



LAKEFIELD
LITERARY *Festival*

2006

YOUNG WRITERS CONTEST
WINNERS

Jet Lag

by Jessica Waite

Grade 12 – Crestwood Secondary School

I was thinking about Haley again. I knew now that I had been thinking about her since the first flight yesterday, but it had been an unconscious type of thinking. With her image in my head, it was a kind of absent-minded stirring of my own emotions that wasn't unlike fixing coffee in the early morning. It wasn't until I was in the hotel room in Athens that the cloud of jet lag had cleared enough for me to realize what my mind was up to. In a way, it was the new scenery that was beginning to change my life.

You see, it seemed to me so far that Greece was nothing more than a narrow, ancient bridge between Rome and Mecca, crossed mostly by motorbikes and Vespas. Here on the coast, it smelled like the ancient body of water that might flow beneath that bridge, and if you cared to climb to the roof of your hotel, there it was smiling and waving, a monster of deepest blue gilded by sunlight. Looking at the Mediterranean, I got a sense that, while it was constantly moving, it was also completely unchanging. These were the same waters that tossed and shook jovially while Caligula ordered his troops into the surf, swords drawn, to attack Poseidon.

And here on the shore, Athens was pale and wet with fog and rain. I could remember our massive coach bus performing a tedious dance routine through the glassy, narrow streets, the windows soaked and grey. But here in the hotel, we were all safe and warm. All around us, Athens spilled out, its square white rooftops breaking through a low-lying mist up to the mountainsides. The mist broke like waves upon the harsh, sunny Grecian cliffs, seemingly above the weather, and rolled back to drown us in its weight.

There were four of us, flung out like tired, dirty clothes across room 306. My closest friend, Kat, was propped against the pillows of one tiny hotel bed, the consistency of which reminded me more of gym mats than mattresses. Her hair, usually red and straight and gorgeous, had started to frizz, her bun coming apart. You knew she was tired because she didn't have the energy to fix it – or perhaps, like the rest of us, she had simply forsaken the mirrors when she'd given up attempting to dust off the unflattering signs of travel. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing deeply.

The remaining dirty laundry, Dylan and Peter and I, were also in varying stages of unconsciousness. Dylan was most like a discarded bra, her arms draped over the back of the chair by the window. She was small and brunette, eyeing her pack of smokes on the nightstand across the room, blinking like a girl on tape set in super slow motion. Her boyfriend, Pete, was curled up in a ridiculous position against the second bed. He was crumpled like a worn pair of pants, stroking his makeshift 17-year-old beard. It was a strange, mottled, almost calico collection of colours, which didn't go with his fair, blond hair at all.

And I was lying across the foot of Kat's single bed, chewing my fingernails. I could feel my hair sticking up all over the place, though I remembered it being flattened at the back after the 9-hour flight. At this point, however, I didn't care enough to fix it.

We were four helpless travellers, struck dead by jet lag.

Soon, my thoughts were gambolling with one another in the delirious way thoughts do when you're beyond exhausted. We were thousands of miles from home in a country I couldn't have pointed out on a map, listening to the miniature honks and horns of the miniature European cars. They cycled through the roundabout outside our hotel with furious repetition, and if you didn't watch closely, you could believe that it was the same cars and motorcycles, caught in a hellish cycle of forever cutting one another off (or of searching for the right exit), like some ancient Greeks punished by the gods.

In an hour, we'd be expected upstairs for supper. I didn't know how I was even going to make it to the elevator. I chewed my fingernail and thought about Dylan's smokes. I was surprised that she had given up on them. Her surrender spoke volumes about how tired she must be.

My fingernail gave way beneath my teeth, and at the same time I felt my mind slip away from the smokes and the roundabout. It was swept clean, like a tabletop that stood between two arguing lovers. Suddenly Athens was gone, and I made a startling realization about human nature as its place was filled by another image of Haley – *deep hair, larger-than-life laugh, small white teeth, and grey eyes that took you in and stirred you up and set you back down with a dazzling, cloudy flash that you would never be able to forget* – sleeping on the plane. It was a glance I'd stolen despite myself. I hadn't spoken to her since I cut her out of my list of acquaintances in a desperate attempt to get her out of my head. Eventually, I more or less stopped thinking about her. It was a tedious truce met with my own confused emotions under delicate terms: they play dead around Haley, and I'd feed them all the boyfriends I could to help. Unfortunately, "all the boyfriends" turned into one horrendous mistake that lasted a year and a half. He had given me a sloppy goodbye kiss before I got on the bus for the airport, and I had ruffled his sandy hair in a way that I was sure he could misconstrue for affection. Told him no European boy would steal my heart. I wanted very badly to love him. But I couldn't, not when she existed, even as a glimmer in my mind. When we had started dating, it had been worse. When he shaved, I could imagine that I was kissing her lips, not his. I could imagine her smile, somehow devilish just beneath its still, student-council surface. But it had been six months since she had crossed my mind in any definitive way.

Until today. Whatever day it was, jet lag had brutalized my internal clock. In my confused state, Athens was nothing more than a sea of greyish Mediterranean surf upon which the Parthenon bobbed and waded, high up on its hill. It was narrow streets that merged and split and spiralled together with no semblance of order. It was unidentifiable scents and bitter orange trees and a hundred million free-standing kiosks. It was angry drivers with homicidal mopeds. The imported cigarettes were too cheap, the food too expensive, and the liquor too available. This was what I knew so far.

