



*Words out of the  
flatlands  
2012*

KWA Anthology

**WORDS OUT OF THE FLATLANDS**

**2013**

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PROSE and POETRY

from

**THE KANSAS WRITERS ASSOCIATION**

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## Letter from the Editor

It has been an amazing journey for me, not only as the Contest Coordinator but also the point of contact for all of the winners. To be a part of delivering the news to entrants that have won or received an Honorable Mention on their work and receiving their response was simply, enchanting. I have no doubts that each author is destined to be a powerful voice in their genre. You have made this contest a success and I look forward to next year's.

I can't forget my fantastic team of judges who have done such an outstanding job at choosing the winners. You all deserve a big hug and so much more. My gratitude will always be yours.

Of course, I wouldn't be in this position or have the opportunity to be the Contest Coordinator without the wonderful KWA. I feel like I've found a home with you. You all have made me feel like I have been a vital part of your organization. I can never repay your kindness.

A special thank you goes to our sponsors. Your support for our contest has been phenomenal. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Samantha LaFantasie

**Please note that none of the entries have been edited beyond that of formatting, including font and size. They are presented herein, as they were judged.**

# 2012 KWA Contest Winners

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## Adult Division

\* Denotes Entrant is NOT included in Anthology

### First Chapter

First Place	Richard Walkup	<a href="#"><i>Love is Mine Enemy</i></a>
Second Place	Wes Brummer	<a href="#"><i>Dust and Roses</i></a>
Third Place	Everett Robert	<a href="#"><i>The Last Ride of Dakota King</i></a>
Honorable Mention	Melody Adams	<a href="#"><i>All in the Life of a Spy</i></a>

### Short Fiction

First Place	Wes Brummer	<a href="#"><i>Ghost of a Chance</i></a>
Second Place	Dennis E. Smirl	<a href="#"><i>Crying for Donna</i></a>
Third Place	Byron Folkerts	<a href="#"><i>Papa's Watch</i></a>
Honorable Mention	Amy Hadachek	<a href="#"><i>Storms at the Stockyards</i></a>
Honorable Mention	*Bill Goodwin	<a href="#"><i>Eight Ball</i></a>
Honorable Mention	William Brian Johnson	<a href="#"><i>Musings at the End of the World</i></a>

### Non-Fiction

First Place	Dennis E. Smirl	<a href="#"><i>Welcome to Vietnam</i></a>
Second Place	*Bob Sommer	<a href="#"><i>Movies</i></a>
Third Place	Steven Laird	<a href="#"><i>Cookie Day!</i></a>
Honorable Mention	Richard Walkup	<a href="#"><i>Hopeless</i></a>
Honorable Mention	Nancy Breth	<a href="#"><i>Beauty: God's Love in Motion</i></a>

### Humor

First Place	Steven Laird	<a href="#"><i>Supermarket Opera</i></a>
Second Place	Ray "Grizzly" Racobs	<a href="#"><i>Oops!</i></a>
Third Place	Wes Brummer	<a href="#"><i>Ghost of a Chance</i></a>
Honorable Mention	Byron Folkerts	<a href="#"><i>Bear at the Door</i></a>

## Short Stories for Youth

First Place	Storme Maynard	<a href="#"><u>Namesake</u></a>
Second Place	Julie Stielstra	<a href="#"><u>Mahvolio</u></a>
Third Place	Julie Stielstra	<a href="#"><u>Cloud and Rain</u></a>
Honorable Mention	Sheila Dalrymple	<a href="#"><u>Tex the Turkey's Jiggly, Jaggly, Wiggly, Waggly Thing</u></a>

## Rhymed Poetry

First Place	Yvonne Nunn	<a href="#"><u>Country Boy, Prize Bull, Pastured Hoss</u></a>
Second Place	Carol Dee Meeks	<a href="#"><u>Brilliant Gems Come Out at Night</u></a>
Third Place	Marilyn Page	<a href="#"><u>Not Now</u></a>
Honorable Mention	Byron Folkerts	<a href="#"><u>The Circus</u></a>
Honorable Mention	Carol Dee Meeks	<a href="#"><u>Like a Spring Macbeth Bubbles Before the Run</u></a>

## Free Verse Poetry

First Place	Robert Cory	<a href="#"><u>Exodus: Redux</u></a>
Second Place	Byron Folkerts	<a href="#"><u>The Question</u></a>
Third Place	Sally Clark	<a href="#"><u>Rear View Mirror</u></a>
Honorable Mention	H.B. Berlow	<a href="#"><u>Dark Soliloquy</u></a>
Honorable Mention	April Pameticky	<a href="#"><u>Between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Hour</u></a>
Honorable Mention	Heather Larson	<a href="#"><u>Late Fall</u></a>

## **Youth Division**

### Fiction/Non-Fiction Prose

First Place	Molly Wierman	<a href="#"><u>A Mother's Love</u></a>
Second Place	Ally Burr	<a href="#"><u>The Last Inning</u></a>
Third Place	Ally Burr	<a href="#"><u>A Slurred Choice</u></a>
Honorable Mention	*Christin Miller	<a href="#"><u>Conscience</u></a>

## Adult Division First Chapter

### First Place

*Love is Mine Enemy*, by Richard Walkup

One

Saturday afternoon

The rain fell in torrents as Mike Larson's plane touched down on runway one-nine right at Kansas City International Airport. Mike was an hour and a half late. He'd missed his previous flight at Chicago Midway and was in a hurry to get through security; beat the crowd to the baggage claim; and then on to long-term parking.

After exiting the United flight, he patiently followed the crowd in the jet way, and then stepped around several passengers on his way past the unmanned security checkpoint. About an hour earlier, he was supposed to have met his nephew, Jack Foster, at the Westin Crown Center near downtown Kansas City, Missouri. He'd tried to call him earlier to let him know he'd be late, but he couldn't reach his cell. As soon as he got into his car he'd try again.

Mike hurried past a crowded baggage claim and continued on around the curved terminal building toward a construction area ahead. He darted around a large maintenance cart and collided with a slim young woman hurrying in the opposite direction. He managed to loop his arms around her, caught her, stopped her backward fall, and then pulled her upright. For a full second they remained in an unintended embrace.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," he said awkwardly.

She struggled to apologize. "No, no, it was my fault."

"Not yours, ma'am, I was in too much of a hurry and wasn't looking."

"I should have been watching where I was going," she stammered.

The woody fragrance of her perfume married with her fresh sweet feminine scent. He would always remember it. Her shoulder-length auburn hair framed her young, finely sculptured face, flawless skin, widely-spaced striking green eyes, a dimple in her cheek, and full lips, all unfettered by make up. At four or five inches shorter than he, she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. They separated slowly, their arms awkwardly lowering to their sides. She looked as flustered as he felt, her breathing as rapid and irregular as his.

"Look, Miss, there's nothing to apologize for, we were both in a hurry. It was bound to happen."

She continued to gaze into his eyes. After a long moment she seemed to come out of a trance. "Oh-my-god, I'm sorry for staring, but you look so much like someone I know."

"You know, I should be the one to apologize; you don't look like anyone I ever knew, and yet I can't take my eyes off of you." He immediately regretted the impulsive remark. She'd think he was hitting on her. "God, I'm sorry. I'd better stop before I make a fool of myself."

It seemed at least once a year upon meeting an attractive woman he'd blurt out something stupid or inappropriate. Over time he'd convinced himself he possessed a form of Terrets Syndrome that was triggered by these kinds of encounters.

She smiled for the first time since they'd collided. "Don't beat yourself up; my name is Michelle Marley." She offered her hand. "From Lawrence, Kansas."

Mike had never considered himself shy, but now, he could hardly speak "Ah, Mike, Mike Larson, from KC North," he said, and gently took her hand for a moment. Although he didn't shake it, he held it briefly. "Why don't we start over? I'm already late for my appointment downtown, so why don't we go to a bar or coffee shop and unwind before we step out into the downpour?"

She looked thoughtfully at her watch and then back to Mike. "The thing is I was on my way to meet my sister at gate seven. She called me earlier and said she might miss her flight, and I need to see if she made it." She paused and glanced briefly past him. "I see a Starbucks sign up there." She nodded in the direction from which he had come. "I'll check to see if my sister arrived while you save me a place...on second thought, better save two places in case she made her flight."

Before Mike could answer, she was gone. Although Michelle's physical presence had left, her fragrance lingered.

Making his way through a throng of people crowded around a baggage claim, he entered the coffee shop.

He ordered plain coffee and found an unoccupied table in the corner. No matter how soon she returned, the wait would be too long. He'd found one of the most attractive women he had ever met, and wanted to get to know her.

While waiting, Mike pulled out his cell phone and called his nephew.

"Hey, Mike, where are you?"

"Sitting in a Starbucks at the airport."

"What happened? When did you get in?"

He took a cautious sip of his hot coffee before answering. "I missed my connection at Chicago Midway. I got here fifteen minutes ago, about five-thirty. What's going on?"

"We just sat down to eat; are you still going to make it to the party tonight?"

"Sorry, Jack, I don't think so. I'm really beat and I think I'll go straight home and get some rest." Mike heard a woman in the background call out, "Hey, Jack, what the hell you doin' over there? Come here big boy."

"Gotta go Mike. My fans are demanding my presence."

"Yeah right. Have fun, Jack. Bye."

As the minutes dragged by, Mike sat back and sipped his coffee. He fidgeted with his cell, then checked his watch. After twenty-five minutes, he worried he'd been stood up. Mike didn't want to believe she had skipped out on him. He really didn't think it was so after what happened between them; the sincere way she reacted, the honesty in her eyes and voice was just too real.

After forty minutes Mike got up and headed to the security checkpoint for gate seven. Ironically, Michelle's sister's gate was next to the one where he had disembarked. When he got there, no aircraft were deplaning, no one was being processed through security, and Michelle, the woman he had just met, was nowhere to be seen.

Mike gazed through the thick plate glass windows beyond the security area that looked out over the ramp. He stared off in the distance across the airport complex through the falling rain. Daylight had faded into the evening gloom; the mood matched his own feeling of disappointment.

Still in a state of disbelief, he looked around the curved passageway, hoping to see someone who might tell him they had seen the young woman.

He decided to ask one of the TSA agents standing nearby waiting for the next rush of passengers.

“Ma-am, sorry to bother you, but I am looking for someone; a woman who told me she was coming up to this gate to look for her sister inbound from Chicago O’Hare. She was about five-six, in her late twenties, attractive, with light brown hair. She came up this way from the Starbucks about an hour ago. Have you been here that long?”

The thirtyish looking African-American woman eyed Mike for a long moment as though to clear him as a terrorist.

She slowly shook her head. “I’ve only been here for about twenty minutes, and I haven’t seen anyone who looked like that.”

“Thanks,” Mike mumbled and headed back toward the baggage claim. Disappointed and embarrassed, he decided against any further inquiries.

A short time later, Mike exited the airport shuttle bus in long-term parking. When he found his Ford Expedition, he quickly stuffed two bags in the back, and now nearly soaked, slid into the driver’s seat.

As the engine caught and came to life, he heard a loud thump nearby, a startled cry of a woman’s voice and a man angrily screaming—apparently at the woman. They sounded somewhere close, but the vehicles on either side of him were empty. Over the sound of the drumming rain, he could understand nothing of their shouting match. He shut off the engine and listened. The man shouted again; this time it sounded like he yelled, “*Bitch!*” This was followed by a woman sobbing. Mike had to strain to hear. Finally, the confrontation quieted down. He didn’t want to get involved, but maybe the guy was beating her. Impulsively, he honked a long blast on the horn, then opened the door and started to get out. Another car started somewhere to his right. The engine revved, tires spun on wet pavement, followed by a crash. Then the vehicle sped away toward the parking lot entrance.

Mike started his car, backed out of his space, and headed in the same direction. Two cars away he saw a late model Lexus with collision damage. Apparently the couples’ car had backed out at high speed and collided with the right rear tail light, smashing it and crumpling the rear part of the fender.

As he stopped at the gate to pay, the attendant asked, “What the hell happened back there?”

Mike shook his head and said, “I’m not sure.” He told the man what he’d heard and about the Lexus. “Did the guy pay when he came through here?”

“Yeah. He came through without stopping, threw me his ticket and a twenty, and then took off. I didn’t have a chance to see him or his passengers.”

## Adult Division First Chapter

### Second Place

*Dust and Roses*, by Wes Brummer

Chapter 1      December 9, 1934      3 PM

Beatrice sat on her perch outside the loft window listening to the voice in her head. It was Sally. Today, Sally was being annoyingly persistent. *Come on Bee. You can do this. Put your arms down by your side and push off. It's easy. It will be like flying. A rush of wind, and then we can be together. Push off when I say.*

It was Sally's idea. Bee had to agree, climbing up to the attic was a delicious idea. No one knew she was here. The view was enormous. She could see everything from up here, but no one could see her. It was a thrill to open the heavy window, throw back the shutters, then climb out onto the ledge. She could fall. That was why she was here. Eternity was seconds away. Except now she was freezing. The thrill was gone. She just wanted to finish it.

Bee put her hands down on the windowsill. Her fingers gripped the wind battered, unpainted wood on either side of her. She was ready. The thin muscles of her arms tensed. She was about to push off.

*Wait! Not yet. You're spoiling it!* Sally scolded her. *I give the word. Not you. Now pick the last thing you want to see.*

Bee hung her head. She hated to be "talked to" by Sally. A slight wind brushed her thin blonde hair from her face, and ruffled her flour sack dress. Her bare feet dangled in space high over the front porch roof below. She would really have to push hard to miss it. She wasn't sure if it would make any difference.

She looked for something noteworthy to see. In front of the porch was a semi-circle path that led to the main road in front of the farm. That was Miller Road. It looked so small from up here. It made Bee dizzy. She could just slip off now. But Sally would be angry. Bee did not want to disappoint Sally. And she absolutely did not want to anger Sally. Sally could be scary-mean when she was mad.

Bee shifted her gaze to the bleak horizon ahead. The sun was well to the south and going down. The farmland stretching out before her was fallow. Little stirred. There was some blowing dust on the road reaching south. This was South Farm Road. She saw the name on a sign once. It joined Miller Road just to the east of the tenant house. The dust rumbled toward her. Bee could see a dot resolving itself into an automobile. It was long and silver with a sloping box-like roof. The engine screamed a protest as the driver slammed on the brakes, and the car swerved to the right side of the dirt road. It screeched to a halt amid a cloud of dust. As the dust cleared, she could hear a man and woman shouting, but she could not make out the words. Then she heard a piercing scream.

A man jumped out of the car. He was young and well dressed. He wore a dark blue, almost black pinstriped suit with vest and a wide-brimmed Panama hat.

He had a sun-tanned face. That seemed odd for winter. He was very handsome and very, very angry. He slammed his door, walked around the front of the car, and yanked open the passenger side door. A young woman fell on to the dead grass, landing on her side. She screamed again. It was an agonized burst of rage and hurt. The young man stood over her, his fist raised, as if he was about to pummel her again. Then he must have thought better of it. He reached into the back seat, pulled out a suitcase, and threw it down beside her. Slowly, the man turned to look at the fortress-like house. He looked up and saw Beatrice.

Bee sat, not moving. She was curious. *What will he do? Am I next? What was Sally thinking?* But the man just stood there. Bee stared back. Each examined the other. Slowly, the man began to smile. Then he did the oddest thing. He made a grand gesture of tipping his hat, sweeping his arm, and bowing as if he was at a ball. He held the bow for a long moment. He stood back up, replacing his hat in a tippy sort of angle. Finally, he got into his car and roared off.

Bee watched for movement from the woman. She was curled up. She raised her head with shaky effort. Both women locked eyes. Beatrice took careful note of her condition. Red rimmed eyes, blood seeping from her nose and lip, hair askew, and her once nice dress torn and covered in debris and dust. *Sally, what do I do?* But Sally wasn't answering. She was gone.

Bee carefully shifted her position, conscious of where she was. With clumsy effort, she made her way back into the farmhouse.

The young girl methodically made her way down from the attic. First, she peeked out of the hatch and looked down into the third floor hallway. No one there. She lowered herself from the hatch and hopped onto a massive linen closet. She then carefully replaced the square attic board. She climbed down from the stout cabinet then reached into one of the drawers. Bee pulled out her apron, putting it on. She reached again down the side of the drawer and retrieved a slate, chalk, and her rag doll. Sally was crudely made from a burlap sack with a tied off head, stitches for eyes and mouth, and knots for arms and legs. Bee placed the articles in her apron pocket. With Sally tucked away she was ready to find the matron. Miss Gloria would know what to do.

Gloria Eisner sat in the common room trying to teach Patrick how to sew on a button. "But first, you need to know how to thread a needle." Gloria held up a sewing needle in one hand and a spool of heavy black thread in the other.

Patrick rolled his eyes. He was a thick-set youth with short arms and a mop of unruly hair. His pants set bunched around his knees and ankles. He squinted at the needle. Dr Zwiefel said he was near-sighted. "But I don't need to know this. Can't you do it, Miss Gloria?"

"I can, Patrick, but you need to learn for yourself." Gloria was adamant. "You've already got two buttons missing from your heavy coat. Watch and I'll do the first button. You can do the second." With practiced ease, Gloria threaded the needle and sewed a large silver button to the lapel of a worn woolen coat.

"Silver makes a nice contrast with all the black buttons. Don't you think? Now it's your turn."

Patrick was lost. "You went way too fast, Miss Gloria. I don't think I can do it. If you could do the second one for me, you can double my chores. I don't mind."

"Patrick, you're hopeless. People won't always be around. You can't keep making excuses."

Gloria started on the second button. Patrick turned his head and carefully breathed a sigh of relief. Beatrice approached them with her chalkboard out-stretched. Patrick tried to make out the letters.

"Um ... Miss Gloria? Beatrice has something."

Gloria glanced up. Beatrice looked even more somber than usual, then she saw the words on the slate, GIRL ON SOUTH ROAD - HURT.

"Patrick, I want you to go to the South Road quickly. Pretend like your eyes are a camera. Look for someone on the ground. Then get back here as fast as you can. Tell me what you saw. Beatrice, I

want you to ring the dinner bell three times. Stop for two seconds. Then ring three times again. Keep doing that until Mr. Eisner comes. Show him what you wrote. I'm getting my medical bag. We will need to get her back here." Both Patrick and Beatrice stood staring at her wide-eyed.

"Get moving. Now."

Both of the inmates took off. Patrick ran out the front door and down the porch steps. Beatrice made her way through the big farmhouse to the back porch where the cast iron dinner bell hung. Gloria went to the pantry between the kitchen and dining room and fetched her first aid kit. She took careful note of the most useful items.

*Bong. Bong. Bong.* The resonant old bell peeled away. The front door flew open. Patrick raced in breathless. "There's a girl by the road. She looks like a movie star. She's bleeding and all curled up. She said, 'Help me'."

Gloria finished her inventory. "Now, Patrick, go to the kitchen and have Mr. Wheatley put on some water to boil. Then go upstairs and get some clean towels. They're in the linen closet. Go now." Patrick took off again, this time towards the back of the house.

The bell quit ringing. Gloria heard James' loud voice questioning Beatrice. That was a waste of time. "Gloria? Gloria! What the hell is going on?"

James thundered into the common room. Other inmates showed up as well. Gloria closed her bag. Time was wasting.

"A girl is lying out on South Road. She's injured. We need to bring her in. There's a stretcher in the infirmary storeroom."

"I'll get it. Anything else?"

Gloria considered, "No. I'm heading out. Beatrice, you're barefoot. Stay inside. Patrick, get one of those towels wet and follow us out." Without another word, Gloria took her bag, and headed for the front door, grabbing a coat on the way.

She cut across the empty field, not bothering to follow the road. She reached the huddled shape, knelt down and cradled the girl's head in her lap. She was surprisingly beautiful with dark brown hair. I was full and excessively long. With practiced fingers, Gloria looked for a pulse. The girl was shaking with cold and possibly shock, but her pulse was strong. Gloria checked for broken bones. A loud groan came from the girl's cracked lips when Gloria ran her hands over her abdomen and left side. Could be cracked or bruised ribs. There was something else. Gloria bent down to the girl's ear.

"Help is coming, child. We'll get you in where it's warm." The girl opened her eyes. Dark brows gave her eyes an arched appearance. Gloria wiped her tangled hair from her pale face. She was trying to say something. Gloria placed her ear to her lips. "Say it again, honey." Gloria listened, holding her breath.

Her single word was almost a sigh. "Baby."

They brought her inside and carefully moved her from the stretcher to an empty bed. The bed had leather straps and leg ties for the insane. Gloria sent the men out. "Bring some hot water in here," Patrick brought in the towels. Bee stood quietly watching. Gloria cut a slit up the front of the girl's dress and parted it. Such a shame. It was store-bought, silky, and fashionable. But she needed to examine her ribs. "Bruised up. Could still be cracked. Just not sure. We'll have to get Doctor Barry out here to check on her. Bee, get me a dipper of water. Oh, and bring a nightgown."

There was a knock at the door. Gloria pulled a sheet to cover the girl. Bee left. Gloria took the pan of water from James, closed the door, then set about cleaning up the battered girl.

"Dear, this is going to sting. I'm wiping the blood and dirt from your face."

Not waiting for a reply she began to clean the cuts.

"OWW! Stop!" The girl opened her eyes and batted the towel away. She scowled at Gloria.

"Ahh, good. You're awake. How's your head? Do you know your name?"

“Sara.” She touched her lip. “I got a headache.” The girl raised her head, then groaned with pain. “My side hurts. I’ve never hurt like this before.”

“I’ve seen worse. We’ll fix you up. Your ribs are sore. It looks like you’ve been kicked by a horse.”

“My boyfriend.”

“I’ll want to hear more about that later. What I’m more concerned about is the baby. How far along are you?”

The girl eyes widened, “Oh that’s right. I told you. I just went to the doctor – when was that – yesterday? He said I was six or eight weeks along. I’m due in mid-August.

There was a soft knock at the door. Bee returned with the water. Gloria fished around in her bag, found a bottle of aspirin, and gave it and the dipper to Sara. “This is Beatrice. Bee saw you out on the road. Bee, this is Sara.”

Bee took the board out of her apron and wrote, SARA IS A PRETTY NAME.”

“Uh, thank you.” Sara raised her brows to Gloria.

“Bee can’t talk. But she hears well, she doesn’t miss much. As I was saying, we need to get you checked. You’ve took a beating. That can’t be good for the baby. We have an attending physician, Doctor Barry Zwiefel. He does routine checkups for us, as well as emergencies. I think we can call this an emergency.”

“It hurts to move. It a sharp pain just to breathe. Can I just rest for a while before leaving?”

Doctor Barry makes house calls. We can have him here later today. Let’s finish cleaning you up. Bee brought some bed clothes for you.

“Thank you.” Sara looked around. “What is your name? Are you a nurse? Is this a hospital?”

Gloria laughed. “I’m Gloria Eisner. The people here call me Miss Gloria. I do a bit of nursing whenever the need comes up. And, no, we’re not really a hospital. I manage the tenant house and supervise the inmates. My husband oversees the work farm.”

“Inmates.” Sara noticed the handcuffs and straps attached to the iron bedrails. *Oh, no.* She tried to get out of the bed. *I can’t be tied up.* She drew in a breath. *Get out.* Sara threw back the covers. *Get out now.* Her feet hit the floor ready for flight.

