

*2010 West Virginia
Young Writers
Anthology*

May 2010

Introduction

We proudly present the anthology of the 2010 West Virginia Young Writers contest. It showcases the stories of 23 students who first won in their counties in their age divisions and then won at the state level. These Young Writers represent 19 counties from around the state. Included are the winners of first, second, and third place in each age/grade category, plus the winner of the Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship. In addition to the scholarship winner, six “Honorable Mention” essays are included here as well.

The West Virginia Young Writers Contest has honored good writing by our state’s students in grades one through twelve for over 25 years. The contest is an initiative of the West Virginia Department of Education and West Virginia’s Writing Project at Marshall University (South Charleston campus), and Marshall University Writing Project in Huntington which includes satellite site Coalfield Writers. The 2010 contest was co-directed by Dr. Barbara Holmes, director of the Central West Virginia Writing Project, and by Terry Reale coordinator of English and language arts, WVDE.

2010 Credits

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Young Writers is an initiative of the West Virginia Writing Project

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Paradise

By Ryan Caleb Stacy

Williamson High School, Mingo County
Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship Winner,
1st Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

I peered deep within those lustrous orbs (their tawny-toned cores glistening and juddering with despondency) while I brushed the small droplets of sweat from his furrowed brow.

“I love you, Daddy”, I murmured.

“I love you too, son”, he replied, almost imperceptibly.

I knew everything about the man beneath those eyes: his dreams, his hopes and aspirations - anything; he was my father. I knew that he'd seen this formerly, this moment, in some distant nightmare. He knew what was to come, and that the walking morning would not salvage him from jeopardy in this moment, neither in any instant thereafter.

I sauntered across the room and retrieved the swarthy book from the window ledge. It was weathered and torn on the edges, and on the bottom-right corner, my name was stitched with gold. I walked the threadbare Bible over to his bedside and extended it towards him. He grasped it shakily and motioned for me to come closer.

I bent down next to him, my face in close proximity to his own, and listened diligently. He traced his index finger across the golden text, frailly, then pointed directly at my chest, mumbling softly, “You learn from it now”.

It was the golden age of my youth, when each moment was wholly snarled with a great influence of halcyon; when all the lobelias, and marigolds, and scarlet begonias warbled in glee beneath the generous sunbeams. My father and I ambled along the soundless stretch of that

brook (the one that extended from the very tip-top of the mountain all the way to the bottom, where it met with one endless rumble of motion against stillness) at which point he said to me, “Son, let’s go watch the sunset at the very top of this mountain.”

“Why?” said I.

“Why not?” he returned, “Adventure comes knocking but once every little while; to deny it is to say God: I have better plans for myself.”

Weighing these words with good measure, I looked out at the swaying, flowery masses, their eager faces goading our departure, and sighed; the verdict had been resolved long ago. We poised at the very root of the mountain, where all the dimness and quietude of the greater coppice lingered. I sighed; the voyage was, indeed, crooning our names with inscrutable symphony.

He hacked turbulently, then - seizing his chest intensely, drawing a single breath frantically into his frame. I felt the harrowing thunder permeate my body - expanding into every reach of my senses and vanishing abruptly as if God had graciously ended the rumble. Sighing at the discharge, I examined his hands - those worn and weather-beaten recruits, (the very same which had clothed and nurtured me with their labor, that lifted me to unfathomable prospects) and sighed. They were far more pallid than before.

“It’s okay,” he said, that grin piercing through the darkness.

“No, it’s not,” said I, lowering my head, permitting the dribs of brackish moisture to fall into my lap.

He lifted my chin and peered unswervingly into my eyes.

“It will be.”

In transient time, we found ourselves at the uttermost peak of the mountain, where the small wedge of level earth extended roughly fifteen feet from edge-to-edge. The sun was absconding, then, far into the musings of our yesterdays and the hopes of some fantasist's tomorrow.

“Did you see that?” he exclaimed.

“Did I see what?”

“That movement, over in the thicket.”

“No, I didn't see a thing.”

Rising gradually, he beckoned my stillness with his index finger pressed firmly against his lips, then stepped meticulously between the patches of newly grown lilies to find the source of the clatter.

“Oh! said he.

“What is it?”

“Come over and look.”

I arose, inquisitively, and marched steadily through the flowers to where he was hunkered. Ensnared within the authority of the thicket, struggling for release, was an undersized robin. He was heaving, and twittering, and shuddering with the madness of desire. My father scrupulously unhooked his wing from the devious thicket and cupped the bantam robin within his hands.

“The world is still golden”, said he to the robin.

Then, with one fell swoop, he released the robin high into the evening. We watched as it coiled and bathed in the fruits of its own sovereignty, and then diminished into the profundity of dusk.

“I don’t understand,” said I to him.

“You don’t understand what?”

“Why you have to die.”

He chortled and shook as he struggled to sit up, then looked at me, smiling from ear to ear. “Why not? Death comes knocking but once every little while. To deny it is to say to God: *I have better plans for myself*; believe me, son I do not.”

He unwound and descended into the small coziness of his bed, and closed his eyes. I brushed the small droplets of sweat from his furrowed brow.

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you, Son – without end.”

His breathing relaxed and I ambled toward the door slowly, the tears running copiously down my face. I turned to look, one final time, at my father. He was smiling.

In my mind, he was strolling along a soundless brook with *his* Father, basking in the forever-golden age of youth. I could see all the lobelias, and marigolds, and scarlet begonias warbling in glee beneath the eternal sun. I could see him basking in sovereignty, like a robin set free from a vile thicket - plunging down into the untamed valleys of some distant paradise.

Heaven's Tea Party

By Madison Brown

Hacker Valley School, Webster County

1st Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

Something landed on my windowsill. What was it? Could it be? I went a little closer.

An angel had perched on my windowsill. She looked at me and I stared at her. Her white dress was blowing in the breeze. Under her dress she had sparkly white shoes that matched her golden halo.

Angel called to me. She wanted me to fly with her! I couldn't wait to climb on her back. She immediately took off and I was in the air. I thought the ride might be a little shaky, but I felt safe on her back. She was just like a helicopter on her take-off. She flew me over the mountains and through the trees. The journey was just like a ride on the Tennessee Tornado carnival ride. It took away my breath. The water below was baby blue just like a robin's egg. Higher and higher we flew.

Pooofffff....we finally reached the place where we were headed. The golden gate ahead was opening. Heaven! There were lots of angels fluttering around. The angel had taken me to Heaven! Ahead was a table set with a teapot, teacups, and saucers. There were other angels sitting at the table waiting. As we sat down, God joined my special tea party. We sipped tea together with our pinky fingers bent. The sweet tea tasted good with our chocolate chip cookies.

After eating, we played tea party games. It was really cool. We played games like Hide and Go Seek. Later we played tennis. Time was passing by quickly, and it was time to leave. I was sad to go.

The angel took off again with me on her back. We flew back over mountains and valleys. It was getting dark, so I said good-bye. When I got home I was so tired that I fell into bed. The angel winked at me and she was off on another tea party adventure.

Duck's Big Mistake

By Mea Bartic

Rivesville Elementary School, Marion County

2nd Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

One day there was a little duck named Julie who lived on a farm. She was different than the other ducks. Julie didn't want to be a duck. She went to visit the cats in the barn. She said, "Hello, how do you do? I don't like being a duck, I want to be a cat. Is that fine with you?"

"Sure!" said the cats, "Are you something to eat?"

Julie said, "That's okay, I think I'll come back another time."

So Julie waddled off really fast to see Rabbit. "Maybe I would like to be a rabbit," she thought.

"Hello Rabbit, how do you do? I don't like being a duck, I want to be a rabbit. Is that fine with you?"

"Sure! I munch and crunch on carrots," said Rabbit.

"Do you have any seeds, at least?" asked Julie.

"Well, I'll try to find some."

"That's okay. I'll find some food on my own."

Julie waddled really slowly to the cows.

"Hello, how do you do? I don't like being a duck, I want to be a cow. Is that fine with you?"

"Sure! But the farmer has to milk us everyday."

"Oh, I can't give milk! I'll come back and see you another time."

Julie thought to herself, "I am so tired, I can't be a cat or a rabbit or a cow."

I guess being a duck is the best thing for me. So Julie waddled home very fast and said,
“Mommy and Poppy, I’m home.”

