm from
 But it isn't about to be here...
 "Well you had a choice to come here"
 That's just another assumption,
 After high school I was gonna take off a few years.
 But My mother teared at the noition,
 And I feared that I would have these regrets,
 But I haven't given up on it yet.
 I've always taken it easy,
 I've always worked best under pressure,
 I've always been kind of a hippie,
 I've always liked when people missed me,
 So I've always left,
 and I still regret it,
 Since a greater opportunity is always hidden,
 By the ghosts of our past inhibitions,
 I want to help take the mask off our global ambitions,
 To celebrate all our traditions,
 by getting rid of them.
 Instead of abusing our diversity by always using it,
 We can embrace our diversity by being ourselves.
 And if we are all so damn good at faking it,
 We really should invest in a theatre program!
 I'm here because I think I can.
 "I think I can!, I think I can!"
 I'm an engine that could,
 I'm drudging up these hills of should,
 Although being wise implies a number of years...
 And you can't always persuade all your peers,
 I will start something here,
 Something my own.
 If I can get out of bed, I will do the best I can,
 to make a difference.

Difference by definition is the atagonist of the same.
You cannot be afraid to advocate your name.

On graduation day...
I'm sure I'll be late...
But lots of people here graduate,
I'm trying to mix it up a bit.
I'll make a difference by being different.
I'll take the road less traveled by
and still come out on the other side.
Who knows if I will get out of this maze...
But if can reach my own nice slice of cheese,
And if I see a little more need,
And a little less greed,
And a little bit of soul,
In this colorful fishbowl,
I'll Come back to nostalgia I can only imagine,
When I come back;
Barney,
and whomever it may concern
I will never call you sir,
But if I can make it on my own
By car, by bus, by plane or feet,
maybe I will come to Alumni Week,
and if I might one day call it coming home,
I might just think about throwing you a bone.

Losíng Son
By: Hyunmi Kim

Tak, Tak, Tak, Tak.

Raíndrops are knocking on the windows of the barn. The sound of rain against window sounds like the ticking of a clock that keeps people awake. The morning rises but it is still dark because the sun is obscured by a rain cloud. Furthermore, a streetlight beside the barn is out and tonight looks darker than usual day. Inside of the barn is damp with humidity and covered with dust because no one dropped by. A corn hill that stacks by a clever and diligent farmer is in the next to the barn's door, and gets wet when the rain drops fall. There's mold on the forgotten sacks that

prepared for the harvest. And a plastic gun and youg boy's white sneakers are on a shelf.

After a fierce wind, holes in the roof of the barn gape open, and Raíndrops fall down through the crevice. Fallen raíndrops flare out like a white chrysanthemum. Tak, Tak, Tak, Tak.

No Pressure Right?

By: Kathryn Leetch

As I stand here at this point in my life I take a second to pause and soak up my surroundings. I have played volleyball for so many years now that I can't count on one hand the number of times I have been in this exact situation, in different locations, of course. The thrill of catching the ball from Lisa, a fellow teammate, and walking slowly back to the serving line is almost overwhelming. I control myself. I take a few deep breaths and assure myself that I have served the ball countless times- in practice and in games- that I should be able to get the ball over one more time. I begin to think about the pressure and the heartbreak that could follow if, however, I don't make it this one last time. Our team will lose, and not just this one game- but the entire match, and the district championship. We have worked entirely too hard for this one little serve to determine our fate as a team. Why me?

Why am I the one that has to choose whether we leave this gym successfully or not? Why couldn't I have been the one to give Lisa the ball, and she be the one to serve the last point of our volleyball career? I can feel my hands start to sweat even more than they already were, my eyebrows are raised, my breath starts to quicken, my heart races. I look to the crowd and I see my friends there, signs and all, cheering for me, encouraging me, and telling me I can do it. Oh, how I doubt them- and myself. I look to my coach, feeling as though this moment is slowly passing, and she tells me which spot to serve to. Let me tell you this, every time she tells me where to serve, I over think, and I miss. Great.

My senior year of high school, after just transferring from a much smaller school, I was in this unfortunate situation. I was the new girl who had the talent, had the pressure of being a captain, and couldn't let this team down. Though I had been playing for this coach for a year already, I still felt the need to help carry the team to success. We were playing at Francis Howell Central High School for the district tournament. The first round- we play

Francis Howell High, probably one of the most despised teams in our district, and we get the first shot. We had already played them multiple times throughout the season, and were at a dead split for wins and losses. I honestly didn't care about winning districts; all I cared about was winning this one game.

I was at the line, just like today; sweaty palms, racing heart. The crowd was going insane. So many people wanted us to beat this team to the ground- and it was up to me to finish them off. Game three out of three; 24-23 us. I'm up to serve. Again, I thought to myself, why me? Maybe I'm here for a reason. I bounce the ball three times (like always) give it a spin, and extend my arm to have it in front of me. I look at the ball. I look at my coach. I look into the crowd to see Lisa, then an opponent, now a teammate. I smile. I knew exactly who I was going to serve the ball to, and she knew it was coming. I toss the ball in the air, a perfect toss. I step forward into it, making contact exactly where I needed to, giving it all I had. I see the ball skim over the net with power and strength- still heading in the direction I had planned. Diekhaus hoped to set the ball when it got to her- she failed. Tears in her eyes before the ball even got to her hands; the ball slammed through her weak fingers and hit her in the face. Game over.