I stared at the ceiling, working on my next fingernail. The ceilings here were just like the ceilings in Canada, but they weren't Canadian. They were Greek ceilings. Curiously, that observation triggered a realization: no matter how much distance you put between yourself and your life, no matter how far you run from that sole, catalytic problem, you are the same person. Your problems are still there, packed tightly to you, just as surely as you packed your toothbrush. Ironically, it was at the realization that I was the same person no matter where I was in the world that I felt myself begin to change. If I could accept that a change of scenery would not induce a change of heart, then maybe I could accept that I could not outrun my feelings for Haley. Maybe I had to confront them. Feeling a painful twang in my stomach, I twisted on the bed. How could a thought be so simultaneously uncomfortable and exciting?

I thought about the others and wondered what dark skeletons they had accidentally packed, fresh from their closets. I imagined us each worrying the same problems while our view of the world widened, our perspectives changed, and our lives altered each day we were here. And we had only been here one day... yet Haley had edged back into my mind. All it took was a glance.

I saw her sleeping and felt the way the shape of her face fit back into my mind with the ease of practice. It felt so good there that my stomach fluttered briefly.

There was a knock at our hotel room door, and Pete jolted awake. It was a tour guide or teacher, summoning us to supper, I knew that. But all the same, I felt a hot blush settle through me. My thoughts were on a girl, and before I could help myself, foolishly I imagined it was her at the door.

I got up from the bed to tell whoever it was that we were on our way. And if it was Haley, I knew that with my jet lag and exhaustion, I would be able to speak nothing but the truth.

2006 Senior Fiction Runner-up

Private War

by Dan Sisson

Grade 12 – Lakefield District Secondary School

It is 5:30 a.m. Yawning, he draws himself from the warm cocoon of his bunk, gradually letting his mind join his body's wakeful state. While not naturally an early riser, the young private has become accustomed to this daily ritual synonymous with military existence. Much has changed in his life since his somewhat impulsive decision to enlist, his waking habits not of primary import among them. His intentions are honourable, he is told, sacrificing some degree of his youth in the service of a higher cause. As his mind gradually clears itself of the night's haze, he rises from his bunk, stretching in anticipation of the advancing day.

An acute twinge across his back reminds him of the withered mattress on which he combats the night, a tightness of the shoulders and neck prompting recollection of the previous day's labours. An icy shower marks his sudden return to the conscious world, the chilling spray submerging any hopes of reconciliation with the hours of darkness. The dry razor claws his face, leaving it crimson and raw. Now dressing, he draws the heavy standard boots over his aching feet, the throb in his muscles peaking briefly as he pulls on the brown fatigues, synchronizing his body with the colours of the dead world around him. The private steps to the barracks' entrance, leaving the shelter of the building for the universality of the exterior environs.

Fall in.

The sergeant paces, billowing dust encircling and shielding him from sight as he evenly observes the men aligned before him. He stops momentarily, rising to full height and drawing breath as he commences the morning briefing. He speaks of duty, of purpose, and of sacrifice. A comrade, it seems, is held captive and soon to be executed. The private listens and contemplates his superior's words: an aggressive midday assault on an enemy compound; the liberation of their captured fellow. The private smiles internally at the pure heroism of the task, a swell of pride rising within. The sergeant completes his address, all body motion ceasing along with the spoken word. He stiffens sharply and salutes, the collected dust of his uniform drifting off with the rapidity of the gesture. In unison, the collected body of soldiers mimics the gesticulation, a simple organism, an extension of the Alliance's might. The private, automatic in response, acts in accord with his fellows, unaware of the motion. His thoughts are elsewhere, drifting to an endangered peer and glory as yet unattained.

Dismissed.

In preparation for combat, one must maintain a calm and objective mind with respect to the potential for injury and harm. Imprudent and unwise preoccupations serve only to distract the combatant from the necessities of war: survival and selective victory.

- The Alliance Handbook of Military Might

The private breaks from the group, solitarily moving towards the armoury to select and arrange his kit for the noontime mission. Bands of servicemen surround him, technicians inspecting and repairing damaged machinery, pilots scrutinizing charts and maps, religious infantrymen kneeling in prayer, atheists reading or playing basketball. Each maintains routine, pursues superstitious activity to sustain luck and good fortune. The private has no such notions of providence.

Implements of destruction border the entrance to the armoury. Flickering caged bulbs line the ceiling, casting the room in a frail antiseptic glow. The private hastily selects his equipment, shifting and sliding awkwardly among the steel cage walls of arms. Upon retrieval of the necessary gear, he promptly departs, unnerved by the oppressive presence of death within.

Upon entering a combative situation, the soldier cannot lose objectivity. Becoming overwhelmed by the chaos of battle serves only to reduce one's ability to analyse and examine surroundings. As an individual succumbs mentally to the distress of war, the physical hazards propagate exponentially.

- The Alliance Handbook of Military Might

Whomp-whomp-whomp-whomp.

The private stares blankly at the passing terrain, mesmerized by the homogeneity of its structure, its singularity of colour. The world of dust and sand stretches beyond the horizon, a hollow sea infinite in magnitude, devoid of life. He turns away from the vacant land and surveys the interior of the helicopter cabin. The soldiers about him are now without ritual, separate from the relative security of the camp and the superstitions therein. The aircraft carries them independent of their own desires, the indefatigable chariot. Their faces are indistinguishable and indefinable, shielded and enclosed by heavy masks to save their lungs from the thick dust. Only the eyes are visible, each pair staring into those of a comrade, sharing the solidarity and stillness of the moment. No words are exchanged, nor fears expressed. One vomits in a corner, another whispers a silent prayer, others vacantly study their feet. The private closes his eyes.

Bring 'em home.