The Golden Lion

By Riley McCallister

Wellsburg Primary School, Brooke County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

There once was a king named Gordon who ruled the land of Halligorm. Queen Paula was away searching for the Earth Gem which kept the earth turning. An evil troll king, Elgarmok, wanted the Earth Gem so he could take over the world.

One morning, the Royal Messenger burst into the throne room, “Queen Paula has been captured by Elgarmok!!”

“We must save her!” said King Gordon, “We need to find the Golden Lion.”

King Gordon traveled to the Whispering Woods. He heard a mighty, “Roooooaaarrrr!!” as something big and golden sprang from the bushes.

“You are trespassing in my woods!” roared the Golden Lion.

“I-I-I am King Gordon. Please help me rescue my Queen from Elgarmok,” stammered the King.

“Only if you let me stay in your castle,” said the Lion.

“Deal,” said King Gordon.

“We fly to Elgarmok’s castle!” said the Lion who had very big wings.

At the castle, they heard a cry, “Help me!” and found Queen Paula hanging over a pot of lava!

“We will save you!” said King Gordon as he broke her chains. The Lion tried to catch her but she slipped and fell into the hands of the troll guards.

“Looks like we sounded the alarm!” yelled King Gordon.

“Never fear!!” the Golden Lion roared as white light shot out of his mouth and petrified the trolls. They flew down and picked up Queen Paula.

Elgarmok stomped into the room growling and slashing with his sword. The Golden Lion spit fire at Elgarmok and the troll king fell to the floor. Lava began pouring through the cracks in the floor.

“The underground volcano is going to erupt!!” cried King Gordon.

“I’ll fly us to the Earth Gem,” the Lion shouted.

With the Earth Gem safe, they flew back to Halligorm and lived happily ever after.

Handlebars

By Taylor Griffith

Madison Elementary School, Boone County
1st Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

I live in a very small town nestled deep in the mountains of southern West Virginia. You will not find sidewalks, stop signs, or street lights in my community. You will not be able to locate a restaurant, movie theatre, museum, or sports arena either in this quaint little town called Rock Creek. So as you can see, the chances of some individual considered “great” or “famous” by society’s standards visiting in my area are pretty slim! But, I have met “exceptional” people right here in the mountains of West Virginia. I am going to give you the opportunity to meet one of them today in my story.

The person I want to share with you today is known throughout my county by a single word name, “Handlebars.” I admit I was confused about his name at first. Only recently did I make the connection, his nickname comes from his mustache that is very long and curled up on the ends just like a set of handlebars on a bike!

My friend is a carpenter by trade. He has the ability to take a piece of wood and turn it into something beautiful. People all over our county are willing to wait patiently until Handlebars becomes available to work for them.

Although my friend is well known for his work and his unique mustache, neither of these are why I consider him exceptional. I admire him for devoting his life to making the world a better place for animals, especially those that are deserted or mistreated.

For over two decades, this remarkable man has opened his home, heart, and wallet to abused animals. Among these are, Jasper, Cinnamon, and Rusty, three very neglected and mistreated horses, that now and forever will hold a special place in Handlebars's heart. Their long journey back to health has been both difficult and expensive. All three have required medical attention that has resulted in several long stays at the Virginia Tech Equestrian Center. This is a very expensive hospital designed for horses that have life threatening illnesses. Handlebars would travel the four hundred miles to visit them often while they were there.

People all over my county could share a special story with you about Handlebars and his horses. This is one that has always stayed prominent in my mind. Handlebars was doing carpentry work at my grandparents' house, when a storm started forming on the horizon. He immediately dropped everything and raced home to Jasper, Cinnamon and Rusty. He later told me that loud noises still frightened them and his presence had a calming effect.

Famous men in history were considered great because of the lessons they taught that impacted people's lives. The lessons I have learned by watching Handlebars live his life will stay with me forever. I will never again look at any of God's creations and not marvel at their uniqueness or understand completely in my heart that all of us deserve to be protected, wanted, and loved.

Pickled Ramps
By Mary Katherine Skidmore
Glenville Elementary School, Gilmer County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

It was the gloomiest day of the war. The date was November 17, 1863. Ma and I had just received word that my father had died. Ma was crying on Gramama Ruth's shoulder. "Don't worry, Jean Marie, don't worry." But Gramama Ruth was crying too. Pa's name was Montgomery. He was tall and skinny with chocolate brown hair. He was the kindest person I ever knew and he used to sing to me all the time.

Oh, how silly of me to not to introduce myself. My name is Annabelle Sylvia Raleigh, daughter of Montgomery and Jean Marie Raleigh. I'm living in a Civil War camp in the wilderness of Virginia. The news of my Pa's death had hit our family hard and we were all crying.

Then Old Gregory came by. He can always make people laugh. He lives in our camp along with several other good folks such as Theodore who's always highy-tighty and Benjamin who's a business first kind of guy. There's also Tom, who looks like a French crook and Thaddeus who is a big teddy bear. The younger children didn't understand why I was so solemn all the time. I must admit, it is not easy to act joyful, when you're not. As Old Gregory whistled he asked me, "What's wrong little lady? Want some pickled ramps to cheer you up?" I giggled. He told me the news while I ate the ramps. There was a new man in camp named Andrew. And what should happen next but Andrew came to meet us. While we were talking, I saw a Yankee standing in the woods. I yelled and then I heard a shot. Andrew jumped in front of my frozen

body and took the full force of the shot. I screamed and Gregory hurried me into the cabin and told Ma and Gramama what happened. I felt my dress was wet and I looked down to see that my arm was covered in blood! Ma rolled my sleeve up and I saw the bullet. It had gone through Andrew and into my arm. Ma cleaned me up and got the bullet. I was in bed for a month. Everybody in camp visited me and brought treats. Gregory brought pickled ramps. Theodore brought the news. Thaddeus brought toys and Benjamin brought Yankee riches. But the thing that comforted me most was the dream I had one night. I dreamt about Pa. He was in a lovely place and I wanted to stay with him. He told me he loved me but that I needed to stay with Ma because she needed me more. He promised that the war would soon be over and I could go back to being a child, playing in the fields full of wildflowers and swimming in the cool streams. He hugged me tightly and then he was gone. When I awoke I was still hurting but I remembered Pa's promise and I knew that better days were to come.

The Quilt

By Emily Morton

Lizemore Elementary School, Clay County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

“Grandma, will you do me a favor?”

“What is it, sweetie?” An old lady poked her head around the kitchen door. Her hair was a grayish white color as the moon looked when you’re lying on top of a barn when the sky is clear.

“I need you to help me make a quilt. This old ragged thing doesn’t help me when I sleep in the barn to help out with Lucy.”

Lucy was a new born horse that had just been born three weeks ago. Her grandma looked at her with a sweet gentle smile. Her eyes gazed on her with complete happiness.

As if she didn’t have to say yes, she could see the answer in her eyes.

“Of course, I will,” she said with a sweet smile.

They worked together on it the whole week long. One day when the little girl was washing dishes, she remembered that she needed a dish towel. The little girl ran upstairs to the attic. When she got to the attic, the light was dim.

She looked around. Then she saw the wardrobe at the back of the room. She walked toward it. The floor creaked loudly. When she got to the wardrobe, she touched the handle. It was rusted and cold. She opened it up. Then a piece of cloth fell out. It was ragged with a leaf sewn on it. It was dark red with stars around it.

The little girl took it downstairs. She showed it to her grandma. They both gazed at it. A little while later, they sewed the old ragged piece on it. The quilt looked very nice. That night the quilt was so comfortable that both of them fell fast asleep under it.

When the little girl grew up, she had a daughter. One day they were sitting on the couch under the quilt when they heard a phone call. The girl's grandma was in the hospital. They rushed over there and brought the quilt. The grandma was lying in the hospital bed. The girl who had grown up, and the daughter laid down in the bed with the quilt. The grandma was happy, and they lied under the quilt for the last time.

The Last Cast

By Maggie Lohmann

Bridgeport Middle School, Harrison County

1st Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

Ker plunk! My red striped bobber hit the water with a splash, sending ripples dancing across the water.

“Nice cast, Leslie! The fish should start coming any minute for that nice juicy worm,” my dad complimented.