I focus in on the scenario now, snapping back into reality. Could I make the same outcome happen yet again? I bounce the ball three times (like always) give it a spin, and extend my arm out in front of me. I focus on ball, feeling the lines in the white and blue leather between my fingertips. I wipe my forehead, take a deep breath, and relax. I gain the confidence I knew I had in these few seconds, and I stay positive. The team is counting on me. I give the ball one last toss, a perfect toss. I step into it like I should, and I make contact right where I wanted to. The ball soars off of my hand and the crowd holds their breath. In this split second I catch mine. As it approaches the net, I begin to get nervous- it looks low. It hits the tape. I throw my head back in pure embarrassment and disgust with myself. I cover my face with my hands, and tears begin to fall. I hear cheers- the crowd is going crazy. My eyes are closed, I fall to my knees, and I feel Lisa's touch on my back. "Get up, dude! We just won!" What? The ball hit the tape, and as I covered my eyes, it toppled over the net, making it nearly impossible for the other team to get to it before it hit the ground. Point Westminster- game over.

Small Mercies

By: Anna Bohn

She sat in the waiting room with her head down. Anyone passing through that room could tell she was scared. That wasn't really out of the ordinary. Most pregnant women feel anxiety when getting their babies tested for diseases and disorders. But this woman was terrified. She held another child, a baby girl only ten months old, close to her breast. The infant looked up at her with big blue eyes, a miniature reflection of her father. This sent a chill down the woman's back. What if he came home from work early? What if they didn't need him at the garage? These were irrational questions. He never got off early. But even hypothetically, the possibility was frightening.

He had forbidden her from undergoing prenatal tests. "Why do you need to know? What if something is wrong? You'll get an abortion and tell me it was a miscarriage. You can't fool me. You know I'll find out." And the thought of what he would do after that was almost enough to make her ignore her doctor's earnest appeal. If the baby had problems, the mother would need time to prepare the house or to make arrangements to give birth in a specialized facility. Of course, if this were the case, her husband would unavoidably find out about the secret testing. It was for the sake of her unborn child that she had to face this fear.

A nurse called her name gently, and the woman stood and followed her into the doctor's office. She was there to hear the results of her screening in addition to her regular check-up. The doctor smiled in a kind, sympathetic way. He inquired after the little girl in the woman's arms as well as her seven-year-old son, both of whom he had delivered. This doctor had some unspoken understanding of the situation. He had been in the business long enough that it was not difficult for him to recognize a battered woman. At the birth of the first daughter, he had observed the fear that tainted the woman's joy at giving birth, as well as the barely hidden hate with which the little boy regarded his stepfather. This knowledge made it so much harder for the doctor to meet the woman's gaze as he shared the test results.

"Linda, the screening shows a positive for Downs Syndrome. We can check the results with the amniocentesis test, but you need to start preparing yourself for a child with special needs." Dr. Tobler saw the heart-wrenching affect of his words play across Linda's face. He knew that she wouldn't consider abortion. It was against her

beliefs, despite what her husband thought. He performed an ultrasound, during which he used a long, thin needle to draw some amniotic fluid, and then let her leave.

Linda sat in the car. Her hands were shaking too hard to fasten Erin's car seat properly. She knew she had to pull herself together to get to the elementary school in time to pick Drew up. Her worst fears had just torn into her reality.

The next three weeks were the darkest period of Linda's life. The questions swirling around her head made her dizzy, and she went about her daily routine mechanically. How could she possibly prepare for a Downs Syndrome child without letting Harry find out? Where would that money come from? Real estate was going well for her, but Harry kept a close watch on her finances. What if she miscarried? Down's Syndrome would increase the chances of that. Harry would assume she had gotten an abortion. Even if she could prove she hadn't, he would still find a way to blame her for the baby's death. She shuddered at the thought. Anything he had done to her in the past would pale in comparison to what was in store if she lost this child. And what about after the birth? Her husband was not equipped with the patience it would take to raise a handicapped child. She cursed her own cowardice for staying with him. She felt she deserved everything she got for her stupidity in marrying such a monster. But her children were innocent. Drew, Erin, and this new life inside her should never have to suffer from her mistakes. During those three weeks, Linda wished that her children had been born into a different family. The kind of family that had only ever existed in her imagination.

One morning, the phone rang. Linda was on her way out the door, late for a meeting with a client. She almost didn't answer. But she sighed, picked up the phone, and mustered an almost cheery "Hello?"

It was Dr. Tobler. Also an impatient man, he could not wait for an appointment to tell her the results of the amniocentesis test. "The first screening was a false positive, Linda. Your baby is healthy! You're going to give birth to a healthy little baby!" Linda managed to thank him and hang up before the tears began pouring from her eyes. She slid slowly to the kitchen floor as she sobbed prayers of thanks. The baby leapt with joy in her womb. Salvation had come for both mother and child.

Five months later, Linda lay in a hospital bed, Harry beaming

beside her. A fourteen-month-old Erin was on his lap, and Drew played with his aunt in the playroom down the hall. They had been thinking of either Michael or Stephen for a boy. Or maybe Harrison Wallingford Bohn IV. That was Harry's idea. Considering the last option, Linda was a little relieved that the baby was a girl. "What about 'Annie?'" she asked, not certain if it really suited the child. Harry looked into the newborn's face. Another set of blue eyes, just like his. But these eyes would later become rebelliously green, like her mother's. "Anna sounds better," he said. My mother held me closer to her chest as she answered, "You're right. Her name is Anna."