Stabbing pain lanced her gut. Shallow breaths hurt less. Her breathing became more rapid. She couldn’t get enough air, so she tried to breathe yet faster. Her panting turned to pumping wheezes. She could feel her heart beating rapidly. Still not enough air. She seethed. Panic gripped her. She couldn’t even scream. Vision blurred. Dark walls closed in. The room looked small and far away. She felt herself pulled into a tunnel.

Beatrice pointed to the hand cuffs. She wrote, BED IS SCARING HER.

Gloria gripped Sara’s shoulders. “Listen, Sara. Relax. Don’t panic. Breathe slowly. The cuffs and straps are not for you. We can change beds later. You are not a prisoner. You can leave anytime. Slow your breathing. You’re getting too much air.” Gloria hugged her, stroking her back. “Relax ... relax.”

Dimly, Sara heard the words. Slowly, her panting subsided. The lightheadedness eased. She felt spent. She wanted to sleep, but she had to know. “Where am I?”

Gloria was surprised. “Child, you need to sleep. We can talk later.”

“No. I need to know now. I have no idea where I am. He abandoned me. I’ve got nowhere to go.”

Gloria was quiet for a long moment. “That is so sad.” She turned to the window, looking into the waning light. Finally, she turned to Sara.

“You are at the Joshua County Poor Farm.”

Beatrice wrote something, then turned her slate to Sara, AND ASYLUM.

## Adult Division First Chapter

### Third Place

*The Last Ride of Dakota King*, by Everett Robert

#### CHAPTER ONE:

Ben and Frank, Jack and Suzy

Dakota thought he had seen everything the West could throw at him. As a Bureau of Indian Affairs agent, he had seen Indian raids on isolated homesteads and military retaliations that had gone horribly wrong. When he worked as a Pinkerton detective, he had witnessed daring train robberies by a handful of masked men. During his time as a US Marshal and Texas Ranger, he had seen the price small towns extracted from cattle rustlers in the form of vigilante justice. He had learned new tricks from Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson, had watched Doc Holliday gamble away and then regain a fortune in a night, had chased both the Dalton and James gangs. For over forty years he had roamed the West, bringing justice where it was needed. He was sure he had seen it all and even told a reporter one time, "There ain't nothing they can throw at me, that I ain't seen before."

Dakota kept a house and owned a saloon in a little Kansas town called Bird. The house wasn't much to look at. It was a small cottage built for two. It wasn't anything fancy but he liked it and called it home. Though he was pushing seventy-two, he checked on the saloon's business every day before taking a ride with a Colt strapped to his hip and a hat perched low on his head. He had become a familiar sight to the denizens of Bird, their constant protector and watcher. They knew he'd watch over the town, keep it and protect it when he was there, but they were also embarrassed by him. It was 1908 and progress was coming to Bird. The gambling halls were replaced by banks, whorehouses with churches, well-worn dirt trails with roads. There was even talk of cars. There was no place for someone like Dakota King, they whispered, he's too old and too old fashioned, why doesn't he just move and leave us all alone. Dakota had asked that same question, but had never come to a satisfactory answer. He had tried, once before, but it had been an unsuccessful move, and it wasn't long before he found himself back in the little town that seemed to have no place for him. Maybe it was a misguided sense of duty and loyalty to the town that kept him there.

As much as the town couldn't understand why Dakota stayed, they had sympathy for him too. He had been a part of Bird since before most of them were born, and they knew he'd be riding more and more during this season. His wife, Lila, had loved the holidays, from Thanksgiving to the New Year and they had celebrated with gusto. When she died, that part of him died with her and the holidays became harder and harder to deal with and Dakota became harder and harder to deal with. That was why he was riding so far from town on that cold November morning, only to be stopped by the strangest sight he had ever seen.

At first glance, it wasn't that strange: two children hauling small, wild pumpkins and

gourds in a small wooden wagon. *They have to be cold*, Dakota thought even as he pulled his own moleskin coat tight around him, *look at how they are dressed*. Their clothes were black, thin and threadbare. The girl wore a too-small bonnet that she had obviously outgrown, and the boy wore a hat meant for a full grown man, probably his father's. They both wore black jackets but they were old and unable to protect them from the cold, which was blowing down from Canada early this year. From head to toe, they looked Amish, which Dakota thought was strange. He couldn't remember the last time any Amish had passed through. Their cheeks were flushed and raw and their hands trembled from the cold as the wind bit through what little protection they had and into their skin.

Sad as the scene was before him, that wasn't the strangest sight. What took the old man by surprise was the two turkeys pulling the wagon. They were hitched up like horses, with an old clothesline for a harness and strips of leather for reins. Dakota had heard of domesticated turkeys, several people raised them in Bird alongside chickens and geese and ducks, but he had never seen them used as these children were using them now.

"Ho there!" he called out as he reigned up on his horse and brought it to a stop. The children looked up at him, their eyes wide and full of fear. He hadn't seen a homestead for several miles, and didn't see one nearby. He didn't know where these children came from, how far they had wandered, or where their parents were. The lack of information bothered Dakota. This was his territory after all, and he'd be damned if he was going to let a pair of kids die here. "That's quite a set up you got there. Gathering pumpkins for Thanksgiving dinner?" Dakota asked, still astride his horse. But the children offered no answer, they simply watched him with their big blue eyes. He frowned, the lines in his face furrowing deeper as he did. This caused the little girl to drop her reins and rush to her brother's side, gripping his arm tightly. Dakota didn't know what he had done, but it had obviously scared these children. Without hesitation, he swung off the horse and landed in the hard frozen dirt with a thud. He felt a sharp familiar pain shoot up to his knees as he did, but he chose to ignore it. He was getting old and there was nothing he could do about that. His own father had ridden from East Coast to west clear up into his 90s. Dakota was still trying to live up to the old man's expectations and wouldn't let a little joint problems in his knees stop him.

"That's quite a set up you got there," he repeated stepping a little closer to the turkeys. Again Dakota was flummoxed. He had had limited experience with birds like these, but he was sure they would gobble and flap their wings when approached by a man they didn't know. But instead the birds stayed quiet; it was the boy who started flapping.

The kid, who couldn't have been more than ten or twelve years old, clumsily reached into the deep pocket of his jacket, fumbling and searching for something buried there. Then from the depths of the pocket, he pulled out an old Navy revolver, much too big for his small hands, and pointed it at Dakota. *Curious*, Dakota thought, *when did the Amish start carrying guns*. "Stay away, get back." The kid ordered Dakota in a thin, reedy voice.

King took a step back, his hands up and in front of him. "Whoa, there cowboy, I'm not going to hurt you."

"I said, step back!"

Dakota watched as the gun wavered and swayed, held in uncertain hands, a trembling finger just inches from the trigger. Dakota, thinking his height over the boy might be the issue, took a step back and knelt down on the frozen earth, hands still raised and ignoring the screaming pain in his knees. "Slow down there son..."

"I'm not your son!"

"Then what's your name, what can I call you?"

"His name is Jack and I'm Susan," a little voice called from behind the boy.

"Shut up Suzy, we're not supposed to talk to anyone."

"That's good advice Jack, who told you that? Your pa?" Dakota kept one eye on the boy, but his second on the girl whose shoulders started heaving and tears welled up in the corner of her eyes. Years of working as a lawman had taught Dakota how to look at two people at the same time and give both his full attention.

"Where is your pa? Or your ma for that matter?" Dakota pressed forward with his questions even as he stayed completely still.

"They're...they're...they're around." Jack said, but the tears in his sister's eyes and the uncertainty in his voice told Dakota otherwise.

"What happened Jack? Where are your folks at?"

"SHUT UP!"

Dakota watched as the boy struggled to cock back the hammer on the old Navy. Dakota thought it prudent to change the subject a little.

"Say, I've never seen turkeys hitched up like that before. That's pretty clever."

He watched as Suzy stepped forward nodding, "That's Ben and Frank." Her head bobbing and a few locks of blonde curls sprung free from the small bonnet.

"Named after Ben Franklin?"

Dakota would later swear he had never before or after heard such a squeal of delight, "How did you know?"

"My own daddy taught me about how ol' Ben wanted to make the national bird the turkey. I've always thought he was right."

The boy looked at him suspiciously, "Why's that?"

"Well, look at them? You got two birds there that most people say are wild and untamed creatures. That all they do is make a bunch of racket and flop around causing trouble. But they aren't at all like that, Oh sure, you leave them out in the wild and they'll act just like that. If you give them a purpose and raise 'em up right, you can train any turkey to work hard and keep you safe." It was the most Dakota had been allowed to say since running across these two orphans. Jack nodded his small, shaggy head.

"Our pa said something similar."

"Your pa sounds like a smart man. Did he give you that gun and teach you how to use it?"

Jack nodded, his shoulders beginning to heave as he fought the emotion building up deep inside of him.

"Did he also tell you to respect the law?" Another nod from Jack.

"And what a US Marshal's badge looks like?" Dakota asked as he reached across to pull away part of his moleskin jacket to reveal the distinctive brass star encased in a circle that clearly said "US Marshal." Suzy gasped again and stepped forward, but Jack wasn't sold yet.

"How do we know you ain't killed a real US Marshal and took his badge?"

"Remember what I said about your turkeys keeping you safe?" Jack's only answer was a nod.

Dakota continued, "What do turkeys do when someone they don't trust steps forward or toward you?"

"They squawk and gobble and carry on like they are getting plucked!" Suzy answered. "See, Jack he can be trusted, they didn't do that at all when he stepped forward."

"That's right Suzy. Jack, can I get up now? My knees are hurting awfully bad and you look like you're awfully cold."

Jack nodded again and Dakota stood up slowly and extended his hand, "I plumb forgot to introduce myself. I'm Mr. King, but you can call me Dakota."

If the widening of eyes could make a sound, THAT would have been the loudest squeal Dakota would have ever heard, he thought as he watched Jack's eyes widen to the size of dinner plates.

"So," he asked without a trace of irony, "I take it you've heard of me?" and Jack nodded. "Can you tell me, then, why the two of you are out here alone gathering pumpkins without a house or parents in sight?"

The two children looked at each other and silently agreed to answer the famed lawman. "We were traveling, from Colorado to Kansas City," Jack began. "Pa just announced one day that we were leaving, we were going to take a wagon to Kansas City and then a train. He told us to get packed up. So we packed and gathered the horses..."

"And Ben and Frank!" Suzy said.

"And Ben and Frank," Jack added. "Everything was fine until a couple of days ago when we got ambushed. We had stopped for supper. Me and Suzy had seen the pumpkins growing wild and went out with the turkeys to gather them up. We were heading back when we saw the fire and heard our Ma scream."

"So we hid!" Suzy interrupted again.

"When I thought it was safe, I went back and saw Ma and Pa they were both..." The tears didn't just well up this time, they flowed down his cheeks in a torrent of sorrow. Dakota reached out and touched the boy on the shoulder, nodding slowly.

He didn't need to finish the sentence for them. "Can you tell me anything about the men that did this?"

Both children looked at each other, lost in thought and then Jack answered, "There were black horses." Dakota nodded again, lost in his own thoughts this time, thinking about how the vaqueros that the Glabers hired used to ride black horses. But that was back when the Glabers ran their rustling operation out of Bird and robbed banks across the region. They hadn't been active in years though, and when they *were* active they weren't known for killing innocent travelers.

"I think I know who did this, and I promise I'll do everything I can to bring your parents' killers to justice. While I'm doing that though, you can't be staying out here. Not this close to Thanksgiving. Come on into town, we'll sit by a fire, get you warm, something to eat, and drink hot chocolate..."

"Or coffee?" Jack asked, excitement slowly overcoming grief.

"Or coffee." Dakota said as he lifted Suzy up into his saddle first.

"But not turkey, right?" Suzy asked him and something about the earnestness and innocence in her voice made Dakota smile for the first time since Lila's death as he nodded.

"That's right, no turkey."

"And Ben and Frank, can they come with us?"

"Of course they can." Dakota said as he hefted Jack up and then climbed up into the saddle himself and began the ride to Bird.

*What a sight we make, thought Dakota, me riding with two kids and pulling two turkeys hitched to a wagon full of gourds and pumpkins. You know, Dakota's thoughts continued, I might just be bringing to town something nobody has ever seen before, and that was not an easy thing to do.*

## Adult Division First Chapter

### Honorable Mention

*All in the Life of a Spy*, by Melody Adams

Darkness.

No, not total darkness, I could just make out the twinkling of stars above me. The stars kept disappearing and reappearing, and it took my sluggish brain a few minutes to realize that palm fronds were swaying above me.

I was lying in wet sand. I could hear waves of water lapping shoreline. Where was I? I began to sit up and pain seared in my left side stopping me. I gasped, and felt my back with my left hand. Grit from sand.....and stickiness.

Gingerly, I searched my back. My shirt was in tatters. Under it I could tell that my skin was hot. I felt the wood that was invading my back, my breath hissing between my teeth as pain exploded when my hand brushed the huge chunk.

Then I remembered.

I remembered the storm at sea.

I remembered the crew panicking as the rogue wave slammed into the ship, twisting it like it was aluminum instead of steel. Lifeboats never made it into the water with people in them, but exploded into splinters as smokestacks crushed them. An explosion deep in the ship left it leaning precariously to stern. Suddenly, I found myself in the water, gasping, spitting. My life vest on but not secured. I fumbled with the ties of the vest while trying not to swallow more salt water.

Looking around I saw men in the water, yelling, screaming. Waves crashed, rain made seeing impossible. Another explosion, this time above deck sent deadly missiles into the water, into the men. Someone near me was screaming over and over, "My eye! My eye!"

Something floated near me and I grabbed it. A piece of the ship, I had no idea what it was. It floated, and that was all I was concerned with. The storm that had struck our ship still raged around me. Lightning struck terrifyingly close.

The ship was sliding down, and as it did the suction began to pull everything in the water back and down with it. I kicked my feet and tried to push my float away from the sucking ship. I could hear men behind me screaming as they felt the ship begin to suck them down to the depths. I was also pulled back, but I continued to kick with all the frenzy I could find, and gradually won the battle. As the remaining smokestack hit the water another explosion shook me. Something hard struck my back with such force it took my breath. Then there was nothing but blackness. Blackness and sweet silence engulfed me.

**Four days earlier**

“Sir, the men on the *Cruzer* know me, I’ve been on board for more than a month now, working alongside of them, taking the brunt from that bastard Capt. Roch. I heard him talking last night and I’ll bet my Granny’s soul that he was arranging to pick up more girls on this next cruise.”

“McGuire, I wasn’t aware that your Granny was willing to give her soul to anyone, let alone her conniving, slick grandson.” A gravelly voice spoke from the blackberry next to Sean’s ear.

“Ah! Sir! You cut me to the quick, now ya do! Slick, aye, but conniving?” Laughter could be heard in Sean’s lilting Irish brogue.

Then his brow furrowed, as he thought of another ship hold of young girls from the African coast being brought to the states to be sold to the highest bidder. The young girl he held in his arms six months ago still fresh in his memory. She had been a mere ten years old. She had been sold into slavery, to be used by cruel men who had no consciences or souls. She had died in his arms. Sean and the squad of men that had busted the slavery ring saved twenty seven girls. But the five that didn’t make it still made his heart clench in his chest.

“I’m not going to let any more children die, Sir, not if I can help it. Roch is dirty; I can smell the dirt on that bastard. I want to be there when that scum goes down.” The snarl that came through the phone convinced Sean’s boss that his stubborn streak was running full force.

*The agency had been watching Captain Jorge Roch for a year now. Besides transporting unique, endangered animals from Africa to the States to sell to the highest bidder on the black market, Roch was now apparently working the sex slave trade too. The agency had been close to busting Roch four months ago, Intel from someone on board the Cruzer had been coming into the agency every week like clockwork, and then all messages stopped. Not knowing what had become of the spy, Sean requested to be placed on board. Working under the disguise of a traveling, possibly shady seaman, Sean managed a slot on board the Cruzer.*

I gingerly stood my land legs not quite engaged yet, and wobbled to the left. I was on a beach, where, I hadn’t a clue.

I spotted flotsam washing up on shore so deduced that I had not been unconscious for long. Stumbling to a palm tree I tried to turn my head far enough around to see the wound. No luck. I laid my head against the rough trunk of the tree and sighed.

*Nothing comes easy to you Sean lad!*

Clenching my jaw, I reached back with my left hand, grasped the spike, counted to three and pulled. “Holy Mother of God!” I fell to my knees, black spots danced in front of my eyes. *Don’t blackout on me now Lad.*

The spike of wood had moved but was still invading my back. Breathing out once, I pulled again, thankfully, this time it came out. I was panting, sweat running down my chest. The back of my neck was freezing; I was on the verge of a blackout. I pressed my forehead to the tree, feeling the pain as bark dug into my flesh. The pain helped center me, brought me back from the black abyss I was falling towards.

The huge chunk of wood was next to me in the sand. I had dropped it the moment it was free of my body. Looking at it I realized that I had had a large piece of gaff, a pole with a hook on the end to haul in fish, in me. Thank God it was the just the wood and not the metal hook. I was lucky to not have been shish-ka-bobbed. Tentatively, I felt the wound in my back. It was sticky; it was bleeding freely, but not gushing. Knowing that the flow would help to clean the wound I wasn’t overly worried. Guessing strictly by feel, I pictured a three inch slash just below my left shoulder blade running down. I think that the wood had hit my ribs and veered right making a pocket of sorts between bones and flesh. The pocket was approximately six inches deep. Sand was already mixed with the blood on my back, making me wonder what else was now floating through my bloodstream. Infection in the humid tropics was a given. I would need medical help soon. Antibiotics were going to be needed.

I would need fresh water soon, for cleaning the wound and also to stay hydrated. People think that in tropical locals that dehydration isn't a problem. Needless to say, the heat in these areas saps moisture out of a body about as fast as desert heat does. So as I stood by the palm, looking about, I noted mentally that the water washing up wreckage was coming from the West. The sun was just beginning its evening decent, making me squint at the glare. That would put the forest behind to the East. Deciding to follow the beach for a while before trying to battle the dense growth, I started south. The beach itself was a good fifty yards wide, giving me plenty of room to walk without getting wet in the surf or fighting the mosquitoes lurking in the trees. I was still seeing black spots out of the corners of my eyes and I was feeling a bit woozy.

"Lord be praised." I murmured to myself as I spotted a stream coming out of the woods, cutting thru the sandy beach to the waiting ocean. I stumbled to it and fell to me knees drinking the sweet, cold water in huge gulps. Knowing even as I drank too quickly that I would more than likely throw up, but the terrible thirst in my body demanded to be quenched. Finally, thirst slackened, I lay down in the water. The water felt glorious on my fevered body. It stung the opened wound, but felt wonderfully cleansing also. I think I may have dozed for a bit, waking to my body trembling. The fever was showing itself, and I was nowhere closer to finding help.

## Adult Division Short Fiction

### First Place

*Ghost of a Chance*, by Wes Brummer  
*Also placed third in Adult Division: Humor*

“So, you’re saying some developer is kicking us out so Cedar Rest can become a casino?” Sandra crossed her arms. John shielded his eyes. Sandra shined like a spotlight when she was angry.

The other spirits sat downcast. John Peterson rubbed his eyes. Explaining the material world to Sandra was like talking to a ... wall. “It’s a matter of money. I need to come up with a quarter million dollars to match the developer’s bid to buy this old house. I’m just a renter. I came here to work on my music. I haven’t got that kind of cash.”

“It’s *we*, John. We’re all in this together. And we appreciate you helping us to save our home. Most humans would have bailed. Even when you first moved in, we thought you were different. Quiet, yet intense. We liked the guitar playing. You didn’t even flinch when we showed ourselves to you.”

“I was working on lyrics to a love song. At the time, I thought I needed to be more careful what I wished for. Since then, I’ve gotten used to the idea of a house with its own built in audience.”

“Anyway,” said Sandra, “Thanks.”

Bernadette nodded. “We couldn’t do it ourselves.”

Patrick nodded, “We’ve gotten attached to the place.”

“So we need a plan for lots of cash. Or else bulldozers will be knocking down this old rest home in three months.” John peered at the spirits. “Ideas?”

“How’s this?” Bern shimmered with excitement, “Cedar Rest could be a haunted bed-and-breakfast.”

“Maybe we could host murder-mystery parties. We could even act out the murder.” Patrick drew a finger across his translucent arm. Red ectoplasm dripped, hitting the floor in sparkles.”

John rolled his eyes. “Great ideas. The problem is money. You’re proposing a business. We need a slam-dunk. An event. We need a hook to reel in the big fish for big cash. It’s got to be legit. Or at least close.”

“I’ve got it!” The table jumped. Lights flared. Sandra jumped up and paced the room.

“So let’s hear it.” Patrick said.

“Remember that movie with Vincent Price? He offers a prize to people who manages to stay overnight in a haunted house. That’s what we can do. People pay to stay overnight. We scare them. Make them run. We keep the money. We save the house.”

John rubbed his chin. “It’s got potential. It’s an old house. It has a reputation for being haunted. Imagine that. But you guys are not scary. You’re like that bunch on *Friends*. Any of you seen that show?”

The three ghosts looked blank.

“Never mind. Past your time. You’ll need to work on being scary. You’re way too chatty. Off hand, the less you say, the scarier you’ll be.”

Sandra asked, “So, are you saying our ideas are a little dated?”

“Trust me on that one.” John paused, thinking, “The entry fee will need to be high. We can encourage our dare takers to bring their recording devices and video cast if they want to.”

“As long as they pay to play,” said Sandra. “We don’t care what they do.”

“You have to understand,” John said. “Times have changed. People are skeptical about everything, including ghosts. Ghosts are not scary. They don’t interact. There’s no threat to life and limb that a zombie can deliver. I have some horror movies. They might help.”

“We’re ghosts, We’re naturals at this” said Sandra.

“Let’s see those movies,” said Bernadette. “Are they in color?”

“I wonder if we’ll photograph.” Patrick broke out his pocket comb and touched up his crew cut.”

Five hours later, John turned off the DVD player. “That last one was called *The Evil Dead*. What do you think?”

Sandra uncovered her eyes. “We haven’t got a chance.”

Patrick uncovered his ears. “We are so dead.”

Bernadette uncovered her mouth. “Can I see that last one again?”

Later that day, John hired a twelve year old to do social networking. The kid worked for peanuts. Actually, it was frozen Twinkies, John’s private stash. The kid thought he would make a killing on Ebay. Good luck, John thought, the dates were expired.

While the word went out to every ghost hunter, urban adventurer, and nut case, John made other arrangements. He hired a carpenter to mount cameras throughout the rooms. He set the stay-over entry fee at fifty thousand dollars. If someone walked out next morning, they would get one hundred grand. John wanted fifteen takers just in case someone managed to get through the night. As he answered e-mails from prospects, he listened to the ghosts practicing. They’ll be lucky to break even.

Someone knocked at the door.

It was the property owner. “Say, John, I just got word that you’re trying to raise money to buy this dump. There’s just one thing I’ve got to say to you.”

“What’s that?”

He stuck out his hand. “Thanks a heap. I’ve just doubled my asking my price. The casino people are getting back with me tomorrow. I think they’ll bite. That means this place is worth half a million bucks. Thanks a lot, buddy. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

Finally, the big night arrived. Twelve people took the dare; ten guys and two women. Social media called them “The Demon Dozen.” It looked like they were moving in. John had never seen so much junk before. There were floodlights, cameras, laptops, cables, generators, microphones, and a menagerie of scientific equipment. He wished he could call the whole thing off. The gang was in way over their heads. It was like lambs to the slaughter. They just tapped into the new millennium’s version of the *Ghostbusters*.

It was a long night. John was right. It *was* like lambs to the slaughter.