“I hope so. I’d like to have enough fish to cook for dinner tonight. Mom would be excited to get a night off,” I replied.

My name is Leslie Dodge, and I’m twelve years old. I attend Myersville Middle School and am in the sixth grade. I run cross country and track for the school. I also enjoy fishing with my dad and singing in my church’s choir in my spare time.

“Leslie, snap out of it,” my dad called, “I think you’ve got one!”

As I reeled in my line, I had the urge to just let go because of the extreme weight on the other end. I guess Dad saw me struggling, because he rushed to my aid. We both almost fell in, but finally reeled in a huge bass.

“My stars, Leslie, that’s certainly a big one!” my dad told me.

“Do you think that we have enough fish for dinner now?” I asked. I hoped we could have my fish for dinner, for once.

“According to my scale, your bass is a good four pounds,” my dad told me.

“Your scale has to be wrong Dad. There’s no way I could’ve caught that big of a fish with one shrimpy worm,” I said in awe of myself.

“I think we’ll be having fish for dinner, Leslie.”

“Let’s get home as soon as we can so we can start frying the fish,” I said.

Then my Daddy said, “Let’s just stay here a while longer. I have something that I need to tell you.”

“Alright, take a whack at it!” I told him

“Don’t be upset with me sugar, this is a great privilege for me and our family,” he explained. “I’m getting deployed to the army. I’ll be leaving in a week. This is our father, daughter time before I leave.”

I felt as if I’d been hit by a truck. My world had been shattered and I let some tears fall.

“Please don’t be upset Leslie. Be strong for me,” he said, his eyes starting to fill with tears as well.

“Sorry Daddy. I’m proud of you, but this is so hard to believe. What if the worst happens to you?” I asked

“Don’t think about that. I’ll be fine,” he encouraged, although there was a hint of worry in his voice.

“Okay Daddy, whatever you say.”

Six months had passed since that fishing trip and they were the hardest, slowest six months of my life. I missed my dad’s help with homework, fishing trips, and his overall presence. Every day I prayed he would be home soon.

One day as I was walking down the hall on my way to third period math, I spotted a sign for play auditions after school. When the final bell rang, I walked to the auditorium. There was a

large crowd of students waiting for auditions, and I doubted my chances of making the cut. The auditions went well and I waited in the audience for my name to be called. After what seemed for hours it came- Leslie Dodge! I had made it!

Finally after three months of hard, tiring work, it was opening night! I knew Mom and my younger sister Anna would be in the audience cheering me on. I only wished that my dad could see me. The show ran smoothly as I acted out my part. It was an amazing experience. As the curtains were closing, I thought I saw someone familiar out of the corner of my eye, but they closed too quickly for me to see.

I went to the dressing room to take off my make-up and costume. When I went outside to see mom and Anna, I was greeted by a wonderful surprise. My dad was standing there beaming! I ran, jumped into his arms, crying tears of joy.

“You were great,” he said. “You used to be my Little Angler, but now you’re my Little Actress!”

Dusk

By Katherine Adase

Bridgeport Middle School, Ohio County

1st Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

I started screaming. All of my emotions spilled out at once, in one ear piercing screech into my pillow. I couldn't believe how horribly disturbed people could actually be; actually, I could. I've been through so much I can't believe that I could have even thought it could have been a possibility that a human being could be accepting and generous. That's it, I'm running. Running so far away that no face I'd ever seen would be within miles from me. Between ridicule at school, their harsh beatings as I curl up on the ground in sheer pain from the fiery punches and the blurs of faces laughing hysterically, and my mother. The smell of alcohol and cigarettes fill the room as she opens the door each day after roaming the streets only to find me and punish me for something she made up in her miniscule mind. I don't know which is worse. Even my razors can't save me now.

I looked at the clock, 7:24. She'd be home in about an hour. If I could find something, a hammer maybe, I could break through the planks of splintery wood nailed to my window after she'd crashed somewhere on the floor. If I ran now, she'd have enough time to call the police. Also, if I leave in the night, no one can see me flee from this cursed town. "Anna!!" *Oh no, she's home, I thought I'd have more time than...* The door slammed open and smashed into the wall, finishing off my cracked mirror.

“How could you do this to me? You made me like this, you horrible disgraceful animal! I wish you were dead, I should just kill you now, so no one else has to suffer from looking at you, let alone having to speak to you!”

And there she fell, flat on her face with a low boom onto my ancient floor boards. Great, I'll leave now. It's already dark since it is still winter. Oh god, she looks so trashy lying there with her tons of makeup and fur trench coat, big flashy jewelry, and bleached blonde hair. That coat looked awfully toasty and soft. Well, it is winter, and I don't have a coat of my own, so maybe I'll just take hers.

Well, here I go, I think to myself as I climb out the window. I drop down and land on my feet real hard. Winter's icy finger made the hair on my neck stand at attention like a soldier at boot camp. I start walking, trying to look as sane as possible. Even though I'm alone, I feel like I'm being watched by someone, or something. *AH!* Something slammed me to the ground, knocking the wind out of me. A bag s thrown over my head and with one final blow, I'm out cold...*Oh my head...I can't...where am I?*

I stand up, holding my lower back, and make a complete turn, somewhat slowly. I must be dreaming, but I can't be. The sky was a purplish black color with a few twinkling stars looking at me. A brick road coming from all directions pointed at a very peculiar tree. By just glancing at it, it looked like any other tree, old and lumpy, with red leaves. But as I regain my full vision it looks like two people, a boy and a girl, hugging. And the plain red leaves seemed to blossom to hearts. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, like something from my scribbled math notebook or a place I'd only fantasized about staring out of a window on a dreary day. Suddenly, lots of people started pouring in from the intersection around me. They were conversing and laughing, stores started appearing with glowing signs and manikins and just

amazing objects I couldn't have even dreamt up. Ornery clocks and fancy Victorian dresses begged me to come by. I stopped someone; he had the most perfect facial features, not a hair out of place. "Where am I?" I ask. "Where are you?!" he exclaimed his teeth straight and white. A surprised smile emerged on his astounding face. "*You* are in Dusk."

Petals

By Cassidy Tolley

Ripley Middle School, Jackson County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

I could still hear the beat of the monitor. I felt as though I were trapped in yesterday's world. Only hours before, he was safe at home. I'd been replaying the scenes over and over in my head, involuntarily.

We were on our way home from church. It was warm, the sun glared off of my mother's red truck. We never even saw the car swerving our way.

"Nicholas," a nurse said, startling me. "Your mother would like to see you." I nodded and began to shuffle out of the room. It still pained me to see my brother so frail and broken.

As I entered, my mother greeted me with a smile but her eyes revealed her disguised pain. Not only had my brother been seriously hurt, but my mother, also, had broken her arm and ankle. I had escaped with only minor injuries.

"How's Nat?" she croaked.

"Better and better" I lied. She smiled gently, muttered a few words and rested her head back on her pillow. I watched as her eyelids slowly shut and I sat there for a few moments, listening to her breathe and being thankful for the sound.

My feet instinctively moved me back to Nat's bedside. His face was bruised and he looked so pail against the hospital sheets. I took his hand in mine and bowed my head. "I'm sorry," I whispered into his ear. "I didn't mean to fail you." A loud buzz from behind me made

me jump. It sounded like it was coming from the heart monitor. My eyes suddenly widened and I staggered backwards.

“Help!” I screamed. Doctors rushed into the room and asked me something, but I couldn’t make it out. I dropped Nat’s hand and backed up. The room began to spin and my vision blurred. My legs went limp and I fell into the darkness.

* * * * *

My mother came home from the hospital a few days ago, but unfortunately Nat wasn’t with her. Today was his funeral. I had started to accept fate. A person can’t fight the things nature intends. I have since been able to swallow his death. My mother, on the other hand, hasn’t.

The drive to the cemetery was long and silent. My mother didn’t say a word. It was grey outside; rain had just begun to fall as if the clouds were weeping over Nat’s death. Their ceremony was held downtown. Mom pulled the car up the paved road and we got out, rain flattened the hair to my forehead. As we walked toward the crowd, their conversations hushed.

A chill went through my body as I got my first glimpse of Nat’s casket. I drowned out the minister’s words as I stared in horror at the wooden cage. Sobs escaped from my mother and I watched as she ran to the car.