Musings of an Emptied Soul

By: Gaurav Khanal

As I stay in repose, thoughts have come to me like they never did. Much has happened in the past day or so that has left me asunder. This sentiment that arises in me is unfathomable. While I lay in this leather couch—the feel of which is heaven compared to the dorm bed—I have come to discover another part of myself that had been lost for quite a while. I have discovered this new feeling of care that roots deep down the crevices of my heart. This feeling that portrays itself without any word—in silence. In silence, I think, I work. My mind had never been so quiet before. Pause. Silence. It almost resonates—the words echo against the green walls, along with the silent sound that emanates from my mouth while I sip a cup of tea. Brilliant . . . quiet, indeed. While I write this, I very much remember the Christopher Durang play "An Actor's Nightmare," where he parodies Samuel Beckett's work, "Words and Music." As I reflect, I think about many different things. Now I have moved to the dining table—old wood, elm I believe; the chair is wooden too—I can feel it. Pause. I still sip on this cup of tea, which was too hot to begin with. Pause. While I drink, I can feel the warmth entering my cavity. The warm liquid as it flows through my esophagus washes away everything, like a flood that inundates the riverbanks. This flow of water, very similar to the flow of time, cannot run backward. I feel like my mind is also on a constant flow. Also moving in a direction from whence it cannot turn back, but can reflect; and this reflection just paves the path for more fluidity. The previously viscous mind as now been released of the lag and now sways without

friction. Generally speaking, I change my thoughts every second or so. "Random", people would call it, like this very piece I am writing. Pause. Now I am back in the couch. The other thing that has been dominating the scene, besides the silence, the tea, and me moving back and forth, is the raging clock that ticks every half of a second. Ticktock, ticktock, ticktock . . . The ticktock of the grandfather clock is so domineering that one needs extra effort not to be bothered by it. The sounds from the clock; the heavy sighs and breaths I partake. Pause. I can feel it, the heater is on; the air is gushing out of the vent. Now, the sound of the heater. The partial deafness in my right ear has been both an advantage and a drawback. An advantage, in that when I sleep I usually press my left ear against the pillow so that I do not hear a lot of "sounds", or noises to be particular, though my left ear. A disadvantage, in that, sometimes I cannot hear when someone to my right is whispering. However, my partial deafness does not stand a chance against the crescendi of little sounds. Slowly, the silence is not silent anymore. And so, it is hindered by sounds that make up little of chaos. Since I am alone in the house, and the dogs sleeping, I sense things that I did not sense before—I hear sounds, I feel the softness of the couch, I feel my feet rubbing against each other as I stay with my legs folded. In terms of sounds, that which would normally cause cacophony sound like harmony and melody. Thus, there is a dominance of two things: sound and silence. There is sound; there is silence. Sounds . . . silence . . . ticktock. Pause. The heater blows hot air. Pause. Silence. The dogs bark. Silence. Hence, a musical composition it is! The silence is the melody. The sounds are the harmony. One compliments the other. Indeed, it is music: an appreciation, an occurrence of sounds and silences. Pause. As for the feeling, it changes although the essence remains the same. The heater switches off automatically. The dogs stop barking. The teacup is empty. All that remains are the breaths I take and the sound of the clock. Slowly my heart stops racing, and the breathing becomes faint. Now it is only the clock that is producing the sounds. Time has elapsed, is and will go on elapsing. So what was the point? I ask myself. For a moment, I felt like I was a part of the symphony, and now I lay here all by myself, without any company. It seems that the musical composition took away my soul. And the breaths that were faint are not there anymore. I am aware, yet I am left asunder: alone, without the company of the sounds, all empty—an emptied soul I am.

Eunique

By: Dean Moran

Eunique is pretty-

Her dark brown eyes gut me as we sit in her car,
eating pistacios, and smoking a blunt weed cigar.

She says she wants to be a singer; she can feel it inside of her-
but she won't have a repertoire
and she won't sing a cover.

She says she could be a great president one day,
But she would never fuel the machine.

She only sings what she feels...

She doesn't watch tv

-she only reads-

But not those trashy magazines,

Just rebel poetry.

The prose of Thureou,

the teachings of Marley,

With pride in her eyes,

She sighs the triumphs of Schmedly Butler,
and she cries when she reads Bukowski.

She says it's pointless to worry.

She says...

even if they knew all the problems,
no one out there really wants to solve them
besides...

it would be bad for the economy.

Eunique is a Scorpio-

She believes in Astronomy.

A black scorpion is her smooth dark skin
raging between waves of her straight dark hair,
racing down to right about where...

her tramp stamp would be...if she were a tramp,
but she doesn't like labels.

Eunique doesn't like names,

She calls her parents hippies.

(But she still smokes their weed with me)

everyday...

and as she inhales, she breathes so beautifully,
her breasts rise and fall so lucidly.

That look in her eyes,

cursing me, hurting me!
 calling me weak and challenging my world...
 I want to hold her hand.
 I want to feel her electricity run through me...
 But we are just the host and hostess of the cheesecake factory.
 We live a façade of smiling and calling out names.
 "Smith; party of 3,"
 "Johnson; party of 8."
 Alright! Woohoo!
 The Johnson's can't wait!
 (Johnsons always love cheesecake)
 She whispers, "they're all the same"
 "What a pretty name," they tell her.
 "I was born that way" she always replies.
 and puts on that smile
 and sells it with her eyes.
 We all wear our disguise
 as we go through the everyday hell...
 of picking up those pistacio shells...
 God knows they can't give them peanuts while they wait!
 (Chuck the owner knows that those things are addicting.)
 Up to two hour waits...
 nobody complains since they are breaking open shells-
 Munching the time away.
 Most days we blow smoke and toss our own shells on break
 It's like our own slice of cheesecake-
 whenever it came it was always worth the wait.
 We had talked about sex, love, reality and drugs
 We had been work partners for almost 6 months,
 but just as madly as I was in love,
 I was intimidated by Eunique.
 the buzz of the blunt that kicked in after lunch break
 one day made me brave
 and I put my hand on her knee.
 She raised her eyebrows at me as if we had never met...
 but she let me stay there for a while
 She gave me a big, genuine smile
 And she grabbed my hand back!
 To my surprised...
 she squeezed it like hell!

and in between our palms was a pistacio shell
 But unlike the many shells I've seen,
 It had never been open-
 It was clean as a sheet!
 And it looked as if it would be impossible to eat...
 "Don't fall in love with me,"
 she said to me real sweet.
 "I'm like one of these"
 "You can't crack me."

