



LAKEFIELD  
LITERARY *Festival*

2005

YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST  
WINNERS

2005 Senior Fiction Winner

## Poems for a Blonde-Haired Girl

*by Russell Woods*

*Grade 12 – Kenner Collegiate Institute*

I wake up. There is no clock and the windows are all covered; there might as well be no time. I wake up and I write you a letter. I send with care two hundred hopeful little words and a handful of poems that I kiss for good luck. I kiss your name on the envelope with my sleepy lips and seal it away back in the drawer with all the other letters to you. Even if I could find the courage to send my desire to you, I don't know where you are, where you've been, or where you're going. I don't see you around anymore. I suppose we didn't speak much near the end. There were just broken glances in between lovely and complicated glass.

This envelope reminds me of you. Sitting here, I can feel it being so cold without ever touching it or drawing it close. It is white and pale, yet too hard to be snow or innocence or purity. The envelope is a spitting image of you. Your name is upon it, scrawled in my worried handwriting, and I am thinking about your bleached blonde hair. You never wore your hair down, but that's the way I am thinking about it now. It's sweet and typically beautiful as it curls by your breast. With it tucked up and swirled away, I wouldn't have guessed it to be so long. I always thought you could have been a model, but for what, I never knew, maybe whisky or boxing gloves – if you weren't wearing any of that oily crow makeup. I close the drawer where all your letters are and yet, you don't just slip away as you have before.

I write a few more poems before I go to the kitchen or the shower. Only one is about you, and the rest are terrible. In the kitchen the morning is cold, and my feet are made from porcelain, like a doll or a toilet. I crack an egg in the frying pan, and it looks like a train at the end of a tunnel as it starts to hiss. There is no music in the world that is this kind of music. I sit and eat in silence with a warm coke. The yoke starts to look like your face. I think you were prettier than a broken egg, but it is hard to remember now.

We never made love, and maybe that's why I'm thinking about you now. You didn't believe in that kind of thing and knew the exact word for a pipe cleaning between friends. Another girl had once said "touching souls," but that's hardly as truthful. I turn on the shower and make sure the water could boil me if I wasn't careful. It is splintered mercury diving into my shoulders, and nothing else would feel so absolute. And in the steam on the shower doors, I write your name a thousand times over and then let the letters fade so I can replace them all over again. I suppose this is suffering, love sickness, but it feels more like a nine-pound weight in my guts. I have seen you in the shower over and over. You asked for your towel to dry your hair; you walked about the place naked. In the kitchen you would stand bare in front of the window and tell all the neighbours to stick it.

Washing the dishes before I leave, I remember when you would wake up in your stained old sports shirts and grab the closest bottle you could find, and I would make you up fries and a tough, purple steak. You'd finger through old magazines because novels had no pictures; you'd believe in cleaning the pipes before I left for my day, and you continued fingering through old magazines. The dishes are done, and my hands feel like the hands of a drowned old lady.

I'm catching the bus. The morning is unadorned; there is no dew on leaves and no sympathetic breeze, and you never wore jewellery. Thought it was too girly. You would roll down the window on the busted-up nights, and while other girls I had known wore big badges made of silver and gold, it wasn't for your ghost skin. Red lipstick made you look like a cannibal, but still you wore no fancy things. The women on the bus are wearing rings and necklaces resting on skeletal collarbones; they've got sick blue on their eyes, and it's done better than you used to. I couldn't blame you for not caring like that sometimes. It made you savage and rude. It made me want to break windows and smash TV's and drink wine from a box during the hot 3:00 a.m. hours of July. The girls on the bus, pretty and skinny, couldn't do that.

I'm writing another poem at my desk when I've got nothing but time. It didn't start out with you in mind but found its way there eventually. The poems you used to write me come to mind. You wrote them drunk and sexy as hell, and they came out drunk and stupid as hell. I wish I had kept them, but they're in a big city garbage bin now. All the ink is probably some hobo's tattoo. I always told you it was good, but you knew I was drunk and that I couldn't write poetry either. I could only listen to Charlie Bukowski reading his poems and say the fat old fool drinks as much as us but just uses the drink better.

I've got no thick needle pain for food and the drugstore is across the way. It smells like you smelt, I'm sure. Other men are talking all about football and the women walking by, and I'm looking at my reflection in a spoon from my coffee. The traffic is busy today. And all at once, I can't help but see you some time ago.

You were lying across the couch in my underwear and my t-shirt and my scent. You held a pillow between your legs and turned off the TV. The room smelt like a railroad and felt like a coal mine – and there you were. Stretched out, you had a vacant motel loveliness. We were both sweating in the heat, and I unplugged the phone, closed the curtains, and lit the mailbox on fire. Your lips looked like rust, and the memory tells me they tasted like kerosene. The heat was getting to us, I recall.

The memory seems so new. Yet to be made. You held the back of my neck so I could feel your chewed-down nails. You didn't care, in this memory; more than ever, you didn't care.

We spent hours not caring, forgetting about all the things in the world outside the tiny olive room, and we didn't lie to each other about chances we may have had. The thoughts we thought out loud seemed so far away. We spent hours lying bare-skinned, tangled on the couch, where we fell asleep in our sweat and desire.

I go home full of courage made from longing. I pull out the drawer with all of your letters, taking my time to kiss each one. I mail each one to somewhere you might be, hoping these symbols find you, tell you, and bring you back to me.

## Closed In

by Emily Ames

Grade 12 – Lakefield College School

The musty smell of herbal remedies and vitamins pours out of the small store like air being released from a balloon. This odour escapes and then dissipates into the fresh afternoon fall breeze. An elderly lady emerges from the doorway and carefully, with the help of a rickety metal cane, inches her legs forward to a low-standing wooden bench. She slowly bends her knees and moves her body onto the platform that is now beneath her. Her petite figure seamlessly disappears into the background of the building, which is now behind her. Her long, ragged '50s paisley brown dress and worn-in white sandals hardly contrast with the rusty bricks that make up her workplace and home. The only feature that really jumps out from this scene is the woman's hair. The bouffant-pompadour style best characterizes it; frizzy, white puffs flow up off her pale skin like that of a tormented Troll doll.

She takes a moment and surveys the familiar setting that lies in front of her: a typical two-lane road lined by a narrow concrete sidewalk. Cars speed past; their colours blend together like flashes of light. Music blares from a nearby store. A few people pass by on the other side of the street, where a substantial three-storey building is marked by the sign "Young Men's Club Association." The woman turns her head ever so slightly to her left to look upon the neighbouring building. A barbershop service is set up in a closet-sized room. Its doorway does not allow anyone over five foot six to enter without crouching. A generic "Closed" sign hangs from the window of the door.

The woman then takes out the obituary section of *The Globe and Mail* and spreads it out with two arms in front of her. The columned rows, neat headings, and rectangular pictures blur into one mess as her eyes seem to transcend the page that she is reading and rest somewhere in oblivion. The noisy sounds of cars and blasting hip-hop beats all combine into a droning hum as the elderly lady sits, dead still on the wooden bench in front of her tiny brick store.

Two young women approach where the lady is sitting. Their intrigued eyes gaze past her motionless body and travel into the store from the mildew-rimmed windows. Their expressions shift from captivation to smirks of disgust and contempt. When they are a few paces past the dive, one remarks, "That place should be shut down or something!"

"Yeah, like who would go there to buy their health food when all that stuff must have been sitting around for decades now? It's as if the whole place has been stuck in time for the last twenty years. I mean, just clean the store up already. Maybe then that horrible reek of stale vitamins won't scare away customers. It sure has warded off health inspectors. Or maybe that's due to that lady. She's always sitting there, aging away along with that goddamn store," the other girl quips in as the two walk away from the storefront, their ignorance in tow.