I impulsively stepped forward and out of the crowd. The preacher eyed me but kept talking. I walked up to the platform that Nat rested on. The minister stopped reading but my eyes were fixed on the rose bouquet that lay on the lid of the coffin. I reached forward and took two of the red flowers.

My legs carried me away from Nat and to the truck where mom sat with her head between her knees.

“Mom,” I said as I crouched down to her face. She looked up at me with blood shot eyes.

I handed her the flower and whispered, “Nat would like you to have this.” She took it from me and breathed in its sweet scent. I crumpled the other rose and stuffed the remains into my pocket. When I opened my hand, I found a single petal clinging to my palm. I stared down contently at the petal as a single drop of rain washed it away from my grasp.

Sylvan

By Hannah Smith

Buffalo Middle School, Wayne County
1st Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

Fear of being struck down is ever present as the first roll of thunder echoes throughout the surrounding hills. Lightning flashes in the distance, a signal that the arrival of a brutal storm is soon in coining. The forest falls deathly quiet, and despite the surrounding fauna and trees, I feel utterly alone.

My leaves are shaken as a fierce wind cuts through the air. Animals scamper up my trunk, frantically searching for safety; how I yearn for a veil of protection. Another gust of wind rips bits of my bark and hurls them into the endless expanse of sky. Slowly, the clouds approach like lions stalking their prey. I cherish the few seconds of peace before thunder vibrates the ground. The final rays of sun are blocked and the woods are engulfed in an envelope of darkness. The first drops of water fall onto my outstretched branches.

Constant worry keeps me from enjoying the renewing shower. It is not the water that bothers me; it is only the thought that my long, beautiful life could be ended in a split second by a single surge of severing lightning. Seeming to sense my worries, the sky lets out a long grumble of thunder and illuminates everything with another streak of ominous electricity. Buckets pour onto me now, turning the refreshing shower into a merciless pounding. I'm already longing for the end of this assault, but it has only begun.

It's a never ceasing fight of Thunder and Lightning. Every time Lightning cracks her whip, Thunder claps his monstrous hands; a battle of wits that will never end. Dark clouds loom

overhead, stretching on for miles in every direction. Rain slashes through my delicate leaves; water pools around my trunk as the creeks begin to rise. Every second seems like an eternity as the minutes turn into hours. My final reserves of strength are depleted as the war rages on through the night.

In the final hours before dawn, where everything is dead and cold, the rain begins to slow. A dim ray of hope appears in the form of sunshine as the clouds sweep across the sky. The thunder is only a purr of a kitten, and the lightning is only a flash in the sky when dawn arrives.

Painting the clear sky in an array of magentas, citruses, and marigolds, the sun blossoms over the horizon. No longer is the storm a threatening pride of lions, only a memory. I have survived! Warmth spreads across the land, and a beautiful rainbow turns the hills into a watercolor of promise. Water drips from the shining foliage, spider webs glow with brilliant clarity, and animals remove themselves from their protective surroundings. The world is alive as everything greets the new day with optimistic simplicity.

The Guardian Angel

By MiKayla Abbott
Road Branch School, Wyoming County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

My family owns a cabin located in a remote northern region of West Virginia, and we have visited this camp quite frequently throughout the years. My great-grandfather built it decades ago and handed it down for his heirs to enjoy. In the summer, we hike the trails that lead us to the Civil War monuments, fish in the Lost River, and swim at Trout Pond. During the winter, the sportsmen of the family gather to enjoy their preferred past time, hunting! It was during such a visit when my family came to believe in guardian angels.

My great-uncle, Terry, always arrived at the cabin a week prior to the scheduled family hunt to clean, put fresh linens on the beds, and stockpile the food pantry. He gathered firewood for the gigantic wood burning stove, which heated the first floor of the simply furnished cabin. It took a lot of wood to feed the stove for an entire week, so he worked hard chopping and storing for the season.

Next, Terry scouted around the North Mountain looking for signs of deer. His first couple of days proved unsuccessful but tended to pick up as the week wore on. On the third day, Terry said, "There were no scraps, droppings, or any visible signs of deer." He decided to return to the camp after a few hours for a rest. He built a fire in the stove, enjoyed a beans and cornbread dinner, and then decided to take a nap. The room was so warm and inviting, he fell into a deep slumber. Suddenly, a strong unexplained force knocked him out of his sleep and onto the floor. Startled, Terry expected to find an intruder, but what he saw was far more terrifying! Huge

flames engulfed the living room wall; frantic, he immediately grabbed the fire extinguisher from the kitchen and doused the inferno.

As the other family members began to arrive, he relived those petrifying moments, and they pondered the mysterious force that woke him. The only conclusion he could draw was that a guardian angel protected him from a horrible demise.

Ever since the blaze, my family has come to believe unseen angels watch over our hunting camp. There have always been reports of extraordinary appearances above sleeping people witnessed by family members. However, once he or she got a good look at the image, it simply vanished. When she was young, my grandmother and her sisters investigated a bizarre noise in the middle of the night and discovered a floating figure. Until the fire, our family suspected these stories were simply entertaining myths or ghost stories handed down from one generation to the next. Looking back, we now believe guardian angels hover inside our cabin protecting us from harm too horrible to imagine! Perhaps my great-grandfather sent them to protect us. Personally, I like to believe he *is* an unseen angel!

Anticipation

By Morgan Jackson

Robert L. Bland Middle School, Lewis County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

Springtime was just around the corner. The snow had melted and the grass was turning that new spring green color. It was time to plant the garden! Morgan got her shovel, hoe, gardening gloves, and a watering can with pretty lady-bugs painted on the sides. She grabbed two whole handfuls of watermelon seeds from Momma's seed caddy. Morgan was going to grow, watermelons!

"The best time to plant your seeds is in the morning, when the ground is just the right temperature," Daddy told her.

That night, Morgan could hardly sleep. She kept thinking about her watermelon seeds.

The next morning, Morgan, Daddy, and Momma went outside to start planting her garden. Momma marked a small square patch with four wooden boards.

"You can plant your seeds here," Momma told her.

Daddy showed Morgan how to use the hoe to scrape the ground so that it loosened the dirt. Soon they were all working together to plant the seeds. Morgan hoed the ground while Daddy shoveled rocks from the dirt and Momma made the ground moist with Morgan's watering can. When the soil was turned up and ready for the seeds, Morgan placed each one carefully in the ground. She told each seed to grow up big and strong as she pressed them into the ground with her thumb.

Morgan went outside every day to check on her seeds. She watered them and sang songs to them while she pulled weeds from around the tender seedlings. Morgan was excited for her watermelons to grow. She could almost taste the sweet cool juice squirting in her mouth when she would take her first bite of the red fruit. All summer long Morgan watched and waited, waited and watched. On June 1st, her watermelon seedlings were two inches tall. She measured her watermelons every day as the seedlings grew into plants. More waiting and watching, and a few songs later, around June 28th her watermelon plants had yellow flowers budding. Morgan was worried she had planted the wrong seeds! But Momma assured her that the flowers were actually her watermelons growing.

Occasionally, her Grandad, a master gardener, would stop by Morgan's garden and admire her watermelons.

"You are a great gardener Morgan!" he would say. "When am I gonna get to come spit watermelon seeds with you?"

Morgan would smile and feel proud that her Grandad was just as excited as she was.

Finally, after watching and waiting, measuring and checking, watering and weeding, Morgan's watermelons were ready to pick. Daddy showed her how to tap on the watermelon and listen. A low hollow sound meant that the watermelon was full with sweet, delicious juice. Morgan's mouth watered with anticipation. Just thinking about eating her watermelons made her smile. But Morgan knew that eating her watermelons too early, before they were perfectly ripe, would be a mistake.

"No Daddy, I think I will give my watermelons one more evening, one more night under the bright moon. Tomorrow, we will have a watermelon eating, seed-spitting party!"

Daddy laughed and sent Morgan off to bed.

That night, as Morgan was tucked snug in bed and dreaming of her watermelon party, something else had the sweet taste of watermelons on its mind. Not just one something, but a whole family of somethings. Raccoons!