Just Business
 By: Zach Williams

Richard was a business man at heart, and the end of the known world wasn't going to change that. Sure, times looked bleak at the moment, but he'd learned a long time ago that getting ahead was less about being in the right place at the right time, although that was certainly part of it. No, Richard was of the opinion that you had to be prepared for when the right time came. Having the foresight to prepare for civilization to take a sharp and sudden nosedive was an exceedingly rare thing, however, so he had expanded his personal philosophy to include versatility as well, which he certainly had in spades. If someone had called Richard smug he would have agreed with him or her wholeheartedly, but would be quick to add that it was not necessarily a terrible thing to have a high level of self-satisfaction. For him at least, it encouraged him to strive to do better so the feeling would stay with him.

Becoming a trader had put him in an excellent position in that regard. Thanks to the desperate times, his own business acumen, and the deals he had made with the various local hostile groups, he had been able to carve a comfortable living for himself. It wasn't his ideal existence, but he was also certainly aware that he could be doing far, far worse for himself.

Richard allowed himself a small smirk as his donkeys ambled along a deserted highway. It was an indulgence that he was exceedingly poor at resisting and thus the expression commonly occupied his face. He always replaced it with a more neutral expression when doing business of course, but when left to his own devices as he so often was, the slightly haughty grin could

regin unopposed.

He swayed back and forth on his slow-moving mount as he raised a bottle of wine above his head, saluting no one in particular before taking a light swig of it. Another luxury he had not yet seen fit to curtail. Richard occasionally gave a halfhearted effort to avoid dipping into his own merchandise like that, but had never experienced any immediate negative consequences from doing so, so such attempts rarely got very far off the ground.

His smirk was temporarily dethroned by a frown. Just what was this, then?

Richard had stumbled across the remains of an apparent battle with multiple dead on both sides. Much like many people he had become somewhat of a vulture in order to survive by picking clean those who hadn't made it to their After Life, but that didn't mean he found it particularly enjoyable. Dead bodies were just so creepy and it didn't take much time at all for them to start stinking to high heaven besides.

Still, Richard was not the sort of man to ignore such a windfall out of sentiment, no matter how distasteful he found it. If he was lucky there might even be some ammo lying around. Heck, maybe even some guns. Such items would inevitably fetch a healthy sum of money. Even if the weaponry had already been taken the clothing was still useful and there would doubtlessly be at least some semi-valuable personal effects to go along with them.

The subtle grin back on his face, Richard patted his mount as he climbed off and prepared to set up camp. Salvaging wasn't difficult but it could take a surprisingly long time and it was already edging into late afternoon. Besides, it wasn't as if he had anyplace he was hurrying to get to.

Without much else to do Richard amused himself by coming up with identities for the bodies he was rifling through and a reason for them to have been killing each other way out in the ass-end of nowhere. He thought himself to be a rather creative man, and fashioned a few names and motivations that were quite outlandish. It wasn't like anyone was going to jump out of the bushes and declare him the winner if he correctly guessed; it was purely a distraction from the distasteful work. Therefore as the shadows lengthened and the bodies began to pick up more of the signature post-mortem scent, his speculations about the bodies became more and more bizarre.

He'd been lucky; whoever had been at the bodies before him had been in a hurry or had never searched a body before. There was ammunition. Not as much as there could have been, sure, but Richard wasn't about to complain about finding leftovers for absolutely free. No guns though, not that he had expected anyone to be careless enough to leave one behind. They'd be worth their weight in gold if gold still had any value. Heck, maybe more. People had to protect themselves, after all.

Richard sighed as he looked down at a particularly mutilated specimen. Somebody on the other side had managed to land a head shot and it had made a bit of a mess. He decided that he'd rather not try to sleep after looting such a sorry-looking thing and called it a night as far as taking things off of bodies went. There was still a bit more to do before he would be able to get any shuteye.

He was fortunate that keeping watch wasn't one of those things. While there was no love between him and the barbarians that took slaves he was still a practical man. He'd come to an understanding with them almost as soon as he'd learned of their activities. He gave them a cut of his profits and in return they didn't capture him or kill him. Sure, they didn't seem able to resist the urge to rough him up a bit whenever they saw him around, but it was a small price to pay for safety from one of the biggest threats around. Heck, sometimes they would even trade with him.

Richard would always give them the most favorable deal possible, of course. It wouldn't do to antagonize them by taking advantage of them.

Still, it would be nice if someone got rid of them. They were a bit of a money sink.

Richard didn't like to think of them much. Going over his travel plans usually got his mind off them though, so he thought he'd do that. After all, people didn't exactly live for very long if they just went wandering around for any extended period of time.

Using the last of the sunlight, he pulled his tattered map of the general area out of the small worn box it was kept in. Maps were pretty valuable, especially if they were kept more or less current like his was. It was covered with all the additions and deletions he'd had to make as he came across the changes in the landscape during his travels; fairly substantial changes in some places. Some of it was the result of the bombs of course, but much, especially in the

cities, was just simple disrepair. Bridges collapsed, trees fell and blocked paths, dangerous animals overran landmarks, etc. Things hadn't progressed far enough to make maps entirely useless but Richard knew it was just a matter of time. Maybe not even in his lifetime, but it would come. It was sort of sad when he took the time to think about it, which wasn't very often. Someone had put a lot of effort into the original map and it was all slowly but surely becoming obsolete; heck, it wasn't even going that slowly.