The helicopter hovers solitary and secluded in the open sky. Ropes descend from its belly, meeting the earth in an elemental bridge. The men grasp the cables, leaping from the sky to rejoin the land, their territory, their element. The private approaches the edge of the cabin, reaching toward the link to earthen stability. Fire explodes below. Hostile combatants lie in wait, casually observing the arrival of Alliance forces. Simultaneously, they leap from shelter, weapons raised. Alliance soldiers scatter, diving, rolling, ducking towards safety as the inferno encloses them. The private grips his weapon, training it upon unfriendly faces. While initially overwhelmed and disrupted, the private's peers gradually siphon control from the clandestine opposition, returning the world to eventual relative calm. The private plunges from the sky, sliding along the conduit to

the ground. Its shipment discharged, the helicopter departs, draping the area in a blanket of churning dust and earth.

Swiftly and silently the soldiers traverse the ground toward their objective, a squat building in the near distance. The group travels wordlessly, vigilantly, and guardedly, observing the rooftops, fearful of unseen threats. The private walks slightly apart from the cluster, wary and unnerved by the sudden onslaught. As he passes a shaded side street, a quick motion draws his sudden attention. Weapon primed, he creeps toward the source of the distraction, alone and divided from his fellows. The weighty silence is stopped by the even sound of his heavy boots, a dense and decisive thud.

Gunfire.

He drops to the earth, shielding himself. The weapon discharges a second time, revealing its location to the private. He readies himself, swiftly rises to his feet, and fires. The formerly veiled foe drops his rifle, the metallic device clattering at his feet. The private stares silently as his adversary falls. Child conscript. A boy of ten years lies within a crimson pool, the bullet having pierced his heart. The private's grasp upon his weapon relents, the firearm falling to his side.

Explosion.

The concussion propels the private from his feet, driving the breath from his chest, and sensation from his mind. He seizes his weapon and sprints toward the main street where he left his fellows. As he reaches the corner, he drops to a knee and peers into the boulevard. Fire. Blood. Dust. The city centre, not 50 metres north of where he stands, lies in rubble. The target building is scattered across the promenade, an oppressive crater in its stead. Bodies are strewn in haphazard fashion through the street, playthings forgotten by an unconcerned child. The private wanders the ruins, surrounded and encased with death, subjugated and repressed by the enveloping devastation.

War is not as complex or convoluted as common conviction would suggest. Ultimately, there is but one purpose and goal of any conflict: survival. The concept of victory and defeat is merely an alternate interpretation of this fact. For victory, one must not succumb to that which befalls his opponent, endure beyond opposition's endurance. To win, survive.

- The Alliance Handbook of Military Might

A sole survivor, the resultant hero. Survival is often a callous and cruel reward, to emerge isolated and solitary from the chaos, naught but breath in the lungs and blood in the heart. An untrained Alliance pilot was the root of the "accident," mistaking his mission objectives for those of the infantrymen. An honest error, not a consequence of malice or antagonism, but simple incompetence. The pilot responsible later commits suicide, the grief and guilt overwhelming his young mind, additional blood spilt in the cause of victory.

Whomp-whomp-whomp-whomp.

The private thoughtfully observes the passing world, the endless expanse beyond the horizon. The helicopter calmly glides through the sky, carrying its payload towards its ultimate destination,

unperturbed and diligent in its task. He surveys the interior of the cabin where medics are feverishly and fruitlessly attempting to revive the near-dead and the long-departed are stacked in plastic bags, hermetically sealed from the outside world. The mound of the deceased gradually swells as the hopefuls become the hopeless. The private removes his helmet, hoping for fresh air untainted by the blood-stained mask. As the sickly odour of his fellows enters him, he vomits. He returns his gaze to the world outside the cabin, wordlessly minding the sands below. His eyes relax, the rolling dunes pulsing and dancing before him, the heartbeat of the desert in time with his own.

Welcome to war.

Only Skin Deep

by Amanda Steel

Grade 11 – Kenner Collegiate Vocational Institute

I wish I could tell you what I felt.

You're standing a good twenty feet away from me, one hand holding your skateboard, the other in your coat pocket. You stand in a small circle of friends, talking in a low voice, with an uncanny mixture of ease and excitement. Nevertheless, it strikes me as odd that I see you at all, since you weren't supposed to come back. You were, after all, out of my life.

I look at the scene with *déjà vu*, because this is where I first saw you months ago. Last March your hair was shorter, whereas now it wings out from beneath your hat. The people who surround you now were the same people who were with you back then. Last March your sweater fell on you loosely as well, but suited you all the same. A new brown shirt has the same effect today. The main difference, however, is that last March you were smiling.

Suddenly you're looking right at me, and it's not too hard to figure out what you're feeling. Shocked by what I see in your eyes, I take a step back, forgetting my lifetime rule: don't ever look scared. I've seen dislike and resentment in your eyes before. I've seen contemplation and concern. I've seen passion and warmth. This time though, I see nothing but fierce contempt, the will to destroy. The storm behind your brown eyes is unnerving. It takes only a few moments to figure out how you could justify such a look of disdain. Soon enough, the answer registers: you must have heard what I've done. Everyone else here knows about it, but I have to wonder who told you. Perhaps you found out from the same friend who sparked our falling-out months ago. It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest. I go to rub my forearm, more out of nervous habit than anything else, but I catch myself in time and regain composure. I look away and resume reading my book alone against the wall. I am all too aware of the constant glances my way.

Everyone here knows me. Some people are graciously indifferent to me. Some people might still call me a friend, but all they can do when I catch their eye is grimace and look away. I can't blame them, considering the situation. The clearest people in the picture are the ones who won't be calling me a friend for quite a while. Not after what they found out.

I hear my name whispered again, so I throw an insolent stare at the girl gawking at me. She closes her mouth and turns quickly, looking slightly embarrassed. I nearly smirk at her awkwardness, but I restrain myself. If you saw, it would mean direct confrontation with everyone, and I don't want that right now. I see more glances at me out of the corner of my eye. I snap my book shut, a bit exasperated. It's obvious at this point that I'm not about to sink back into my novel

outside. Nor am I about to continue taking this kind of alienation, I decide, so I head for the warmth of the indoors. I head for the double doorways, which you and your friends block with a circle.