Morgan rose out of bed early that morning. She burst through the back-door, across the dew-touched grass in her backyard, straight to her garden. What she saw was horrifying, terrible in every way. She stood in shock as she looked where her plump, ready-to eat watermelons once laid. Nothing was left but the nubs of vines and a few sour pieces of rind. The raccoons had devoured every last delicious piece of Morgan's watermelon garden. Tears streamed down her cheeks. There would be no party, no seed-spitting, and no watermelon for her to enjoy. All that waiting and care was for nothing. Gently, a familiar voice spoke from behind her.

"Ah Morgie Morg. There's always next year."

Morgan turned to see her Grandad standing behind her. She wiped her eyes, sniffled her nose, stomped her foot, and said. "Not for me! Next year I'm planting cantaloupe!"

The Sky was Just a Touch Grayer than the Ground

By Celesta Adams

Meadow Bridge High School, Fayette County

1st Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

The winter sky was just a touch grayer than the ground, and chimneys exhaled dark clouds in constant long breaths, never breathing inward. Roofs stood high and stooped low, all a single shade of sparkling white. Snow fell softly, not at all like the small charming town was used to. Who would know something like that?

Perhaps it would be the youngest child playing happily in the sea of white or maybe the young town mayor who had just been elected for the second time, but no, the best person to ask would most likely be the old frail woman who had watched the generations come and go as a witness to time itself. Her hair was thin and curled short. Her plum colored scarf added another almost meaningless layer to the clothes wrapping her boney frame. Though her blouse and skirt were made of thick fabric, they felt like nothing more than rags against the chilly wind. Silver wire-framed glasses rested on the bridge of her nose.

Her history was intertwined with the town's own. She had been born on a day in winter, in a small cabin that once stood in the park on the spot where she now sat. Over the years, a brown wooden bench with flowers on both sides had taken the cabin's place, but she didn't mind. Things changed, and time moved on, after all. It was a blessing that came with age to see the world move forward, she often thought.

Activity in the town always slowed to an inching crawl during the freezing winter days just like death, despite the Christmas holidays where only a few splashes of color would light up

her neighbors' yards. Death, the final action the old woman, and all the people and creatures in this world, eventually perform. Her heart was like a clock with a dying battery, and with every struggling tick of her clock's rusted hands, she could feel her time coming. She should be scared, she thought. She should be apprehensive and worried for what awaited her in that other world, but she felt none of that. Instead a calm, mysterious wave of peace and sincerity washed away all of her anxiety and fear.

Days ago, she had met with the doctor, at the age of forty still a young man in her eyes, and learned of the disease that would surely take her to her grave. The doctor had given her an option; surgery, a possible chance to postpone her inevitable fate.

At first she was thrilled with the option and happy to possibly gain a few more months or years with her young descendants. She was ecstatic at a better chance that she might be able to hear her great-great-grandchildren's first words or see them off to their first days of kindergarten, but in her old age she couldn't help but wonder, would it be worth it? Would it be worth it to live for years more only to make her family members suffer by letting them watch her decay any further? Had she not experienced more years than any of her peers and even more than her own daughter who had passed away some years ago?

It was with a heavy heart that she turned her back to the option of surgery and declined the offer which had shown so brightly to her at first. On days like this, she was reminded bitterly by her aching body that her soul's stay in this world was long overdue. Accepting this truth, she watched the skyline. She gave a long weary breath and rested against the back of the bench with her entire weight, which felt like several tons. Her eyelids slipped closed, and she only meant to close them for a second. Her heart gave one last serene beat. A small smile graced her chapped lips, all while the snow sprinkled on her shoulders.

The Roar

By Joshua Lee Smith

Doddridge County High School, Doddridge County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

I awakened to something being pulled off of me. It could possibly have been a sheet. I was stuck in a blank void, with nothing to hear but my own thoughts. Then, I heard a sound that shattered my ears like glass. It was simply plastic rattling, but it sounded like God was crumbling up the sky in his mighty hands. I couldn't help but wonder, what this was; what's happening? A minute passed by, but it felt to me like centuries. Then I felt it!

It was filthy with cracks running all over it. It was rough and raggedy, but gentle. It was a hand! I felt freezing cold chills pulsing in my head, as the muscular hand ran down my back. I was now off the ground, suspended by the hand. The short, stubby fingers ran down the stitches.

I was tossed by the hand into what seemed to be, as high as the clouds. It feels like I am spending a decade falling back down into the hand. I heard voices, but none were mine. They were deep and boomed in my head, like a bomb explosion. Even with the voices being loud and clear, I couldn't make out what they were saying. It was all I could do to make out letters like B, E, L, and A.

Whoa! The whole ground beneath me started swaying. My heart began beating faster and faster, with each sway of the hand. Then, I comprehended what was taking place. I was being carried by the hand, to some distant land. I asked myself, "Where am I going away to?" The whole time these events were happening, I hadn't grasped that slowly I had been acquiring more senses, including this new one, smell!

I could smell now, and I smelled something buttery. Popcorn! I was smelling popcorn. It was rich, heavy with butter, and salty. Even through all this excitement of being able to smell, I couldn't help but think. Where am I? Is all of this a dream? Crack! I could hear sharp, thunderous sounds. They appeared like whips snapping in the air. Then I heard it! The sound that struck horror in my heart. A sound that was unlike any noise I'd heard before, and I will never forget it.

It sounded comparable to a million elephants running at once. It was very bizarre! By this time my heart was thumping so quickly, I felt like my heart was going to blow like a nuclear bomb. I was petrified, but for some unknown cause I was drawn to it. The sound had a beat, and somewhat of a harmony to it. It lured me in, like a gnat to a bright light. I attained my next sense.

Wow! I could see a light in the distance. It was dim and shaped similar to a square, but I barely noticed it. As the light drew closer, or as I drew closer to the light, I could feel heat on my body. I had no control over my body, but I did have my senses. For the first time I looked down. I could see the stitches running red and thick down my sides.

My vision was hazy, but I could make out shapes. Also, I could see clearly some things in front of me. I was very near to the light, almost noticing the increasing volume of the roar. I could now tell I was reaching the end of this passageway. I could see green, brown, and white. It was now that the roar was the noisiest, and the aroma of the popcorn was the strongest. The deafening sharp cracks felt like bullets passing through my head. Then, the hand I was resting on, suddenly snapped back violently.

The hand drew back far, from the extension of the arm, and it snapped forward with thrust. It threw me far above the ground, into the blue sky. As I soared, I noticed my direction

was towards one of the blobs. I landed, but was enclosed by a giant hand. It didn't feel exactly like skin, more like a leathery substance. In a split second, a hand reached in and picked me up.

I was thrown down again, through the air into the same material. Back and forth I went, like a game of tug of war. Smack! Next time around a solid object made contact with my head. I flew above the green diamond, like an eagle. I made it over a woven fence, and I landed in another leather, giant hand.

Now, I sit in my glorious, clear, glass case. People often stop and view my red, thick stitches, and the name written on my face. The lines are dismembered, but they still read, "Babe Ruth." So I rest here for all time, with nothing to do except relive the day I came to life. I no longer spend my time in a black void. I still, to this day, can sometimes hear the roar.

Darkness

By Alex Jones

Cameron High School, Marshall County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

Meticulously they crawled across the sands, dunes spreading before them as the waves upon the ocean. The heat from the flaring sun entrapped by the sand seared their rough leathery skin and still they continued. Rifles poised as if they were an extension of them, ready for an adversary to emerge from the shimmering heat. But none appeared, only the endless sand stretched before them. They traveled, step by step across the desert, marching tirelessly to their destination.

As they walked they heard the jets scream across the sky, loaded with their weapons of destruction. The bombs they dropped tore buildings from their foundations, incinerated inhabitants where they stood, and most effectively ripped the hope from the zealous hearts.

In two days they reached the cataclysm. Mangled bodies interlaced the rubble. Once great and immaculate edifices lay in shambles along the road, any evidence of their eminence discarded. But these men were hardened. Indifferent they marched the streets, callous to the anguish surrounding them.

Night began to fall, and the order to halt was given. Gratefully the soldiers stopped and began to tear boots from blistered feet, removed the Kevlar that kept the steel gnats from devouring their flesh. Tents were erected and fires lit. But they were not alone in the night. They had been hunted for days, stalked by men of the desert who remained hidden from their ignorant eyes. Now was their time; silently they slithered through the dunes cloaked by the darkness.