The elderly woman remains sitting on the bench for a few more minutes as if a trance has come over her. Leaves fall from nearby trees, foreshadowing winter's imminent arrival. They spread onto the sidewalk ground. Due to their change in colour, they are hardly recognizable from the ones of summer. Yet that simple transformation so easily alters its surroundings. Leisurely, the lady folds up her daily and makes her way back into the store.

She is greeted with the familiar, comforting mouldy smell once again. A small clearing on the linoleum-tiled floor leads her to a shambolic desk where bills and letters lie under boxes, piling up on either side. The desk's messy state is mirrored around the store. The room is jam-packed with products. Bottles of all colours line the walls, snaking their way around the rows and circling the place with labels. No signs appear on the walls to direct customers to specific products. More boxes, leaning against the walls, clutter the floor and aisles, creating a large mound at the far back right corner. A small circular clock is mounted on the far wall. One arm ticks away incessantly as the lady perches herself onto a high stool, hardly visible behind the heaps of mess on her desk. Her bony shoulders curve forwards as if the strength of gravity is slowly forcing her towards the ground. The woman reaches out her hand and turns on the nearby radio. The sound of guitar feedback fills the congested room and then abruptly turns into a mix of fuzz over the sound of classical music. The reception keeps on getting worse, but she doesn't seem to notice, or really care. She just sits there blankly staring out at her stuff, her heaps upon heaps of stuff surrounding her like faded memories that at any moment could pass away, but never do.

When the clock strikes four, as if on cue, the lady switches off the radio and descends from the stool. She grabs a long, shabby fur coat and heads out the door towards the road and onto the sidewalk. Her body shakes as the cold, unforgiving winds attack her stockingless legs. Making her way towards the back of her store, she takes from her pocket a set of keys. Approaching a forest-green Volkswagen Golf, she unlocks the car and sets herself on the faded-blue driver's seat.

She is well-accustomed to this ride. It takes approximately five minutes. Out of the parking lot, down the one-way street, up another, a turn here, down a busy road there, and up into a much larger parking lot than the one she began in. The elderly lady parks the car and hurries into the adjacent one-storey building, passing by the large yellow double-arc'd sign.

The smell of grease fills the restaurant. There is only one cashier on duty and only one other customer in line. The elderly lady looks at the signs that address the menu. They are large and easy to read, but she doesn't need any reminding of what she always orders. When it is her turn, she mumbles something practically inaudible, but the cashier seems accustomed to this and rings in the lady's order with ease. The bright decor of the place (or the promise of free smiles) does not appear to alter the old woman's mood a bit. She picks up her food-filled tray in a zombie-like way and sits down at a table overlooking the road.

Leaves continue to fall, this time from a few oak trees that line the driveway of the restaurant. The elderly lady sits there alone, consumed by her meal and her inner thoughts. She does not pay any attention to the changing leaves or the way in which they gently sway to the ground. Her slowly deteriorating coat is protecting her now from the change in temperature, and her tattered sandals don't seem to mind the cold ground too much. Bit after bit, she digs away at the processed

cheese and microwaved ground beef. The world around her shifts and moves but doesn't shake the elderly women from her business. Once her meal is finished, she clears her tray and heads back out to her waiting vehicle.

Five minutes later the elderly lady is back in her store, surrounded by the consoling bottles and stale air once again. Yet this time, she does not sit down at her stool or venture into the evening air to rest on the bench. Rather, she picks up the plastic broom that is positioned against her desk and begins sweeping. Small dust bunnies fly into the air as the layer of grime is swept from its spot. With a sweep here and there, the elderly lady randomly stirs up the dirt on the yellowish-white floor. She cleans it as if there is no need for a dustpan. She slowly makes her way to the back right-hand corner of the store where a mass of Birkenstocks boxes are piled to the ceiling. Some remain open, with hints of brown orthopaedic sandals peeking out, while others are tightly closed. Larger boxes have been thrown into the mess, along with random medicine bottles and smaller boxes, creating a disorderly mass of junk.

The old woman continues her brushing, making her way around the main stacks, pushing the lonely pill bottles to the side beneath the aisles and behind the boxes. She begins sweeping more quickly now, harder, pushing the grime farther to the sides and deeper beneath the aisles. She then squeezes between two large mounds of boxes. There in front of her lies a body, a man's figure, outstretched, face down on the dirty floor, boxes all around. The elderly lady carries on her sweeping as before with quick strokes pushing everything under more mess, never having really altered the state of things from how they were before.

2005 Senior Fiction Runner-up

## The Watcher

*by Amanda Motyer*

*Grade 11 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School*

The boy who called himself the Watcher was walking, in plain sight and yet not seen, towards the park which he liked to frequent. It was a beautiful day, crisp and overcast. The bright oranges and greens of the trees were contrasted and sharpened by the rolling masses of grey above them. But the Watcher, deep in thought, did not notice.

Invisibility. Such a tantalizing concept. Invisibility, the Watcher knew, was not, as many thought, a matter of making yourself actually invisible to the human eye, but of making yourself so normal, so ordinary, that people just wouldn't notice you. And to all appearances, the Watcher was just plain ordinary. No one gave him a second glance, and he was left to do his watching.

He remembered that he had once been told that there were two kinds of people on the planet: the people who lived their lives and the people who watched others living their lives. He, obviously, was in the second category.

The Watcher reached his destination and stood in his usual spot, casually leaning against the black chain-link fence that surrounded the property of 7 Moore Street, watching, waiting. Thinking. About people of course. People were his specialty. Some watched birds or the night sky, but the Watcher watched people. People had many faces, he'd learned. Not necessarily good and bad faces, as was the common misconception. There were many dimensions of good, just as there were many dimensions of bad. Each new situation could provoke a different response from the same person, therefore showing a different face.

His thoughts were finally interrupted as two people entered the park. They were both girls; one appeared older than the Watcher himself whereas the other could have been no more than five or six. She wore overalls and a striped shirt, and her golden hair was drawn into two pigtails on either side of her head. In her arms she carried a red ball.

The older girl sat down on one of the wooden park benches, pulled a book out of her bag, and began to read. The little girl suddenly threw the red ball and hit the older one in the head.

“What was that for?”

“You said you would play with me.”

“I'm busy.”



“But you said...”

“Leave me alone, okay? Go play on your own.” She went back to her reading.

Dejectedly, the little girl went and picked up the red ball and then, in a fit of anger, threw it as far as she could. The ball bounced once, rolling to a stop at the feet of the Watcher. Slowly, he bent down and picked it up, turning it over as though it were a precious and long-lost treasure.

It was not perfectly smooth; small bumps on its surface gave the impression of sandpaper, but the colour was flawless, the red completely unblemished. Closing his eyes, he clutched it to his chest and felt the warmth of childhood innocence seeping through him.

“It’s mine.”

The Watcher opened his eyes to find the little girl staring up at him.

“What?” he asked, bewildered.

“That’s my ball.”

“Oh... yes. Here you go.”

The girl took it, and with one last glance up at him, quickly darted away. Discomfited, he also hurried away, but in the opposite direction.

The red ball. It had exuded power, the kind of power which is obtained by an object from someone’s attachment to it. The fact that a little girl treasured her little red ball made it priceless and irreplaceable. Such a concept was difficult for the Watcher to grasp, since he himself did not seek comfort from familiar objects, and yet this red ball, which did not even belong to him, was somehow different.

The Watcher had hoped he would never see her again. But he did.

He was on his way to the park when he heard a wail. The Watcher looked up and felt his heart suddenly stop beating in his chest.