The last of the natural light in the sky didn't last long and Richard was soon forced to carefully fold the map back up and place it back into its container. Holding it near the fire just didn't really seem worth the risk, especially since he'd have plenty of time the next morning to go over it.

This did not mean that he would shirk the rest of his chores, however. The donkeys were tied up in the area the patchy grass looked thickest, rudimentary warning systems were placed around the perimeter (little more than bits of string tied to a bundle of sticks which would rattle loudly if someone accidentally tripped one), a space was cleared on the ground for his unfortunately lime green and blue sleeping bag, among other things. With all of this accomplished, Richard would make one more round to make doubly sure everything was in order. It was undoubtedly boring work, but a little bit of caution would likely do him more good than all the weaponry in the world.

Richard was in the middle of double checking that the donkeys were tied securely when he heard something that made his blood run cold. A howl drifted out of the pitiful wooded area. Wolves hadn't made out much better than humans during the widespread destruction, but they had most definitely hadn't been eliminated from the world. In fact since humans had done so well at knocking themselves off of their own pedestal many predators were faring just as well, if not better in the aftermath. Many people were not used to thinking of themselves as being equal to these animals, which tended to make them easy prey. Richard was one of those who had learned quickly that survival was greatly aided by a healthy respect for the various creatures in the world.

This posed a dilemma. Should he hope the wolves had not caught wind of him and remain or pack up as much of the camp as possible before fleeing into the night? Predators had nearly unanimously become more bold and aggressive from lack of

sufficient food. Richard wasn't at all sure that fear of him and his fire would be enough to keep them away from tasty morsels such as himself and his pack animals.

He supposed it was too much to hope for that he hadn't been noticed. He gripped the butt of his sidearm nervously as he began quickly packing away the things he knew he would need later. Richard frequently glanced around to make sure that he hadn't been surrounded without noticing, but it was already dark enough to make such efforts nearly futile. It was not the first time he had been unpleasantly reminded of his own helplessness and he fervently hoped it would not be the last. Every single sound made him tense even more. Had the situation not been so dire Richard would have found his bulging eyes and strained face to be ridiculous- even humorous. As it stood, however, packing as quickly as possible and struggling to look in every direction at once easily beat every other thought by a mile.

After a few minutes that seemed to stretch into hours he finally got things packed up and ready to move. He'd be leaving the donkeys behind of course; it wasn't like wolves would be stealing most of his merchandise. They'd not only slow him down trying to keep them together, but they would also undoubtedly amplify the noise and smell of frightened prey. Assuming he survived the night Richard would come back later and hide what was left from human scavengers until he could come back to retrieve it. Obviously it was a less than ideal situation, but he didn't exactly have a lot of attractive options. He'd been through similar dilemmas before. As long as the hiding place wasn't painfully obvious then the few people who happened to wander through would be none the wiser.

Richard took no time to lament and hurried in the direction he thought was opposite to the one he had heard the howl. He only hoped that he might end up in an area that was at least vaguely familiar but knew that he would have to prepare for the worst; the worst that didn't involve being chased down and eaten by wolves, at least.

The panicked rush away from the campsite was actually fairly uneventful apart from the cuts and bruises that inevitably come about from stumbling around the woods at night. When an hour of nervous travelling had passed without any notable incidents, Richard began to hope he had simply imagined the whole thing.

Still, better safe than sorry; he continued for another half hour before fatigue was able to slightly overtake caution and he found a suitable spot to lie down for the night at the base of a small cliff, if a little uneasily. He thought the cliff might look familiar, but in the early hours of the morning it was still too dark to tell. Still, he judged the risk to be worth it. Richard no longer possessed the full vigor of youth. In all likelihood, trying to pull an all-nighter would mean a full day of unfocused listlessness if he was lucky. If he was unlucky, he might just end up falling in an unconscious heap somewhere. Neither of these options were very attractive when it was entirely possible to be ambushed and killed if he was not fully alert.

Still, sleep was long in coming. The rocky terrain that had made the area so appealing as a defensible position did not make the most comfortable of beddings. Neither did the scare that had sent him running help with the situation. Finally, shifting uncomfortably and trying unsuccessfully to not think of bloodthirsty animals, Richard managed to drift into an uneasy sleep.

Richard was not unfamiliar with grogginess, but they were only casual acquaintances at best. He normally made it a habit to get plenty of sleep in order to keep his mind sharp. That particular morning, however, found him unhappily in the grip of that acquaintance. What little sleep he had managed to get had not been particularly restful.

He rubbed his eyes and yawned deeply. Fatigue and discomfort had temporarily chased thoughts of danger from his head. Richard drew his eyebrows together in tired confusion when he saw his makeshift campsite and how it lacked most of his possessions.

Looking up at the cliff face brought it all back; the howl, the panicked packing, and then the escape into the forest. Remembering all that also reminded him that it was going to take up quite a big chunk of the day to find the camp site again and pack it up; not to mention cleaning up whatever mess the wolves had wrought in his absence.

Richard tried to think positive. Maybe the howl had only been in his imagination or, if not, maybe they were already in the middle of chasing some other unfortunate soul. He didn't really

think either of those were the case, but it still cheered him up somewhat to think about. After all, stranger things had happened.

Yawning again, Richard stretched his aching muscles and felt for the map in its usual place in his pack. He blinked in confusion when his hand met nothing but assorted odds and ends. With dawning horror he began tearing at the contents of his pack, eyes wild. Even when the pack was completely emptied he still sat on the ground looking inside it numbly for nearly a minute. When doing that provided no discernable improvement he buried his face in his hands and let out a muffled scream of frustration. While this also did not bring back the lost map, Richard did feel slightly calmer afterwards. Things could have been worse, after all. Not much worse, but he would have to take what he could get. He had a day or two worth of food and a few tools, at least.