Robins sang beautifully the next morning. The last police cruiser left an hour ago. Sunlight flooded the eastern windows of the abandoned rest home. Sandra, Patrick, and Bernadette sat morosely around the battered kitchen table. John closed his cell phone. Around them broken cameras and burned out equipment lay everywhere. It looked like the day after a frat party, except for no beer cans. It was 7:30. John was the only soul in the house. Living, that is.

“The good news is they’re all alive,” he said. “Two are actually lucid. The rest are in ‘acute psychosis due to trauma’. With drugs and long-term therapy, most should be OK.”

"I don't get it," said Sandra. "We did our scariest stuff right at first. By eleven o'clock we were all played out." Both Patrick and Bernadette nodded.

"I know. I recorded it." John smiled ruefully. "Patrick, you came bursting out of the wall, completely engulfed in flames, screaming bloody murder. Everyone was spellbound. The flames died. Your skeleton shattered. Then your skull came up and you said, 'What'd you think?' It ruined the effect."

"They clapped. It felt great." Patrick said.

John turned to Sandra. "Yours had nice touches; chainsaws for arms, cutting hunks of flesh off yourself. Great stuff. You should have gone after the audience."

"I couldn't do that. I'm not that kind of person." Sandra looked offended.

"You're not a person. You're a ghost. You should have gone after them. What you did was just a show. And speaking of shows." John turned to Bernadette. "This should have been a bachelor party. You rose up out of the floor ... naked? Let's see ... eyes bleeding ... dripping fangs ... tongue action was a bit questionable ... but, really, snakes? ... down there? Were you trying to scare them or turn them on?"

"One guy gave me his card. I took it as a complement." Bernadette beamed.

"So, let's cut to the chase." Sandra said, "We were in different parts of the house like you told us to be. We did our bit. We failed miserably. After awhile everyone took out their little phone boxes and started talking to each other. Other people fiddled with their cameras and machines. They were more interested in their stuff than they were in us. They came here for *us*, and they weren't paying attention."

"What did you do?" John leaned forward.

"It ticked me off. I got into one of their little boxes and gave a guy a piece of my mind. At first, he laughed at me. Then he told me to get off. Finally, he hung up on me."

"Go on," John said. "What did you do then?"

"I called him back. He didn't like that. He did something to turn his box off completely.

"And?"

"And I turned it back on again. I yelled at him. I told him not to ignore me. It must have been a cheap phone. It melted in his hand. Then he started screaming. I hate wimpy men. Of course, using that *Exorcist* voice may have had something to do with it."

"That's when I joined in the fun. I decided to call guys too, but I was a lot nicer about it than Sandy." Bernadette shrugged, batting innocent eyes.

"Guys don't talk to guys," said Patrick. "So I checked out the equipment. I had no idea it would blow up so easily. It was like a chain reaction."

Sandra sighed, "That's about the time the panic started."

Bernadette shook her head. "I know. Things were going so well. I was having a wonderful conversation with a really cute guy. It's too bad the phone melted into his head. I wonder if the hospital will let me visit him."

Somebody knocked. "Disappear guys," said John. He went to answer.

"Hello, John Peterson? I represent the casino development group. We have an offer for you to consider. You and your friends."

"My friends? I live here alone."

"We can be grown ups, Mr. Peterson. I'm referring to the ghosts." The man looked up. "Come out. This concerns you as well."

Slowly Sandra, Patrick and Bernadette appeared behind John.

The lawyer withdrew a contract from his briefcase. "First of all, the bad news. You must return all the money you acquired from last night's enterprise, or you will be sued. Our firm will offer to

work *pro bono* on any civil cases filed against you. You will be in court for years. Or ... you can work for us.”

He pointed to the contract. “The casino assumes you will be haunting the facility once operations are underway. Therefore, we would like to employ your services on retainer. Mr. Peterson, you will act as contratee. We will designate what guestrooms your crew is to ‘preoccupy’, and the duration. I leave the severity of the ‘pre-occupation’ to you. Sign now and there will be a lucrative bonus. You have up to 48 hours to modify the contract within reason.”

“I don’t know,” John said, “I’d feel better thinking about it.”

Sandra read the contract as the men talked. “Sign it,” she whispered.

The lawyer held out his pen. “That’s the spirit.”

With the lawyer gone, John turned to Sandra. “I never thought you’d cave for something like that. What gives?”

“I got a new scheme. We can buy this house, and have it moved somewhere else. Tell them to add that to the contract. Saving the house was the whole idea in the first place.”

“And the scheme?” John asked, regretting.

“We’re robbing the casino. I saw this movie, see, when I was alive. It had Frank Sinatra. All we need are eleven bodies. Real bodies. Like zombies.”

John’s jaw dropped. “OK. We save the house. We don’t need another crazy plan. Besides, where are you going to find zombies?”

Sandra smiled. “Good point.”

“I’m glad that’s settled. Now, I need some sleep.”

John made it as far as the kitchen door before Sandra jumped up pacing. “I’ve got it. We’ll have eleven ghosts dressed like zombies. John? John? Where’d he go?”

“He ran to his room,” Patrick said.

Bernadette sighed, “I think you scared him.”

**Adult Division  
Short Fiction**

**Second Place**

*Crying for Donna*, by Dennis E. Smirl

“Doc, do you ever wonder why things turn out the way they do?”

“Constantly. So what are you wondering about today?”

“I’m not sure,” Jack Markham said as he settled into the leather recliner across from my desk. “Lots of things. You know. Just things.”

“Okay.” I sat quietly, giving him my undivided attention. Markham was fifty-two years old, and a fit 190 pounds stretched over a 6’ 1” frame. Gray-haired, ruddy, and stylish, he was dressed in an expensive black polo shirt, dark trousers, and wearing black loafers that looked comfortable and pricey. I knew he was a successful lawyer, and I’d noticed he carried an ornate ebony cane and walked with a pronounced limp. After three rather unproductive sessions, it was something we hadn’t talked about.

When the silence had gone on long enough, I asked, “What would you like to talk about today?”

“I may be getting married in July.”

“Oh?”

“We’re engaged,” he said. “I hope...” he sighed and closed down.

“You’ve never been married.” That was in the personal data form he’d filled out before he started therapy.

“I was engaged once. A very long time ago.”

“But you didn’t make it to the altar.”

“No.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” He rubbed his eyes. “It was *such* a long time ago.”

“But you still think about it.”

He nodded. “There were so many pressures back then. It was tough.”

“A bad time.”

“The worst time in my life.”

“Go on,” I said, gently.

“Yes. Maybe I need to.” His eyes glistened and I considered offering him a tissue, but chose instead to sit quietly and listen.

“Linda and I were thought to be the ideal couple. Both our families agreed. She was beautiful, I was handsome and promising. Our future was set. We would have had a big white house on a hill with two beautiful, well-mannered children and a large, friendly dog. Eventually, I would have been elected governor of our lovely state.”

“A perfect life,” I said. “Completely planned.”

“Yes. And how could I not love Linda? She was tall, and slim, and beautiful, and talented, and smart. Everyone told me I was the luckiest guy in the world.”

“You weren’t so sure.”

“Actually, I thought I was. People told me I’d snagged the gold ring. My future was guaranteed, just waiting for me to reap the spoils of a privileged upbringing and a perfect life.”

“But it didn’t work out that way.”

“No. The summer after I graduated, and before I entered Law School, Linda went to Europe for a year. Her parents said it would be a perfect interlude between her junior and senior years. It would broaden her education, and her horizons—endow her with yet another layer of sophistication.”

“You were engaged by then.”

“Yes.” He rubbed his temples with the heels of his hands. “We were supposed to be sufficiently mature to endure a year’s separation. It would be good for my character, and hers, to be apart for a while.”

“That wasn’t something that made you happy.”

He scoffed. “What surprised me was that it didn’t make me *unhappy*. Maybe I should have caught on, but I didn’t. Our families insisted that I loved Linda and that she loved me, and that a year’s separation would allow our love to grow and mature.”

“And you believed them.”

He looked at the ceiling for a few moments. “No, but I bought into the fiction. Honestly, once she was in Europe, I wasn’t lonely. Instead, I felt... like I could breathe.”

“You were free.”

“Yes. Linda was just so... so competent. No, that’s the wrong word. She was so damned *excellent*. After a while, being around someone that perfect... I don’t know. I have no idea what I was feeling once she was gone, other than... relieved.”

“Did you talk with anyone about what you were feeling?”

“Who would I have talked to?” He looked rueful and then stared at his shoes. “All my friends graduated with me, and they went elsewhere for the summer. Law School didn’t start until September. I didn’t have to work because I had a trust fund from my grandfather, and I had nothing to do but entertain myself.”

“What about your parents?”

“They were too busy planning my future to listen to my concerns.”

“And so you entertained yourself.”

“One Saturday night I went to see a play. I don’t remember its name but it was at the University’s ‘Tent on the Green’ outdoor theatre. What I do remember is that the University had flown in an actor from New York to play the lead, and the production was so wonderful that I sat for a while, after it was over, just thinking about what I’d seen. That’s when I saw her.”

“Someone new.”

He nodded. “She’d played a small part and came out of the changing tent before any of the other actors. We saw each other when we were about forty feet apart, and the next thing I knew, we were talking. I told her how much I’d enjoyed the play, and then I asked her if she’d had dinner. She said she hadn’t—that she never ate before a performance—and that she was famished. So, we went to a restaurant that was open until midnight.”

“You were engaged, but you asked a girl for a date. What were you feeling at the time?”

He looked away and sighed. “Certainly not guilty. Maybe a little less lonely. I was just puzzled by my behavior. Here I was, set to marry a blonde, blue-eyed goddess, and yet I was taking a dark, pug-nosed, almost tomboyish young woman out for a late dinner.”

“What happened?”

He sighed deeply. “It was great. We stayed until I was sure the owner was going to ask us to leave, and then I offered to drive her to her dorm. She asked why I was trying to get rid of her so early. I thought about it for a moment. Then I told her I was engaged to be married and that I didn’t like deceit.

“She was cool with that, and I took the long way back to campus so we could talk more as I drove. When we got to her dorm, she told me she had a bigger part in their next play, and suggested I make time to see it. I walked her to the door, she went inside, and I drove back to my apartment. It was all so innocent.

“A week later, I went to see the next play. It was a French farce, with lots of doors opening and closing and people running around from bedroom to bedroom—and she did have a much bigger role.”

“Had you been thinking about her?”

“Honestly, I couldn’t get her out of my mind. That bothered me.”

“Did you feel guilty?”

“No. Just... puzzled.”

“What was her name?”

His hands shook noticeably and it took him a moment to get his breath. “Donna... Donna Reynolds.”

“Go on.”

“I hung around after the play. She came out of the dressing tent, and I told her I remembered that she never ate before a play and that I figured she was starving. We went to the same restaurant, and we stayed until closing time. But that time it was different. We both knew I wasn’t going to take her back to her dorm.”

“What were you feeling then?”

“Happiness. And still, not one shred of guilt. I knew my life had changed direction, and that I’d have to deal with the repercussions of that change.” He stopped, and then asked me for a bottle of water. I got it for him, and he continued, “We went back to my apartment, and talked for a while, and... and then we went to bed.”

“Yet you still weren’t guilty.”

“Not a bit.”

“Had you been intimate with your fiancé?”

He looked surprised. “Yes. Several times. And every time we talked about how much we both wanted to have children. Anyway, the sex with Donna wasn’t as good. She was unsure of herself, and maybe she was trying too hard, but... I didn’t care. Doc, would it make any sense if I told you I looked in her eyes and saw love?”

“It only needs to make sense to you.”

He appeared to think about that for a moment. “Okay, I get it. Anyway, I realized that I had never been in love—not until then. I looked into her eyes—I *fell* into her eyes—and made contact with another human being in a way I’d never before experienced—never *thought* I could experience. And at that moment, I thought my heart would hammer its way right out of my chest.

“We spent several days together. When she wasn’t in rehearsal, she was with me, and I have never laughed so hard, felt so good, loved with such insane intensity... For that one short time in my life, I was truly, desperately, madly in love.”

“But you didn’t marry her.”

He reached over and took a tissue. His eyes were leaking. “I’d picked her up after a performance, we were on our way to a different restaurant for yet another late-night dinner, and a drunk driver ran a stop sign and slammed into her side of my car. Donna died instantly. I was in a coma for three weeks.”

“And then you woke up.”

“Yes, and Mother had prepared a speech for me. She said my cheap little harlot was dead, and that both sets of parents were deeply and profoundly disappointed in my unseemly, immature, and boorish behavior. She handed me a package postmarked from France. It contained Linda’s engagement ring. I looked at it for a moment, and then tossed it in the waste can near my bed. Mother walked out of my hospital room and we never spoke again.”

“Your choice or hers?”

He looked away for a moment. “Hers.”

“And your father?”

“Dad sided with Mom.”

“You had other problems from the accident.”

He smiled slightly. “You’ve noticed my limp.”

“I have.”

Cocking his head slightly to the right, he asked, “Do you mind if I cry for a while?”

“No.”

He sobbed for a minute or so, and then let it all out. After a while, he stopped, wiped away the tears, and said, “I’ve never really cried for her before.”

“For Donna?”

“No. For my mother. She wouldn’t accept the fact that I wasn’t obedient—that I couldn’t be faithful to the young woman both families had selected for me—and she died hating me for my weakness. She cheated me, and she cheated herself. I didn’t attend her funeral—or Dad’s. I haven’t visited their graves, and I never will.”

“Have you cried for Donna?”

“Yes. And I still do.” He glanced at his watch, smiled, and pushed himself up from the recliner. “Hey, our time’s up, but that’s usually your line, isn’t it?”

“Next week?”

He paused. “No. I’m going to be busy with all the arrangements and preparations.”

“Later, maybe.”

He shrugged and made his exit.

Over the next few weeks, I thought about Jack Markham several times. He’d started the session unsure about his wedding plans and finished it telling me how busy he would be with all the arrangements. Had there been progress in the session, or did he just quit me in a nice way?

Then as I glanced through the newspaper one Saturday morning in late July, an article in the society section caught my eye. Accompanying it was a photo of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Markham. I scanned the article. Markham had taken early retirement and he and his new bride were relocating to Australia, where they planned to fish and swim inside the Great Barrier Reef. She looked beautiful; he looked happy.

Maybe he’d stopped crying for Donna.

**END**

## Adult Division Short Fiction

### Third Place

*Papa's Watch*, by Byron Fokerts

Driving east that morning, the sun glared directly into my eyes. I was Icarus flying toward the sun. *Would I dare to get close enough to melt my wings?* Like Icarus, my father had given me wings – wings to escape. It was my father's death that gave me those wings, and after graduation, I did escape.

I had agreed to spend that weekend with my mother at my grandparent's farm. As my truck crept into the familiar drive, I noticed how everything looked the same, just fresher leaves on the trees. I parked behind the house and shuffled my way to the back door.

A high-pitched squeak on the screen door announced my arrival. Mom and grandma were sitting at the kitchen table sharing conversation and coffee. Grandma's tiny hands hugged the cup as if trying to keep warm.

"Gina, you made it."

"Yes, mother. I made it," I said in a noticeably unfriendly tone.

"How was the drive?" she asked.

"It was fine," I replied, trying to sound a little more polite. "Hi, Grandma. How have you been?"

Grandma's eyes twinkled as she smiled up at me. "I've been just peachy, Gina," she said. Grandma was always peachy. I smiled back.

"Where's grandpa?" I asked, more as a courtesy than a care or concern. While I enjoyed time with grandma, I never felt comfortable around grandpa. Although he was my father's father, he and my dad never got along very well. I could tell in the silence they shared when we were together. It was a silence that I inherited when I was around my grandpa.

"He's outside," grandma said. "He'll be right in."

Through the kitchen window, I saw grandpa walking towards the house. He was a big man, but his appearance seemed a little more fragile than what I remembered.

"There's my Gina girl," he said as he walked through the door.

"Hi, Grandpa. You can call me Gina now. I'm not ten anymore," I said, noticing that I had just reverted to my unfriendly self.

"And you can just call me Papa," he replied.

"OK, Papa." I complied hoping the polite Gina might resurface.

"How about a fish, Gina?"

That was grandpa's way of inviting me to go fishing with him, and while two days at the farm didn't excite me, fishing would help.

"That sounds great." "Papa." I added.

"I'll get the gear all ready," said grandpa.

"And I'll fix you a quick lunch to take with you," said grandma.

Grandpa stepped out to the barn while grandma started fixing sandwiches by the sink. She stepped down to the cellar saying that she was going for fresh preserves.

Mom gave me that look. "It wouldn't hurt you to be a little nicer, Gina," she said.

"I'm going fishing, aren't I?"

"You know what I mean," she replied.

I stared back.

"It was your idea to come here, mom," I whispered. "And here I am. I'll be nice."

We heard grandma's shoes click against the wooden steps as she came back up to the kitchen. Mom finished her warning with a solemn glare.

*Oh, Icarus! Where are my wings?* I thought.

Grandma handed the lunch sack to me and I thanked her as I escaped out the back door. Grandpa was at the side of the barn spading worms.

"I think we're ready," he said.

"Good," I replied, avoiding the word grandpa or Papa in my response.

We grabbed the gear and walked through a small pasture towards a wooded area that hugged the river. I noticed a gray wall of cloud approaching as we snaked our way through the trees and down to the river bank. It was a trail that I knew well. My father and I had fished here many times when I was much younger. It brought back good memories.

We sat on a grassy slope as it started to shade. Grandpa baited the hooks and I could smell the rich soil in the can with worms. We cast our lines in opposite directions.

"How are things going for you, Gina?" grandpa asked.

"It's OK. You know," I said.

I watched him as he looked out over the river. We sat there for a long time. The breeze picked up and new leaves rustled in nearby trees around us. I knew it wasn't the right time. I knew it wasn't the right place or even perhaps the appropriate thing to do. I also knew that I wasn't always one for being appropriate, but I decided to ask, anyway.

"Whatever happened between you and daddy?"

He glanced at me. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Why didn't you and dad ever get along?"

Grandpa looked back to the river as if expecting the answer to go floating by. His hand reached up to an old chain that connected one of his overall buttons to a pocket watch. He pulled out an old tarnished timepiece that I had seen on him many times before. He sat there staring at it. Finally, he opened it.

"How about we eat your grandma's lunch first?"

"I'm not really hungry - Papa," I said, with what sounded like more rub than affection.

Grandpa unhooked the chain from his button and placed the watch and chain carefully into my hand. I had never actually held it before. It was worn and fragile. I clicked it open. The watch face had a jaundiced shade with a second hand that drug as if burdened by some unseen weight.

"OK. I'll tell you about me and your dad," he said. Grandpa leaned forward and looked out over the river.

"Gina girl," he began, "when your father was born, I felt like a new man. Your grandma and I had only been married two years when he came along. And we were new to the farm here." He paused and I noticed the sky continue to darken. He reached for the poles and brought in the lines.

"What say we finish this talk later?" he said.

"No, grandpa. I need to know," I said. "Please."

We sat for a while as he thought.

“A baby changes things,” he continued, setting down the poles. “On the day your daddy was born, my father gave me that pocket watch. On the front he engraved your daddy’s initials. On the back, he engraved my initials. They’re pretty well worn down now, but they’re still there.”

I pulled the watch up to my face and studied the covers. I could just make out the JAK on the front and the KBK on the back. I hadn’t noticed them when he handed the watch to me, but they were there. My hands gently closed around the watch and my eyes returned to grandpa. His face was drawn as he searched the river for his story.

“My father told me that my initials were on the back because he knew that I would always be there to back your daddy up.” His voice softened and seemed to break. “I never forgot that,” he said.

We both sat quietly. The river continued to drain past us. The breeze continued to stir dancing leaves. And the clouds threatened overhead.

“A baby just changes things,” he said. “Your daddy sure changed me.” I heard him sigh. “I felt like it was up to me to protect him. To shelter him from harm. I can’t really explain it, but I felt like I had to make everything right. I had to watch over him, so nothing bad would ever happen. I was standing guard. It was my watch.”

He paused as I listened.

“I feel like I let him down.”

“How, grandpa?”

He sat quiet. It seemed forever.

“I was so proud of your dad,” he continued. “I never told him, but I was. He was just so headstrong, always doing the opposite of what he was told. I just couldn’t understand why he didn’t want to live the life that I had mapped out for him.” Grandpa shook his head. “Isn’t that something? The way I constantly tried to run his life.”

I sat there quietly, caressing the watch in my hands. Grandpa slowly stood and glanced over at me.

“Gina girl, what did your mother tell you about your dad’s accident?”

I looked down and thought. “Just that he was killed by a drunk driver. That he died instantly,” I said, looking back up at him.

“And that’s the truth,” he said. “But, there’s more.” He turned his back to me as if he didn’t want me to hear. “You were just a little girl. Your daddy stopped by the farm to talk about something. We got into another one of our arguments. Then he just left.”

Grandpa stopped. I listened to nothingness.

“He left angry. That was the last time I saw him.” Grandpa tried choking back the cry.

I stood and reached for grandpa’s arm. He turned and I saw the tears in his eyes. I hugged him as I felt myself start to cry. His big bear hug suddenly went frail as he fell through my arms. He lay motionless on the ground.

“Grandpa.”

“Grandpa!”

“Papa!!”

I knelt beside him and leaned over to listen for his breath. The wind continued to pick up and swirled the branches under now thick clouds. There was no breath to be heard.

I panicked and raced back to the house crying and yelling for help. Grandma and mom came out and I told them about grandpa. As mom assisted grandpa to the river, I phoned for help.

The ambulance arrived as I was pacing the driveway. Two paramedics followed me to the river just as the first sprinkles hit, cold and icy against my salted cheeks. We got to grandpa. Grandma was crying and bent over him. Mom and I helped her to her feet. The EMTs hurried to

grandpa and checked for a pulse. One began to pump his heart with the palms of his hands. One proceeded to do mouth-to-mouth.

I held onto grandma as she cried. As I cried.

They checked again for a pulse. “We need to get him to the hospital – Now!” the heart pumper said. They placed grandpa on a stretcher and raced him back to the ambulance. We followed them to the hospital in mother’s car. When we arrived, grandpa was taken to Emergency. We waited in a side room.

Through a large plate glass window, I could see the world outside had turned dark and cold. The sleet continued and laid claim to the corners of the window.

I had never been very good at prayer, but I looked out and I prayed. I prayed through the ice. I prayed through the wind. I prayed through whatever stood between me and God. *Help my grandpa. Please, Please, Please. Help my Papa!*

We waited.

And we waited.

I looked out as the sleet warmed to a soft rain. The wind let up and there was a sense of calm.

A long white coat approached us. I saw everything in his eyes. A voice said, “I’m very sorry. We were unable to help him.”

We stood there. Stunned. It was as if time had stopped. The earth didn’t rotate. The clocks didn’t tick. And like Icarus with melted wings, I fell to earth to drown – drown in my sorrow.

I fell to my knees and sobbed. “Oh, Papa. I’m so sorry,” I mumbled. My mother and grandma cried as they dropped beside me, holding me from each side. They helped me up and we went to a couch. I wept in my mother’s lap as she smoothed my hair with her fingers. She held my fisted hand.

“What are you holding, Gina?” she asked.

My palm opened and I saw that I still had his pocket watch. Papa’s watch. I opened it to see that the time had stopped while we were back there on the river bank.

And I cried.