Private Ron Fuller sat in his cramped foxhole, stiffened muscles crying for relief. His exhausted eyes scanned the horizon for any sign of movement. Finally, he could take it no longer. Rising from the orifice in the sand, his exposed chest above the sandbags was enough of a target. The crack of a rifle split the air, and as he turned, a searing heat penetrated his back and he fell heavily into the sand.

Darkness. He sat enveloped in the silence, staring perpetually into the blackness where time seemed not to pass. He was conscious only of the obscurity encompassing him, continuing endlessly. He knew not how long he sat in the emptiness. But it began to consume him, pulling him deeper into the nothingness that waited. Then something changed. Slowly he ascended from the abyss as if cradled in some imperceptible grasp. The blackness was no longer impenetrable; gradually it faded to grey until he was swathed in a warm glow.

Suddenly his eyelids burst open and he was blinded by an intense white which faded only to again blind him a few seconds later. His surroundings were changing rapidly; white clad men in masks appeared and disappeared from his concise view. Suddenly his surroundings ceased to churn before him and he felt himself thrust into the air only to land a few inches away. The caustic sting of a needle tore through his flesh as he began to ebb from consciousness.

His eyelashes fluttered; steadily his senses began to return. He saw the stunning blue of the sky, smelled the richness of the earth, heard the beautiful melody of chirping birds as a sweet nectar indulged his taste buds. But these feelings of pleasure were only ephemeral. Another change occurred. The pleasures began to fade, diminishing to a tepid glow until they were merely apparitions of his past.

He plummeted to the dregs of being and he began to feel the familiar nothingness. And this sensation soothed him. He began to suckle the void, savor the emptiness, and with its nourishment he was shrouded in the darkness, forever in darkness.

All the Hope I Needed

By Rachel Stark

Petersburg High School, Grant County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

Escape, with fire screaming in my legs; it was the only thing my brain fathomed. No one had ever dared the woods. It was the epitome of temptation, too much of a façade to be real. The forest rose high into the heavens; its leafy sentinels guarded the entrance, beckoning, but warning. There was a quick sensation, an instinctual moment of fear as the evergreens grew nearer with every sprinting leap. It was not a fear of the unknown; I no longer cared what became of me; but fear that I might discover the one thing that had always eluded me, *freedom*. It was the thought of freedom that propelled me to an almost certain death. There was a difference in dying a free person and a captive one; it was that difference that meant everything.

As I vaulted closer to the boundary, the whole environment seemed to slow down. In a matter of milliseconds, my surroundings vanished and darkness engulfed the bleak daylight. Darkness swallowed everything, all sound and all thought. It was the blackest night of my life. Pines with their dripping, sweeping limbs scraped the ground, needles raking the earth like talons. Shadows were distorted in the dim glow of my flashlight; they sprawled in to the night like creatures unknown. Never had I been so completely alone in my entire life.

It could have been minutes, or even hours and I would have not known, but then the chill set in. It was stealthy at first, like the most skilled thief, but then as shocking as a cruel slap to the face. I had heard stories; stories meant to frighten children from ever considering the forest, but this was no child's tale. I looked to the sky; for guidance perhaps? – but there was nothing to

behold, not a single fading star, nor the comforting reassurance of the moon. How I wished for the slightest sliver of light up in that sky, a single shard of hope. Suddenly, the thicket to my left trembled, rustling as if shaken by a violent wind, but the air was calm. My body was paralyzed, and my throat could utter not a sound. I had no defense. Strangely enough, my mind was not gripped in fear. Here in this desolate woodland, I was not a prisoner. I could meet death on my own terms; I could fight and not run. The heavens knew how tired I was of running. For the first time in my life, I stood my ground and waited.

Out of the heap of gnarled bracken, a nightmare erupted. Its vermilion eyes watched me tempestuously, ebony fangs bared and honed to deadly perfection. It lowered its beastly snout to stare directly at me. My heart almost stopped; those soulless eyes made my hair stand on end. I could have lost myself in the overwhelming madness lurking in their depths. It pounced, and its strength was nothing I had ever witnessed before. With its massive oily-black forepaws, the creature pinned me down without effort, molding my back to the ground. Its snout and teeth gently raked down my head, down the side of one cheek, and continuously down the side of my body until it reached the tip of my boot. It scraped up again, this time sniffing the scent of my person, slowly, meticulously. A low growl escaped its muzzle, similar to a dog's. I winced. Please let it be quick, I prayed.

To my extreme astonishment, the beast lifted its paws off my chest, its snout crinkled up, like it had inhaled something unpleasant. Raising its great brutish head, the creature howled mournfully into the night, lamenting of hunger. Then as quietly as it had stalked me, the beast slinked back into the undergrowth. Before I made any movement, I listened, and when I was sure the monster was gone, I turned over in the dirt and wept.

It is peculiar in the dark, the more a person surrenders to it, the less afraid he or she becomes. Pupils grow larger, senses grow stronger, and the body accommodates itself until everything becomes less foreign. Instead of a baffling foe, the night becomes your shield, a cloak of protection. It was not the first time, as I curled up in the mud where the creature had left me that I had heard the Searchers trampling around, no doubt hunting for the one who got away. No matter how perilous the journey might be in this place, I would never let them find me. I remembered Mother's brave and loving face as she mouthed her last sentiments to me; tears flowing down both our faces.

"Do not forget," she had said when our plans had been finalized, "You will have only seconds before they realize you are gone. Run. Run as fast as you can until you make it to the trees." Her voice was then cut off by the sounds of the Punishers making their way down the hall.

"Go now," Mother whispered urgently, "Do not look back. Be steadfast." I stood there gazing numbly into her pained face. It would be the last time I would ever see her.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too," she replied back, and a quick smile flashed upon her features. I burned that image into my memory forever. The footsteps of the Punishers grew louder.

"Quickly now! The woods!" she pleaded, her last request to me.

It was here that she had spoken of finding refuge, and I had. I was alive, and *that* she would have said, was all the hope I needed.

The Leaflet Turn

By Emma Nicole Rogers

Parkersburg High School, Wood County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

The last dry, shriveled, reddish-brown leaf seesawed through the air, suspended in the silence of the heavy sky. The once cerulean blue paled to a pastel tint as if leached of all vibrancy and life, reflecting the world of white below.

Glancing upwards we stared, trying to figure out if there would be the hint of any coming snowstorm; but only wan sunlight, distant and without warmth, peeked from behind swollen grey clouds. The light glistened along twisting tips of bare, shivering limbs, the ice crystals tinkling in peals of the chilling breeze as they trembled under their heavy burdens. Beautiful . . . I started to speak aloud to my mother, but she seemed lost in her own thoughts, gazing in quiet wonder at the wintry scene around us. It would be wrong to speak in such a pristine, reverent landscape, wrong to intrude, so I kept my thoughts to myself and simply enjoyed our walk together.

Crunching snow echoed under our boots monotonously along with our labored breaths as we briskly plowed through the drifts. We looked over at one another with glowing, rosy-red cheeks and noses from the numbing raw wind, grinning from the efforts to keep stiff legs moving. There was no need to hurry our walk, and pausing to allow my mother to catch up, I suppressed a shiver of my own. Stuffing gloved hands deeper into my pockets and hugging my elbows tighter to my sides, I knew that it would not be much longer before there would be too much snow and too little daylight to go for many more walks like this. I was about to ask if my

mother knew what the weather would be like tomorrow, to see if we would like to walk together again, when winter decided to answer for itself.

A sharp, stinging cold howled suddenly, viciously cutting through the layers of clothing, as though they were but tissue paper; and the chill sank its frigid fangs deeper, draining away all warmth. Hot, condensed breath rushed past dry, cracked lips as the air was sucked from my lungs, which crackled like long-ago trodden leaves and rattled as the icy wind filled them. The wind seared the senses in an icy fire, burning till tears welled and momentarily froze to thick lashes, dying down abruptly as a sighing moan.

I opened my eyes wide in startling awareness, blinking as the leaf landed directly in the short distance in between where my mother and I stood, fluttering before us for only a moment. It was the most delicate curl of brown and red, resting on the new snow that had fallen with a soft shower of fine powder. As if resolving itself to finally leave the old maple's great branches bare, the leaf had visibly expired in the swirl of frost.