The little girl, whose name he did not even know, stood in front of the black chain-link fence. The sun shone off her golden pigtails and the tears running down her cheeks. There were three other children nearby; in age they could not have been any older than the Watcher himself, but the Watcher would not have been capable of the looks of menace on their faces. It was not these looks that made his heart stop beating, nor was it the sight of the little girl crying. He had very little understanding of such emotions since, being a watcher, he seldom experienced them for himself. No, it was not those things. What made his blood run cold was that the menacing older children had taken the little girl’s red ball, and this violation was worse than anything he could have imagined. But doing something, anything, would be out of character for him. It was the little girl who convinced him otherwise.

She saw him, and her sad, pleading eyes latched on to his, beckoning silently. She had seen through his invisibility, and this time it wasn't because he had picked up her red ball. It was this, her ability to see him, to notice him, and not have her eyes simply slide over him and move on which prompted him to action.

Despite his inexperience, his movements were smooth as he swiftly crossed the street and without a word, took the ball from the older children and gave it to the little girl. There was nothing to be said. The Watcher's simple presence and his act of suddenly appearing out of nowhere were menacing enough that the offenders backed off.

“Thank you.”

He looked down at her. She had stopped crying; the treasure was hers once more. He was now being looked upon with gratitude, gratitude for doing something that anyone would have seen needed to be done. He turned to ensure the retreat of the offenders, and when he turned back again, the little girl and her red ball were gone. He never saw her again.

It was only after he had returned to his former existence that he realized what he'd done. It hadn't been just a simple act of kindness. For a minute – and it was really only a minute – the Watcher had not been a watcher; for a minute, he had been one of those people living their lives, one of those people who *were* watched. But only for a minute.

2005 Senior Fiction Runner-up

## Reflections: Pillars of Bliss

*by Kevin Romanuk*

*Grade 12 – Lakefield District Secondary School*

He goes on a walk. Not a typically common or fashionable activity for someone his age, but one from which he derives much pleasure nonetheless. He walks not to be alone with his thoughts, but to give himself the time when his thoughts don't have to be alone with him.

He walks along a path that he has trodden countless times before. Over the years he has witnessed its former lushness be trampled away to bare dirt. The path knows him. It has stored his footprints and compared them; it has watched and felt him grow tall and strong. The path knows that when his strides were much shorter, he would use it solely for his own purposes: to reach his destinations, to use a convenient shortcut, never stopping to acknowledge the path itself. Now that his strides are longer, he can cross the path in a fraction of the time, but strangely, he does not. Strangely, it takes him much longer to walk this path. He knows the reason for this. By taking his time, he hopes to make amends for his previous unappreciative use of it.

He notices a sign. Clearly the sign was not erected recently. The sign has been there as long as he has walked the path. He has never read it. Today he does. "No Trespassing." He laughs to himself. He now knows how he will repay the path. They could place a thousand of those signs, and he would still walk it. No man should hold the right to restrict another from a path that only wishes to be walked upon and enjoyed.

At the end of this path is a place he comes often. His lake is accessible from this place. He could have gone to the waterfront on his own property, but he prefers this shoreline instead. He has tried to share this place with others. He doubts that it means the same to them. Perhaps he does not know what it means to them. He picks up a rock. Holds it in his hand. He notices a smoother rock, a superior rock. He picks it up as well. He throws the first rock into his lake, then the second. The second goes farther. Each disappears under the surface. He will never see either rock again. He sits down at the water's edge.

All his life he has had this place. Most of his life he has taken this place for granted. During his childhood he wanted nothing more than to leave. He wished he lived in the city, a place of convenience, a place of utility, a place to grow with others. Now that he knows his life will take him there regardless, he wants nothing more than to stay in this place and protect it. He wants more time here. More memories.

The gentle waves create a soothing melody as they slap against the shore. The wind is trying to make the water escape onto the land. The wind doesn't know that the water would prefer to stay where it is. He gazes out over the endless ripples. He remembers his friends in this place. He

smiles; there is still time to bring them here again. His mind wanders, as a teenaged mind will, to a love of his past, a sexually charged encounter that happened in this very place. These memories are very dear to him. He cherishes them. He is grateful that he knows the value of good memories. He holds onto them as they are created.

It is time to go home. Not for any particular reason. Maybe others will worry if he is gone too long. His eyes see a rock just under the water, perfectly smooth and polished by the endless ripples. He wonders if this is a rock he has thrown years ago, returned from beneath the surface to be thrown again. He picks it up. He knows that if he throws this rock, it will go farthest. There is no splash after it is released from his grip, only a crash. He smirks. Someone will have to erect a new sign on his path.

Before he enters his house, he takes a deep breath and then spits on the ground. He always does this before he goes inside for the night. He has never really questioned the reason. He assumes that he does it because it is his last chance to do so during the day. He wonders if he does it to leave a mark of himself. To state to nature that he has been there.

He does not want to sleep. There is too much on his mind. Too much that warrants his attention. He opens his back door and sits on the pillared brick structure that lines the back of his house. He sat on rocks earlier; now he sits on bricks. He wonders if someday no one will notice a difference between the two. He wants to know why he wants to know so much. All day he has explored the minor details of his life. He explores these details of his life again at night, for contemplating life itself is too daunting a task at this late an hour. He listens to the ripples of the water once more.

There is music, the culminating festivities at some invisible midnight soiree. It travels across his lake so clearly, that had he known the words, he could have sung along. His mind stops racing. He listens intently to the words of the unseen musician. He wants to be there with them. He wants to join in on these festivities and bask in the company of others. He wants to socialize with this invisible group.

Suddenly, the hour, the next day's tasks, the desire to join in don't matter anymore. The voice of this man, rolling across his lake, up the slope to where he sits is powerful enough to block all other thoughts. The music of man blends so seamlessly with the sounds of nature. He cannot move, nor does he want to; he is mesmerized and trapped in the beautiful symphony as it washes over him, coating the land with a blanket of perfect harmony. He has read about moments like this, an author's attempts to describe the indescribable. The characters would cling to such moments desperately, willing to give up anything to prevent it from fading away. He always told himself he knew that feeling, lying to himself in a foolish attempt to quell his own desire for such a moment, but now here, in this place, in *his* place, he truly knows the feeling.

The music stops. Perhaps the song is over. He cannot say for sure. The individual words and notes ceased to be decipherable long ago. He now hears only the sounds of the waves again. They seem inadequate without the sounds of men to accompany them. He hears laughter and conversation. Clearly his invisible guests give no consideration to him. Their lives continue. They do not know that a stranger in the night was just with them. He wants to be angry with them, angry

at the unseen, angry with the fact that he is unseen. He wants to throw his perfect rock across his lake to get some kind of acknowledgement from them.

He cannot be angry. He is anything but angry. What they gave him briefly far outweighs that which they took away. This is one of those moments he will hold onto forever. He decides that sleep is now possible. He whispers or yells a thank you. He cannot tell which. He turns to go back inside. He takes a deep breath. He does not spit. He does not need to.

2005 Junior Fiction Winner

## A Strip of Yellow Lines

*by Jess McCuaig*

*Grade 9 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School*

It was a small town. Battered and tired. You know, those one-street towns you drive through on your way to something bigger and better. Every evening, when the sky was a palette of pastels, I would stand on the oil-stained pavement just staring down a strip of yellow lines. More than anything, I wanted out.

I started climbing when I was no taller than my father's kneecap. Crib rails were no match for me. By the time I stood at his waist, I had climbed every tree in the neighbourhood. The scars on my arms and legs were like badges representing every fall. I was never one to be confined.

The world was unknown to me. The farthest I had seen was several fields' length. As far as I was concerned, the tallest tree on Earth wouldn't offer an adequate view. I knew that many marvels lay beyond my sight, for the books I read told me of them endlessly. But I was tired of reading. I wanted to experience life like the people in hard cover novels did, first-hand.