## Adult Division Short Fiction

### Honorable Mention

*Storms at the Stockyards*, by Amy Hadachek

“Large destructive hail, damaging winds up to 70 miles an hour, and a few tornadoes are all possible today,” squawked the all-hazards weather radio; a constant reminder of the Tornado Watch in effect until sunset. One glance upward confirmed the sky was taking on eerily ominous cloud formations.

However, there was little time for weather-watching today. It was Tuesday; the widely-heralded cattle sale day across the Texas Panhandle. No one looked forward more enthusiastically to this day of the week, than Tyler Anderson; a well-respected cattle breeder of prized Texas longhorns. The tall ruggedly-handsome “Ty,” as he was known to his rodeo buddies, was “cowboyed-up,” from his beige felt cowboy hat dipping low near coal grey eyes, down to his black ostrich boots.

“Ya got ‘em all loaded up?” Ty yelled over the loud running diesel 18-wheeler.

“Yes sir. All thirty-six walked the ramp,” counted ranch hand Geronimo Juh, smiling proudly behind the steering wheel of the steel cattle hauler. Geronimo, his jet black shoulder-length hair matching dark soulful eyes, was named after the Apache war leader, who surrendered to General Nelson A. Miles near Mexico, September 4, 1886. It was a new beginning for white settlers in the Southwest, but a bitter exile for the Indians. Geronimo, proud of his Native American hard-fought heritage often told that story while unloading the longhorns; their impressive horn spread averaging 40 to 65 inches.

Ty leaped onto the truck’s step bar and up into the cab; simultaneously slamming the huge truck door, as they hunkered down for the two hour drive to the Stockyards.

“Got any new jokes, Geronimo?” Ty packed a dip of chewing tobacco inside his gum.

“Huh boss?” Geronimo was eyeing the sky, as much as he was watching the road. “Look at that turquoise-green sky back there. Somebody’s getting a big hailstorm,” exclaimed Geronimo. Indeed, the volatile West Texas sky was already offering its own reality show. With few trees to block visibility, the panoramic view offered rapidly climbing towering thunderstorms. Ty sighed, and sat back again, anticipating an exciting day at the sale barn, but he’d never imagine that the stormy night ahead would produce more turbulence than just dangerous twisters.

The parking lot was nearly full when Ty and Geronimo arrived at the Stockyards. Ty, a Stockyards faithful, who helped his grandfather Jacob Tyler Anderson transport Herefords to the sale barn when he was just nine years old, was obviously a regular. Upon arrival, Ty was flanked by fellow cowboys.

“Hey Geronimo, you texting a babe on your cell phone, while driving or something?” teased Houston LeFors, #4-ranked National Finals Rodeo bull rider of the year. “Thought y’all would never get here.”

Then the Mayor chimed in. “Well Ty, did you forget you needed diesel, ‘sted of unleaded” Potter McCoy joked. In addition to being the Mayor of Maude, a nearby town of 2,000 McCoy also owned the largest feedlot in the Panhandle. Geronimo just shook his thick dark straight hair, heaved open the huge cattle truck, and began the unloading process.

“Oh Mr. Mayor, we made it just fine sir,” Ty, in courtesy, took off his trademark custom-made cowboy hat, and extended a hand to the Mayor. “But this is no ordinary sale day for us. We’re selling some of the longhorns,” he relayed to stunned cowboys.

After registering his steers inside the stockyards office, Ty settled into his regular stadium seat and nodded to Geronimo. Outside at the pens, Geronimo was easy to spot; his wrangler jeans tucked inside bright orange knee-high cowboy boots; complete with spurs. Geronimo’s heartthrob, Sonsee-array Bleu, the striking great-granddaughter of an Apache Chief, had also joined Geronimo outside; while home on vacation from her studies at the University in

Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

Ty felt a tap on the shoulder, and turned around. “You’re not really selling your longhorns, are ya?” drawled well-known Angus breeder Al Goodnight.

Ty looked into widened eyes. “Yes sir, times are changing, and I need to as well.” Ty sensed several pairs of eyes staring right through him. He closed his eyes for a moment; wishing folks wouldn’t tarry in his business.

Ty’s longhorns sold faster than Amarillo lightning. He was pleased with the price, and noticed a text on his cell phone from Geronimo. “All went great. Sonsee and I are next-door having a beer.” Ty swallowed the rest of his coffee, and leaned back to continue watching the sale of his buddies’ livestock.

Suddenly, an earsplitting clap of thunder rocked the auction barn. Even the auctioneer paused briefly, then continued; rapidly rolling his sentences, as hands rose offering cattle bids. The thunder became more frequent, raindrops pounded the roof, then, cussing was heard, as hailstones pounded the windows with a vengeance.

And then, a piercing radio alert tone.

“*A Tornado Warning is now in effect for the next hour,*” declared the voice on the weather radio, transmitted over the loud speaker. “*Trained storm spotters report a tornado 11 miles Southwest of Maude, moving northeast at 25 miles an hour.*”

Ty’s buddy, Houston rushed over. “Ty, that’s us. The twister is coming!” he exclaimed. Ty did the math. If it held together, the tornado would be at the Stockyards in a half hour. They raced next-door to find Geronimo.

Blinding bolts of cloud-to-ground lightning strikes were a rude greeting when they flung open the auction barn door to leave. Ty realized the storm was getting closer, as thunder became more frequent, and the sky had morphed into that gut-wrenching turquoise-green color; promising a more violent hailstorm. And, that tornado was barreling out there somewhere, heading in their direction.

Meanwhile, a fight had also broken out in the parking lot, and shockingly, several cows were roaming freely toward the street, in the pouring rain. As Ty and Houston guardedly approached the crowd, Ty noticed water flowing downstream with blood mixed in, circling around his boots. He saw Sonsee-array sitting on the asphalt, shaking in the drenching rain as she leaned over to comfort someone.

“Oh God, don’t let it be...” Ty prayed. “But if it is Geronimo,” he continued, “Please let him be okay.” His second prayer was answered. Geronimo looked like he’d been at the losing end of a fist fight, with a black eye and his long jet black hair soaked around his face. After Ty and Houston carefully helped Geronimo up, he winced as he walked.

“Where’s the blood coming from?” Ty asked Sonsee-array, as she dabbed Geronimo’s bloody forehead with a wet paper towel.

“Oh Mr. Anderson,” she gasped. “Geronimo tried to stop that bad man from stealing the longhorns.” Ty’s face froze, and his eyebrows went up. She continued, “Geronimo got beaten up pretty badly, but he’s okay. He’s mainly upset about the longhorns.”

“But I already sold the longhorns,” Ty explained. “A man named Lee Matthews bought ‘em.”

Sonsee-array cried, “Mr. Anderson, two steers were shot. Geronimo tried to save them, and that’s why he has blood on his clothes, from the longhorns. I don’t think that man meant to shoot them, but when he got caught stealing them, he panicked.”

“Boss, we were next-door, in the saloon,” Geronimo interjected. “A man named Rock Chambers was drinking heavily, and when Lee Matthews walked in, Rock started buying him shots of whiskey.”

Geronimo grimaced in pain, continuing, “We heard Rock. He kept asking Lee about the longhorns he bought. Rock knew they were worth a great deal. They both got pretty drunk. Next thing we knew, Rock and another guy were outside at the pens, arguing with the foreman. It got rough.”

Ty filled in the blanks. “That’s when they stole the longhorns.”

Geronimo looked downcast.

“Geronimo, you’re the best employee...I mean best friend anyone could ever have!” Ty declared. “I know you loved those animals we just sold, as if they were your own.” Ty had to choke back his own emotions now. “I’m just happy that you’re okay, G.”

As lightning bolts flashed in the distance, and quarter-sized hail unleashed in the Stockyards parking lot, it was a moment in time, as Ty, Geronimo and Sonsee-array looked at each other, and, suddenly it was hard to tell the tears from the rain.

A piercing tornado siren broke the moment, and the crowd fled the vulnerable parking lot for safe shelter. That is, everyone except Ty, Geronimo, Sonsee-array, Houston and the Mayor.

“Ty, y’all gotta get outta here,” ordered Mayor McCoy. “You aren’t safe. That twister is minutes away!”

“Well then sir, we have just minutes to get this job done,” insisted a stubborn Ty, as Geronimo and he grabbed cattle prods; hurriedly steering the roaming cows back into their pens.

Geronimo lifted back a wave of thick wet hair; and watched a Sheriff’s cruiser screech into the parking lot; warning lights flashing. Ty approached the two deputies.

“We don’t have much time,” an officer yelled over the tornado siren screaming in the night. “That tornado has already overturned mobile homes 11 miles southwest of here!”

“Man, that’s when the warning came out,” Ty calculated. “Good thing we got those weather radios.”

Suddenly, the funnel-shaped cloud was unmistakable; spectacularly illuminated by the vivid lightning. Ear-splitting thunder vibrated the ground, and the rain pushed out in torrents.

“There’s no storm shelter here, and there are too many lights swaying in the wide-span sale barn,” Ty yelled over the storm’s volume. “Quick, let’s get everyone to safety.”

“Listen here,” barked Mayor McCoy. “That southwest-facing café isn’t safe, since most tornadoes typically come from the southwest. Everybody get inside the bathroom now,” he ordered.

After what seemed like forever, suddenly a stark peacefulness descended upon the bathroom’s occupants.

Ty shoved the door open, and the cowboys climbed over piles of branches and pieces of the roof’s shingles.

Ty heard Lee Matthews providing evidence to sheriff’s deputies.

“Geronimo, you are a godsend,” Ty heard Matthews say. “You risked your life to save the longhorns, even though I’d bought them, by then,” Matthews added. “I’ve been dealing with a drinking issue, and never should’ve accepted those free drinks. Man, I am sorry.”

“I forgive you Mr. Matthews,” Geronimo quickly responded, and dashed off. Matthews raised his eyebrows, and followed Geronimo to a place where two hurt longhorns lay underneath a metal overhang.

“Oh Lord, no,” gasped Matthews. “I had no idea!”

“Hurry, let’s do this together,” instructed Geronimo, still wearing blood-soaked clothes. The four men, including Ty and the Mayor quickly attached a long cattle rope to a western-style saddle, and pulled the heavy longhorns out of the rain. Each wanted to spend the last minutes, with the precious animals.

However, it wasn’t just the animals lying in the parking lot. Rock was face down, next to an overturned truck. Geronimo jumped into action, and began providing CPR to Rock.

When paramedics arrived, and Rock was loaded onto a stretcher, he muttered, “Sorry man,” to Geronimo. Inside the ambulance, the liquor was wearing off, and Rock started to shake, mumbling about the danger he caused.

Two weeks later at the Tri-State Fair, Geronimo was whistling while unloading the 18-wheeler full of longhorns. A young cowboy eagerly watched Geronimo, as he paired-up the spectacular animals for a cattle drive.

“You are cool,” the boy squinted at Geronimo.

“No, these longhorns are the cool ones,” responded Geronimo.

“No, I mean you are cool. You saved my Uncle Rock’s life in a tornado last month. That’s how I knew your name.”

“Is that so?” Geronimo raised one eyebrow. “Well,” he said, crouching down to become eye-level with the boy.

“Let me also tell you the story of how I got my name.”

## Adult Division Short Fiction

### Honorable Mention

*Musings at the End of the World*, by William Brian Johnson

After a bleak economy, several wars, and politics corrupted everything, we needed a zombie apocalypse to cull the herd. We were not ready for the entire planet to die, but Doomsday happened. My name is Joe and I am a survivor.

An asteroid lazed in Mars/Jupiter orbit and gravity flung it at a planet teeming with life. NASA first realized it was inbound. The tax dollars that funded someone's science fiction wet dream calculated our doom down to a millisecond.

The world's military went on alert and their leaders went to Geneva. Talking heads started covering the stories of their now shortened lifetimes. Congress blamed Senate on inaction, Fox News blamed the President, MSNBC called out Congress for cuts on military spending, and TMZ reported that Charlie Sheen scheduled an apocalypse party with a real virgin sacrifice. Within a day, the news stopped their spin, and most reverted to a countdown clock, except for TMZ that reported that the DEA, FBI, and ATF raided Charlie Sheen's house.

Movies made us believe the impossible. As news crept from Geneva, we discovered there were no oil-drillers ready to go up in a shuttle or space missiles at beck-and-call to save our collective asses. Humanity left their jobs, stores, wars, and went home to spend our last days with family and friends . . . except for me, the economy had left me jobless, without a woman, and put an eviction notice on my apartment. Luckily, the eviction was dated a day after the end. Credit cards still worked and the sole remaining open liquor store in driving distance loved me. I guzzled the best bourbon ever made and watched Ted Koppel come out of retirement to walk us into oblivion.

On Earth's last full day, I woke up slightly hungover to the morning local news. The two main anchors had left and the weatherman controlled the news desk. For years, he pointed at green screen as storms rolled by and made bad jokes. Today, instead of his silly sport coat and neon bowtie, he wore a coal black suit and gave a eulogy for the planet. The asteroid forecasted to hit about a thousand miles from us. As the weatherman signed off, he simply said "keep hope".

On the national news, physicists had replaced politicians. They were better than horror writers guesstimating our methods of death. Some said pressure waves would incinerate us before the asteroid hit the ground, others said the asteroid's velocity would rip away Earth's atmosphere on impact. They talked about the planet breaking apart and reforming in a million years. A smaller, lifeless Earth with twin moons could survive. Excitement irradiated in the physicists' eyes. Religious leaders replaced the science people and the excitement died. They begged for forgiveness, redemption, and credit cards. I turned off the TV and decided to join the doomed masses outside.

People milled about like a funeral precession. A book once said, never laugh on the way to the gallows; it makes people think you're insane. At this point in life, you could either die with a smile on your face or groveling on the ground. I wasn't quite skipping in the streets, but there is something about probable mass extinction that makes you not give a shit about life's commonality.

Life went back to personal experience for a lot of people. Unfortunately, extreme sport junkies were dying in droves . . . great awesome footage . . . but lots of fiery screaming death.

My last night on Earth, I stayed sober and climbed up the roof where a deck chair waited. The asteroid was going to hit at 6:48 pm the next day.

The city turned off the neighborhood's street lights, my guess was to let everyone see the stars one last time. The cosmic show made me wonder how long it had been since anyone looked up. I even forgot how the moon and stars looked under the blanket of the streetlight's old orange glow.

The asteroid appeared as a bright dot in the sky just to the left of the full moon. Once you looked at it, the eye would train back. The neighbor next door was checking it out with a telescope. He was yelling to whoever listened.

Dust had been flying off the moon all night. He had a couple ideas why, but none of it made sense to my common brain. Amber light flickered as moon dust hit the atmosphere and streaked like tiny meteorites.

As the night progressed, it got worse. The amount of dust hitting the atmosphere at times obscured the full moon. Occasionally, there were breaks in the atmospheric show and the neighbor yelled something about a crack forming on the moon. I looked up straining to see. For a brief moment, the sky cleared and the moon exploded like a fine china plate dropped on a tile floor. The neighbor tried to relay it all, but as things happened, more moon dust entered Earth's atmosphere.

I finally had my "we-are-gonna-die" moment. This really was the end. It took an oh-shit moment to realize it.

The neighbor yelled started yelling something incoherent as he looked through the telescope. "A monster just came out of the moon!" he yelled.

This neighbor was known for occasionally yelling at walls until the police showed up.

"It's got a squid head and the body of an iguana. I can see its eye's burning from here."

Stuck on the fact that the moon just exploded and we were next. I nodded at the guy, like a beat to a song, then looked up. In the depth of space, shining black, a new moon-like shadow drifted in front of the asteroid. Burning embers lit up the sky and stopped us from witnessing more. For a moment the neighborhood hushed and focused on the man with a telescope waiting for the next report.

"It's in front of the asteroid and something just exploded."

Something flashed like a far off supernova outshining the burning moon dust. I ended up going next door and getting up on the roof. He gave me the strangest smile and motioned to the telescope.

"Check it out, I think we're saved."

Damn if he wasn't right. Tentacles flowed out and grabbed large moon rocks keeping them from raining down on the Earth it just saved. Its giant red eye watched the earth while the other probably scanned for more threats from space.

I took a moment.

When I was ready to expose my brain to more, I noted the monster looked full and tired, floating in the darkness waiting for the next disaster to come. Apparently, cheap science fiction novels saved my life. The next neighbor that came up and looked, paused, then leapt from the roof.

We stopped the others from coming up. We all tried to describe what this could be, words failed.

The "Moon" passed us in the night sky as it had done eons before. We stayed on the roof, my insane neighbor and I. Each pointing and trying to talk, but in reality, far from ever completing a full sentence. Near dawn when the atmospheric dust slowed down, the shiny dark figure disappeared over the horizon as what we thought was our final sunrise, rose majestically behind us.

“Well, I’m getting evicted tomorrow, I guess I should go pack.”

“No, man. And miss the celebration of a lifetime. Live it like it’s your last day on Earth.”

I shook his hand and introduced myself.

“I’m Joe.”

“Call me Grover, man. Seriously, don’t bum out the moment. You can come live with me if you want.”

Life had always been interesting, but not a living with a schizophrenic wall-yelling neighbor-type of interesting.

“Thanks, but I got a place to go.”

“You don’t lie well, Joe. Take a seat and just relax for a while. Think like us inmates got a reprieve from the madness. We just realized there is something bigger than all of us here.”

I sat on the roof with Grover and watched the sun rise. Occasionally, the moon dust still hit the atmosphere and caused barely noticeable sparks in the day lit sky.

“We all live in one giant day-to-day illusion, Joe. It makes me wonder how much of this is real and how much is an H. P. Lovecraft type of an illusion?” Grover said and excused himself for a moment.

In his absence, I still had the mass hysteria feeling, like time was up. I waited a moment for Grover’s return then went back to my place.

At home, I turned on TV. None of the cable stations worked because the satellites were goofed up on moon dust. I rounded up a few boxes from the last move and halfheartedly dumped stuff into them. Still there was the feeling of overwhelming doom. Maybe it was survivor’s guilt from the one death in town.

I grabbed my keys and headed out. Grover was back up on his roof and invited me up.

“Gotta make a couple runs.”

“Stay close to home, Joe. News gets worse the further you go out.”

That stopped me for a moment.

“Nietzsche said ‘To live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering,’” Joe continued.

I drove away from Joe when he started talking about psychic powers and shared experiences.

“My brain is pushing out signals like wi-fi,” Joe called out as I drove down the street.

It made me laugh on a day I became homeless. Driving out of town, the radio didn’t work and the sky looked odd, like it was on fire. Maybe it was all the atmospheric moon dust.

I had a year pass to a local campsite. There was a great spot under a nice shade tree with a firepit that I would call home until I got back on my feet. In the twenty minutes it took to get there, the air became denser, harder to breathe, and noticeably warmer. The campground itself stood on the top of a hill that overlooked a valley. Hundreds of people had lined up on the top of the hill. Many held on to each other.

I arrived and moved through the sobbing, frightened masses. No one spoke, only stared off in the distance. A bright light stood out on a horizon that looked like it was on fire.

I recalled Grover’s words:

“How much of this is real and how much is an H. P. Lovecraft type of an illusion?”

A small blonde girl in the crowd looked at me with questioning tear-stained eyes.

“The news is only going to get worse, the further you get from home,” I said.

She reached up and took my hand.

I looked down at her took her hand and held it tight.

“My name is Joe, and I’m a survivor.”

Looking at her made me wish we were all under the psychic wi-fi that Grover put out. The gentle calming thought that we had survived this with the help of an intergalactic savior.

*My name is Joe and I am a survivor.*

I held that thought until the first pressure wave ripped through the valley.

The End

## Adult Division Non-Fiction

### First Place

*Welcome to Vietnam*, by Dennis E. Smirl

The red telephone rang.

I picked it up.

The voice on the other end said, “Scramble 802 for Major Richardson.”

“Copy.” I hung up. Seven pairs of eyes followed me as I sprinted for the door. “We’re scrambling 802! And Richardson’s flying tonight! Move it!”

My crew of mechanics followed my mad dash like a gaggle of overachieving Boy Scouts. Like me, they knew that somewhere within a radius of a hundred and fifty kilometers of our base, a platoon—or even a company—of American soldiers were engaged with the enemy, taking heavy rifle, rocket and mortar fire, yelling for aerial support—and every second counted.

I jumped into the driver’s seat of the dark blue Air Force van, started the engine, turned on the lights and siren, slammed the gearshift into low, and the moment the last airman was aboard, lurched away into the 2 A.M. darkness.

Our van had originally been equipped with a governor, set at a maximum of 45 MPH I’d been one of the miscreants involved in removing and hiding said governor. Unbridled, the van would do 58 MPH in top gear, and I was getting all of that as we hurtled over the tarmac, siren blaring and red light flashing, in the direction of our aircraft.

If Major Richardson hadn’t been flying that night, our behavior wouldn’t have been any different. When we got a ‘scramble’ order, we raced to the designated aircraft with all due haste. Sometimes, we beat the aircrew by several minutes.

But Major Richardson was not like other pilots. He was a warrior, not a bureaucrat, and when our ground-pounders needed help, he ignored the darkness and the weather and took the fight to the enemy with all due haste. Maybe that’s why I didn’t care for the other pilots as much. Typically, they would arrive at the aircraft in their own good time, spend what I felt was unnecessary time getting the aircraft ready for their little piece of the war, and eventually trundle off to the active runway to go fly and fight.

With Richardson, it was a lot different. The governor had also been removed from his van and watching his approach to his aircraft was enjoyably heart-stopping. He would race toward the airplane at maximum speed, stand on the brakes at the last moment, and when the vehicle was down to about 10 MPH, he’d yank the emergency brake, locking up the rear wheels and killing the engine, while he stepped out of the van, M-16 in hand, just before it came to a stop.

He’d sprint to the aircraft—a WWII vintage C-47 equipped with three mini-guns pointing out the left side of the fuselage—and take the steps into the cabin two at a time. My crew would already have the interior lights on inside the aircraft, and I would see him run through the cabin, stow his rifle in its rack without breaking stride, and start the right-hand engine before ever sitting in the pilot’s seat.

All the while, with lighted wands in hand, I'd be hurrying out to a spot 40 meters in front of the airplane, maintaining eye contact with my idol as he continued bringing the vintage aircraft to life. Once ready to leave the revetment—usually after less than ninety seconds of getting his engines started—he would motion to me by putting his fists together, thumbs out, and then quickly moving his fists away from each other. I'd wave my wands to tell two members of my launch crew to remove the wooden chocks. As soon as I gave him the signal that he was clear to taxi, Richardson would advance the throttles, and the 27,000 pound airplane would start moving my way.

At a certain point, the aircraft would be clear of the revetment. I would extend my left wand and cross the right wand over my chest, signaling the Major that he could make a ninety-degree turn to the right. Most times, as my launch crew and I watched his airplane taxi into the darkness, we'd lean against the van or the revetment wall, grin and breathe a sigh of relief, and maybe even high-five a little, having enjoyed our quota of excitement for the night.

That night in February, 1969, however, our local insurgents decided to add to the fun. Just as Richardson's aircraft started moving toward me, mortar rounds began dropping in like so much rain.

I was terrified and all I wanted to do was drop to the pavement and pull a piece of it over me. But I couldn't. Richardson was looking at me, I was looking back at him, and neither of us was about to chicken.

I guided him out, waited until his aircraft was safely onto the taxiway, then dove into the revetment and flattened on the pavement next to one of the thick steel walls. The mortars kept raining in, and I consoled myself by thinking that while the VC had me curled up on the ground, hoping to survive the attack, what was heading for their friends and comrades was one hell of a lot worse. I was also hoping that one of those mortar rounds wouldn't strike the Major's airplane.