While I silently observed the leaf on its wind-borne journey, captivated as it skittered along the snowy surface, my mother had stepped forward, patiently waiting for me to catch up to her now. A chilling current billowed around her, snapping the ends of her scarf violently and frightening a bright, cherry-red cardinal into flight from where it had been hopping along the hard packed ground quite happily.

Carried by the frigid forces, the leaf tumbled along the crystalline terrain faster and faster, erasing the faint tracks of the bird in its veiny wake, until it was swept up towards the ghostly branches of the birches. Unfurling, joyously floating towards the forest treetops, the leaf soared along the current until, with a shudder, one of the darkened branches bowed under the weight of

snow. Instantly the resulting free-falling snow drove the tiny, fragile leaf into a drift, caught under the crushing weight of ice, never to touch the sky again.

The startled cardinal's shrill chirping that filled the emptiness, broke the icy hold over me. As I staggered forward in the cumbersome snow, it burst into panicked flight from the still quivering snowless bough. We continued to trudge along, brushing against each other in our unwieldy walk towards our sheltered front porch, tired and ready to be warm again. I clapped my gloved hands together, rubbing them back and forth for warmth, until another glove took my own, squeezing gently. Then our thoughts drifted apart again like our footsteps.

Drawing closer to the house I finally spoke past chattering teeth, "Cold out there isn't it?"

We stamped our boots on the front steps, finally thawing from winter's mesmerizing spell, as toes uncurled with pins and needles, ear tips slowly regained feeling, and the snow melted from along boot cuffs to soak our pant legs. My mother nodded in agreement as her teeth began to chatter, rearranging her scarf as she fiddled with the key in the lock.

Shivering I waited, shifting my weight anxiously from foot to foot, shuffling inside my boots, feeling renewed from our stroll. I was glad for our time together and for the clarity of winter air, but I was also eager for the warmth of our home and for the mugs of hot chocolate she promised as the door swung open at last. I sucked in one last, deep lungful of breath: rich, snow-dampened soil; crisp, slightly smoky air; and autumn leaves . . . the smells of home. I tried to find that last autumn leaf, taking a good long look back along our snowy trail before entering the house, but it was already lost and forgotten as the first flake fell from the heavy sky . . .

Left Behind
By Thomas Canny
Barbour County
Honorable Mention Recipient
2010 Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship

As he was putting on his coat, making the final adjustments to his attire, Adam was careful not to let the tears that had already welled up in his weary eyes drip to stain his neatly pressed suit. Trying to tame his trembling hands enough to perform the seemingly simple task of buttoning his overcoat proved difficult, but Adam was unaffected, for his focus was not in the buttons. Adam's mind couldn't leave that sight of three nights before, the reason for his lack of casualty or color in his attire at the present, and the cause for the distant look on his tired face.

The commute from his home to the church just three blocks away seemed eternal. The questioning gazes, the ceaseless glances informed him that all on the small-town sidewalk were familiar with his situation, but none were aware of the reality from which Adam was incapable of escape. A diverted glance from an ignorant bystander brought Adam's eyes to the street, bringing with it a flashback which flooded his conscious with events he wished had never occurred.

Racing three cars down a road which snaked through a dark forest after a long night of hard partying was a great idea in the minds of six teenage boys. The immortal young men had no idea of where this would take them just three days later. At the start all was well and the boys' limited perception was just enough to get them halfway to town unscathed. As the dingy minivan moved to the front, the brothers in the flashy sports car made daring attempts to regain their

rightful place ahead of the others. Success was short-lived, as Adam and his younger brother Scott found themselves to be the inevitable targets of a speeding train only one hundred yards ahead.

In his stunted sense of cognition, Adam decided his brakes were far less effective than his accelerator, and made an attempt to challenge the train in a race to their intersection, despite his brother's pleading cries against it. As the car and the train sped closer and closer to the finish line, Scott's cries grew louder and louder. At once, Scott's frightened shrieks turned into excited shouts with the realization that they had cleared the tracks. But suddenly, Scott wasn't heard at all. In fact, Adam heard nothing.

Adam woke to his mother's stifled sobs and tear-tainted face. The white hospital room told Adam he should be in pain; however he felt nothing unpleasant, except his mother's empty, longing stare at the blank wall. When Adam tried to sit up she made a pitiable attempt to smile at his awakening but he read in her eyes that he was not her foremost worry just then. She stood, and from her lap fell a framed picture of Scott and Adam together, taken weeks earlier, but now seen through shattered glass. Adam now understood the reason for the vacant expression she showed him. He looked down to examine himself, to see if he had fared much better, but he could see nothing past the blood he imagined staining his hands.

The church was just around the corner, but Adam was no longer moving in that direction. His world was still. He only noticed that while the agony he felt froze him where he stood, the world continued moving, oblivious to his internal suffering. Adam woke from his slumber and

continued through his final steps toward the church entrance. He mounted the stairs and gained the inner part of the church.

The change in temperature was drastic, yet Adam allowed himself no warmth. As he made his way past the viewing line, his soul was pierced with the darting glances from those waiting for one last look at the remains of a life stolen prematurely. Upon reaching the casket, Adam feared approaching his dead brother's corpse too readily. Each step was placed reservedly until Scott's lifeless figure came into view.

Adam's tears refused to hold back; his knees would no longer carry his weight. He felt faintly the hands of a stranger struggling to support his limp body, however it was not his body that needed uplifted. Adam's heart was heavier than it had ever been, laden with guilt, distress, anger, remorse, all at the same time; his body finally collapsed under its weight. Adam's wretched soul could carry no more. When placed in his seat, Adam attempted to raise his head, but he had no strength to bear such a burden. The service continued, the world continued, without stopping to notice that Adam's stood still.

Adam could not stay still forever, but he couldn't bring himself to move on. He only prayed for a chance to rewind, to rethink a fatal decision. While he knew that that answer would never come, he could think of no other solution.

Upon arrival at home, Adam's first and only destination was his bed, but sleep escaped him. He was haunted with ceaseless visions of the train, his car, his brother's face behind broken glass, and that lifeless body in the casket. Weeks passed, but these images relentlessly controlled all of Adam's thoughts and tormented his soul. He could not escape the consequences of his actions.

Friends came and went, but all were too distant to reach him. Adam's mind lived his life, but his heart and soul never found a way to leave that night. His body could live no longer without its core. Adam gave up trying to go on; he longed to reunite his living body with his dead soul. This he did.

The piercing glances in the street turned to questioning gazes into another young, lifeless body lying in a casket. From thence, they went back to their own lives. The world kept moving, leaving yet another behind.

Less Human
By Zachary Stout
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Since the twentieth century, technology has been advancing at an incredible rate. The telegraph granted a nearly immediate form of communication, eliminating the time-consuming need of messengers. Radio signals improved on the communication aspect, and the television virtually perfected it, giving it a more “natural” interaction, in the sense that it felt more personal seeing the actual person. However, the invention and advancement of the Internet should be attributed to most of modern society’s accomplishments; a limitless supply of information at one’s fingertips.

With so much information being exchanged by scientists and universities, our understanding of almost everything increased exponentially, and by May 13th, 2201 synthetic organisms became the norm. The technology available made it nigh impossible for the naked eye to differentiate between living and synthesized life-forms. Granted, the technological perfections ran off a 100% energy efficient power source, and did not require food or water. This made them ideal for dangerous or otherwise uninteresting jobs.

Unfortunately, with the ever advancing technological feats of man, humanity became more and more detached from their very essence. Instead of technology “relying” on people, it was vice-versa. People found it increasingly difficult to function without a device of some sort in their hands. The majority of people became virtually emotionless. It’s now 2317, and as I record this video, my mind is a beehive of emotions. Rage and love, fear and excitement are giving me

a feeling of transitory divinity. It's as if I'm being born again, with the added effect of awareness. Humans are the most advanced of all creatures when it comes to emotions, and all emotions, "pleasant" and "unpleasant" alike, are what makes us, us.

This emotional experience (or "phenomenon", as some would refer to it), stems from a message I received late at night about a week ago. My doorbell chimed, but before I could open it, the deliverer had already vanished. I looked down and saw the letter, weighted down by a small rock. I immediately recognized the name as belonging to the maintenance man from work. I opened the letter, unable to prepare myself for its contents.