I walk slowly, seemingly unconcerned. I try to walk steadily, not looking at the ground, but avoiding your eyes. In ten seconds, I will be inside. I wish I could tell you how I feel.

“Hey.”

You drop your greeting carelessly, but I feel the sting in the undertone. I swing my head slightly to look at you and match your gaze, trying to bounce back every ounce of pain you’re sending me. It seems to have momentarily worked; you stare at your feet for half a second. When you look up, I respond.

“Hey.” Now, how articulate am I? Nevertheless, I learned a long time ago that it matters a whole lot more how you say something than what you actually say. There’s no need to waste a structured, “good afternoon” on you. I wouldn’t have meant it. I’m four feet from the double doors. You’re leaning against the one that doesn’t open. I find myself looking at my feet when I’m two steps from the door. I have never hated my shoes more. I’m less than half a foot from the door when my fingers find the handle. The group has gone very quiet. Two girls seem to have stopped breathing. I go to pull the door open when your voice pierces the silence.

“Can I ask you a question?”

I turn lazily to face you and cock my head somewhat to the side. My hand is still on the door. I stare right at you to let you know I’m listening.

“How does it feel when you cut yourself?”

Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee. Your head is tilted to the side, as if you have no stronger desire than to consider my answer, but the coldness in your eyes tells me I could drop dead before you, and you wouldn’t even blink. The way you carry yourself is impeccable.

I close my eyes and look away, flinching at your icy voice, colder than the October air. I strain myself to look back up, but my eyes are not completely dry. I even face you and say nothing for a few moments, thinking back to last March and how well it started. I remembered March to be my completion, though it was nothing but my undoing. I remember how I would have given anything to make you happy, but would have been happier just to give you up.

I felt lonely when you were with me, but emptier still when I was with him. I felt ashamed when I saw what I’d done to us. I felt scared when I thought of what you’d do when you found out – and powerless when you did. I felt like breaking when you walked away from me. I felt shattered when my friends did too. I felt angry and desperate and cold and I remembered how the little pain could get rid of the big pain. I found my scissors and let you go.

I draw a steady breath. I open the door and sink into the door frame.

“These cuts are only skin deep.” I’m almost shocked at my monotonous tone. Still looking at you, I take a few steps backwards through the entrance. “I don’t feel a thing.”

2006 Senior Fiction Runner-up

The Structure of Us Above Water

by Emily Wilkins

Grade 12 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

She looked at him through the grey sheet of moisture and wondered why he held his hands like that, spread out to the sides as if he was bracing for an impact, which we now know he was. He stood like a skin-and-sinew cattail in the loamy shallows, reflection north by northwest, a whitish smear on the surface stippled with mist like bad reception. The ice had sent his skin crawling with the legs of millipedes, and, with her nose only inches from the water, she observed that some frogs would still be buried down there like living fossils.

He had wanted to take the boat off its blocks, he said. Maybe find a way of chipping the old paint off the hull and refinishing it. He liked to think about the gleaming boat over the sloe pool and the way the summer crop of algae would adhere to the varnish and trail like siren hair behind it.

His trousers were rolled up to the thigh, exposing lanky limbs with a scattered growth of dark hair that disappeared into the murk like twin rotted trunks. She wished he would dry his feet and put them back where they belonged – in his socks and loafers. Some of the stones were still frozen together.

But he didn't know the ice the way she did; he hadn't been born around ice, learned its patterns, learned not to trust it. She knew that ice melted and then came back, always came back, and these interims of warmth could not break her confidence.

She asked whether he knew the feeling of stepping across the permafrost line? He had to ask her what she meant, but while she tried to explain it to him, he let his eyes drift back over the lake, imagining the answer for himself. He didn't know why she needed to put contour to these things, giving the melt a topography that she could trace knowingly and mistrustfully back and forth as winter faded in and out. For her there was one season: winter. Everything else was deception.

But to him the evolving seasons were a kind of affirmation that nothing had yet gone stagnant. If a season stretched on for too long, the body filled with a white noise that no euphoria could dispel, a physical anxiety like too much coffee on an empty stomach. Well, she crouched moodily at the water's edge, eighteen years of winter setting off a cacophony in her ears. Not exactly beautiful, not the sort of girl you could row around a lake. But the rain harmonized perfectly with her irises.

In her left hand she held a blackened stick that had softened from its long rot beneath the ice. It seemed a strange gesture, and he would wonder why she held it so tightly that the loamy flesh pushed up beneath her fingernails.

Where permafrost starts, she said, you can feel it like a new shirt. And she watched his back, picturing his face and the expression there, the fleeting ice-colours. Winter had taken his smile and worn it thin, although she thought she caught its haggard shape now, still internal, in his posture.

2006 Junior Fiction Winner

In the Hands of Fate

by Alicia Del Mastro

Grade 10 – Lakefield District Secondary School

There was a strong smell of fresh fish and tobacco in the air. The streets of Frankford were crowded with specialty shops selling everything from the finest hand-wrapped cigars to delicate fine bone china. I suspected that the shops did very well since Frankford was the only city off the coast of the Silver Sea for miles and miles. I walked in and out of the stores, admiring the different cultures that made up this very welcoming city. With the exception of one awkward man running a newspaper stand, the people were very friendly and talkative.

I had arrived in Frankford just a few days previously, in search of my long-lost brother. I had an optimistic feeling about this day, which led me to believe that I would finally see him again. I only vaguely remembered him, as I was very young when he had left home. He was a caring brother but had spent much of his time alone in his bedroom and never bothered with his siblings. My parents told my sister and me that he had left to find happiness and a life of his own. They said that he would be back to visit, but he never did return. Now, looking around this wonderful city, I understood why he never came back.