My seventeenth birthday brought along sweet opportunity: the smell of gasoline as I filled the tank, and later, burning rubber as I stepped on the accelerator. The fields disappeared with my longing in a blurred image behind me. Each time I went a little farther until one day I didn't return.

\* \* \*

Mud oozed through my fingertips as I fell for the hundredth time that day. Footing was treacherous in the Ruwenzori Mountains. A local had offered to hike up with me. He reached out to help me up. A loud sigh escaped my mouth. Aching muscles, mud-crusting clothing. The tiny crisscrossing crevices running across my hands brown with dirt.

"Just like my days in the sandbox," I thought with a smile.

That thought had crossed my mind frequently since the time I began my worldwide ventures. Now on my feet, I looked around. Half a day's climb put me in my euphoria. Mountains, Earth's shoulders, were available any time I wanted to see over the crowd.

The view was...well! The sun was at the angle in the sky that makes you close your eyes and drink it in. And the breeze lifted my hair off my shoulders into a furling ribbon behind me. The birds circled below. With arms stretched out, being airborne didn't seem so impossible. Having the ability to break the limits, to push the –

“We should be heading back now, don’t you think?”

His words made me start. My guide stood rather awkwardly, rubbing one toe in the dirt. My face flared. I answered quickly in the affirmative; my tone made it clear I had forgotten he was there.

That night the sky was a midnight cityscape, in total darkness with a few lights on. Tomorrow I would be relocated. As per usual, I tossed and turned all night, and my brain kept up a hearty conversation with itself.

\* \* \*

Paint fumes were twenty times stronger in the hot Uganda sun and primer glistened on the freshly coated walls. Predictably, the roof was mine. Heights were no problem to me. The shiver sent up my spine wasn’t a horror movie chill but rather the kind an author would get when he held his first published novel in his hands. I had been stationed in Kotido for about three weeks, working on a community centre project. The whole village had come out to make sure it was completed with great care. During my break, I sat speaking with Ochen, a man I had befriended upon arrival in Kotido.

“Where is it you come from?” he asked.

I remember trying to explain, but he didn’t recognize the city names I mentioned. With a stick I began to draw a map in the warm sand. The heat was starting to get to me. I hadn’t finished drawing North America before I passed out.

\* \* \*

Confusion enveloped me. I squinted into fluorescent lighting. I was lying down in a very modern room. It was stark, but the designer had tried to force character upon it with floral curtains, subdued blue paint, and a rose-coloured armchair. The sterile smell of the place was very familiar.

A woman clad in pea-green scrubs strolled in. Immediately I knew I was in some sort of medical facility. I had almost forgotten what the overwhelming smell in my nostrils was. The last time I had been in an up-to-date hospital was when I broke my arm as a child.

“How are we feeling today, dear?” asked the shuffling nurse, plumping my pillows in what seemed like a choreographed routine.

It wasn’t until then that I realized I wasn’t feeling quite my usual self. I was tired. Extremely tired.

\* \* \*

His lips moved, but the man in the white coat with the clipboard didn’t make a sound. Still, I knew what he had said, and it felt like a bullet hitting my chest.

\* \* \*

Losing my hair wasn't what bothered me. The fact that I had lost the drive and ability to do what I loved most nearly brought me to insanity. I stayed in the hospital for almost a year undergoing various treatments, but nothing helped. As time wore on, a new sickness began to grow within me, one that could not be medically treated.

My heart was far wearier than my deteriorating body. It was strange when I first acknowledged what else might be killing me. For once in my life, I wanted to go home.

\* \* \*

I remember the ride home in my dad's beat-up yellow pickup truck. My heart beat at a steady pace, and my breathing relaxed as I saw familiar houses greet me. If I were to stand now, I would reach my father's chin, but I'm having trouble getting enough strength to do so.

This is still a small town. Peeling paint and cracked sidewalks. You know, those one-street towns you drive through on your way to something bigger and better. Tonight I sit beneath a painter's masterpiece on oil-stained pavement. I no longer stare down the yellow lines; I already know what's out there. My gaze is focused on the sky. My next journey will be upon this road. I was never one to be confined.



## The Medicine Hut

*by Kaitlin Fuller*

*Grade 9 – Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute*

Jebediah laughed as he finally pegged one of the sheep with a stone. He'd been wandering around causing trouble all afternoon: first pushing one of the little kids into a mudhole, then letting Mr. Nygun's cattle out, and now bothering the sheep from his perch in a dry old tree. Hearing a faint shuffling, he quietly parted the brittle branches to see the road. An old man hobbled painfully down the compacted dirt. He wore many layers of fancy woven silks, and long strands of beads around his wrinkled neck. His many bracelets jingled with each step, and his wispy white hair fell back behind his shoulders. A large gold medallion glinted on his chest. He walked with an intricately carved cane that curled into the head of a dragon. His strides were slow and pained, but he didn't seem to be affected by it.

Jebediah smirked and trotted into the main road, coming up behind the old man. "He's an outsider," he thought to himself. "He'll be sorry he walked down *my* road."

Strutting up mere inches from the ancient man's heels, he stomped on his beautiful robes. But to Jebediah's surprise, the man didn't turn around. He kept up his painful pace as if nothing had happened. Jebediah, visibly irked by the lack of reaction, strode up beside the old man and knocked into him.

"Watch where you're going!" he hollered into the man's deeply lined face. And still the man walked passively on down the road, seemingly lost in some fantastic daydream. Now Jebediah was getting mad. He stomped his foot and stood right in front of the trespasser.

The old man finally seemed to register Jebediah's existence. His large, gnarled hand twisted firmly around his cane. A small, almost pitying smile played across his face. In one swift, imperceptible motion, he brought his cane down and cracked it over Jebediah's skull. With a yelp, Jebediah clutched his splitting head. He let loose a string of words so vulgar that his mother would have disowned him. Lunging at the old man, he tore the cane from his bony hands. Stumbling back a few steps, he held the cane over his shoulder like a baseball bat.

The old man's smile still hadn't wavered. Jebediah became absolutely irate – and the sweltering noon heat wasn't helping matters. He tightened his grip on the cane and wound up. With a furious yell, he swung the cane over his head and brought it down with all his strength. A strangled yelp came from the old man.

Jebediah looked at the splinters he held. He had smashed the beautiful cane over a rock in front of him. The old man regarded him with disgusted dismay. "Now that was a very foolish thing

to do,” he said in a calm and calculated voice. “I think I shall go find your father and tell him about this. That was a very valuable item you just broke.”

The last thing Jebediah wanted was trouble with his father. The village had fallen on hard times with the drought that had begun almost two months ago. His father was an elder of the village, and a lot of pressure was on him to help bring about better times. He was more irritable and angry with each passing day. They couldn’t afford to replace this old man’s cane.

“No,” Jebediah squeaked, “Please don’t tell my father; I’ll do anything.”

“Hmm,” the old man arched an eyebrow, “Is that so?” Jebediah kicked at the dirt and shrugged. “There is another option. You will come and work for me at my shop. You shall work off the damage you’ve done, and not a word will be uttered to your father.”

Jebediah didn’t know what to say. Working at this man’s shop seemed like a crazy idea... but the last thing he wanted was for his father to know...

“I guess I have no choice,” he muttered, running his hand through his dark, curly hair. “What do I have to do?”

“Good decision, boy. You’ll be working at my medicine hut,” he replied. “Meet me there at dawn. It’s ten minutes up this road; you can’t miss it. By the way, you may call me Twajibed.” He turned and hobbled back the way he had come, not giving Jebediah a chance to reply.

Confused and unsure, Jebediah stared after Twajibed while the sun made a rippling heat-mirror of the horizon.

“This is odd... but I guess I have to do it,” he quietly said to himself.