Eyeing his pack sullenly, he got up and brushed himself off. He'd have to figure out where he was sometime, so he figured he might as well get it over with.

Richard peered around hopefully. He thought he might recognize a few landmarks. The cliff he had slept under looked sort of familiar, but he hadn't been through the area enough to be sure. The vague familiarity of only some of the surroundings made him feel like he was constantly almost having déjà vu. The frustration that had been temporarily placated returned full force. Richard let out another yell as he kicked at his pack savagely. When he realized that he was repeatedly bashing the only supplies he had left he forced himself to lean against the cliff until the rage whirling around his mind was able to cool again.

To temporarily help take his mind off of his problem, he picked up his pack and examined the damage. It wasn't all that extensive on the outside; he had, after all, chosen it for its durability. Its insides were a different story. One can of beans had been completely demolished along with his tomatoes, coving much of the rest of the contents in a thick brown and red gruel. His pair of binoculars had been snapped in half, although he counted himself lucky that he hadn't cracked the glass. The pistol seemed alright, but he was no firearms expert so he wouldn't be able to know for sure until he actually used it. His compass, knife, electric lighter, flashlight, and the rest of his food seemed none the worse for wear, much to his relief.

With a sigh Richard began cleaning off his meager

possessions. It was slow going without a towel or anything similar, but eventually he managed to get everything but what was wedged in various cracks and the residual stickiness. It would serve until he was able to find a source of water to rinse everything off more thoroughly.

Richard looked upon what was left of his property with a frown and shaded his face with his hand from the noon sun. It seemed there could be no more putting off the inevitable; he needed to get moving. The question was, in which direction? It had been very dark when he had gone running in fright and his head hadn't exactly been clear so it was difficult to tell where he had come from and his unfamiliarity with the territory certainly didn't help matters.

He thought the area to his right might look like someone had recently stumbled through in terror which made it slightly more likely to take him someplace useful. Without having anything more to put it off, Richard started reluctantly trudging through an unfamiliar wilderness.

Any kind of familiarity he had thought he saw almost immediately disappeared; the dead trees and underbrush very quickly turned into a monotonous blur. Richard severely wished he knew something of tracking beyond looking for a bright neon sign pointing the way. He thought he might be seeing a few more broken branches in the direction he was heading than in the surrounding area, but he knew that it could very well be simply wishful thinking. It certainly didn't help that he remembered running for quite a while the night before, meaning it would also be some time before he knew whether or not his guess had been right. At least he was relieved to recall that he hadn't thought to throw any zigzags or sharp turns while he had been running. While it might have been a good idea to do so as he was possibly being chased, it would have made it virtually impossible to find his way back without his map.

Several hours passed before Richard realized that he was even more lost than he had previously suspected. Not only did he not know where his campsite was, he didn't even have a vague clue about where he was. The compass told him he was heading northwest which, depending on the direction he had been running the night before, could very possibly have put him pretty far outside his normal travelling zone. His inability to recognize any landmarks seemed to lend credence to that idea.

What brought this disorientation to his immediate attention was the fact that he was very near to reaching the edge of the forest. While this wasn't exactly ideal in that it meant he was truly lost. The silver lining, however, was that once he left behind the severely restricted line of sight of the forest he might be able to spot something familiar, or even some sign of civilization. If he could reach a city maybe he could find an un-looted map to get back his bearings. While this meant that his cargo would almost certainly be looted by the time he was able to find it again, he wanted to try to look at the bright side of things.

Richard squinted at the afternoon sky to try and figure how much daylight he had left. He was no expert by any means, but it looked as though he might have between one and three hours of solid light to go on; enough to get out of sight of the hateful forest, at least. The combination of staring at the bright sky and his lack of sleep caused him to launch into a long yawn. Maybe it would be best to just call it a day. If he kept going it was possible that he might have to sleep right out in the open, a prospect no survivor would look forward to. Richard tried to rub the fatigue from his eyes with very little success.

If there was one nice thing about travelling with so few supplies, it was that it was very easy to unpack. Very soon a small pit had been dug, mostly with his bare hands. He had experimented with using sticks and his knife for a little while, but found it to be maddeningly slow. His hands would likely be sore for the rest of the night and part of the next day, but at least he had somewhere to build a fire without having to worry about burning the whole place down. Richard wiped some sweat from his forehead with annoyance and decided that any rest he took at this point would be well deserved. He'd just lean up against a nearby tree until he cooled down a little bit; giving himself sunstroke wasn't going to do anyone any good, least of all himself; and if he found just precisely the most comfortable position in a groove in that tree, well then so much the better. Sleep was upon him before he even knew how tired he was.

He awoke to the sound of howling. Richard and grogginess were growing much too accustomed with each other for his taste lately, but that sound cut through it almost immediately.

"Son of a bitch, you've gotta be kidding me!"
It was fully dark at that point, rendering his wild eyed attempt

to spot anything dangerous around him useless. Richard gritted his teeth in anger and frustration. Was there not an ounce of goddamn fairness in the world?

Barely even taking the time to form a coherent thought he dove forward, scooping into his arms whatever random possessions happened to be in front of him. In his sleep deprived state it didn't occur to him that the sound he heard might have just been a nightmare that stemmed from last night's misadventures, but he wouldn't have taken his chances even if it had. Richard didn't believe in gambling with his life.

He scrambled forward through the fallen branches on the ground, suffering several deep scratches which he did not notice. What he did notice was a rustling suddenly rising around him, confirming his fears. In his rush he slammed his shoulder into a tree, sending him spinning to the ground. He sobbed as he miraculously managed to get back onto his feet without dropping any of his cargo.