It was almost noon, and the grumbling of my stomach indicated that I was ready for lunch. I tied up my long blonde hair and attempted to catch a cab. The whole city had a lunch break at noon, and the streets were suddenly crowded with hungry workers, who were pushing and fighting over the nearest modes of transportation. I couldn't believe how greedy everyone became when they had to get somewhere. The quiet, calm city I had been enjoying was now a crazy circus packed full of animals.

A very strong, impatient man shoved me out of his way. It sent me tumbling to the ground, and my purse and glasses went flying through the angry crowd. I crawled on my hands and knees, searching frantically for my glasses. I heard children laughing at the sight of me, an intelligent business woman, scrambling around on the ground in a skirt and high heels. I finally located my glasses, and at that instant, the strange newspaper stand worker grabbed my purse and darted away.

I saw the man turn down a grubby alley. I figured I had nothing to lose and decided to run and catch him. With high heels in hand and determination in my veins, I ran down the alley after him, screaming. Briefly glancing at the sights around me, I realized that the city was actually remarkably unpleasant. The dumpsters behind the shops were overflowing with garbage, and rats were feeding off scraps of rotten meat, carelessly dumped near the rear entrance of the butcher's shop. Even the sun refused to shine in this dismal alley. Ravens flew overhead, encircling their next prospective meal. I felt as if I was in a horror movie.

The man continued to run at an even pace. There was something strange, yet familiar, about the expression on his face when he frantically looked back at me. I was finding it hard to keep up, and all the obstacles in the alley contributed to slowing me down. I tried not to lose sight of him. When he turned a corner around a decrepit building, my heart sank. I was sure my hopes of getting my belongings back were shattered. Around the corner, there was a 12-foot chain-link fence. Beyond the fence, I once again saw the welcoming street down which I had first ventured. This time, however, it didn't seem as welcoming. In my disappointed and exhausted state, I looked around. To my bewilderment, there was the newspaper man, crouched down in a corner with nowhere to go.

I wasn't sure how to approach him. Cautiously, and attempting to avoid shaking, I asked for my belongings back. Initially, he did not look up at me. I repeated my request a little louder, thinking that I might not have been heard. The man looked up at me with sorrowful eyes. I could tell by the hard lines on his face that life had not been easy for him. His torn clothes, worn hands, and messy appearance made me feel sorry for him. I empathetically decided to forgive him for what he had done. Maybe his actions were out of desperation. I never realized until that moment how lucky I was, how blessed my life had been, thanks to my parents. I slowly reached out my hand to this stranger. I expected my belongings back at that moment, but instead he reached out his hand and touched mine. For a moment I felt connected to this man, not out of sympathy but for some reason that I couldn't quite grasp.

In silence, he handed me my belongings, and I slowly turned my back and walked away.

“Sara, I have missed you.”

I was shocked at the sound of my name. I turned sharply to see where the voice had come from – but all I saw was the pathetic man who had caused me all this trouble. Once again, I turned and walked away. Was I imagining my name being called in this alley, so many miles away from anyone who knew me?

“Sara, I have missed you.”

This time, the voice was unmistakable. I turned and headed toward the man. Tears were now swelling in his eyes. Staring into them, I realized that this stranger was no stranger at all.

Lobster Boxing

by Greg Conley

Grade 10 – Adam Scott Collegiate Vocational Institute

It was May 15th, 1976, as I recall, two days before the infamous Coonel Street Riot. I had been working in a fish shop, a job which surrounded me with some of the strangest odours known to man. This may sound like an easygoing, well-paying job, but you may have forgotten that all of this occurred during the Great Fish Shortage of '76. My employment became a less than an enjoyable task, working in a store whose fiscal future relied on fish alone.

I pried open the crate and sighed – yet another load of frozen trout. Every day, another pile of frozen trout. I popped them in the microwave for a while to thaw them out and then searched around for the fishmonger's friend: a padded mallet. Assuring myself that there weren't any customers in the store, I pounded the trout flat and dropped it in the bin labelled "Halibut." I performed this task with a certain level of detachment, as one must during any similar circumstance. Pummelling a malleable fish into a more inviting shape is not, as the French say, "*un* pleasant experience."

I was just finishing my work when my co-worker Brian entered. He gleefully pointed out that one of the fresh groupers I had been working over had slipped in with the fresh pollocks, since of course he knew they were, in fact, both stale trout. I glared at him and had another go with the mallet at the uncooperative grouper, until it became slightly more "pollocky."¹ Brian seemed to think he had reason to feel smug around me, but his smugness was betrayed by uncertainty. In an effort to raise sales, our fish shop had staged a Lobster Boxing tournament, and Brian and I were the only remaining contenders for the gold prize.²

Although I was able to maintain an air of aloofness about the competition, secretly I was quite proud of my lobster. I was giving it the utmost care and was feeding it on a pure *gefrumble* diet.³ It had defeated all the contenders it boxed and had the muscle tone of something with a very good muscle tone. It was undefeatable.

On the 17th, all was ready. The miniature boxing ring was set up in the middle of the floor, and a huge crowd showed up at the fish shop to watch the match. They did a very good job of appearing to be interested in purchasing fish – without actually buying anything. The lobsters were dropped into the ring, and the bell proclaimed that the match had begun. Brian's lobster's exoskeleton rippled with the power underneath it, and my lobster retreated into a corner, where it

¹ Meshster's Dictionary defines "pollocky" as "An adjective denoting similarity or resemblance of the subject to a Pollock."

² A ceremonial mallet and all the Taste-eze™ Specialty Prime Simulated Lobster Product you can eat (.0671 ounces, according to the National Food Board of the Republic of Congo).