The AC-47 was the Air Force's first gunship, and it could sneak up on you. The upper surfaces of the bird were camouflaged tan and green while the lower surfaces were jet black. At night, you couldn't see it. To make it worse for our enemy in the jungle, Richardson had perfected the technique of approaching at about 5,000 feet above the ground and then dropping down to the firing altitude of 3,000 feet by throttling his engines to idle so that the gliding approach was almost silent.

As he neared the point at which he could fire, he would use the radio to tell the soldiers or Marines on the ground, "Flare now," and one of them would shoot a flare at the enemy position. As the flare was moving through the air, Richardson would position his aircraft for a perfect fire mission, and then tell the chief gunner over the intercom, "Three on line, fast fire." That meant turning on the electrical power to all three guns and setting their rate of fire to maximum of one hundred rounds per second.

Just as the flare landed among the enemy soldiers, Richardson would have maneuvered his aircraft into the perfect place. Then he would press the firing button on the control yoke, and in an area about the size of the average living room, three hundred rounds of 7.62 mm ammunition traveling at around 3,000 feet per second would arrive with every tick of the clock. In that hail of machine gun fire, nothing survived—or even remained recognizable.

Richardson and his crew would stay in the area until matters were settled, sometimes going "Winchester" (firing all 72,000 rounds of ammunition) before heading back to the base—often for more fuel and ammunition. Other nights, he brought back unspent rounds, but those were infrequent because Richardson liked to fight.

Back at the ranch—or Nha Trang Air Base, as it was called by the people who handed out names—the VC finally ran out of mortar rounds and the all-clear sounded. I rounded up my launch crew, got them in the van, and headed back to our flight line shack.

Upon arrival, we found the whole corrugated fiberglass front of our building destroyed. A mortar round had landed right on the front porch, and had blown things to bits. Inside, I found

utter devastation. Everything was torn to pieces. The desks, chairs, typewriters—even the red phone—were all so much useless junk. But the real tragedy was that our 40-cup West Bend percolator was riddled with hundreds of holes. Oh, my. How do you fight a war without coffee?

The following day, I stopped by the office of our First Sergeant. “Chief,” I began, “they blew up our coffee maker last night.”

“I don’t think there’s one in all of PACAF, Lieutenant,” he replied. “I’m afraid you’re gonna have to do without or send one of your guys on a coffee run to the mess hall whenever you feel the need.”

“That’s a possibility, but don’t we have someone new coming in from the states shortly?”

He rifled through his files. “Yes, sir, we do. New man new due in next week. An Airman First Class. Mechanic type.”

I peeled forty dollars from the roll of military scrip I kept in my shirt pocket. “Wire this to him. Tell him I don’t care how he does it, but he’d better not get off that airplane without a 40-cup West Bend coffee maker in his possession. Make him know we mean business.” Then I handed him another forty bucks. “Make *damn sure* he knows we mean business.”

He grinned, nodded wisely, and pocketed the extra cash.

Days passed and we somehow managed to get by without our usual copious supply of coffee. We had three more middle-of-the-night scramble missions, but no mortar attacks, and found time to put the line shack back together with scavenged lumber, more corrugated fiberglass panels, and what office furniture we could scrounge from pinch-penny drones in supply. Unfortunately, we couldn’t find another red telephone. We had to settle for black.

Finally, a C-130 from Cam Ranh Bay landed. As it taxied toward Base Operations, I took our scramble van to meet it. Several airmen and one officer got off the airplane, and then, a moment later, an airman first class with a B-4 bag over his shoulder and a big box in his arms came down the boarding ramp.

I met him. “I’m your OIC. I see you brought the coffee maker.”

He nodded. He couldn’t salute. His arms were full.

“I’ll take it,” I said.

He gave it to me. “There was \$4.73 in change, sir,” he said, digging in his pocket.

I shook my head. “Keep it. And welcome to Vietnam.”

**END**

## Adult Division Non-Fiction

### Third Place

*Cookie Day!*, by Steven Laird

I was a sophomore in high school when I introduced the girl to my mother. She was the latest of a series of girls I had invited to my house to listen to records, munch on snacks—and occasionally, on each other from the time I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Mom was always polite and gracious to them. Probably she was glad that I was at home and not out with the boys creating mischief.

As we were leaving and the girl, her name was Robin, went to the front hall to fetch her coat, Mom motioned me into the kitchen and said “She’s special, isn’t she.” Mom had never commented on any of my dates before. The smile on her face indicated much more than a casual comment about my latest girlfriend: she knew something. I wondered if this was a question or a statement as I smiled at Mom, then silently turned to join Robin in the front hall. This was only the second time I had been with Robin; heck, we hadn’t even kissed yet, well, maybe once or twice.

Mom had not only planted a seed, but fertilized it, watered it, and gave it life. Robin was special and would be the last girl I would bring home to entertain. Over the next few years our relationship became more serious. Although I tried to stray and hold on to my bachelorhood, we were never really apart. Whatever Mom knew when she spoke those words had become known to me, as well as everybody else: we were meant to be together.

A few days before I was to depart for Vietnam, Robin and I strolled through downtown Hutchinson and stopped to visit her Uncle Paul at his jewelry store. As we were leaving he said, “Come here a moment. I’ve got something to show you.” We left with a ring. I supposed that counted as our engagement. Neither of us had ever proposed to the other.

During my time in Vietnam, Robin and Mom shared their concerns over my military commitment, and much more. They became close, not future in-laws, but best friends close. I now know when Mom had said, “She’s special, isn’t she,” that she had meant Robin was special to her, too.

Mom and Robin were my first two girls. The third came along in 1977 when our daughter Brook was born. She was our third child, having two older brothers.

Today, my mother has been gone from our lives for over twenty years. I have however gained three new girls to enrich my life: daughters-in-law Tabatha and Lacey, and my granddaughter Kaeleen. Whatever my mom saw in Robin, she must have foreseen in those who would follow. She often proved to be somewhat of a visionary.

The weekend of Dec. 9<sup>th</sup> had been marked on their calendars for several months: an event that would bring all five of my girls to our house for ‘cookie day.’ Actually it was three days and two nights of baking Christmas cookies. Or, at least that was their excuse. Oh yes, cookies were produced by the dozens, but good times would prevail—AND I was the only guy!

I have been alone with my five gals on a couple of occasions, but never for an entire weekend. All of my girls are unique individuals, but together they are a force to be reckoned with. I knew I would be called on to become their designated driver, chef, waiter, butler, general lackey, and chief cookie taster.

First of all, to see these five in a kitchen is rather oxymoronic as none of them cook! That task is the responsibility of the boys in my family. It isn't that they can't cook—they just choose not to.

Above all, they are best friends: that pleases me. To prepare for the weekend, I made sure the liquor cabinet was stocked with the proper assortment of alcoholic mixers for whatever the current drink of the day might be. Bloody Marys were definitely on the menu as were various concoctions of things to be added to sparkling wine, not to mention the Irish coffee in the mornings. After all, Christmas cookies cannot be made without a little lubrication—right? None of my girls abuse alcohol and except for Kaeleen, who is only fifteen, they certainly enjoy a toddy, or two, or three.

The last time I was at a girls' 'pajama party' was when Robin and I were dating, but that's another story. Two nights, two pajama parties: I thought I'd never get any sleep. But, I wouldn't have missed it.

Robin calls me Pop. To Kaeleen, I am Grandpa. The other three call me Daaad, or Daadeee, depending on whether I have done something to embarrass them or they want a favor of me. Robin was Mom's choice—mine too! Brooke will always be Daddy's girl. Tabatha is a great mother for Kaeleen and outgoing. Lacey is my Harley Davidson girl. Kaeleen is spunky, spontaneous, and full of energy. I love them all.

On Saturday, I was rewarded with a couple hours of freedom as they all went to the beauty shop: they had to get their hair fixed. Geez, their hair didn't look broken. I thought it odd that their hair would break simultaneously. When they returned, they again filled the kitchen with laughter while Kaeleen sculpted my hair into several styles. She took pictures to put on Facebook—I hope they don't go viral!

I sat in my chair attempting to read a book while listening to the symphony of clatter, chatter, and laughter emanating from the kitchen. As I set my book aside and leaned back in my recliner, I sensed the presence of my mother. I closed my eyes and saw her face, an approving smile, and hear her words, "They're special, aren't they."

The moment was shattered by a feminine trio, "Oh Daadeee, could you fix us another drink?"

"Yes Mom, they're all special."

**Adult Division  
Non-Fiction**

**Honorable Mention**

*Hopeless*, by Richard Walkup

We sped down I-70 with the AC on high in the comfort of our shiny black Honda. Outside it was one-hundred-five degrees, no wind, the sun bearing down, scorching everything.

We left the Interstate at Missouri Highway 7 in Blue Springs and stopped at a long traffic signal. To our left, sitting half in and half out of a depression between the overpass pier and the pavement sat a young woman wearing a tank top, hair piled up on her head; her complexion dusty and deeply tanned, eyes sunk into her face like they were slowly imploding into her skull. She held a cardboard sign with three words vertically spaced: “Homeless. Hungry. Hopeless.”

*So frail. How old is she? She could be fifteen or fifty. Is she even female?*

Our small car already at capacity with family and luggage, the traffic light switching to green at any second, cars behind us, cars at our side, cars in front passing right and left. No place to park in the rush hour traffic.

She stared directly at me with pleading eyes. Pleading, pleading, *please help me*.

No one spoke, I couldn't breathe.

My hand touched the pocket that held the cash beneath my seat belt. A twenty might help, but even if I could reach it, how would I get it to her in time? Throw it? Of course not, but maybe she could run to me and take it before I was forced to leave.

I struggled to reach into my pocket beneath the confines of the seat belt. Maybe if I held it out the window she could come to me before...

The light turned green. Our gazes locked.

Racked with guilt, overwhelmed with sadness and helplessness, I pulled away and we joined the flowing traffic.

Her image continues to haunt me. Has she been forced into her plight? Has her hope been replaced by despair? Where was she from? Where has she gone?

Where will she bed down tonight?

## Adult Division Non-Fiction

### Honorable Mention

*Beauty: God's Love in Motion*, by Nancy Breth

The day of our own private showing of “Beauty: God’s Love in Motion”, my daughter Carrie and I were on a trek – to find clothes that fit.

She had called me a few days before, all down hearted. She had been to Towne East mall searching for an outfit or two to wear on her anniversary trip and found only size “A” (anorexic) clothes in the styles she liked. Carrie is shaped like a woman, with hips; round, soft to the touch and healthy looking. She has a booty to shake; unlike those bony things that can only rattle their bones when showing off their womanly bodies.

“I’m so depressed,” she was saying. “Everywhere you look all you see are size zeros, advertisements for diet foods, skinny models smiling for the camera as if having lost every ounce of body fat is the path to Nirvana.” And this coming from the happiest, most positive person I know.

“Well we’ll fix that,” I fumed, and we made a pact to find clothes, beautiful clothes that fit and showed off the curves of her gorgeous body, no matter how long it took.

We stayed away from the big malls where all the skinnies hang out. We had hoped to find a “Hips R Us!”; but alas no such luck. We began our search at a small strip mall where we found everything she was looking for and more.

As we walked through the first store she found blouses, skirts and pants that were stylish. And best of all, she discovered in the dressing room that they fit – glorious hug-her-beautiful-curves fit.

Inspired by her sweet success at the first store, we bravely entered store after store finding more clothes and then shoes to match her new wardrobe. Our “oohs” and “aahs”

and “awesomes” echoed within the walls of every clothing and shoe store on the strip as we filled our arms with sacks full of treasure.

After the bounty was all locked safely in the car, we decided to give ourselves a treat at the café in the bookstore. As we sat outside in the shade slurping some kind of heavenly combination of chocolate and creamy fat calories, I was off in my usual trance. Most likely I was reviewing tomorrow’s to do list or beating myself up for something I did or didn’t do the last time the two of us were together. So Carrie saw it first.

“Look Mom, come look at this.”

There on the ledge of the bookstore window was a dragonfly so large I thought it was a hummingbird. “OOH, AAH, AWESOME” we were both saying. She was so regal, a queen of the dragonflies. A sleeping beauty covered in a kaleidoscope of colors. With each blink of the eye, we saw different colors and patterns glistening from the body of this gorgeous creature. She seemed to be posing just for us - a private showing. “Here I am in all my glory and I want to share it with you,” she seemed to say. We gazed in wonder while she rested in the cool breeze of the shade.

We stood mesmerized in this silent sacred moment until she took flight. “OK gals, you’ve had enough. It’s time to share myself with someone new,” Her Majesty flaunted as she buzzed off.

She hovered for an instant, dazzling us with the beauty of her body in motion, her translucent wings magnifying the rays of sunlight bathing her body. Again we held our breath while watching as she grew smaller and smaller, disappearing in the horizon.

Before returning to our table, we shared a speechless “WOW” moment as we smiled our thoughts at each other.

Our trek to find clothes that fit complete, and mindful now of the importance of being here now, I was fully present for the rock concert as I drove Carrie home. We shared our joyful noise as we buzzed down Broadway singing “Wild Thing” at the top of our lungs with the windows rolled down.

After unloading her treasures, Carrie’s family room became a fashion show runway as she modeled her new outfits for me one by one. “My honey will love this one,” she said as she twirled around the room dazzling me with the beauty of that glow of love she and her husband have shared through all their years together; a glow that extends to a love for Life in all its beauty.

“Ooh, aah, awesome, what a beauty she is,” I was thinking; but what I was seeing was so much more than this lovely woman showing off a few stylish outfits.

Every time I blinked my eyes I saw a different part that makes up the whole, round, soft to the touch, warm and glowing beauty that is Carrie. I saw a kaleidoscope of treasured moments with this child of mine. The tiny baby with chubby cheeks who could melt my heart with one look into those big, brown eyes and the child who has always been at peace with the world and always had a multitude of friends. The frightened child waving good bye on her first day at school, the rebellious teenager who couldn’t wait to move away from home who also wrote books of poetry for me. The courageous woman who went on to pass her travel agent final test with 100% in the same week she caught her first fiancé in bed with another woman. I saw this wise mature woman trembling like

a child as she walked down the aisle to be married to her best friend and can still hear the musical joy in her voice when she shared the magic of the moment when he proposed. I saw the broken hearts, the scrapes and scars, the laughter, the singing, the dancing, the disappointments and the successes and how through it all – all the yelling and scolding and the betrayals she always looked up to me and respected me and loved me. I saw the regal beauty in her calm, enduring strength through all the crises she has been through; the radiance of that first smile after her brain surgery even though it hurt like hell to even blink; the lilting laughter which soon became pounding headache when I helped her with that first shower after the bandages were off.

I saw a loving soul forged from glory and joy and from pain and suffering; a soul that refuses to give in or to stay in the shadows. Like the dragonfly she only knows how to fly and loves the sharing of the beauty of her flight through life. This beauty comes from God's love, a source deep within, flowing out and into the world to be given away, an eternal beauty that whether size 0 or size 40 will glow always brighter and more majestic through the years. She is Beauty. She is God's Love in Motion.

We both found beauty that day – in a smile of satisfaction reflected in the dressing room mirror, in the whirring whisper of a dragonfly's wings reminding us to be here right now, in the pulsing beat of a rock and roll song joining two voices into one, in the sacred silent peace of being aware of God's presence in every moment of our lives. All this in one day - the day of our own special viewing of "Beauty: God's Love in Motion".

## Adult Division Humor

### First Place

#### Supermarket Opera, by Steven Laird

As we rejoin our program at the Downtown Supermarket we hear Jimmy Dean™ saying to Mrs. Smith™, “Is it really true that she was splattered all over aisle three?”

“Yes, some say she was pushed—murdered,” said Mrs. Smith™.

“But Marie Callender™ said it was an accident—that she got too close to the edge of the shelf and slipped,” said Jimmy Dean™.

“Either way, it’s too bad. Dorothy Lynch™ was really nice.”

“Are you kidding me? She fooled around with everybody. Just ask Hungry Jack™, it wasn’t just pancakes he was hungry for, if you know what I mean,” said Jimmy. And then there was Cap’n Crunch™ and Dinty Moore™. Heck, probably half the men in the store. There was no satisfying her at all.”

“You say she was fooling around with Cap’n Crunch™? Wasn’t she engaged to the Red Baron™?” asked Mrs. Smith™.

“Now that you mention it,” said Jimmy, “if the Red Baron™ finds out about Cap’n Crunch™ . . . that could get messy.”

“Yeah, I hear the Red Baron™ is really cold. No telling what he would do,” said Mrs. Smith™.

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Meanwhile, over on aisle two, Duncan Hines™ said to Orville Redenbacher™, “What’s the deal with Aunt Jemima™ and Mrs. Butterworth™, they’re thick as thieves.”

“Yeah, it’s a sticky situation all right,” said Orville. “As I hear tell, they’re stuck on each other. It’s been going on for quite a while.”

Supermarket Soap Opera

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“Aunt Jemima’s™ married to Uncle Ben™,” said Duncan. “Does he know about this?”

“It’s only a marriage of convenience,” said Orville. “Ben’s a little . . . ah, you know, still in the closet.”

“I guess that would explain his spending time with the Green Giant™. No wonder he’s so jolly,” said Duncan.

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“Cleanup on aisle four,” blared the overhead speaker.

“What’s happened now?” asked Mrs. Ott™.

“It’s the Gerber Baby™!” screamed Sara Lee™. “He’s been kidnapped!”

“He’s such a cute little guy,” said Mrs. Ott™. “It is a boy, isn’t it?”

“Golly, I always thought so,” said Sara. “His parents are Little Debbie™ and Peter Pan™. Do they know yet?”

“I didn’t know they were married,” said Mrs. Ott™.

“They aren’t. They just hang out, you know.”

“Seems they did more than hang out if they got a kid. That Little Debbie™ is such a tart,” said Mrs. Ott™.

“He’s adopted. Word has it that his real mother is Dorothy Lynch™ and the father is Oscar Meyer™. Look. There goes Mr. Clean™,” said Sara. “If anybody can find him, he can.”

“I got news for you sister,” said Mrs. Ott™. “He ain’t all that clean.”

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, over on aisle six, Betty Crocker™ said to Dinty Moore™, “You haven’t told Supermarket Soap Opera

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anybody about last night, have you?”

“What—about us, you mean?” said Dinty. “Naw, I’m not a kiss and tell kind of guy.”

“Well, word has it that we were seen over in the produce section,” said Betty.

“Who says?”

“I heard it from Oscar Meyer™, who heard it from Chef Boyardee™, who heard it from John Morrell™. It’s all over the store. I’m so embarrassed,” said Betty. “My marriage to Duncan Hines™ is ruined. What ever shall I do?”

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Later, on aisle five, Cap’n Crunch™ and the Red Baron™ are searching the Hidden Valley™ for the missing Gerber Baby™.

“Didn’t I see you with Dorothy Lynch™ over at the produce section by the lettuce earlier, before she was killed?” asked the Red Barron™.

“She wasn’t killed. She lost her balance and fell,” said Cap’n Crunch™.

“You didn’t answer my question,” said Red Barron™. “Were you with her or not?”

“What does it matter to you,” said Crunch. “She was free to do as she wanted.”

“You flake! We were engaged. Didn’t you see the ring?” said Red. “I could crush you right here.”

“Ooooooh, you’re so cold it scares me,” said Crunch, laughing. “She’s been with every guy in the store, and she wasn’t wearing any ring! That’s fair game in my book.”

“So—I think you’re the one who killed her!” exclaimed Red Barron™.

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Supermarket Soap Opera

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At the same time over at the Pepperidge Farm™, Mrs. Butterworth™ and Chef Boyardee™ were looking for the Gerber Baby™ in the hay loft of the barn.

“Was he really kidnapped, or could he have just wandered off?” asked Mrs. Butterworth™.

“I don’t know,” said Chef Boyardee™. As he turned toward Mrs. Butterworth™, their arms touched and they looked lustily at each other. Unspent emotions erupted and they . . .

Tune in for tomorrow’s episode as the search for the Gerber Baby™ continues, the mystery of Dorothy Lynch™ deepens, and PF Chang™ cautions Dinty Moore™ that, “Man who fool around in pantry get ass in jam.”

## Adult Division Humor

### Second Place

*Oops!*, by Ray “Grizzly” Racobs

Not long ago, my wife had a few ladies from her church group drop in for a short meeting over snacks and cookies. She briefly introduced me to those present and I paused for some small talk.

I noticed one woman was certainly expecting a young one, so I spoke to her about the upcoming event.

“I’m sure you’ve heard that both of our daughters have delivery dates next month? When are you due?”

“I’m not pregnant,” she coolly replied.

Oops! I offered my apologies and took my leave, post haste.

I began to ponder other times I had been part of the “open-mouth, insert-foot, close-mouth syndrome,” if there is such a thing.

See if you can relate to any of the other fairly unexcused blunders that I could recall from my recent past.

&

I was in the break room having lunch during a day of substituting a fifth grade class. One of the handful of teachers gathered in the room asked me how my day was going.

“Fine,” I told her, “but it would be better if I didn’t have one mouthy kid in there to put up with.”

“Sorry to hear that. Who’s giving you problems?” she inquired.

“Adam. He’s obviously a spoiled brat and probably from a family who lets him do whatever he wants.”

“Really!” she replied, with eyebrows raised. “Adam is my son.”

Oops! I shrugged my shoulders, shook my head and left the room as soon as I could conveniently do so.

&

In another stint of substituting, I was filling a spot for a high school boy’s PE teacher. On this particular day, for some reason, I was the lone adult in charge of a combined class of freshman girls and boys. The lesson plans instructed me to split the class up into six teams, in any way I saw fit, to play volleyball on the three courts set up in the gym.

I decided not to put males and females on the same team and opted for a boy-versus-girl scenario. After initial warm-up exercises, I told the group to break up into two lines with boys on my left and girls on my right.

The students left their spots and headed for positions along the boundaries of the court in front of me.

I noticed a girl lined up on the boy's side. I paused to repeat my directions. "Boys on my left and girls on my right," I said, a little louder than my original instructions. I looked at the girl in the fifth spot down on the left. She didn't move.

The boy in the first position stepped towards me and in a quiet voice, said, "Brady's not a girl . . . he just looks like one."

Oops! Laughter followed . . . from both lines and from Brady, too, thank goodness. I know I turned red, but managed, "With great looking hair like you have, son, I thought you must be a girl."

&

At Walmart, last spring, I selected a jacket from an assortment of coats on a rack marked "HALF PRICE". The coat's actual tag didn't indicate the reduced price. I asked the nearest employee about the situation.

"It will show up at the register when they scan the tag."

I accepted the explanation, continued on with my shopping and didn't think about it until I looked at my receipt after ringing out at a register. I noticed I was charged full price for the jacket. I queried the clerk with, "The coat should be half price. The floor person told me the markdown would show up at check out. It didn't." She told me to go to customer service for a refund.

I moved across the aisle and waited in a line there and finally told them of my plight.

"Who told you the jacket was on sale?" the associate asked.

"I didn't catch her name."

"What did she look like," the woman behind the counter asked.

"She was, ahh . . . a big woman," I said, as I spread out my arms to simulate her girth.

"That's my sister and she's not that fat!" she threw at me.

"I didn't say 'fat', you did," I said in a low tone. It was a cool few minutes I had to endure before the refund was received. I now try to make note of the names of any employees I speak to in any store.

&

I was third in line, while waiting to check out at Dillons. The man at the front was having a hard, lengthy time writing and recording his check for his purchase.