With his feet finally planted semi-firmly on the ground Richard wasted no time in taking off in a panicked dead sprint. Malevolent branches slashed at his face as he ran while roots tangled underfoot. He fell once again, this time as a result of one of the roots. One of the items in his arms went flying ahead of him, but he didn't dare try to recover it once he had regained his footing; he could practically feel his pursuers' hot, panting breath at his back.

Finally he broke through the tree line and into the open plain. While it was true that he held very little hope for outrunning whatever was chasing him, he knew that he stood a much better chance than if he remained in the woods and continued running into things in the dark.

When he remembered to scan his surroundings as he ran Richard let out another sob, this one of joy. A town! Civilization! As far as the wildlife had come in evening the odds with humans, they still almost unanimously remained incapable of besting a good old wooden door, at least not to the best of his knowledge. If they had been able to figure it out without him knowing, Richard would almost be impressed enough to let them come and get him with open arms.

Almost.

As it stood, Richard still clung to his life dearly enough to ignore the stabbing in his side that predicted a bad stitch as he

sprinted across the field. In a very short while it would grow painful enough that it would force him to slow down so he was determined to get every last bit of speed and distance out of his rapidly decaying stamina.

He was more than halfway to the nearest building when the stitch exploded where his love handles used to be. Richard stumbled as he cried out in pain and allowed himself to slow down. This decrease in speed allowed him to take a quick peek behind him.

It was hard to see anything clearly in such an awkward position, especially while on the run, but he didn't think he saw anything-

A nearly miniscule twitch in the brittle brown vegetation was all the confirmation he needed. While he knew he wouldn't be able to match anywhere near his previous pace, Richard nonetheless pushed himself to gain a little more speed. He didn't think getting to the building before his pursuers would be much trouble any longer, but why take the chance?

As his feet hit the street Richard quickly shot another look over his shoulder. It was in this position that prevented Richard from seeing the open manhole in the center of the street. It had been blocked from sight by an errant car that was at just the right angle to obstruct his view from the forest, much to his misfortune.

The first clue which led Richard to deduce something was amiss was when he felt his right foot plunging into thin air instead of the solid blacktop. Noticing this, he barely had time to turn his face back forward before his momentum smacked it hard to the ground. A sudden burning pain in his mouth informed him that his teeth had been damaged in some way; it wouldn't be until a little later that he discovered that two had been chipped quite badly. At that particular moment though, the blow to his head had temporarily stunned him, causing the rest of his body to lose its tension. It was in this limp state that he slipped the rest of the way into the entrance to the sewer.

When the back of Richard's head connected with the bottom of the sewer it pushed him from a simple stun to full-on unconsciousness.

Richard's awakening was not a pleasant one. The first thing he noticed was the fact that someone appeared to have replaced his mouth and the back of his head with intense pain. Instinctively he attempted to hold it and curl up into the smallest ball

possible, but the merest touch sent a fresh bolt of pain through his skull. As he jerked his hand away from the tender area he noticed blood on the tips of his fingers where he had briefly touched the epicenter of the pain. As he was taking inventory of these miseries he also noticed that his right leg hurt quite badly as well; not as much as his head, but still no slouch. He suspected it was fairly badly bruised.

At least he had finally been able to get some sleep. Richard was going to find that goddamn lining.

He experimentally twitched his neck, testing whether or not he'd be able to lift his head off the ground without being paralyzed by the daggers in his head. The initial movement was about as bad as he'd expected, but after a few seconds it subsided to a dull, if still quite intense, throbbing. At least there was that.

When he was reasonably certain that he was not in immediate danger from his injuries Richard started to take in his environment, what little there was. High arching walls on both sides in addition to the walkway he occupied and a depression which would have contained a man-made stream if anyone's plumbing was still working. A sewer then.

Richard supposed there were worse places to end up with a splitting headache and a mouth that felt like it had been filled with broken glass, but he was hard pressed to think of any. In the pit of an active volcano, maybe. Hopefully things had dried up enough down there to have forced out the extra bacteria waiting to infect the first head wound they came across. He would have liked to have turned his head a little more to check on this but he suspected that doing so would not be worth what his head would put him through.

Gazing up at the hole in the ceiling, he wondered if he shouldn't still be fearful for his life, but dismissed it. He suspected he had been unconscious for some time, so if anything had designs to end his existence they would have had ample time to do so. He imagined the wolves standing around the mouth of the sewer whining almost pitifully as they sniffed at their prey but were not stupid enough to try to follow him down.

Richard noted the disrepair of the ladder leading up. Several rungs had already fallen down and the rest didn't exactly look stable. He feared that this would be the case for most, if not all of them. Wandering around an underground labyrinth did not exactly appeal to him, but it didn't appear he had much of a choice in

the matter. It wouldn't really matter if the cut got infected and killed of course, which was not an uncommon occurrence with such injuries, but he couldn't really plan for that kind of eventuality so he figured he'd just put it aside at that moment. He decided that his first course of action needed to be testing the limits of his movement. After all, the greatest of escape plans wouldn't be very much help if his body wasn't able to carry it out.

Gingerly, he lifted his head further off the ground and no further shots of agony were shaken loose. So far so good. With more care than he'd given anything else in his life, Richard slowly bent at the waist and sat up. He felt slightly woozy from the loss of blood and his head was still pounding, but otherwise he was none the worse for wear. He stood still a few moments waiting for the wooziness to pass before taking a hesitant step forward. It was a slight risk, as tripping would almost inevitably lead to further damage to his already poor cranium, but the gamble paid off. He had moved himself half a foot to the left of the ladder without incident, and if he could do that easily enough it was likely he could keep going a ways before he had to stop. Richard didn't feel comfortable risking the treacherous-looking ladder yet, and so hobbled a few feet on the pretext of checking his surroundings.