³ Quite the little achievement, since I have yet to discover what *gefrumble* is.

became entwined in the ropes of the ring. Brian's lobster stepped forward for the coup de grace and then collapsed from the sheer weight of the atmosphere above it.⁴ I was the winner! Although quite jubilant, I stood perfectly still.

Brian, on the other hand, was much less amused. He had been waiting weeks for his moment of victory, and now his lobster was dead, defeated at the hands of 101.3 kilopascals of pressure. He needed revenge, and I was his target.

Before I could react, Brian had reached the halibut counter and was flourishing one in my direction. "Don't point that trout at me," I warned, casually reaching for the concealed perch I knew was hanging at my belt. "It could go off." Oops! The gaping audience had now, with the help of my little slip, made the connection between the cheapness of our goods,⁵ and the strange flavour in the anchovy paste. The crowd rushed us, but I escaped with my champion lobster and grabbed the .0671 ounces of Simulated Lobster Product as an afterthought.⁶

Yes, it may seem that my moment of glory was cut short, but I am still living it today. The shop was audited and shut down after the riot. I lost my job, but there are plenty of jobs. There was only ever one Coonel Street Lobster Boxing Championship, and I am glad to have lived it.

⁴ Sometimes, things just happen. There doesn't have to be a reason.

⁵ Fresh Coho Salmon fillets, 76¢ a pound! Perfect for barbecues! Now with absolutely zero dyed trout!

⁶ Actually, the Simulated Lobster Product consumption proclamation was a mistranslation. It would seem that .0671 ounces is the most Taste-eze™ Specialty Prime Simulated Lobster Product two people can eat. That's one trip to the hospital I don't want to repeat.

2006 Junior Fiction Runner-up

The Silent 'H' in 'Herbs'

by Kristen LaRoque

Grade 10 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

Our story does not begin in “a land far, far away” nor does it occur “once upon a time.” However, it does involve a main character of such intrigue as to constitute the telling of this tale.

Somehow, it is not quite fitting to start at the beginning, and to work backwards seems quite absurd. Perhaps then, we should start in the middle and more specifically, in the middle of a mid-life crisis, and more specifically still, in the middle of a train of thought...

“There were never any limits to this life...well, only those you imposed yourself. In fact there were hardly any other outside forces at work. Yes, you certainly made sure to eliminate as many as possible – including fate, it seems. No doubt it was strangled out of your everyday life through the ceaseless use of your daytime planner and wristwatch. And the endless responsibilities which you so selfishly and faithlessly took on yourself so long ago. Control had consumed you; thus, you were controlled by your pursuit of control. The irony was almost overwhelming...”

Such was the way our character muddled around in her mind, often spending the moonlight hours forming stiff cords of thought, weaving herself in and out of reality, and receiving a pleasant degree of rope burn. Indeed, one could conclude that her mind rants often had the power to render her exhausted to the point of mental incapacity. By morning, she was quite incapable of sensible interaction, with the exception of that which occurred between herself and her dear herbs.

There was definitely a point in her past when their relationship was more or less an obsession that involved the careful consideration of the silent “h” of the word “herb.” Indeed, our character would hope that you would be acquainted with that linguistic technicality and thus empathize with the fact that she herself had once paid very close attention to it. The reason for her doing so was quite simple: if she were to falter in her pronunciation of the word, she just might compromise her image as an expert, as the all-knowing being that graced the office and deserved everyone’s admiration. She had been working toward it for a good many years and had gained sufficient knowledge for such a title (ever encouraged by the prestige associated with it). She became engrossed with the idea of adding another badge of intellect to her patchwork persona, hoping that the final stitch would tie it all together and bring meaning to her life.

Her efforts in achieving such a conclusion never ceased; however, they were never fruitful either. Thus, a looming feeling of failure and of lacking something had always surrounded her, consumed the space between her and her front door, and left footprints on the welcome mat.

Eventually, it was a feeling that ceased to exist.

In fact, this placid evening had given her the opportunity to become tangled quite elaborately in other thoughts, so much so that that cloud of dissatisfaction dissipated. She was enjoying, for the first time in a long while, clear skies.

She awoke from her complacent reverie and stood abruptly, disorientated to the point of stumbling into a planter pot containing her beloved chives. It was knocked to the ground with a crash that sent bits of painted clay all about her. Though it was a seemingly minute reality jolt, our dear emotionally fragile character was struck with a fury of sensations in response to it that rivalled the intensity of a hurricane. Indeed, they had been roused from their once dormant state by the reappearance of life – a thing which finally occupied the innards of our now uninhibited character.

At this point, it became clear to her that the concept of things beginning – and then later ending upon the completion of their term – prevailed only to some degree. It was coupled, of course, by the idea of continuation, a free-form thought that left plenty of room for speculation as to what existed beyond the final breath, the last moment. Though she knew it was certainly the end of the pot and of the Mexican motif that adorned it, it was not, however, the end of the chives within it. Thus, she included them in an honorary omelette, not only to pay homage to the broken planter in which they grew but also to satisfy the hunger that had arisen within her during her revelations.

A few weeks before this point, our character would not have acknowledged her need for food, as it would have been buried beneath scads of paperwork and fast-food packages. Or perhaps, if she did give it a fragment of attention, she would have sent her assistant to the nearest coffee shop in order to supplement her meal with a caffeine boost. That, and a microwave dinner when she got home, would be enough to sustain her until her favourite soap opera came on. Thereafter, the melodrama would suffice until sleep prevailed.

Twenty-seven years of functioning in this manner had caused her once lively spirit to fade like the neutral beige confines of her cubicle. Thus, on a particularly sunny day (following a particularly uneventful office party), she put forward her best foot (along with her notice of resignation) and walked out the door.

Her liberation was not accompanied by grand fireworks or jubilation, but by a subtle inclination to explore the possibilities and allow life to simply happen. Her kitchen floor was littered with the remnants of the clay pot, her daytime planner was in the garbage, and she, our main character, the heroine of this tale, had just finished the last bit of a most delicious chive omelette.