\* \* \*

Jebediah rapped on the door of the little hut. It had designs like those on the cane. He was about to knock again when it slowly swung open. No one was behind the door; only an indigo wisp of smoke greeted him. He tentatively stepped in as the door creaked shut. He was absolutely astounded. There were shelves upon shelves of interestingly coloured bottles and fluids.

Long garlands of strange beads were strung along the low ceiling, fencing in the indigo smoke. There were no lights, just an eerie glow whose source couldn’t be pinpointed. A complicated series of vials and tubes was set up on an ancient mahogany desk. Liquids within them bubbled and steamed. Tiny, lizard-like creatures turned and rolled in the larger vials. Jebediah became mesmerized by their unnaturally slow and smooth movements... He inched closer...

“Boy,” a voice hissed, “*Never* touch those if you wish to keep your soul. I have but one rule: I command respect.”

“Oh, hello Twajibed,” Jebediah said flatly, watching the man approach from a dark corner. “So what am I supposed to do and for how long?”

“First, we must make something clear. You shall not touch what is not yours if you are not instructed to. There are very – and if you roll your eyes one more time, I shall cut them out – powerful items in here. Please boy, I wish nothing to harm you, so just heed my words.”

Jebediah simply cocked his head and shrugged. He thought this senile old man had to be overreacting. Twajibed promptly set a crate down in front of Jebediah and smiled.

“You will wash these.” He indicated the contents of the crate. “Then come and find me for further work. And, you shall be here for as long as I deem necessary.” He shuffled off to the corner he had come from, again not giving Jebediah a chance to speak.

Jebediah set to work. He scrubbed box after box of dirty vials and instruments. He soon got bored and tossed his washcloth into an empty crate. A large, shallow stone dish caught his eye. It stood on a pedestal in the far corner of the hut. Jebediah looked around casually to make sure Twajibed wasn't near. He carefully crept over to the dish. The smoke seemed to be coming right out of the bubbling liquid. Jebediah passed his hand swiftly over the strange liquid. It began to settle and the smoke stopped. He stood on his tiptoes and leaned in over the dish. A crystal-clear image of a lush forest appeared. A voice floated up towards him as a shadow dashed by.

“Come in, come play... come in, come play...” it repeated over and over.

The soft, captivating voice seemed to drown out all other noise and numb all his senses. He felt as if he was floating. The shadow dashed by again.

“We're all having fun, join us...”

He felt himself being drawn closer to the picturesque forest. It was as if a collar had fastened around his neck and some unseen force was slowly tugging him forward. The adrenalin raced freely through his entire body. It made every part of him ache with an odd pleasure. What was happening? What was this thing doing to him? He had to get to it. Maybe it would make him feel better... make this end...

In the blink of an eye, he was hurtled through time and space and found himself in the clearing in the mirror. A symphony of chirps, purrs, and groans chorused around him. He looked up at the sky. Instead of a magnificent blue, he saw the smoky silhouette of Twajibed's shop.

“I knew you couldn't obey the rules.”

All at once, the beautiful landscape began warping and melting. The calming sounds of animals turned into a cacophony of howls and screams. The sky bled a crimson red, and the ground crumbled and rose to monstrous peaks. The soft voice grew to a demanding roar: “There's no escape.”

“There has to be; this is all a dream!” Jebediah thought frantically.

“It’s not a dream; you’re ours now.”

How did it know what he thought? He had to get out of here. Jebediah leaped up and tripped over a mass of rocks. He slammed against the black earth, scraping his hands and knees. He realised with a sudden horror that this was all very real. A circle of shadows surrounded him where he lay, and the very earth itself seemed to moan and wail.

“You should have listened,” one shadow hissed.

“You broke the rules,” another one cut in.

“You’re all ours,” yet another taunted.

“You’ll never leave,” one said as it reached towards him.

“You will suffer with us... with us all,” they hissed.

“For eternity.” They began closing in.

Jebediah screamed as the shadows all slid towards him. A cold, strangling grip worked its way from his stomach up his throat. He couldn’t breathe as the shadows leaned over, closer and closer. The screams and wails grew to such a deafening pitch that he could no longer hear. The world was still crumbling around him; only now it was completely silent.

“It’s over.” The shadow’s sweet voice tore through the unbearable silence. It held such a horrifying quality that Jebediah’s veins felt as though they had turned to ice. The world turned black and the feverous screams roared back. A pair of bloodshot eyes snapped open in the darkness, taking a new hold on his battered soul... it was never going to end. Jebediah had breathed his last free breath.

\* \* \*

Twajibed swept quietly around his shop, pausing to frown into the murky dish.

“It’s a shame...” he sighed, before waving his hand over the basin.

A thin black and red string of smoke floated to the ceiling before it faded back to its normal serene indigo.

2005 Junior Fiction Runner-up

## Einstein's Bus

*by Catriona White*

*Grade 9 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School*

He hated the sun, and the sun hated him, which was exactly the reason a silent groan had slipped from him when the sun climbed out of a cloud and glared into his eyes. He laid his head against the icy window, his hair leaving fine, spidery imprints. The bus continued on the path that put him directly opposite the sun's rays. It glinted off the snow that hadn't been turned sandy and brown, so his attentions were drawn elsewhere.

Only a few people were on the bus this morning, and they all sat facing forwards, still harbouring a hope that their friends would join them.

He fidgeted with his bag, hoping they were about to arrive at school. But he looked out the window (they had turned a corner and left the sun behind them) and found they were barely a quarter of the way there. By the first bus stop, he often found the ride agonizingly long, especially without his friends.

He continued to look out the window because the nothingness out there was much more stimulating than the nothingness inside the dirty yellow bus. He peered down into the hunter-green mini van that held a harried driver...

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Eliza herded her screaming children into the mini van, already filled with sticky messes and unnecessary clutter. Eliza hadn't had time to clean any of it. While the kids, Brittany, Becky, and Barry clattered into the van, they failed to notice their mother placing a suitcase in the back.

She climbed in the front and caught her reflection in the mirror. She had forgotten to brush her pale brown hair or apply makeup and was wearing her husband's U of T track sweater by accident. A sigh slipped out, though she felt a scream would be more suitable.

She had married too young, a fact that mocked her daily. Then suddenly she was a housewife with three kids and bored out of her mind.

She glanced back at her troublesome children. She loved them, she really did, but she could not remember the last time she had done anything for herself. If she didn't do something, she would inevitably become bitter. That would surely hurt her children. Filled with overwhelming excitement, she clenched the steering wheel. After all, in an hour she would have a new life! If only Barry would be quiet.

Eliza looked up to see a school bus next to her and a round-faced boy staring down at her. “He looks like a nice boy. I hope my son turns out like him,” she thought.

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He stared a moment more at the woman until their eyes met. He averted his downward, not wanting to be seen staring. But when he looked back, the car had disappeared into the sun.

He tapped his fingers to the beat of “Drink Milk, Love Life,” until they became sore.

He sighed once more, wishing he had the ability to disappear in a blink. He began frantically blinking, hoping his untapped powers would suddenly appear. But he stopped when a heavy-set girl, wearing clothes much too tight, gave him a funny look.

He turned towards the window, a blush creeping along his golden skin. They were into the has-been suburbs, the houses that used to be new and now were run down and outdated. Running on the sidewalk was a man who looked as though in another time he had been handsome. He was decked out in a navy jogging suit and his partly bald head shone in the bright early morning sun...

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Barry applied his S.P.F. 30 sunscreen liberally to the top of his head. He had learned the hard way not to run without it. It made his already odd-shaped head look even stranger when it was red and peeled, especially in mid-winter.

He did his pre-jog stretch. Being a former Olympic athlete (a fact he would brag about to any willing and sometimes unwilling listener), he prided himself with his top-of-the-line workout regime. Of course, he was not in nearly as good shape as he had been at the Olympics.