Nothing all that interesting jumped out at him within those few feet. He took note of the crustiness at the bottom of the depression which, while not ideal, was a great deal better than things could have been. It was odd trying to look at things without being able to turn his head; he had to turn his whole body in order to examine something. The few times he forgot this, he was quickly reminded with another harsh sting in his neck from where it was bent when he hit the ground.

When nothing of particular importance presented itself, Richard sighed and shambled back to his original position. He examined the rungs leading upward as closely as his injuries would allow. In the state he was in he wouldn't have attempted the sturdiest ladder in the world, of course, but it wasn't as if he had anything more pressing to do at that moment.

The lowest rung seemed more or less intact and sturdy, but the next few wiggled around a bit more than he would have liked. Above halfway there were sporadic gaps, the rungs that had originally been bolted having fallen to the floor due to disrepair. The rungs that remained higher up looked even looser than

the ones towards the bottom, unfortunately. It didn't look like he was going to be getting out of this particular hole.

On the bright side, at least it didn't look like the sewer was ready to collapse just yet. Richard had seen a few that had done just that over the years; he didn't want to imagine what it would be like if he got stuck under all that rubble.

Richard suddenly remembered the items he had scooped up during his flight from the wolves. He started looking around in the same stiff-necked fashion. This hindrance in movement combined with the fact that it was the middle of the night made it extremely frustrating to look for something, but eventually he managed to collect more or less the same amount of items he remembered he had been carrying. His few remaining possessions did not exactly inspire him with confidence.

All that was left to him was half of his broken binoculars, a pistol with only the few bullets that were still inside it, and his flashlight. Only the last of these would be of any practical use at that point in time, but he supposed that the other two would be helpful if he ever managed to find his way out, so he pocketed them. He would have to be careful to use the flashlight sparingly as well, as he was unsure of how much battery life was left inside of it; Richard cursed himself silently for not remembering to change the batteries before setting out. There was no particular reason why the thought should have crossed his mind back then, but he regretted it just the same. He considered hurling the flashlight against the wall but then thought better of it.

It was all just so overwhelming. Richard had been living the good life as far as things went in the world they lived in, and then in the space of a few hours he was reduced to crawling around in a sewer with nothing to his name but the clothes on his back and some random junk.

He supposed it wasn't going to do him any good to just stand around and feel sorry for himself. Waiting until later to get moving wasn't going to be any help, wired as he still was from his sprint across the field.

Squinting into the darkness ahead of him didn't do much good. With one last look up to the surface which was barely out of reach Richard sighed, pressed his hand to a wall, and started moving forward.

Richard looked up through the round exit hopefully. He

had wandered around for what felt like hours, but without a watch or even the sky to tell time by it was nearly impossible to say for sure. All he knew was that he was tired and hungry, but still cautiously optimistic. After all, there was a very slowly brightening disc of light right above him and, as far as he could tell, the rungs leading up to it would likely be able to support his weight.

The walk leading up to that point hadn't exactly been pleasant. It was quite some time before his neck allowed him to make even the smallest movements, and he still had a headache, although it had retreated from the original pounding to a dull throb. Nothing he hadn't been able to deal with even before the current state of affairs in the world. He was more worried about the hunger. He put one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder and began putting his weight on it. It held. Hallelujah.

The next few rungs fell to his feet in quick succession. Richard was unable to suppress the grin that forced its way onto his face. He had never been much for physical exertion, but the ache in his legs from wandering around for so long just reminded him of how lucky he was to be alive.

A gigantic BOOM shook the earth, dislodging Richard from his perch about 2/3 of the way up the ladder. A feeling of déjà vu washed over him as for the second time that day Richard found himself falling down a sewer shaft. This feeling of repetition ended abruptly as he struck the ground but retained his consciousness.

Agony exploded all over his body as injuries he had just gotten used to received even more punishment. Oddly enough, his right leg only hurt for a split second, whereas the rest of him was much more persistent. Such was the pain that he did not notice the darkening of the room until several seconds later. It was the bits of debris sprinkling his upturned face that brought him back to reality. He was bathed in utter darkness except for some thin shafts that managed to pierce through the rubble that blocked the way to the surface.

Wait. Debris blocked the shaft? Richard attempted to jerk himself into a sitting position, but his right leg refused to obey, causing the indented motion to become a sort of halfway flail to the left. This accomplished little more than sending another wave of pain through his battered body. He awkwardly fumbled with the flashlight stuck into the waistband of his pants until he managed to pull it free and turned it on. Upon inspection, he decided that

the situation could definitely be better. IN fact, he could not think of anything that could actually make it worse.

Whatever had caused the explosion had been powerful enough to knock loose some already-unstable pieces of sewer structure; enough to completely seal off the exit and one direction of the sewer system. Not only that, but his unresponsive leg was extremely bloody. From the angle he was laying in it was hard to tell, but he thought he might have been able to see some hard, jagged white poking out amongst the red. The rest of him wasn't exactly in the greatest shape either. His head in particular was throbbing even worse than it had when he had first woken up at the bottom of the sewer; he hadn't even suspected that to be possible.

He coughed on the dust and a choked sob escaped his throat. He had been so fucking close. A few more rungs and he would have been home free.

Richard wanted to break anything he could get his hands on. He wanted to howl with rage and slam his body against the walls. He wanted to get the fuck out of that hellhole. He couldn't even raise his voice in frustration; every time he tried to expand his lungs to get enough air the pain in his ribs increased exponentially.

The flashlight happened across a gleam of silver about a foot away from his prone form. The gun. It must have come loose in the fall. Richard was amazed it hadn't gone off when it hit the ground. Or maybe it had. His mind had been fairly well occupied at that point. He looked at it for a long time. The longer he looked, the more he was sure:

He had fought the good fight. It was high time he got to rest.