2006 Junior Fiction Runner-up

Sums

by Miles Rees-Spear

Grade 10 – Lakefield College School

The soccer ball bounced off one of the aluminium walls, creating a dull reverberation through the cavern. Mariah sighed. There were never enough kids around in the tunnels, and most were always on work duty, learning to operate the giant combines in the harvesting caverns. Mariah was too young to do this and so was often left alone while the others worked.

“Come on, Rawley,” she yelled to her dog, who was currently chasing the soccer ball. She picked up the ball and walked off down one of the many branches in the networks of tunnels. The large UV lamps on the ceiling created a strange sheen on the walls, and as she walked it bounced reflections of Mariah everywhere. Occasionally, she would pass hallways filled with the sound of machinery and people working. The tunnels were like a hive, always busy and expanding, filled with buzzing activity. Giant cooling tanks ran from the ceilings to the floor, collecting moisture from the earth and purifying it for drinking. As she walked, she ran her hand through condensation that had formed on the wall and then shook the droplets off her hands onto Rawley, who sneezed. Mariah laughed at his antics. He was always chasing after things or barking at random.

Rawley was one of the few animals in the caverns that wasn't livestock. After the Great War, most species had died, so the cavers wanted to protect the surviving animals for their return to the surface.

At her age, Mariah knew the tunnel system like the back of her hand. She knew its dead ends, its twists and turns, and all the other places worth exploring. As she walked, she knew exactly where she was going and why.

She walked up to one of the metallic doors and knocked. As she waited for a response, she listened to the low hum of machinery in the background.

“Come in,” said a voice from inside. Mariah walked in.

The room was decorated strangely. Growing up in the tunnels all her life, she was not used to the collections of objects that people from the old world accumulated. To Mariah, photographs, paintings, posters, all seemed silly things to put on your wall. It was very different compared to the spartan life that Mariah had lived since she was born.

Seated on an old wicker chair in the middle of the room was Aunt Alice. She wasn't anyone's real aunt; she had just taken on that kind of role. Alice carried a certain aura of difference about her, one of the most striking things being her deep colour. Mariah had never seen the various hues

of the old world, but she knew that people in the caves were pale, white, and ghostly because they had lost the natural skin tone that comes from exposure to the sun. Alice was much older than most of the others and seemed to see everything differently as well. Many in the caves could not remember living on the surface, but Alice could. She had been a young girl when she had been evacuated. Since Alice was too old to work and Mariah too small, they often spent time together.

“Well?” asked Alice smiling. “Have you come to hear a story?” Mariah nodded.

“I’d like to hear the one about how it started. Why everything happened the way it did.” Mariah had heard the story before, but she liked to listen to Alice’s voice, and this story was one of her favourites. Alice looked troubled. It was one of the stories that she was sensitive about. She only told it to Mariah because she felt the girl needed to know the history of those before her and the nature of their misfortune.

“Well then,” Alice began, “It started like this. When I was a small girl like you, everybody used to live on the surface (Mariah could hardly imagine what this would be like). People lived together in huge cities all over the world. However, with the great freedom of space came the horrors and dangers of war. All the time that I was growing up, countries were striving to become more powerful. The resources that the world held were continuously mined away. So much was wasted or destroyed through the pollution from the factories and the cars. All this would have ended the world if greed and anger had not done so first. Some nations (it does not matter anymore which ones) began to expand their empires, constantly seeking more resources and more land. This sparked hatred and hatred sparked wars.” Alice paused, wincing as if the memory seemed painful to her. “The wars of my time were terrible. They were fought with weapons of horrific strength and with nuclear bombs and missiles that laid whole countries to waste. Those that were lucky were evacuated to the caves as a last resort, to wait out the half-life existing on the world above and to emerge once again to the sunlight.” Alice stopped and seemed puzzled by her own story. “I still don’t know how,” she said.

“How what?” asked Mariah after a short silence.

“How, with one touch of a hand, people could erase everything that humankind had worked so hard to achieve... the total sum of our time as a civilization on earth.” Alice sighed, shaking her head. Mariah sat and thought about this for a while. The room was suddenly covered with a thick blanket of silence, interrupted only by the humming of the electric light illuminating the suspended dust particles in the air.

Mariah got up after a while and left. Alice had gone into one of her quiet moods, and Mariah knew better than to ask questions which would only annoy her. With Rawley at her side, she kicked the ball slowly down the passageway and thought of the old woman’s words.

High above her, the sum of human greatness lay blackened and bare under the relentless sun.

Josslyn

by Haley J. Toyé

Grade 10 – Peterborough Collegiate Vocational School

The Queen came into her two daughters' bedchamber. "Well," she asked, "any requests for a story?" The oldest, Alanna, sat up. "At the banquet tonight, Sir Myles was telling us about the legends of Lady Josslyn. Could you tell us one? Maybe the one of how she got her famous companions?" The Queen smiled. "I think I remember that one," she said, and sat down on the edge of Aveanda's bed.

"A pale morning sun filled the forest with its greyish-yellow light. A girl lay sleeping half way down a riverbank, and as the sun rose, its rays glanced off her sword edge, sending a sharp light into her eyes. Blinking, she sat up and looked around, orienting herself. Josslyn had been riding hard for three days straight with little sleep and small rations. When she had run out of light the previous evening, she had used what little strength she had to create a makeshift camp. Her sloppily made fire was out, and her things were tossed beside her unpacked bedroll. She had slept directly on the ground.