It was written with sincere brevity, and had a sense of urgency about it. He said he had been suspicious of many of his superiors for a long time, and now they were trying to capture him after he uncovered an ominous secret, which dated back to the year 2147. He briefly explained how the government had been manipulating us through our everyday technologies. He then wrote the coordinates of the place he wished for me to meet him at. I was bewildered, but highly intrigued.

After typing the coordinates into my GPS, I learned it was only a few hundred yards away, and no houses were near. I decided to give the man a chance, but I still brought one of my kitchen knives with me.

I found the man, right where he said he would be, sitting propped against a tree. I hid the knife in my back pocket, and made my presence known. He fell backwards, in an attempt to shuffle away, but then apparently recognized me and relaxed. He stood up, and began filling in the holes left by the letter.

"In 2147, the world's largest computer maker was bought out by the acting government at the time. With the government being in charge of the development and distribution of every

‘essential’ device of the twenty-second century, they saw the potential this posed. They began implementing their years worth of research into brain wave manipulation, with a very strong emphasis on emotion control. They implanted the device used for doing so in the power source of every one of their products. If it was ever tampered with, the device would disintegrate and render the product ineffective.”

I tried to ask how he could have possibly known this, but he continued at a pace similar to that of a person who is trying to say something before they have to inhale again.

“Their first attempt was to convince the citizens that technological competition against the government was counterproductive. Needless to say, they succeeded, and consequentially, they became the only provider of technological devices.”

At this point, the man was acting pretty weirdly, pulling on his hair, pacing back and forth. It was as if he were trying to convince himself, rather than me, that his accusations were true.

“They’re tracking me down, I don’t know how since I’ve not used any of their technology for several days, but they are. You were the only person I knew in this area, and I’m sorry I drug you into this. But you have to understand this is bigger than either of us.”

He then reached into his pocket, which made me grasp the handle of my knife. However, he drew not a weapon, but a small, box-like device. Definitely not a typical, government issued device, and therefore illegal.

“This is a video recorder. I made it myself, so as to not affect me in anyway. It’s programmed to upload the video to the worldwide channel reserved for emergencies.”

He went on to explain how to use it. I was to press the red button to begin recording, and the green button to upload. The interface was simple enough to use, but I was baffled that a

maintenance worker was able to make something so complex, especially since he was supposedly on the run. He reached it to me, and I placed it the pocket of my jacket. I looked up and my heart skipped a beat as I saw the expression frozen on his face: horror.

I turned around to see two dark vans riding towards us, their headlights turned off. Before I could turn back he grabbed the knife from my back pocket.

I was terrified, but the man only turned me around, gently, and said, “You have to explain everything I’ve told you to the world.”

He reached me what appeared to be a diagram, very professionally made.

“This is all the proof you need to convince most people. It’s instructions on how to access a smaller version of the manipulating device from a standard digital watch. Show this during the video.”

Before I could say anything, he ran the knife through his chest where the heart is located. However, instead of a scream and blood, as I had anticipated, he smiled as a few sparks emitted from his wound. He fell to the ground and laid there, motionless, as all people do, living and synthetic, when they die.

I ran, faster than I knew I could, until I collapsed just after crossing a stream below a hillock. I jerked my head around, surveying the vast expanse of the woods, but I found nothing. I presumed they didn’t know I was with the synthetic being before it destroyed itself, but, nevertheless, I didn’t return home.

They must have accessed its memory database and learned of our encounter, because they’re after me now as well. However, I found an old shed with a surprisingly sturdy door. I can hear them searching all the houses right now, but I’m confident I’ll finish this video in time.

You'll begin to notice the effects of complete emotional freedom immediately. Without a mechanical medium, love and happiness are augmented, and fear and rage, though powerful, are not as horrible as the government leads us to believe and feel. Without every emotion, we lack the full experience of being human. It's sad that a synthetic being experienced emotional freedom, and as a result, lived more like a human than most people have for nearly two-hundred years.

As I finished the video, I heard several men moving around outside. I pressed the small green button just in time to see the door kicked down in front of me, then a flash of light, then nothingness.

Sweet Tea for Two

By Jenna Vance

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There is no one else around. I am alone in the serenity of the backwoods. The summer sun is melting my fears away, large oaks are giving way to my shelter, my protection. To my left, a solitary stream inches through a seasoned path. Rocks lie beneath the stream creating sounds of ripples and obstacles, yet, the confident water journeys on.

On my right sets a small bundle of woven wicker, each piece intertwines the other to form a basket. The contents are simple: two bologna sandwiches, two small mason jars packed tight with freshly picked blackberries, two empty cups, and the aroma of sweet tea that is seeping through the basket weaves. Resting on the lid of the basket is a neatly folded blanket. It is cushioning a small envelope with an unbroken seal.

A reassuring breeze drifts by causing the leaves to chatter. There is a great white oak maturing on the creek bank. Its trunk is weathered and it feels more solid than it did when we planted it. Our initials can be felt etched deeply into the oak's rigid bark. I miss him.

A choir of blue jays whistles over my head. I whistle along as I spread the blanket across the open field. I ease myself down, determined not to squash the wicker basket. The heat from the ground warms my back as the glow of the steady sun begins to warm my heart. My mind drifts away to a time of unknowing, a time of darkness, a time before him.

From birth I suffered from blindness. I grew up in a confusing world that I never felt a part of. While other children were playing catch, I remained indoors, afraid of the unfamiliar

outside world. My life was a constant sensation of nothingness that conveyed apprehension and depression.

My world took a turn the summer he found his way into my heart. He was the first person to break the sight barrier and reach my soul. My parents had tried for years to connect me to worldly objects. However, holding a small cold object and knowing it was referred to as “spoon” didn’t always enhance my understandings of life and all its beauty.

The summer we met we were eighteen. I was taking a stroll through the mountains behind my house. My therapist convinced my parents that it was time for me to experience life beyond our home, so they paved a trail that led to an open field in the backwoods. I was walking attentively as usual. But a rock had landed in my trail. My left ankle rammed into the hard object and I began to plunge forward. That’s when I felt a pair of large, affectionate arms catch my body before it crashed onto the grueling pavement.

Normally I would’ve been frightened senseless by the presence of a strange man. Yet, somehow, at that moment, I felt safer than ever. He introduced himself as a Navy Seal. He was on leave for the summer and had decided to go hiking. Despite his mystic, I invited him to tag along.

It became the first walk of many. When we were together, I felt as if I could not only see the things of this world, but as if I were finally a part of this world. One day, he led me to the very spot where I sit now and spoke of nature in a way that I had never visualized.

Hand in hand, he painted the most magnificent picture my heart had ever seen. He explained how I am like the water that was flowing to our left, calmly overcoming obstacles and bringing life to everything I touched. He then placed a handmade wicker basket in my right hand. He compared our love to the way in which the basket was held together by a tightly

knitted bond. It signified how he felt we could work together to hold all of the secrets to happiness. I envisioned this as I ran my fingers across the surface of the basket, feeling its tender ways yet solid structure.

From the basket, he pulled out a delicate blanket, two bologna sandwiches, two mason jars, a pitcher of sweet tea, and one diamond ring. For a moment I could almost see him, down on one knee, the sun gleaming off of his face as he looked deeply past my eyes and into my heart.

We were married one year before he was called back overseas. In that time I was able to break free, to see, to love, and to be loved. His voice was indeed my buffer, his words allowed me to be one with my surroundings. His sounding footsteps matched the beat of my heart. His mere presence took away my blindness.

I hear a twig snap somewhere in the distance, and I am forced back to reality, it has been eight years since that summer, and I continue to make my way across the paved trail to this field every anniversary. The letter that I now hold is a one way ticket back to darkness. It is a letter postmarked from the Navy. I knew it was bad news that moment my mother read the postmark. He never wrote while stationed for he knew in order for me to hear it, someone else would have to read it. That meant this solitary letter could only mean one thing.

For eight years I have refused to let anyone break its seal, have convinced myself if I do not face the fact that he is gone, he never will be. I will always feel his tenderness when a loving breeze moves by. Always hear his voice in the songs of the blue jays. I can smell him as I pour the sweet tea for two. He is always with me. In a world of darkness, he continues to pen the eyes of heart.