"It's my fault," I softly said to the woman in front of me. "Every time I get in a line something happens to make the process drag on. Maybe customers ought to be charged more for their purchases if they insist on writing a check." The lady rolled her eyes at me, but said nothing.

After her order was processed, she briefly stared at me with cold eyes looking over her glasses, while she pulled out her checkbook. I swear to howdy, she took as long as she could to complete the transaction.

Oops! Since then I avoid lines whenever possible and often utilize the u-scan check out option at many businesses.

&

In the parking lot at the same grocery store, I came across a lady leaving a note under the wiper blade on a fancy-looking, pickup. It was parked at an angle, thus taking up two spots on a particularly busy shopping day before Christmas.

I'm sure the driver's purpose was to prevent the truck from getting dinged by a door from any vehicle that would normally be parked on either side of it. The driver could have easily properly parked farther away from the congestion and accomplished the same cushion.

So how did I become involved in the actions perpetrated by the good lady towards the inconsiderate driver of the truck? After she left the scene, my curiosity took over, as I considered taking a peek at what she had written to the lazy driver. I walked up to the truck, stood beside it for a moment and reached out my hand . . .

“What are you doing?” came a low, gruff voice from behind me.

Oops! So, folks watch out for what, when and where you say or do almost anything, I guess. Knowing me, I probably won’t follow my own advice, though.

## Adult Division Humor

### Honorable Mention

*Bear at the Door*, by Byron Folkerts

There I stood, bare at the door with a bear at the door. What to do?

I had just come in from a skinny dip with friends in the back lake when I heard a terrible commotion coming from the front porch. Thinking it to be more guests, I naturally went to answer. To my surprise, it was the largest grizzly I had ever seen, just finishing a mid-afternoon snack of what appeared to be a traveling salesman that unfortunately selected my cabin over any of the distant others around the lake.

One must understand that my cabin is quite small and a bear of this size would never fit through any of my doors or windows. I knew that I was for all immediate concerns safe if I just stayed put. Leaving the door open to continue to marvel at this magnificent beast, I lit a pipe and sat to ponder my moves, watching my adversary finish off his appetizer while planning for his main course – me, perhaps. My guests came in through the back door and I shared the impending crisis. Big Joe Bob sat across from me on the sofa while the girls pulled up chairs closer to the front door, watching the action.

Big Joe Bob was upset. “Look,” he said, “I’ve just phoned in pizza and that bear had better be gone when the delivery arrives.”

What to do? I now risked upsetting a guest.

“When do you expect the pizza?” I asked.

“Not for another hour or so,” said Big Joe Bob. “But what about that bear?”

“I’m thinking. I’m thinking,” I said, blowing perfect smoke rings up towards my sky light.

About this time, the bear finished cleaning himself from the aforementioned appetizer and turned his attention to the girls. The grizzly put his head in the door, and then a shoulder. Reaching in as far as he could, he made a swipe across an armful of nothingness. The girls giggled and backed up. The grizzly tried another angle but the results were the same. The bear lay back and bellowed a deafening roar. His eyes were as red as his after-snack teeth.

One of the girls threw something out the door to tease the bear.

“Enough!” I said. “You girls go get dressed and stop playing with that bear.”

We all got dressed.

What to do? A bear at the door and pizza on the way. Could things be any worse? By now, Big Joe Bob was getting very upset. Obviously, the beer was wearing off.

“Big Joe Bob,” I said, “You have to stay calm here. I have a number of things on my mind and I can’t have you getting upset until I come up with a way out of this mess.”

“Forget that,” said Big Joe Bob. “I’m hungry.”

Big Joe Bob was never one to take the long way around the barn when it came to relaying his hunger concerns. I knew I had to act fast.

The bear had just commenced to moving about the porch, checking for windows, other doors, anything that would allow him enough room to get in and enjoy the feast displayed before him.

“Big Joe Bob,” I said. “We need to act now!”

Big Joe Bob was in. “What do you want me to do?”

“You draw his attention over to that window. When he gets to you, I’ll place this pan just outside the front door and fill it with beer. We’ll get the sucker drunk.”

Big Joe Bob was obviously in deep thought. He had bought the beer and I knew it was a long shot that he would give in. The girls coaxed him into agreeing, thinking it would be a hoot to see a drunk bear.

“OK,” Big Joe Bob finally caved.

Big Joe Bob returned to the window and mooned the bear. The results were amazing and instantaneous. The grizzly rose to a standing position completely aware of the intended insult and charged the window like Dick Butkus attacking a quarterback. The window shattered as only the bear’s arm would reach through, just missing one full moon.

The girls were quick to grab the pan and place it by the door as I opened a few bottles and poured. We all stood back. The bear, continuing to pace, saw the pan and sniffed. Finding the imported brew irresistible, the bear lapped it up. Obviously unaccustomed to drinking, the grizzly sat back and burped. I rapidly poured more. The bear responded with what can only be called a bearish grin. He lapped up the refill and again sat back and burped for more. Once again, I filled the pan. The bear became so inebriated that he rocked back and forth, finally falling onto its belly with all four legs spread apart, growling in low tones.

“Great,” cried Big Joe Bob. “How do we get the pizza in here now?”

“Wait,” I said. “I have an idea. Let’s play music and put him to sleep.”

“What else is there?” replied one of the girls.

I grabbed the Bose and put in my favorite CD of Walt Disney’s All Time Favorite Movie Theme Classics. I placed the stereo by the door and hit play.

“We are Siamese if you please. We are Siamese if you don’t please.”

Drunk or not drunk, the grizzly gave me a glance something like, “Oh, no you don’t!” The bear was up, bawling in the most awful groan imaginable. It was as if it had been struck in the butt by some unseen lightning bolt. It turned and fell from the porch, stumbling so deep into the woods that I doubt it ever finds its way back.

We let out such a cackle. I was laughing. Big Joe Bob was laughing. The girls were in tears. Five minutes later, the pizza arrived. We met the driver at his car so we weren’t forced into explaining the body on the porch.

“All in all a good time, wouldn’t you say?” I asked the group.

“Unbearable,” someone replied.

## Adult Division Short Stories for Youth

### First Place

*Namesake*, by Storme Maynard

*He ran, dawn breaking the horizon with the promise of a sun that would strike down like a hammer. But for now the air was cool, sweet, and he ran for the joy of running. Small creatures ran with him, rabbits and mice springing to either side and one rangy coyote out in front. He raced with arms spread wide until the winds gathered underneath and lifted him into the sky. With a powerful beating of wings he soared upward to the sun—*

Charley Tsosie started up out of sleep with a gasp, shaking the dream away as the bus rolled on through the night. Man, it had been awhile since he'd had that one! Flying was the kind of dream kids had, and at fifteen he was a long way past being a kid.

He glanced at the sleeping form beside him. She was pretty, this social worker, young. The guys in the gang would've had lots to say about that. Charley's face burned, and he shifted to look out the window. Nothing to see out there.

His foot knocked against the duffle on the floor. It was nice, bright blue, new for this trip. He hadn't had anything blue in years . . .

*"What shit you wearin' man?" Tonio ripped Charley's blue tee down the front, "Don' you go wearin' no blue round here!" and tossed him a red one, much too big. "There, that mark you." In red Charley looked enough like the Chicago-Latino-Strong members that, for once, his Navajo features blended in. For the first time since his mom had died he felt safe, hidden from her boyfriend in a crowd of non-white faces. He'd been ten.*

*He stood lookout for the Strong, sneaked things off shelves, ran messages and goods. He excelled at running; fast, small enough to twist and turn. No one ever caught him. He tried not to think what his mom would've said about the Strong.*

Tonio was dead now, along with everyone else caught in the crossfire of that empty lot, like he would've been if Tonio hadn't fallen over him after the first bullet struck.

*"What's your name, son? Where's your family? There must be someone." He stayed quiet, afraid 'someone' would turn out to be the boyfriend. Endless doctors, social workers, police. His head swam from the noise and pain, and somewhere he'd slipped up and spoke.*

Now, racing through the night, Charley reached into the duffle and pulled out a worn folder. It was too dark to read anything, but he didn't need to read it to remember. He held it tight over his chest where the bullet wound was sometimes still sore.

In the long year of paperwork, arguing, and court dates, letters had arrived postmarked *New Mexico*. There were notes from aunts and cousins, photos of strangers that looked like him, not in the way he'd blended into the Strong, but *just* like him. It made Charley's heart hammer and his stomach do flip-flops.

And there was a letter from his *great-grandfather*.

*Great-grandson, it read, carefully penciled, my heart is full to bear of you. When your mother took you to follow her new man it left a hole in our family. Come home. Please, come home. We will have a sing for you.* Tucked with it was a faded photo of a solemn old man, a wide-eyed toddler, and a smiling young girl. His mom.

It was signed, *Charley Joe Tsosie*. Then, curiously, *Do you remember your name?*

What was that supposed to mean? Of course he knew his own name! But when asked the social worker said, “He probably meant your secret Navajo name, the one a family member gives you that’s hardly ever spoken. It’s very special.”

That made him feel worse, because he *didn’t* remember. What if he didn’t fit in? What if, despite the letters, they didn’t want him after all? What would he say to them? What if—

Finally, exhausted, he fell asleep.

It was past dawn when he woke, curled sideways clutching the folder, his back against the window. He squinted in the flood of sunlight.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” the social worker smiled. “I wasn’t sure how long to let you snooze, the driver says it’ll be about an hour. So, what do you think?”

Blinking, he twisted to look out, and all his breath left in a whoosh.

It was the landscape of his dream. Soft brown hills stretched to the feet of angular cliffs of red and russet, some of them glinting as if peppered with mirrors. He could see darting movements in the grey-green underbrush, while against a sky of startling blue hawks soared.

“The cliffs,” he stammered, “they’re shimmering!”

“Mm-hmm,” she agreed, “That’s the micaceous clay we read about, remember? Potters from around here are famous for it.” Then, sensing his mood, she fell quiet.

When they pulled into the depot at Albuquerque terror seized him, he couldn’t move. It wasn’t until everyone else had gotten off that she nudged him gently, “Charley, come on, they’re waiting for you.”

That’s the problem, he wanted to say, but his throat closed over the words. Quaking, he followed her off the bus.

It looked like a small army to Charley, though he knew there’d been lots of talk about limiting the number of relatives for this first meeting. Two women held each other back, tears on their cheeks, while little ones jumped at their sides. Several men waited behind them, nodding.

The old man stood in front, long grey hair lifting in the morning breeze. He moved forward solemnly, his cane clicking against asphalt, eyes both sad and joyful, a strength in them that wrapped around Charley and held him close. He stopped, inclining his head. “Great-grandson. We welcome you home.”

Charley recognized something else in the dark eyes, an uncertainty, a yearning, and suddenly memory stirred and he knew what to say after all.

“Grandfather, I am Dawn Runner.” And the light that kindled in the old man’s eyes rivaled the sun.

## Adult Division Short Stories for Youth

### Second Place

*Malvolio*, by Julie Stielstra

At just over four inches tall, Malvolio was big enough to be a Big Brown Bat, just a little bit bigger than a Little Brown Bat. He and his family and relations (and there were six dozen of them) summered up in the loft of an old gray barn.

One of the first things Malvolio's mother taught him was that he must never, ever go near the Tallworms.

"Why are they called Tallworms?" Malvolio wanted to know. His mother would know the answer. Her family had lived up under the eaves of the public library and were rather proud of their education.

"Because they are rather pinkish, though they come in other colors too, have sticky bare skin and instead of having their long sides on the ground, they stand up tall," she said. "Did you hear me? That you must never go near them or their house?"

"Yes, Mom. Why not?" The Tallworms' house was next to their barn. There were three Tallworms. One was very big with soft brown hair on the bottom of his head instead of on the top, and a smaller one with hair that fell in a long tail down its back. They also had a pale bulbous larva or grub. It clung to the smaller Tallworm the same way Malvolio and his sister Ophelia had clung to their mother, so he guessed it must be a baby Tallworm and the smaller Tallworm must be the mom.

"Because all Tallworms hate bats!" his mother said.

"Why?" The Tallworms fascinated him. One evening he had flown over, hung onto the windowsill and peeked inside. The lights were so bright they hurt his eyes, but he could hear their voices. Then the larval Tallworm screamed, and he flew away.

"Why why why... always why! They have this idea that we want to get in their hair," his mother said. "I can't imagine why they'd think we'd want to get all tangled up in their long stringy hair..." She shuddered. "They're afraid we want to bite them and drink their blood or give them rabies, or that we have lice and fleas or other dirty things." She preened her breast neatly and gave Malvolio a quick lick on the top of his head. He squirmed away. Uncle Horatio had gotten rabies and was never quite the same after that, but it was only those lazy vampires who drank blood and there weren't any of them around here. Certainly no one had fleas or lice – they all spent hours grooming themselves. They were very clean bats.

"So just *don't*. Tallworms hit us and kill us with brooms and shovels. They are *dangerous*. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mom," he said obediently. But at sunset, as he fluttered and swung around the big farm light, he kept an eye on the mother Tallworm as she stooped over her vegetables in the garden, pulling out weeds, plucking up bugs, and hacking off broccoli heads for supper. Then the Big Tallworm came out carrying the larva, singing it a song, and they all went inside together. Malvolio

crunched up nine junebugs, four moths, six box elder beetles, three hundred and seventeen mosquitoes and a potato bug, and went to bed as the moon rose high in the sky at midnight.

Then one day the Tallworms went away. That night there were no lights glowing in their house. Or the night after. Or the night after that. Malvolio swung down from his elm tree and hung on the windowsill again. It was very quiet. He wondered what it was like inside. Fall was coming, time to look for a roosting place to hide where it was dry and quiet and a hibernating bat could sleep away the winter.

In a Tallworm house? That was crazy. But since Tallworms had no fur of their own, it must be pretty warm and comfortable in there. But he had to wonder... just wonder what it was like in there...

He swept down the to walkway to snatch up a wandering beetle. There was a little low window there - the frame was beginning to split and peel, and the Big Tallworm had fastened something over it, just until he could fix it properly. Malvolio nosed around. He caught a whiff of cool earth - a cave! A cave underneath the Tallworm house! That didn't count as being *in* the house, did it? No, it wouldn't. And if he found a fine cool dry cave for the winter, wouldn't his family be pleased! The window was a bit loose, with a narrow crevice along the side just the size for a bat to squeeze through. Malvolio made himself nice and flat, folded his wings neatly, and... he was in!

He paused on the sill, sent out some scouting shouts, and figured he was in a fairly big room. It was cool and dim and smelled of old stones and wood and dust. This was perfect! He sailed through the cave, squeaking gleefully. Ha! He'd be a hero! Look what he had found!

Another space opened before him, rising up. He coasted up to the top and hit a wall. Well, not a solid wall. At the very bottom was a crack - aha. A door into another room! He laid himself down flat and scooted underneath. A whole 'nother world up here!

His heart beat faster as he realized that now he was in fact in the Tallworms' house. He clung on the wall for a moment, but all was still. He knew they weren't here anyway. He chirped and listened and followed his ears, flitting round corners and down hallways, up more stairs into more rooms. There were box elder bugs in a window sill and he ate them. He rested on a curtain rod, and then he heard a chattering noise. A scent rose up that he knew too well: CAT. A big gray cat crouched below him, staring furiously, jaw rattling and ack-acking. Malvolio ducked below the curtain rod; the cat slipped behind the curtain, staring up and ack-acking.

One good thing: cats can't fly and bats can. He took a deep breath and launched for the door, the cat scurrying below. Frantically he beat from room to room, down the stairs and up again, losing his bearings, missing his echoes, even caroming off a window he had desperately hoped was open and wasn't. Finally, he landed at the very top of a big brick chimney, right up against the ceiling, where the cat couldn't climb or jump. His little heart was hammering. His mother was right: he should never have come near this place! Even if it was the cat and not a Tallworm who was out to kill him. What was he going to do? He dug his claws into the brickwork and hung there, shivering and very very scared.

He knew the cat was down there. He was going to have to get out of here, he couldn't just stay here like this. If he could just find that door, the one to the cave, and get through that crack... He let go with his toes, and flew again.

But he was nearly worn out, and he didn't dare go down too low. He couldn't find it. He fluttered and stuttered and zig-zagged, and nothing led anywhere. He found himself in another room, a small room where everything was smooth and shiny and smelled of water. He was terribly thirsty. He crept along a counter to a shiny tube where he licked and sniffed and yes! Silvery, cool, sweet drops of water on his tongue - he lapped until there were no more drops. And then a stormy wind and a yank and a blow, and the gray cat nearly had him. The cat was on the counter, and

Malvolio cowered on a high shelf. Thick soft folded things that smelled of flowers were piled there, and Malvolio wriggled deep into them. There was nothing else he could do. He was exhausted. He waited. The cat waited. At least deep in this soft nest, it was dark and warm. He either fainted or fell asleep, he wasn't sure which.

He woke to the sound of voices.

Tallworms! They were back! He closed his eyes and wept a tear for his mother, his sister, all his family and relations, because he would never see them again. He hoped they would be quick, quick as he was when he bit off a beetle's head.

Lights came on. He heard footsteps and voices and the larval Tallworm gurgling and giggling. The Big Tallworm came into the room, and stood so close to Malvolio's shelf that he could peek down on the hairless top of his head. There was much spilling and flushing of water. The Big Tallworm went away again. A little hope sprang up... maybe they wouldn't see him! If he could just wait till they went to sleep – he knew Tallworms slept while bats were working – he could try again to get out. If it weren't for that terrible cat...

The mother Tallworm came into the room. She looked around for a moment, shook her head, and reached up to the shelf. Malvolio froze. She picked him up, his whole folded nest, opened it up and yelped.

Malvolio hissed, bared his tiny sharp teeth and hissed for his life. She clapped the folds together again, pinching them tightly together till his ribs were squeezed. He gasped. The Big Tallworm rushed in. She still held Malvolio in his wrapping.

They talked fast and loud and scary, first him, then her, then him, then both of them. The larva was screaming, and Malvolio just sobbed and tried to breathe. Then he was moving, being carried, and the mother Tallworm was saying something – to him, it seemed – over and over she said something in a soft voice. They were outside now, out by the barn. The Tallworm opened up the folds and shook them. Malvolio hung on tightly, his thumbs and toes caught in the fabric. She said something more urgent, flapped harder – he hung on tighter and hissed and chattered. Then she lay the folds down on the ground, poking at them with a stick to spread them open, and walked away.

It had to be now, before they came back with the shovel. Malvolio unfurled his wings, unclenched his toes, and leapt into the air. He looked down to see her, standing a little way away. She was waving. And smiling.

Malvolio slept all night and the next day. Ophelia brought him some moths. His auntie Portia licked and licked him till he no longer smelled of Tallworm flowers. His mother chattered and scolded him until she began to cry, and then she licked him all over again.

That evening, Malvolio hovered near the farm light until the Lady Tallworm went inside. He waited, clinging to the lightpole, till all the lights in the Tallworm house went dark. Then he swooped down to the garden, he and his mother and his sister and his aunts and their sisters and even an uncle and brother-in-law or two from the toolshed. And they ate every single bug that dared to show its face anywhere near the Lady Tallworm's vegetables.

**Adult Division**  
**Short Stories for Youth**

**Third Place**

*Cloud and Rain*, by Julie Stielstra

A cat was my friend before I was even born. She was a wedding present.

My mother told me the story. “My great-aunt Libby came up to me at the wedding and gave me an envelope. ‘It isn’t much,’ she whispered, ‘but use it to buy some cheerful little thing for the house.’ Your daddy and I decided what the most cheerful little thing we could get for our house would be. We went to the animal shelter, and there was a little, round, gray, puffy kitten, and that was our wedding present from Great-Aunt Libby!”

They named her Cloud. Cloud danced after sunbeams, pounced on scraps of paper and climbed up the living room curtains. Mama put a bird feeder outside the window, and Cloud would crouch on the windowsill and chatter at the finches. Sometimes she made her tail get big for no reason at all, and go galloping through the house until my parents laughed and said, “I hear that Thundercloud again!” And at night, she curled up on their pillows and purred them to sleep. By the time I came along, Cloud was a dignified grownup cat, but still round and gray and puffy.

“When I was pregnant, and my belly was *this* big, I would sit in the armchair and Cloud would lay herself right across my tummy and purr so loud I was sure that baby could hear it all the way inside,” Mama told me. “Then I had that baby, and oh, she was a noisy, stinky, hungry baby!” Mama would scratch her head and wink at me. “Let me think, now, it was so long ago... what was her name?”

That made me giggle.

“Her name was Felicity!” I shouted. “That was *me!*”

“No! Really? Well, that baby that used to be you was so naughty she made me get up in the middle of the night to feed her. And then Cloud would snuggle up with us, and you’d put your little hand in her fur and go right back to sleep.”

She says I was much too young to remember it, but I’m sure I remember being warm and sleepy and the feel of soft fur and the gentle hum of purring.

As I got older, Cloud didn’t gallop through the house much any more, but I made her toys out of paper and string or a feather, and she would bat them with her paw. If I hid her catnip mouse under my bedcovers, she would burrow underneath to find it, growling like a little lion.

She started to sleep more. She got narrow and thin instead of round. Her fur wasn’t puffy, but flat and dry. We took her to the vet, and Dr. Susan looked sad.

“Cloud is a very old lady now,” she said. “Some parts of her don’t work right any more, so she feels tired and sick. I will give you some medicine for her, and you should help her eat all the good food you can. We can’t make her young again, but we can try to make her feel better.”

Daddy and I went to the pet store. There were so many different kinds of food! Chicken and turkey and beef and liver and salmon and tuna... we couldn’t decide what was best, so we

bought one of every kind. Every day when I came home from school, I sat on my bed with Cloud and gave her bits of food. Some days she ate a lot, some days just a little. And some days not at all.

Cloud didn't get better. One Friday afternoon, Mama held her in her arms and began to cry.

"I think we have to say goodbye to Cloud," she said. We lay on the bed with Cloud, hugging her and petting her, and we both cried. Then Daddy gently took Cloud to Dr. Susan's office. When he came back all by himself, he lay down on the bed with us and he cried too, hugging Mama and me very tightly.

We talked about Cloud then. Like how she always sat on Daddy's newspaper.

"She always sat right on the exact article I was reading!" he said.

"And she always got into the laundry basket, when the clothes were all warm from the dryer," said Mama.

"And she liked to pounce on my toes under the covers," I said.

Mama washed Cloud's dishes and put them away. She said it made her too sad to see them. That night when I went to bed, I found a catnip mouse in the sheets. I put the mouse under my pillow, and I cried very quietly, because I didn't want Mama and Daddy to be sad again too.

The next day it rained. I drew a picture of Cloud sitting on the newspaper and we put it on the wall over my bed. When I looked out the window, everything was wet and gray and blurry, and I couldn't tell what was the rain and what was my tears. I missed her so much. It was like all the clouds were crying because our Cloud had died.

"We have to remember," said Mama, "We have to remember we are the only ones who are sad now. Cloud isn't sick any more. Cloud is just fine." She blew her nose.

It was still raining when I came home from school on Monday. I was taking my boots off outside the back door and I heard something.

"Dad! I hear a cat!" He came outside and he heard it too. We looked under the porch. We looked under the bushes. We looked behind the garbage cans. We looked in the garage. We couldn't find a cat, but the cat kept crying and crying.

"Do you think it's Cloud? Is she lost? Does she want to come back?" I asked. "I want her to come back!"

"I do, too," he said. "But she can't, as much as we want her to."