He used to be a runner – and a great one at that. He had won meets and had sponsors. He had even been in a commercial for a breakfast cereal. It had been some sugary cereal that doomed its eater to obesity. He had reached the top at age nineteen. He used to think that was a good thing, until he faced the harsh reality that once you reach the top, the only place to go is down.

That’s not to say he didn’t go down without a fight. He was determined to stay in top condition because you never know. His house was full of memorabilia of his heyday; trophies and photos were all he had left.

Every day he jogged, hoping that today he would rise again, that today would be different. And every day the same yellow bus went by, with a boy that reminded him of when he still had had a chance...

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The boy stared at the jogger long after he had passed. Something about him was vaguely familiar.

After a moment, he realised that they were approaching his friend's stop. Hopefully he would get on and provide salvation to those dying from boredom.

The bus glided to a stop and the doors swung open. His friend grinned at him as he leaped up the dingy steps.

"Hey Barry!"

"Hey," he replied nonchalantly.

"You goin' to track tonight?"

Barry ruffled his hair confidently and grinned.

"Course, a future Olympic runner can't skip a practice!"

2005 Senior Nonfiction Winner

## Genocide in Rwanda

*by Hilary Bird*

*Grade 11 – Lakefield College School*

Some called it human revenge, some political action, others a move to maintain power; I call it a merciless extermination of the innocent. It was the second largest genocide of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one that swept through the country of Rwanda and left over a million people dead in its tracks. It took only 100 days for the guerrillas of Northern Rwanda, the Hutus, to butcher almost 15% of the country's population, to bring almost an entire race to extinction. Over the span of seven years, Adolph Hitler and the German Nazi police murdered over six million Jews. Over the span of 100 days, the Hutu rebels of Rwanda murdered almost a million Tutsis, and the world did nothing. "They knew how many people were dying. The world is racist," says Canadian General Romeo Dallaire. "Africans don't count; Yugoslavians do. More people were killed, injured, internally displaced, and refugeeed in 100 days in Rwanda than in the whole eight to nine years of the Yugoslavia campaign, and there are still peacekeeping troops in the former Yugoslavia while Rwanda is again off the radar. Why didn't the world react to scenes where women were held as shields so nobody could shoot back while the militia shot into the crowd? Where boys were drugged up and turned into child soldiers, slaughtering families? ... Where girls and women were systematically raped before they were killed? Babies ripped out of their stomachs? ... Why didn't the world come?"

I wonder what the United States would have done if Rwanda had (or if there were rumours of) weapons of mass destruction, or if the Hutu rebels had tried to kill the president's father?

You would think that the spectre of the genocide would engage the western world's attention and sympathy the way the recent tsunami did, but it didn't. You would think that the spectre of the genocide would trigger the western world's military and economic power into a rescue effort like the response to the tsunami did, but it didn't. You would think that the spectre of the genocide would prompt us, the richest people in the world, to do something, but it didn't. We all slept while 800,000 Tutsi people were slaughtered not even half a world away. They are the forgotten race of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It started April 6<sup>th</sup> 1994, when President Habyarimana's plane was shot down, after he threatened to enforce the Arusha Peace Accords, a demand for peace in Rwanda. Then the slaughter began. It went early into the morning of April 7<sup>th</sup>, and after the night had passed, 8,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu civilians lay dead, villages were burned to the ground, thousands of children were left orphaned, and a country lay in pieces with 15% of its population dead or fearing for their lives. The news channels around America flashed updates on the massacre as we all sat in our living rooms, glued to our televisions and radios, anticipating how our heroic governments would yet again intervene and save the day. One day after the slaughter, then-president Bill Clinton released a statement to the world with his plan of action saying, "I mention it only because there are a sizeable number of Americans there, and it is a very tense situation. And I just want to assure the families of those who are there that we are doing everything we possibly can to be on top of the situation to take all the appropriate steps to try to assure the safety of our citizens there."



We were shocked. We had just heard the president of the only superpower on earth, say that his plan of action was to remove all American citizens – hundreds of whom were peacekeepers – leaving the Tutsi civilians to fend for themselves against a force which was heavily armed and which had only one thing in mind: mass extermination.

Why didn't we intervene? Was it because the daily reports of the killings delivered to the White House over the span of three months were not enough? Did another million people have to die? Or was it because Rwanda is a small central African country with no resource or strategic value and therefore of no interest to the US? And so the American government got "on top of the situation" and airlifted hundreds of American civilians out of Rwanda.

Then what? What was next? Well, we merely became bystanders to what was about to be one of the greatest mistakes made by President Clinton and the United Nations. We watched from the sidelines as people just like you and me were smothered in an unimaginable world of terror. We all swept the "tense situation" under the rug. We pushed it aside, forgot about it, and tuned into to the O.J. Simpson trial that occupied every news network in North America.

It took only 9 days for 72,000 Tutsis to be murdered. The Rwandan countryside was littered with bodies, many in mass graves up to six feet high; others hung from trees to show just how "powerful" the murdering Hutus were. On April 19<sup>th</sup>, with an estimated death toll of over 100,000 people, the Human Rights Watch called on the UN Security Council to use the word "genocide."

Defined by the *New Penguin English Dictionary*, genocide is "the deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group." If not genocide, how else can you describe it? The use of the word "genocide," by itself in any United Nations documents would have legal consequences, and the UN would have to act; it's the law. And if forced to intervene, there was no question in anyone's mind who in the UN would be called upon to foot the bill: the US. When asked whether what was happening in Rwanda was in fact genocide, Kristine Shelley, a State Department spokesperson, was evasive in her reply: "... the use of the term 'genocide' has a very precise legal meaning, although it's not strictly a legal determination. There are other factors in there as well." Poland, Czechoslovakia, Argentina, even the Pope, but not the UN, called it genocide. Many times throughout the numerous debates about the situation in Rwanda, the word was thrown about but never documented; therefore, in the eyes of the law, it was all right for the UN to sit back and watch.

So what about the US? What were they doing while all this was going on? Well, they were refusing request after request for more soldiers, equipment, and intelligence. Why? Because it wasn't in the "nation's interest" to intervene. Humanitarian aid should be just that; it should not be tied to national interest; it should not be conditional. When begged by Canadian General Dallaire (the UN's top peacekeeper in Rwanda) for US equipment to block hate messages sent between Hutu clans, the US felt it was too expensive at \$8,500 an hour. Compare that to the \$87.5 billion spent in Iraq; however, that was in the United States' "national interest." It was only a month after the massacre began that Clinton signed a Presidential Decision Directive, a document limiting the US's military involvement in international peacekeeping operations and a slap in the face for the country of Rwanda.

I find it ironic that the Charter of the United Nations states that the obligation of the UN is "to aid those in times of humanitarian crisis, reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in equal rights of men and women and in nations large and small." Rwanda was in a time of humanitarian crisis, yet the UN did nothing. Thousands of helpless women and girls

were systematically raped till the point of death; their human rights were not being upheld, yet the UN did nothing. Thousands of child soldiers were forced at gunpoint to slaughter their families and friends; their human rights were not being upheld, yet the UN did nothing.

Over 800,000 people died in Rwanda in 100 days; that's nearly 15% of the country's population, gone. The world did nothing. In doing nothing, the world failed the people of Rwanda.

## The Reality of the US/Mexican Border Situation

*by Peter Stewart*

*Grade 12 – Lakefield College School*

On April 1<sup>st</sup> in the appropriately named town of Tombstone, Arizona, roughly five hundred volunteers began pouring into local campgrounds, motels, ranches, and guesthouses. They are the Minuteman Project. This vigilante group is patrolling the Arizona/Sonora border for at least one full month in an attempt to fill the gaps where they feel the official border patrol has severely fallen short. To date, over 820 volunteers have taken part in the Minuteman Project. They are of all ages and various ethnicities.