When Mama came home from work, she heard the cat crying too. We went back outside in the rain and looked again. Mama stopped and listened hard, then looked up.

"Look!" she cried. "Up there!"

High up in the tree, clinging to a skinny twig, was a kitten. The branches were swaying in the wind, and the kitten was crying and crying.

Daddy went up a ladder. The kitten crawled into his hands, and he carried her down very carefully. She was cold and wet and she was purring.

We rubbed her gently with a towel. Mama got out a dish and opened a can of tuna. The kitten ate and ate and ate. She was gray and black and stripy and streaky, with eyes the color of buttered toast.

"Where could she have come from?" Daddy wondered. "It's like she dropped out of the sky."

"I think I know where she came from," Mama said.

"She came from Cloud," I said. "Cloud told her to come here because we were so lonely without her."

The kitten slept on my bed that night. In the morning, she pounced on a sunbeam that sneaked in through the curtains. She galloped down the hall to the kitchen for breakfast, and fell in the sink while Daddy was doing the dishes. She sat on the edge of the bathtub and watched Mama

take a shower, then chased all the drops down the drain. Then she dropped the catnip mouse into the washing machine.

We named her Rain.

## Adult Division Short Stories for Youth

### Honorable Mention

*Tex the Turkey's Jiggly, Jaggly, Wiggly, Waggly Thing*, by Sheila Dalrymple

Tex the Turkey shuffled through the fallen leaves. Now and then he made a low gobbling sound. He scratched and bobbed as he dug his clawed feet into the ground looking for grain from the farmer's harvest. It was nearing Thanksgiving, and he did not want to be the family's dinner. He knew the farmer would be searching for him. After all, he was extremely large, strong and ever so handsome. Tex the Turkey knew he must hide until after Thanksgiving.

"Hey there!"

Tex the Turkey strained his long neck until the wattle, hanging below his chin, jiggled, jaggled, wiggled, waggled and shook like jello. Then he heard laughter.

"What is that silly jiggly, jaggly, wiggly, waggly thing swinging from your neck? I must say, you look pretty funny." With that said, a tiny chickadee left his high perch and flew as close to Tex's beak as he could. His wings fluttered almost as fast as a hummingbird. He held steady in mid air to get a better look.

"Hey, that's weird. It's really jiggly. Have you ever thought of having that removed? It really does nothing for your appearance. Really, I think I'd do something about that thing if I were you. Of course, I'm not you, so I guess I don't have a say-so in that, now do I? Hey, you know what else? Whoa! It's turning red! Hey, you'd better be careful. You know it looks kind of like a great big neon light. Yes sir, shines pretty bright.

Man, a farmer could see you coming a mile away. If I were you, I'd camouflaged that thing. You know, hide it. What IS that anyway?" Then the noisy little bird sang, "Chickadee dee dee, Chickadee dee dee."

Tex the Turkey stared blankly at the chickadee. *What is he chattering about?* he wondered. *What is jiggly and turning red? Do I have something hanging from my neck and shining like a neon light? What does he mean, a farmer can see me coming a mile away? If that's true, I'm in real danger!* Tex feared the farmer, especially as Thanksgiving drew near.

He didn't want to take any chances, so he quickly turned and ran.

"Hey, where you going?" he heard again. This time he felt the little chickadee trailing close behind. As a matter of fact, he thought it might be catching a ride on his tail feathers, so he fluffed them out as wide as he could. He'd have no bird catching a free ride, especially one who talked too much. Impatiently, Tex gobbled with annoyance, just loud enough for the pesky little bird to hear.

Then, out of the blue, he heard something. It was a THUMP, then a BAM! It sounded like.....like..... something had fallen. Tex the Turkey wanted to ignore it, but his curiosity got the best of him. He turned. Sure enough, there he was. The little chickadee was spralled out in the dust. His plump body had landed in the mourning dove's ground feeder. Bird seed covered his head and beak. He sputtered and spit bits of dust and seed as he whimpered, "Chickadee dee dee, Chickadee dee dee".

“Why, that’s a purty sight,” drawled Tex. “Yeah, a real purty sight. I’d say. Ya all better be careful now. I mean, ya look a little weird yourself. Lie on the ground very long and a bobcat might decide to have ya for his Thanksgiving dinner. Yeah, he could see you a mile away. Why, that ol’ bobcat’s probably on his way right now. Gobble, Gobble, Gobble! Yep, that’s just what that big ol’ bobcat will do to you, Gobble you up,” he repeated to the startled little chickadee.

The chickadee’s eyes darted right to left. He tossed, turned, fluttered, and scrambled until his tiny body flew into the air. Seed and dust fell like confetti from the sky.

“Don’t say that” cried the chickadee. “It’s not very polite you know. It’s terribly frightening. That was unkind. I nearly broke a wing! I could have choked on the bird seed and the dust. Don’t you have any manners?”

Before he could go any further, Tex interrupted, “Talk about manners, ya aren’t so polite yourself, makin’ fun of me. I’m a big, good lookin’ turkey, and you have nothing to laugh at. I don’t see anything on my body that jiggles, jaggles, wiggles, waggles, or shines like a neon light.”

The more upset Tex the Turkey got, the more his head turned a bright, bright red. “Just go, leave me alone,” he gobbled, and he ran into the wooded area.

“Hold on there! You mean to tell me you haven’t seen that big ol’ red thing hanging from your chin and down your neck? You mean you’ve never noticed how it jiggles, jaggles, wiggles, and waggles like jello?”

Chickadee didn’t leave. He flew after Tex screeching as loud as he could. “You’ve got to be kidding me! Look how it’s flopping from side to side as you run. Look, it’s turning redder and redder.” As he kept up with Tex, he sang, “Chickadee dee dee, Chickadee dee dee. Wiggle, waggle, jiggle, joggle!”

Tex was furious. Tex was angry. He ran faster and faster, but Chickadee flew just inches above his head babbling the entire time.

“Now don’t get mad! I’m just telling it like it is,” the chickadee chattered excitedly. “You don’t want to be seen by the farmer before Thanksgiving, do you? I’m trying to help. You and me, we’ve got to stick together. You know, the farmer and the bobcat are not our friends. You and me, we could be friends. We could help each other. You’ve got to get rid of that red thing that lights up the land. And me, I’ve got to be aware of the bobcat. I know you’ve got a great smell there. That beak of yours, it’s a real smeller. I know! You could warn me about the bobcat before it eats me. And me, I could warn you about the farmer before he shoots you. But you have got to get rid of that red thing,” he pleaded. “Chickadee dee dee, Chickadee dee dee.”

Without warning, Tex dug his claws into the earth and stopped so quickly that chickadee flew right into the back of his head. Once again, he landed in the dirt. This time he quickly picked himself up and hopped next to Tex.

“What is it my friend? Why’d you step on the brakes?”

Tex glared down at chickadee. “I told ya to leave me alone.”

“Sorry, bud, but we’re a team now,” declared the little chickadee.

“I’m not your bud, I’m not your friend, and we’re not a team.” Tex hollared. “And I don’t have any red jiggly, jaggly, wiggly, waggly thing hanging from my chin. “

Chickadee looked at him in disbelief. He stared and said nothing.

Tex lifted his heavy body and flew as fast as he could. This time he was able to escape that pesty little bird. He flew into the wooded area, then walked until he was in the very open center of a cluster of trees.

He knew the chickadee could not see him. He knew the farmer could not see him.

Lowering his head in the direction of his large claws, he looked and looked, but could not see anything jiggling, jaggling, wiggling, and waggling like jello.

Then he turned his head side ways. He drew his large sad eyes down looking for the red jiggly, jaggly wiggly, waggly like jello thing. He saw nothing.

Next, he lifted up his right leg as high as he could, fanned his feathers in all directions, yanked his head back until it was nearly upside down and searched for the jiggly, jaggly, wiggly, waggly like jello thing. He saw nothing.

He even took a flying leap and flew a short distance upside down, hoping to see what the chickadee had made such fun of. He saw nothing. "Oh Gobble," he grumbled to himself.

Now, he was really mad. He gobbled and gobbled. He shook his head furiously. He gobbled louder and louder. His feathers fanned out behind him. He pranced, trotted, and dug in the dirt. He was angry. Yes, Tex the Turkey was throwing a temper tantrum. The more he gobbled, the louder he got, and the faster his head swayed from side to side. It was then he felt something just below his chin, something thumping against his beak, something swaying side to side, something tickling his long neck. He saw it! It was red! It was jiggly, jaggly, wiggly, waggly like jello. "Oh my!" He raised his head and gobbled louder than he had ever gobbled in his life. It filled the wooded area. It filled the farmer's land.

Then, he heard something even louder than his own cry of sadness. He heard the chickadee screeching his warning, "Chickadee dee dee! Chickadee dee dee!"

He saw the little chickadee high in the sky, above the treetops. He was flying in circles and with one tiny wing, he was pointing furiously toward something in the distance. That is when Tex the Turkey saw the farmer, rifle in hand, searching the fields.

"He's looking for you!" cried the chickadee as he landed near Tex. "Run, run, fly, fly as quickly as you can! I'll wait for you. I'll wait right here."

Tex the Turkey took a deep breath and prepared for flight, but something held him back.

"Go, go he's coming!"

But Tex smelled something in the air. Tex smelled danger. It was the bobcat, a very hungry bobcat hiding just behind a bush, near the little bird. Chickadee hopped up and down, screeching, "Run, fly, go! He's almost here."

Just then, the bobcat reached out with one long claw and caught the little bird's wing. Crack! His tiny wing was broken. Chickadee tried desperately to take flight. It was impossible. He tried to hop away, but he was too slow.

Tex the Turkey saw what happened. He turned and grabbed Chickadee with his long claws, threw him on his back, spread his great wings, and took flight. They escaped from the hungry bobcat. They flew faster and higher. Chickadee held tight to Tex the Turkey's long black feathers. The wind blew furiously, the sky was bright, the world below grew smaller and smaller. Chickadee could barely hold on. He swayed from left to right. Chickadee was losing his grip. He was falling.

"Help" he managed to call, "I can't hold on any longer." Tex slowed down and flew toward the earth, but it was too late. Chickadee slid to the right, then to the left. All he could do was cling tightly to Tex's long neck.

"Hold on, hold on" he yelled. "Hold on to my wiggly, waggly, jiggly, jaggly thing." And that is just what chickadee did. It wasn't hard to find because of its bright red color. It wasn't hard to hold on to as it swung in circles and up and down and right and left. Chickadee held on with his one good wing, and wiggly, waggly, jiggly, jaggly thing wrapped around him securely.

Chickadee giggled, chirped, and tweeted “Chickadee dee dee, Chickadee dee dee”.

Tex the Turkey answered quietly, “Gobble, Gobble, Gobble.”

They landed safely. Chickadee released his grip on the wiggly, waggly, jiggly, jaggly thing. Chickadee looked up at Tex. Tex looked down at Chickadee. They smiled. They knew they had escaped their enemies, and they knew they could not have done it without the other.

That Thanksgiving, Chickadee enjoyed fresh grain and safflower seeds in the farmer’s bird feeder. When no one was near, he called out to his friend, his bud. Tex the Turkey lumbered out of the trees to share the feast. Each sang his song of thanksgiving. “Gobble, Chickadee dee dee, Gobble Gobble. They were a team, and for that they were thankful.

**Adult Division  
Rhymed Poetry**

**First Place**

*Country Boy, Prize Bull, Pastured Hoss*, by Yvonne Nunn

There is a boy from rainless years  
    who sniffs red pintos through the nights  
    while sleep rims shun depression fears.  
    I've heard him wish for homemade kites,  
    pretend he's flying through the air  
    performing tricks the ace will dare.

He walks barefoot across the yard  
    and toes his way through grass burr trails,  
    comes face to face with strung safeguard,  
    a five wire fence tacked tight with nails  
    where neighbor's bull chews drought-baled hay  
    and paws the ground of grassless lea.

The pond sounds beckon him to cross  
    the pointed barbs, to take a look  
    while cattle eat with one lone hoss  
    to find the frogs in sister's book  
    that croak at night a lullaby  
    while he recites "Lord if I die....."

He throws one leg across the fence  
    and then he sees the long horned bull  
    in all of his magnificence,  
    forget the hay, for now he's full,  
    then breaks into a Toro run  
    toward little guy who thinks he's done.

But like in life protection comes  
    to little ones who face a beast;  
    the horse is gored, but bull succumbs  
    to pounding hooves from west to east  
    and boy who knows of drought-crop times  
    donates to vet his saved up dimes.

**Adult Division  
Rhymed Poetry**

**Second Place**

*Brilliant Gems Come Out at Night*, by Carol Dee Meeks  
A Shakespeare Sonnet

The mer'cury climbs and waves of heat salute  
our town while tantrums rage in city yards,  
where groups, despite a mob that could pollute,  
retreat to poems read by local bards.

When wider smiles from sun infuse the sky,  
and passion spills like lava down a hill,  
the crowds complain as sweat invades each eye,  
and readers mount the rostrum poised with skill.

But fury flickers down with folks on stage  
when Shakespeare sonnets sound throughout the park;  
in rhyme they thumb through lines and scan each page,  
then viewers listen, stay sangfroid till dark.

The papers fire details that fashion life  
as sequence songs release their strains and strife.

**Adult Division  
Rhymed Poetry**

**Third Place**

*Not Now*, by Marilyn Page

When she told me, I asked to go with her.  
Her last days, she wanted me to know.  
Not now, she said, but later.

I was five years old then, her daughter,  
not comprehending her deep woe  
and mine to come. I asked to go with her.

The ambulance, the wake, all is a blur.  
Motherless days are tough to undergo.  
Not now, she said, but later.

No one to give Mother's Day cards or  
be with me on my wedding day. It was so  
very long ago when I was with her.

Seeing toddlers with their mothers  
incited envy and anger in my soul.  
Not now, she said, but later.

Finally, the grief goes. I care for  
my lot and my loves. Though  
I did ask to be with her  
my time will not come till later.

**Adult Division  
Rhymed Poetry**

**Honorable Mention**

*The Circus*, by Byron Folkerts

Music from the calliope swirls  
Through autumn's breath on Main Street  
As curious gather for impromptu parade.  
Lions bellow an echoed roar  
From horse-drawn wagon's cage.  
An elephant's trumpet blares beyond  
The noise of crowds in wait.

Tents spring up at town's edge – immense,  
Colossal, enormous in stage,  
With trapeze canopies o'er three rings hinged.  
All gather beneath canvas, bulging at seams,  
The audience hushed in climactic suspense.  
Barnum's charisma in megaphone unleashed,  
The greatest show on earth begins.

**Adult Division  
Rhymed Poetry**

**Honorable Mention**

*Like a Spring Macbeth Bubbles Before the Run*, by Carol Dee Meeks  
A Shakespeare Sonnet

Macbeth and Banquo claim their wars' success  
when witches cackle fates across the moor  
where wasteland lays decayed, a peaty mess,  
and leave a jet-like trail from broom's grand tour.  
King Duncan tabs Macbeth as Scotland's thane  
as he remembers news he'll rule the land.  
The awe of autumn days ascends his reign,  
a show of Shakespeare's lore in regal stand.  
Now Lady Beth decides to kill the king.  
She craves the fame before his term expires,  
and bids two royal men to banquet fling;  
the weaker one agrees to her desires.

Macbeth began a murder spree of crime,  
then after he rejects a Shakespeare rhyme.

**Adult Division  
Free Verse Poetry**

**First Place**

*Exodus: Redux*, by Robert Cory

Flanked by wisps of thinning hair  
my eyes seek refuge from waxy artificial light and glare;  
from the Up/Stop/Out-of-order/In/Off  
Down/Go/On buttons and dings;  
co-worker struggles and office machines.  
The *ersatz* gab of a jam-packed elevator.  
Squeeze. Avoid. Step-across. Dodge. Brush by  
into stark, strobe-like glimpses of sun  
deflected by the asymmetrical cram of assorted architecture  
once new, some newer; all arctic stiff.  
Sunglasses donned. Briefcase in hand.  
One stride eclipses the next  
amid a pi of cellular devices and the aloof;  
fumes, skirts, panhandlers and Johnston-Murphy's.  
The cracked-up-to-be, wilting.

Estranged at last I'm behind the wheel.  
Inside a man-made womb of metal, plastic and fabric construct.  
Encased in a mold.  
(Confined once again.)  
Nestle. Sigh. Disconnect.  
Seatbelt snapped.  
Calculating distance and time.  
Merge. Navigate. Seek.  
Eyeing gauges, mirrors and the billboard advisories  
that line my escape route  
along these iridescent avenues of Kingdom Come.

**Adult Division  
Free Verse Poetry**

**Second Place**

*The Question*, by Byron Folkerts

Morning kisses with hint of first light -  
Plum to scarlet, then auburn to gold,  
Sun burns bright and new day unfolds.  
Like morning glory peeks at new dawn,  
You arise from slumber, breathe deeply a yawn.

Have you noticed the aromas caressing you lately?  
Caught a whiff of perfume?  
Warm cookies from oven, freshly removed?  
A new cut of alfalfa, left sunning to dry?  
An open window's soft breeze, cooling a pie?

Have you walked in the rain? Felt it run down your back?  
Walked barefoot through fresh snow? Or mud? Or grass?  
Touched a flame, perhaps?  
Held a snowflake as it melted?  
Held a hand as you walked?

Have you tickled an ear with your whisper?  
Or giggled abruptly?  
Laughed aloud? Laughed to tears?  
Experienced a concerto, really listening for more?  
Heard the symphony of nature? In a forest? Ocean's shore?

Ever won it big? Had it all? Been the champ?  
Have you lost everything? Been abandoned? Left desolate?  
Ever watched twin rainbows reflect brightly then fade?  
Have you suckled a lemon with juice dripping down chin?  
Or perhaps tasted death - just a taste, then return again?

Have you watched a child sleep?  
Kissed them softly? Dreamt their dreams?  
Have you wept aloud? Uncontrollably? Wailed and screamed?  
Have you been forced to say goodbyes, never to see them again?  
Or missed at the chance, to unending regret?

Your light now is dimming.

Evening primrose returns.  
From gold to auburn, then scarlet to plum,  
This day is over.  
How have you done?

**Adult Division  
Free Verse Poetry**

**Third Place**

*Rear View Mirror*, by Sally Clark

It's a good day when  
I don't have to leave the house  
or even get dressed if I don't want to,  
cars moving slowly down  
the street, smiling half-moon tires  
circling to their destinations.

It's a good day when  
time is something to squander  
as if it grew on trees, budding and leafing  
and curling around in the wind, as if  
fall would never arrive with winter's  
black ice to slick the streets and I can pretend

that she is still at home, watering her  
African violets, driving to the grocery store,  
catching the shoe sale sign in her  
rear view mirror and turning the car  
around. It's a good day when I can forget

to worry if they will remember to turn  
her every two hours or wipe her chin  
after she eats or comb her hair in the morning  
before they wheel her down to watch  
the fish circling in the aquarium.

It's a good day when there's only me  
in my head and not her, when I can look  
in my rear view mirror and see nothing  
behind me but trees, their leaves curling  
in the wind.

**Adult Division  
Free Verse Poetry**

**Honorable Mention**

*Dark Soliloquy*, by H.B. Berlow

It is a Victorian evening,  
rain falling on iron gratings,  
gas-lights flickering in the wind.  
It is a time of hope  
Amid the darkness of the night.

The lover of your youth appears in dreams  
made tragic by the bitter end that awaits  
you on this cobblestone road.  
He cannot rein the horses, cannot smooth  
the path that lies ahead.  
Only in dreams can you roam the forest  
together, hand in hand, a union  
of hearts kept apart, kept mercilessly apart.

Mother of children never born,  
Sister of the condemned,  
Daughter of Abraham,  
Woman of the infinite soul,  
On this road of sun-bleached bones  
you walk with the families of holocaust.

But it is this amethyst night  
that shines in your dark eyes,  
eyes that will never see the herons  
sing their morning song;  
no more will you see the rose in bloom.

And tonight you are calling to me  
from then dilapidated huts  
and barbed-wire fences,  
imploping me to rise above the city,  
telling me that there is more  
in what I see and much more  
than what I see.  
Tonight I feel your heart beating still.

**Adult Division  
Free Verse Poetry**

**Honorable Mention**

*Between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Hour*, by April Pameticky

*You Cray-Cray* she says, and I don't have the heart or the courage to tell her that I have no idea what that means, but since she has her warm brown arm slung around my neck, I step in tandem. We move through the hall, her hip brushing mine, the bone an exclamation point along the side of my body, and the cacophony blurs out her next words, her face turned from mine, her voice gleefully calling out. Her momentum propels me in the wrong direction, and I have to find the breath to tell her that my class is the other way, and I worry about being late, and if I have enough pencils, but mostly I worry about whether or not she will ever put her arm around me again, so I keep going. And I know that's what's wrong with my whole life, that I just keep going.

**Adult Division  
Free Verse Poetry**

**Honorable Mention**

*Late Fall*, by Heather Larson

Hi,  
my soul tastes like the road,  
yours?

Only the conversation won't go like that.

Oh, I wanted you to  
sit me down upon that highest purpose of yours,  
paint me the clearest of canvases,  
open your home to me,  
take me into it.

Instead,  
the weather is cooler than expected,  
there's trash in the street,  
our baggage lined up at the curb,  
a loosely based deck of cards,  
whiskey,  
outlaw country,  
pasts neither outrun or forgotten -- yet not cherished either.

We pack up the car,  
I let you take me home,  
but we threw out the map long ago.

We have people to ride with us,  
it's just that --  
mine are ghosts,  
but mine are still so heavy.

Still,

we can lift, compromise,  
smile,  
cry,  
I can see it all  
when I look in your eyes.

You're everything the dream ever was.

## Youth Division Fiction/Non-Fiction

### Second Place

*[A Mother's Love](#)*, by Molly Wierman

She was a hero.

Alice Jones had never traveled the world. She was no colossus who swooped in to save the helpless as they cried in despair. An ordinary mother, she cared for her family and loved her children dearly, living a quiet life in the country. Instead of an alarm bell alerting her to the villain's presence, the sound of birds warbling and children pattering around the house awoke her every morning.

Alice was a normal woman who lived a quotidian life—but she did great things nonetheless.

She held her son's hand tighter, listening to the rhythmic chirps of the machine monitoring his heartbeat. The sounds had been growing further apart for some time now. When Alice gently called her son's name, whispering small words of comfort in his ear, he did not answer. With a small smile, she sat back in her chair and continued stroking her child's knuckles, massaging his sallow skin. She had kept her vigil for hours now, never sleeping, never crying. Even when the doctors told her to rest, even when the police asked her what she had done to drive her son to suicide, she smiled demurely and gazed at her child as she answered their interrogations. Her little boy had grown, becoming fragile and weak instead of healthy and strong. The large, curious eyes that, years ago, had gazed up at her with a voracious appetite for learning were closed in a final sleep as her son's soul slowly entered its final resting place.

Never once had Alice hurt her son. When he cried from nightmares as a child, she held him close and soothed him to sleep. When he fell on the playground at the park, she wiped his cuts clean and, with words of caution, sent him back to play with his friends. Even when other boys ridiculed him for his short stature and pudgy frame, she told her son he was a handsome young man of God. Throughout his life, she had always been there to support and encourage him, guiding him in love. Had he done so much as imply that he was suffering, Alice would have done everything to save her child. Such was a mother's role.

Some would say she had failed in this responsibility. Finding one's son bleeding profusely after a botched suicide attempt would have made any mother question her worth. Good parents didn't have suicidal children, and if they did, their babies would suffer painlessly, not face slow, agonizing deaths. Just yesterday, Alice's neighbor, a young wife with no children, had come to the hospital to see the tragedy for herself. What Alice thought would be a kindly visit to comfort a tired mother became a one-sided accusation in which the younger woman had vilified the older.

"How could you?"

Alice did not attempt to respond to the charge. She had no reason to defend herself, no wrongs to confess. She had only rights to show for—but even that she did wordlessly, without ostentatious boasting.

"What did you do to him?"

She couldn't hear her neighbor berating her: All she knew was the staccato pulsing of her son's failing heart. As she stared at the boy's paling face, she wanted to take him in her arms just as she had done when he was a baby, cradling him close to her heart. She would sing him to sleep,

blocking out the voices mocking him for being ugly, for being smart, for existing at all—the voices that had created the grotesque lullaby singing her baby to his final rest, eventually drowning out her words of love.

"I bet it was your marriage that did this. If you hadn't driven your husband off, maybe he would have lived."

She gestured toward the dying boy, though she still refused to recognize him. She could only see far enough to find ways to blame Alice. Though she couldn't see what was obvious, she could spend an entire day analyzing all the details of her neighbor's life, selecting the ones that might have driven the boy to suicide.

"Maybe if he hadn't been illegitimate, this wouldn't have happened. Your other children are fine. It's just this one that had problems."

Anyone else might have fought back by this point. Alice was no angel: She *wanted* to defend herself, to assert her innocence, to kick and scream until the woman at least stopped speculating about what sordid behavior of Alice's might have infected her children. In that moment of grief, however, she had no power to take care of herself. She was weak—but in that weakness consisted her strength.

"Well," the woman said, tossing a tuft of bleached blonde hair behind her shoulders, "if you're going to sit there and stew in your own guilt, that's fine. But remember—you did this to him."

She flounced out the door, admiring her svelte frame in the window glass. No children for *her* to worry about! Never had she slept with a man, and never would she.

Alice sighed with relief. Maybe she would have to move once she found the money. Abandoned and unemployed, however, she couldn't conceive a way both to care for her remaining children (even if they lived with her absentee husband now) and to run from her accusers. No, she had to care for her babies before she exonerated herself. What did their opinions, their ideas, matter? Based in slander and malice, the lies could only embitter the town gossips to her.

A nurse walked into the room. His bloodshot eyes examined Alice's son, his gaze perfunctorily moving from the limp body to the heart monitor to the woman.

"What happened to him? I've heard he has been here for some time, but my shift only just started."

"He shot himself. Unfortunately, he didn't have very good aim."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I wish we could do more for him, but I think his time is very short."

"He had a short life. I think it's fitting for him to have a quick death."

"...Yes. How long has he been here, exactly?"

"A little over two days."

"And you've been here all that time?"

"Oh, yes."

The nurse scratched his ear and looked at the motionless boy. With a frown, he noted the sporadic pulse and pale face. Clearing his throat several times, he started to speak to Alice again, but she interrupted him.

"Do you know what he said to me when he came home that day?"

"...No, ma'am. I don't."

"He kept saying I was a good mother."

The nurse bent over the boy, adjusting the ventilator partially obscuring his young, warped face. He tracked the heartbeats on the monitor and adjusted the sheets covering the frigid body. The boy, he knew, was taking his last breaths, though he certainly should have died much longer than two days ago.

"I imagine you must be if you've been here all this time."

"Any mother, good or bad, would be here right now."

Neither spoke for a moment. Alice could hear the doctors moving through the hallways, running from one patient to the next. Nurses pushed patients in beds to the operating room, where surgeons and anesthesiologists waited. She wondered when a doctor would visit her son's room again. Five hours had passed since someone had last come to care for her child.

"Do I... maybe know you?" The nurse studied Alice's face, brow furrowed in confusion. Why would he recognize this woman?

"Oh, that's right." She smiled. "I think you were here when I was leaving after my cancer surgery. We must have barely seen each other for a moment."

"I remember now. You were the first patient our hospital could use robotic surgery on." The nurse allowed himself to feel a twinge of pride—the small town hospital had finally gotten its share of the newest medical technology, and *he* had been there to witness its first use. "How did that work for you?"

"I went to see the doctor a few days ago. He said it's returned—my cancer. The surgery wasn't enough. I suppose it's my fault for getting cancer in the first place. I should have taken better care of my health. That's what I've been told. I've never liked healthy food, you see."

The nurse's face fell. To think even such great technology couldn't eradicate all traces of disease from the world...

"There might be other forms of treatment for you," he said to himself. "There might still be ways to fight it."

"Anthony, how long does he have? Will he be alive for just a few more moments? I want to say goodbye to him."

The surprise of hearing his first name—no one called him by any name, much less his own, in the hospital—returned the nurse's attention to the woman sitting in front of him, cradling her son's hand against her cheek. She entwined her strong fingers with the boy's limp ones, as if trying to give him a transfusion of her strength. He was just a baby to her again—not a suicidal teenager, not a bullied student, just a tranquil baby.

"If you're wondering when you can leave, you can go any time now. We'll take good care of him."

"No. I won't leave."

"Ma'am, you're too sick to be here. Your cancer, if I remember correctly, was in advanced stages when we tried to operate on you. If it's come back, it must be even worse now. You must take care of yourself."

"Do you know what family means?"

"What?"

Alice closed her eyes and listened to the faint heartbeat. Like a reassuring rhythm, it kept her strong, even when she wanted to throw herself on her son's body and weep. No, as long as that heart kept beating, she would hope, no matter how inevitable her baby's fate.

"Family. It stands for, 'forget about me—I love you.'"

The nurse didn't know what to say. After many long years in nursing school and even more practicing as an intensive care nurse, he knew he had gradually, quietly closed his heart. Patients came in day after day, dying in the quiet night and in the busy morning. They were just people, nothing special. Eventually, he had become more acquainted with the dead than with the living—and he had liked it that way. Now this woman had come with her son, so silently steadfast, so openly devoted. For years, he had separated life from death—but here they were together. Life in the face of death, and death to preserve life.

Anthony put down his clipboard. Words were extraneous, yet he felt he had to have *something* to say. He watched as the heartbeat on the monitor began to flatline, as it had so many times before. He heard the dull, repetitive note of death ring in his ears as the woman kissed her

child's forehead. Somewhere, in the midst of it all, he knew she said, "Mommy loves you. Mommy will always love you"—but he wasn't sure if she intended her words for her child, for him, or for the world.

He felt his own heart contracting powerfully in his chest, sending warm blood flowing through his veins. Shivers crawled like inchworms up his spine.

"Mommy'll be with you in Heaven soon."

Anthony swallowed. For the first time, he felt happy—awed, even—in the presence of death.

"Ma'am... you're a hero."

"No." Alice Jones shook her head, blinking away the tears that welled up in her eyes. She rested her head on her son's chest and closed her eyes. All was serene in the face of the chaos outside the room.

"No, Anthony. I'm not a hero. I'm just a mother."

## Youth Division Fiction/Non-Fiction

### Second Place

*The Last Inning*, by Ally Burr

Both exhilarating and nerve-wracking, the late innings of a close softball game brought out the best in a player. Even I couldn't help the sweet euphoria that spread throughout my being.

This adrenaline rush is where my story begins. It was the bottom of the ninth, and my team was up to bat with two outs already recorded against us. We were neck and neck with our opponents, the score having teetered between us the whole game, now at seven to seven. Our home crowd was going absolutely wild.

Normally, I'd be going just as wild with them — cheering for my batting teammates and shouting out encouragements. Tonight was anything but normal. My mom, who'd been battling cancer for almost six months, had been admitted to the hospital early that morning. My older brother Bryce had wrenched me away from the warmth of my bed to drive me to the hospital for mom. I'd spent most of the day at her bedside, praying for remission.

Originally, I wasn't going to play. But my mom, hoarse and weak in the stark white hospital bed urged me to go. It was a Friday game, but there hadn't been school due to a teacher workday. One of the qualifications if it was a school day was that you had to go for at least two class periods to be eligible to play. There wouldn't have been anything holding me back from taking my rightful place in the catcher's gear behind home plate.

Nothing except for my dying mother. At first, I'd protested leaving her, but since the amount of time we had left with her was undetermined, I decided to give in to her wishes and give her what she wanted.

Throughout the game so far, I'd been somewhat distant and distracted. How could I get fully in the spirit game when a disease was draining the life source away from the woman who gave birth to me? My mind snapped back to the game, and I saw that I was on deck. The girl who had been up at bat had singled out.

As I stepped out of the dugout, the crowd's cheers hit me in a wave. I allowed myself a small smile while I warmed up my arms a bit. Before I knew it, the smack of the bat connecting with the ball danced to my ears, and the batter before me was making a mad dash for first. Runners were safe at first and second.

With my heart thrumming excitedly against my chest, I strolled confidently into the batter's box. The pitcher stared me down viciously. Digging my feet in, I grinned at her. It kept coming to me that this was possibly the last chance to score. There were two outs, and I didn't know how much longer we could go on. I had to bat someone in. Our win depended on it. Scoring at this point was a priority, because if we didn't, we'd have to go into extra innings. That was not happening.

I was going to see my mom.

I watched the ball shoot past me into the catcher's glove. It was too close to being a ball for me to swing, but the ump shouted out the called strike. Encouragement swirled around me. Taking a deep breath, I regrouped for the next pitch. *Come at me*, I thought.

I was not going to lose my mother tonight.

Gripping the bat tighter, I tried not to think about how little time there was for our team to score. Another close strike flew past me. It wasn't the pitch I wanted, but I felt my stomach pinch in that way that it did when a strike shot past me. That ball could have been a triple to the fence. And I had let it fly on by. My mind reverted to thoughts of my mother, like it always did when I needed strength during a game.

My mother was my rock. Growing up, I'd always been more of a mama's girl. But my mom had taught me how to play softball. She was always at every game before she got sick. Her health was always teeter-tottering back and forth, and it made for a rough six months. Especially now that it was softball season at my high school. During the game, I always searched the stands for her face. Recently, I hadn't been able to find it. It was times like these that I could pick out her encouraging yell, but it wasn't there.

I was only a sophomore, and I hadn't hit a home run at all for my team. I'd never hit one, period. A memory came flashing back to me.

*"What happens when you hit over the fence, Mommy?" I asked in my little girl voice. We were at the softball fields, and I was hitting as hard as my seven year old body would allow. Mom came over to me and kneeled down, ignoring the red dirt dusting her tan knees.*

*"The world stops for you. The moment you make contact with that ball, you know it will go over before you can even see it. When that day comes, everyone will be cheering for you. It will be your moment," she told me with a smile.*

*"I wanna hit it over for you," I replied.*

*"I'll be there when you do," she told me, kissing my hair and hugging me tightly.*

As the flashback faded, I knew what I had to do.

Everything slowed as the pitcher started her windup. I clenched the bat harder than I'd ever clenched it. Every pent-up emotion I'd felt tonight came rushing back as the ball flew from the pitcher's hand. I swung.

I knew where the ball was going before I even saw it. Screams and cheers swallowed me as I ran like I'd stolen something. All I could think about was Mom and that day when she said she would be there to see it. There was nothing she could do about it, though. She was here with me, even if she wasn't physically here. I just wished she was doing all right.

*Hold on, Mom,* I thought. I looked up to see the ball sail over the fence. Letting loose a scream of my own, I pumped my fists in the air. If only she was here to see it. Rounding third, I saw my team waiting for me at home plate. I came in, and they surrounded me, chanting my name. We'd automatically won when we gained the lead.

My coach was holding her phone out to me, and I put it to my ear.

"Honey, I'm so proud of you," Mom's frail voice said. Tears flooded my eyes. "I've gotten better since earlier, but they still wouldn't let me come to the game. I wanted so bad to be there."

"It's okay, Mom. I hit it over for you," I managed through the tears.

"I know. I love you so much." Her voice became feathery at the end, and all I could hear was silence. Then Dad came on. Worry clenched my stomach.

"Hey, there. I heard about your smash. Mom had to get off, but you should come as soon as you can. She wants to see you." Dad's strong voice sent comfort coursing through me.

"How is she?" I asked nervously.

"She's...holding up. But she's definitely better than earlier. We came so close to losing her. But it seems like a miracle has taken hold of her."

I bit my bottom lip. "I'll be there soon. Tell her I'm coming."

"I will."

We hung up. My team was silent, still circling me. One by one, the smiles appeared, and they hugged me all together. Once I was released, I gathered my things and left with Bryce. They knew

what I was going through. The drive to the hospital was quiet. I was torn between joy for my homer and the worry that was constantly visiting me these days.

As soon as we got there, I jumped out and ran in, cleats clicking against the sterile linoleum of the hospital floor. Streaks of red dust trailed behind me, sprinkling the floor with color. My dad was there to meet me, and I collided into a hug. His embrace strengthened me, and he led me to the room Mom was in. The moment he opened the door, I rocketed inside. Mom was asleep on the bed, her skin pale and the heartbeat monitor beeping regularly. Relief filled me as I gently kneeled beside the bed.

Her hand was soft and warm when I grasped it. Mom's eyes fluttered open, and a smile lit her face. It was so good to see that light in her eyes once again. It'd been too long since it was there. My heart swelled to know that I was the reason for her recovered light.

"Hey, you," she whispered. She stroked my face with her other hand. "My home-run hitting superstar."

"I told you I would hit it over for you," I told her, my voice cracking.

A tear slipped down her cheek. "And I told you I would be there. But I wasn't."

"Mom," I insisted. "It's okay. You were with me. Trust me, you were with me."

She smiled again.

"How are you feeling?"

"Peachy," she replied sarcastically, her voice hoarse. She was still my mother, being sarcastic even in the most serious of times.

The door opened again, and a man in a white coat, who I was assuming was the doctor, came in. "May I have a word?" he asked me.

I nodded once, but I was somewhat reluctant to leave my mom. Following the doctor into the hallway, I prepared myself for whatever news he was about to give me.

"Your mother has been through a lot this evening," he started. "But, she's responding well to the treatment we gave her."

Nodding once again, I knew my face held the question I wanted answered.

The doctor smiled. "She's going to make it."

## Youth Division Fiction/ Non-Fiction

### Third Place

#### *A Sturred Choice*, by Ally Burr

Deep bass beats drowned out the outside world as Addely Connors pulled into a parking space that was as close to an entrance at Clearwater High School as she could. She lingered in her car, soaking in the music as if it would give her the strength to get through her classes that day. Her eyelids fluttered closed for a second, but a second later, they flicked back open. At that precise moment, five-eleven, chestnut haired and blue eyed Benjamin Lorre strode out of the doors with his gaze locked on the red Dodge Avenger that Addely was honored to call her own.

Why had she tried to empower herself with music when her motivation was coming to greet her? Grinning, she pulled her keys out of the ignition, heaved her backpack from the passenger seat and got out of her car. A press of a button locked her precious car and an arm slipped around her waist, guiding her to lean against a solid chest.

“Good morning, Miss Addely,” Ben’s voice murmured in her ear, sending little sparks over her skin.

“Hello,” she replied, having to tilt her head back to see his face clearly. “How was your morning?”

Ben’s eyes sparkled and Addely couldn’t help but smile. “Dreary and dark until you came and then it was bright.”

A feathery laugh escaped Addely. Ben stole a kiss before they began to walk toward the building they’d only have to endure for another year. The bricks had long since been drained of their red tint and looked more like gray than anything. Fallen leaves kicked up in the crisp October breeze.

“So tonight, Derrick is inviting a bunch of us over to his house. You want to go?” Ben asked Addely. Derrick had been Ben’s best friend since the third grade.

“Yeah,” Addely answered enthusiastically. Every outing she’d been on that Derrick had been at, had been filled with constant laughter and good times. He was a great guy to be around, and he played baseball like Ben did.

“Awesome.” Ben kissed her hair, and they walked into the doors.

\* \* \* \* \*

Addely and Ben had been together for four and a half months. She could still remember the first time they’d met, all the years they’d been just friends. But what was even clearer was when their friendship had morphed into something more, something that nobody had seen coming. A lot of people at school had been sort of shocked when the news broke that were going out.

She was the quiet cross-country runner, taking her place in the background of things. Her grades were that of a higher level student, but not to the point of perfection. Addely had never been arrested, never smoked and never touched a bottle of anything alcoholic. Ben was a spotlight magnet. He appeared in the school newspaper every other issue for his athletic achievements or success in debate. Everybody knew his name, and every girl knew his face. He’d even been deemed “swoon-worthy” by a group of sophomore girls with a popular blog. The thing nobody ever seemed to notice was his close friend, the quiet runner.

These things cycled through Addely's head as she and Ben drove out to Derrick's family's ranch. It was a good twenty minute drive, but for some odd reason, Addely had found herself thinking about the start of her relationship with Ben. One thing she relished about being with Ben was that silence could be shared in comfort. There was no need to constantly fill the air with meaningless words. Their presence was enough alone to keep them content.

The sun had gone down rather rapidly, and the headlights of Ben's truck bounced as they hit a rut in the dirt road. Up ahead was the turnoff for Derrick's driveway. Multiple vehicles rested in front of the two story farmhouse. Ben pulled up beside another truck and parked. The two of them hurried up to the front door, shivering in their light jackets in the frigid October night. The stars seemed sharper and brighter than usual, but it was a new moon, and it was the stars that had control of the sky for the night.

Once inside, Addely saw the plethora of food laid out on the dining room table and smiled, knowing that by the end of the night it would all be cleaned out by the large athletes present. She saw Derrick and called out to him.

"Is your sister here?" Addely asked as Ben made a beeline for the food.

"Yep, she's upstairs in her room," Derrick answered from the couch with a game controller flicking and twisting in his grasp.

Derrick's sister, Merissa, was a good friend of Addely's. They'd run cross-country together since their freshman year. They stuck together as quiet people do, and slowly grown fond of each other. Addely found Merissa working on an article for the school newspaper. Merissa put aside her work at the arrival of her friend.

"Hey, girl," Merissa greeted. "How are you?"

"I'm good. And you?"

"I'm getting along." Merissa bobbed her head.

Addely soon lost track of the time as they talked about school, the state champion tennis team and the latest on who'd been caught smoking in the locker room. She finally rose.

"I better go see what Ben's up to," Addely told Merissa, letting her get back to work on her article. While talking to Derrick's sister, she'd found out that their parents were gone on a trip to visit family in Nebraska. They wouldn't be back for a couple days. Addely had been hoping to see Derrick's mom, who made the best cookies in a sixty mile radius.

Each stair creaked as Addely came down, expecting to see the scene she'd left earlier. What she saw was nothing like the peaceful video gaming and face-stuffing she'd seen before. Everyone was holding a plastic red cup or a bottle. Her heart thundered in her chest. This wasn't a drinking crowd. Ben's friends didn't do this. *Ben* didn't do this. Her eyes scanned the room for Ben. He was on the couch, talking loudly with Derrick. As Addely drifted toward him, the sickly sweet scent invaded her nose.

What scared Addely the most was the brown bottle in his calloused hand. He casually took a swig and looked at her, his glazed eyes lighting up at the sight of her.

"How many have you had?" Addely uttered, still in disbelief.

Ben scratched his head with his free hand. "Three?"

The fear was completely gone from Addely now. A roaring, rushing anger filled the hollows left behind by fear. How could Ben do this? Didn't he know what he was doing could hurt him? Didn't he know it was *illegal*?

"You don't even know?" Addely snapped.

"Time gets away when you're having fun," Ben slurred and laughed raucously.

"Fun? You call this fun? You call risking an addiction and breaking the law *fun*?" She ripped the bottle from his grasp and threw it against the wall. Amber liquid and crisp white bubbles oozed away from the point of impact. "You disgust me!"

She couldn't stand the sight of him: hazy-eyed and drunk on the couch. Addely stormed out the door into the October cold. She got halfway to Ben's truck when she heard his voice calling her back. A realization dawned on her. She had to take his keys. She had to take *all* of their keys. There was no way she was going to walk away and let any of them drive home.

"Give me your keys, Ben." Addely stood still as Ben stumbled toward her.

"Why are you leaving? Addely, don't do this." His saccharine breath washed over her. Addely wanted to do nothing more than puke at that moment. Instead, she found her courage and slapped Ben across the face. "What the heck was that for?"

"For being drunk. For not thinking for the first time in your life. You want to throw everything you've worked for away in one night? Fine. But I'm not going to be a part of it." Addely slipped her hand into Ben's pocket. Her fingers latched onto his key ring and she pulled them away from his bleary attempts to stop her.

The rumble of a truck engine startled her. Addely hadn't heard anyone come out besides her and Ben. Then she saw Derrick in his truck, backing out at an unsafe speed.

"Oh, my God, no." Addely's stomach flipped inside out. Derrick was drunk, if not drunker, than Ben. And he was driving. Even Ben seemed to snap out of his stupor to realize the direness of the situation. With fluttering fingers, Addely pulled out her cell phone and dialed 911. Once they picked up, her words gushed out like water out of a broken dam.

"What do we do? Oh, God, what's going to happen?"

The operator told her to be calm and that officers were on the way. A gut feeling told Addely that something terrible would happen. She couldn't just let him go.

"Come on, Ben. Get your butt in the passenger seat of your truck," Addely ordered. They ran to the truck, Addely climbing in behind the wheel. She belted herself in and peeled out of the driveway, anxious and nauseated. They drove for a little while, getting back on the main road, which was lined with trees.

Slamming on the brakes, Addely screamed. Derrick's truck had been rammed into a tree. The driver airbag had deployed but it wasn't white like a sheet. It was stained with red.

\* \* \* \* \*

Derrick was hospitalized with head trauma and assorted broken bones. For a week and three days, he wouldn't wake up. Then, finally, he opened his eyes.

Addely hadn't spoken to Ben since the night Derrick had crashed. He'd tried calling a thousand times, but she didn't pick up—not once. He didn't deserve her attention. After she'd gotten home that night, Addely cried herself to sleep. The odor of beer lingered in her nose, haunting her every thought. How had it all happened?

Why had it even happened? Derrick and Ben had never touched a bottle in their lives, so why start then? As she thought about it, she wanted to take her anger and sorrow out on something. All she could do was pound her pillow into oblivion.

Her phone rang, but for once, it wasn't Ben. The caller ID was Merissa's and Addely answered right away.

"Hello? Merissa?"

"Addely," Merissa choked out. "Derrick is awake."

Tears of joy burned Addely's eyes and rolled down her cheeks. It was a miracle he hadn't been killed.

"The doctors told us that he's not going to be the same," Merissa's grave words rang like a grim church bell. Addely's joy turned to black dread.

"What do you mean?"

Merissa choked back a sob. "He doesn't remember the night of the accident. And he...he..." Uncontrolled sobbing echoed through the line. Addely let her friend cry. Merissa

regained her composure enough to spit the words she'd been trying to find. "His legs are paralyzed and his last memory was of his first day in sophomore year."

The crushing truth of Derrick's accident spread through Addely like an iron poison. It weighed on her until the only thing she could do was squeeze her eyes shut, the images of the wreck dancing behind her eyelids.

Addely opened her eyes in Ben's truck.

"Addely, wake up. We're almost to Derrick's house," Ben's voice coaxed her.

"Derrick? He's home?" Her voice rose an octave. Why was she with Ben? He'd lost her trust for God knows how long.

"Yeah," Ben answered slowly.

"When did you ask me to come?"

"This morning. Are you all right?"

"Don't ever drink, Ben. Please just don't."

Addely sat back, reeling from her terrible dream. It had seemed all too real.