With a constitutional right to “observe and report” illegal passage into their homeland and a valid crisis at hand, there seems little wrong with the Minuteman Project’s active citizenship. In Arizona alone, 580,000 migrants were caught by the border patrol during 2004, but this is only an estimated one-third of the total migrant flow across the state’s border. That would bring the total flow of undocumented people entering Arizona to above one million in just a single year. On top of this mass migration, there is the constant flow of illegal drugs through many of the same desert areas that the migrants use to cross over. This, coupled with the threat that terrorists could infiltrate the United States via a five-day trek through the desert, would suggest that further border patrolling and vigilante observation are more than understandable; they are completely necessary.

However, local vigilantes can be directly linked to vandalism and an abuse of the human rights of many migrants. A campaign that began a little more than a year ago called “Agua Para la Vida,” which aimed to provide migrants crossing the desert with drinking water, was sabotaged by local vigilantes (several of whom are leading the Minuteman Project). There have been incidents in Arizona and California of vigilantes abusing captured migrants by pistol-whipping and unlawfully detaining them. Local human rights groups such as Derechos Humanos and Border Action Network have expressed their grave concern about the human rights of migrants in the regions patrolled by the Minuteman Project. On top of this, UCLA has sent observers to monitor the behaviour of the vigilante volunteers.

On a volunteer trip to the border region of Agua Prieta, Sonora, and Douglas, Arizona, I had the opportunity to see the reality of this issue. At a Mexican YMCA, I met with young people who had been deported after being intercepted by border patrol while crossing the desert. A 16-year-old girl told me the story of her friend, who was humiliated by border patrol; she had heard no word of his location since her deportation. In Nogales, Sonora, I met two men at a drug rehabilitation centre, who told me they had both crossed the border illegally many times and had lived as undocumented people in the United States. One had gone to high school in Tucson, while the other had worked in construction there.

In 2004, roughly 500 illegal migrants died while crossing the border. Most migrants take only a couple of litres of water with them on the five-day trek. The daily recommendation while in the desert is six litres. Sadly, the number of deaths reaches a record high every year. While in Douglas, I took part in a vigil performed weekly by the local grassroots organization, Frontera de Cristo. We walked towards the border crossing, laying small white wooden crosses at the side of the road, one by one, in the shadows cast by the spring sun setting behind the brown rusting wall that lines the border. Each cross had written on it the name, along with the date of birth and date of death, of a person who had died crossing the border.

While in a secluded region of the desert, standing on the Mexican side of the border, I spoke with an American border patrol officer several feet away from me on American soil. Between us was a simple barbed-wire fence that was flattened to the ground in the dried-out riverbed where I stood. Scattered all around were belongings discarded by migrants as they crossed the border. This is done in an attempt to look less conspicuous once they reach inhabited areas. There's a telephone, a backpack, a sweatshirt, an old frayed hat half buried in the sand. On a hillside several kilometres away, I could see the sun reflecting off a parked border patrol vehicle; someone was watching my interaction with a colleague. I asked the border patrol officer what she thinks of the vigilantes. She said she sees vigilantes on a regular basis and is upset that a group of hundreds of volunteers from all over the United States would be flocking to her county in several days to take on the job they are alleging her agency is unequipped to do.

The same day I met with the border patrol officer, I came across a group of twelve migrants hiding beneath a railroad bridge. They were all young men, each dressed in black with several layers of clothing and a heavy overcoat. They brought little with them. Several of the men had small packs, but otherwise they travelled empty-handed. I sat with them, gave them some food packages and water, and spoke about the journey they were to commence come nightfall. I quickly figured out that they were being led by a Coyote, a professional paid to guide them across the desert, and that they had no doubts that they would make it into the United States. I asked the simple question, "Why are you doing this?" A short man who was from the south of Mexico spoke up. His short and seemingly simple answer actually encompassed the profound and far-reaching reality that has created this border crisis. He said, "For a better life." It struck me at that moment that I was no different from these young men. Why would these people risk their lives to get across the border? There are obvious reasons, such as the exploitation of their farming markets by NAFTA, but really it can be simplified to the innate desire to better one's life.

2005 Senior Nonfiction Runner-up

## Divinity

*by Mishal Verjee*

*Grade 12 – Lakefield College School*

*It is easy to observe the divinity behind a burka-clad woman kneeling in prayer towards the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The words of the Koran engulf her like waves of an ocean as she submits to the will of Allah. She is certain that the benefits of establishing her devout existence compensate for the century-long holy wars that have tainted her country with the putrid odour of bloodshed.*

Despite my Islamic heritage, it is not easy to see the divinity in me.

I am a walking contradiction. I am a Muslim woman whose most cherished childhood memories pertain to Easter morning egg hunts, whose favourite topping on her pizza is bacon, and whose fingers can count the number of times she has been to a mosque. One may consider that my actions display incongruity, but on the contrary, I believe religion to be casual.

Just as a storm spins off whirlwinds, this statement generates its own tumultuous set of responses. Some tackle the topic with a more doctrinaire approach: God has handed us His lore, and it is our obligation to practise what it edifies. In my opinion, delineating religion is like attempting to define love. Invite advocates of any faith to share the most significant thing that fuels their devotion, and they will inform you that it is nothing but a feeling – a sense that there is a higher power outside of our own scope of knowledge. For this reason, I do not designate certain times or routines to elevate my belief to a state of faith; I just have faith.

The contentious issue of religion is particularly pertinent in today's society; therefore, I strive to increase my level of religious comprehension in many facets of my life. I have been fortunate enough to travel the world extensively and have thus encountered an array of exceedingly diverse religions. After exploring the profusion of sixteenth-century churches along the cobblestone streets of Quito or simply hearing the intricate bell chimes from a dilapidated Slavic church in Dubrovnik, I always take a moment to ponder the gamut of my spiritual experiences. The self-discovery that accompanies a silent reflection is inevitable.

I believe that the world we live in today has digressed from the fundamental principles that hold humanity together; compassion, unity, and benevolence are muffled melodies in a world of cacophony. In a world plagued by self-interest, it is ever comforting to have God in close proximity, eager to demolish our worst impulses and augment our best. When I lay my head down at night to contemplate my meaning on this earth, it helps to know that there is someone out there in the cosmic universe that knows the answer.

Although it may not be blatantly evident, there certainly is divinity in me.

2005 Junior Nonfiction Winner

## Snowmen Priorities

*by Greg Conley*

*Grade 9 – Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute*

When I was six years old, my uncle came to visit my family in Ottawa over the Christmas holidays. He was a university professor in Vancouver, so we didn't see him very often. He only ever managed to come over during the long holidays and always had a lot of marking to do. That particular year, he had over one hundred papers from his students, and spent more time downstairs with his laptop and his boxes of work than he spent with us.

Ottawa is very close to the Gatineau Mountains, and so there is frequently a very large amount of snow. Our house was in the suburbs and had a big, open yard that seemed to attract the snow, occasionally reaching depths of almost a metre. This hadn't happened yet at my sixth Christmas, and there was less than 15cm of snow. One humid, warm night, there was a fall of particularly wet snow, which stuck to telephone poles and frosted the windows. At this age, I loved to play in the snow with my parents (making snowmen, digging tunnels, building forts to protect myself from non-existent neighbouring children); however, on this occasion, they were spending the entire day downtown shopping. I had been left with my ever-busy uncle. I wanted to make a big snowman (or enormous, from my point of view at the time) in the sticky, wet snow, but my uncle was too busy with his students' papers to help me make it. I went out to craft the colossus by myself.

By this time my uncle had grown sick (literally) of the cool temperature of the basement and was working in the dining room. He was bored, of course; very few people like to mark one paper after another, especially when there are eighty left to read and grade. He saw me struggling to push a large ball of snow around the yard. This ball was then placed on top of another (an even more poorly constructed lump), and the whole thing crashed (well, crashed slowly – it was more of a flop) onto the ground, where it completely fell apart. I was just about ready to give up and come in, when my uncle reached a decision and came out to help me. My parents came back later in the day to a majestic snowman, about six feet tall, and a house full of wet boots and coats. The snowman had taken us about three hours to build, but in the end my uncle didn't care. He decided that spending time with his family was more important than grading his students' work. He could always grade on the plane, and he only had a week and a half to spend time with us. He told me this when I asked him why he had come outside with his cold; it didn't really make sense to my easily distracted mind at the time since I had always been taught to finish my homework before I could play. My uncle hadn't finished his homework, and he certainly was playing. I was having fun building the snowman, so I didn't give it a second thought.

When I got a little older (a few weeks older, in fact), I realized what it was that he was getting at. Sometimes, even necessary work shouldn't be the highest priority. He got his marking done during the rest of the holiday he spent with us, on the plane, and in the days afterwards. I certainly appreciated the time he spent with us. I think we had a much better and more memorable holiday, simply because he decided to come outside to make a snowman instead of working.

2005 Junior Nonfiction Runner-up

## Just Like Him

*by Lauren Schmied*

*Grade 9 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School*

Light trickled down gently through the trees, making each rock on the gravel road sparkle. A stone bounced across the road when I kicked it with the tip of my shoe. Music hummed quietly in my ears while I fiddled with the volume of my mp3 player. It was as if every moment of every day should be like this: no problems, no worries, just the true calm, beautiful life that most people live.

Hearing the sound of my alarm broke me from the trance of my beautiful dream. I dragged myself from the warm, soft, secure sheets in my bed and into the shower. If only dreams were real. As the hot water poured over me, engulfing me into its liquid world, the shock of the events of yesterday came flooding back. It felt like being smashed and thrown around by a tsunami. He was gone. Have you ever met someone, become close – very close – and then drifted apart and not talked for a very long time? Don't let it happen.

I closed my eyes as the water droplets rolled down my cheeks, imitating tears. I let my mind drift back to the events of yesterday.

The score was tied, 24 - 24, and our opposing team had the next serve. "Come on girls; we've got this!" encouraged our coach to the left of us. We had been on a losing streak for the last four tournaments and were getting sick of it. The girl tossed the ball into the air and, with a loud smack, sent it soaring over the net.

"I got it!" I yelled as I stepped back to volley it into the air for a grand spike.

"Out!" screamed a girl to the side of me. Quickly I made a decision. The ball looked like it was going out. As I scrambled to get out of the ball's way, it hit directly on the line. The sound of defeat echoed loudly through the gym and into the ears of our team.

"Shoot!" I yelled, half to myself.

"In," said the ref, as the shriek shrill of his whistle ripped through my eardrum. "Oh, man," I thought, "another tournament lost." I grabbed my bag, slung it over my shoulder, and slouched out of the gym. My friend Meg was trailing behind me, rambling on rapidly about something that I didn't listen to. We headed out the front doors to where my mother awaited with anticipation. Throwing our bags into the trunk of the car, we slumped into our seats.

"I heard there was a boy who got in a car accident last night," I mentioned to my mom. "What was his name?"

“Mac Williamson – and he died,” my mother said bluntly. All of the cars, people, trees, and homes melted from my view and were replaced by empty, cold, hard tears that clouded over my eyes. My mind and body froze.

“Are you okay?” asked Meg curiously as she slid her hand onto mine. I didn’t respond, frozen in time as images of the occasions when Mac and I had met, talked on the phone, and hung out spun in circles, leaving me cold and confused. We dropped Meg off. She hugged me warmly, but as she let go, I felt chills. All I heard was her say goodbye and the door click into place behind her.

My mom drove to the grocery store where she left me in the car to dwell on the loss of my friend. As I fumbled with my cellphone, I dialed my best friend’s number. She had gone to school with Mac. Together, on our phones, we sat and cried.

The darkness of my car shaded me from public display as globs of mascara and tears tumbled down my face.

Feeling the steaming water from the shower break through the cold shell of memories that surrounded my body with misery, I let all of the memories of Mac and me slip through my fingers. I tried to grab hold of them, but they were gone. Just like him...



2005 Junior Nonfiction Runner-up

## Annie

*by Agatha Seward*

*Grade 9 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School*

The clock ticked. No one moved. I felt that if I did, I would have shattered the air. The clock ticked again. I slowly lowered my head and saw my hand shaking. My eyes filled up with tears but I forced them to stop. I took a deep breath as I told myself over and over that I could cry at night when no one was around to hear me. I looked up, hoping to see a familiar face. I looked across the table and saw my siblings, motionless. My eyes stopped at my mother. Her head was down to hide her tear-stained cheeks. She never cried in front of us.

“Okay, kids,” she swallowed her shaky voice and faked a tiny smile; “it’s time to wash up for bedtime.”

No one wanted to be the first to move, but eventually, one by one, we drifted on a cloud of misery to bed. I was relieved; I would be able to cry into my pillow all night. Except that night, I was past the point of crying. I think we all were. I never went to sleep that night. I just stared up at the ceiling and thought of Annie.

Annie was my young aunt, but I knew her as my second mother and best friend. If Mum didn’t let us have dessert one night, Annie was the type of person who would sneak it to our rooms later. And when we were bored, she would sit through countless hours of “Barney” with us. She lived with us for as long as I could remember, and my mum looked after her because she had cystic fibrosis. We all loved her so much, and since our dad was never around, she helped look after us. To be bored when Annie was around was impossible. To us, she could do anything: bake a birthday cake, draw with us, slide down the slides forty times in a row, anything. She had so much life inside of her, yet only a few years to live.

On the day of her funeral, I went to my mum, who was doing the dishes. I walked up to her and hugged her. While my face was buried into her jeans, I asked her why Annie was gone. My mother hugged me back and we cried together. Our hug lasted for a long time and she comforted me.

“I can’t go,” I told Mum, while still clutching onto her with my tiny trembling hands. She understood my request. I was only five; five-year-olds weren’t supposed to go through this pain. The saddest thing in my life should be only when I scraped my knee. I couldn’t bring myself to stare into the face of my lifeless aunt. I brought myself to my uncle’s (Annie’s husband) funeral six months earlier, and it was hard, too. He had cystic fibrosis, like Annie. I never thought about the disease when they were alive, but when they died, I hated it.

Annie was like an angel; no, she *was* an angel. She came to Earth and loved us when we needed it most. She taught us lessons early in life and then returned to heaven to watch us from there. People say that you get your personality in the first five years of your life; I think Annie contributed a huge part to mine because people say that when they look at me, they see Annie.

“Come on kids, it’s time to go to...” my mum stopped to take a deep breath, but she never finished that sentence. I still sat at the table and watched all of my brothers and sisters put on their shiny, black church shoes. My mum’s friend came over to watch me while they were gone.

When they had left, I stayed on the stool and asked myself “why?”

“Why did she have to die?” I thought, “why now, why ever?”

It was our usual time to go outside, but I never did so without Annie. She had been in the middle of teaching me to ride a bike. She told me that next week she was going to take my training wheels off permanently. That wouldn’t happen. I didn’t know how I would ever go outside again. If Annie couldn’t enjoy it, neither could I. In the past, whenever “Barney,” or another of our favourite shows, would come on, I would always want to believe that Annie would come to sit with me. Even at her sickest moments, she would insist on helping my mother make dinner or school lunches for us.

I sat lifeless, staring out the window, watching time go by without me while I thought of the memories. I must have sat there for a while because, during that time, my family came home. They flooded through the door and sat at the table with me. We all wiped away our tears as we listened to the clock ticking.