She stood up and staggered down to the river. After a quick splash, as much to get clean as to wake up, she led her jet black horse, Hoshi, down to have a drink. The mare had earned her Konota name because of the silver star on the top of her head. Knowing the horse would stay put, Josslyn climbed the bank and walked to where the land levelled out. There, she cleared away all the rocks and branches from the little clearing. She proceeded to stretch and then moved to a blocking exercise and afterwards, pattern dances. She focused on her movements, her sword whipping around her and gleaming brilliantly as the sun was released from the horizon's grasp. Just as she was about to do a downward stroke to end the battle with her invisible opponent, something caught Josslyn's eye.

High up in a tree, yet still low enough that the sun hadn't reached it, an object was glowing. Josslyn planted her sword in the ground and walked to the base of the tree. She took one look around and began to climb. The wind picked up, the tree swayed, and branches whipped at her face until she could barely see. When Josslyn looked up, the deep blue light coming from the object pulled her onwards. She stood up on a branch, reached out, and grasped the glowing object. Suddenly, the tree stopped moving and the wind died. Josslyn, who had been bracing herself hard against both, was ejected full force towards the ground. She landed with a thud. After regaining her breath, she looked down at her hands. The object resembled a sword. It was long and sleek; what was unique about it, however, was that it wasn't made of ordinary steel. It was a midnight-blue stone with a silver grain look to it. Running her finger along the edge proved it was double-edged and sharper than any sword Josslyn had ever held. "How?" she whispered. "How or what could've made this?"

In all her time as a page, a squire, and now a knight, Josslyn had never heard of a sword made of anything but steel. As she walked back to her own sword, which was exactly weighted for her use, she was startled to realize that the stone sword felt as if it too, had been made just for her. Both hilts were wrapped tightly in black leather and both bore the same silver emblem of a dolphin jumping over a full moon. The stone sword had stopped glowing, and she realized, with a jolt, that her own sword was starting to burn in her hand. As she tossed it away, her sword burst into flame. The flame became smaller, and a blinding light emitted from it so that Josslyn had to turn away. Falling to the ground, the flame darkened, and Josslyn walked over to discover a blue stone dagger. She cautiously picked it up and slid it into her belt. Then she put her new sword into her scabbard. Josslyn called Hoshi over, packed up her camp, and covered their traces. Lord Jasson, the Royal Training Master, had drilled into her that any traceable man or woman was a dead one. She mounted Hoshi and clicked her horse into a trot. Josslyn left the forest and started off on the road home. She didn't know it then, but she would remember those past few minutes for the rest of her life."

The Queen took in a slow breath and sighed. "Do you really think that happened?" inquired Aveanda. At ten, she was already a very critical person.

"Why would I be telling you if it didn't? You know, Josslyn was her second name; she never revealed her first."

"I wish I could meet her," sighed Alanna wistfully. "I hope to be as great as her some day."

"And you can be." The Queen smiled. "But not tonight; tonight you both must sleep so you'll be bright and fresh for court tomorrow." She kissed her daughters' heads affectionately. "Good night, my princesses."

The Queen left her daughters sleeping and went to her own chambers she shared with her husband, the King. After she put on her nightgown, she walked over to the door of their private closet and opened it. Inside, was a weapons rack, and on the top of it sat a matching sword and dagger. Both hilts were wrapped tightly in black leather and both bore the same silver emblem of a dolphin jumping over a full moon. The sword and dagger waited quietly – for her and for another adventure.

2006 Senior Nonfiction Winner

I, River Nymph

by Ally Dunbar

Grade 12 – Lakefield District Secondary School

Every day in the summer, I head to the same place around the same time. I cannot explain why I do so. I am compelled, required, drawn to the river at the end of my dusty road. Sparkling, soft, deep, dark, cool... it calls to me.

The swiftly rushing river is more than an escape from the shimmering heat. It is an escape from life and all that defines it: minor teenage issues and angst, family and friends. I swim to escape boys, work, school, duties, and priorities...my future. Swimming is an anaesthetic.

The plunge is a cooling shock followed by a watery kiss, a liquid embrace. When I am completely submerged and deaf, there is no way of knowing what is going on elsewhere; it is only that moment, breath held, eyes open but blind, those precious few seconds that matter. I can see myself: pale skin gleaming against the water's darkness, hair streaming wildly, dark eyes flashing in the depths.

I swim alone and am frequently told to stay away from the river. I am asked to seek the security of a falsely blue chlorinated pool...avoid bacteria, undertows, rusty nails, creatures that bite and sting, sharp rocks that welcome smooth flesh. My boyfriend teasingly tells me horror stories of muskies that bite swimmers in rivers. He isn't aware that this terrifies me. Yet still I swim there. My mother scolds, tells me to "be careful, look in the paper, another poor child drowned in a ditch...be careful, Ally...be safe. Don't swim across the river, you're not strong enough; the current will sweep you away..."

I know the dangers of the currents; I know they can kill. One day, while sitting on the riverbank, I saw a donkey, bloated and shaggy, drift along in the current, being borne downstream. Its lips grinned at me, exposing stained teeth forever barred in a horrific, clenched grimace of death. Its white-rimmed shining eye gleamed, regarding me before it was swept past. I knew the donkey; it belonged to one of my neighbours. It was old and weary, carrying burdens all its long life, only to rot in the river. Did it slip and fall, or did the bawling cows crowd it and push it out of the way to fill their greedy mouths with water? I suppose that in the end it didn't matter; nothing really did. I went home, considering the river's graphic warning.

I remember many days by the riverside, sitting and watching minnows flicking around my legs and toes, the bolder ones placing butterfly-light kisses on my skin. Tiny flashes of silver are replaced by a larger, duller rusty silver, marred by black letters, scarred by the mark of evolution and civilization. This silver water-born object, so unlike the perfectly linked scales and grace of the minnows cutting through the water, strikes me as an attempt by the human race to imitate the

fish and claim the river as its own. The conservation authority's motorboat roars rudely and shrilly as it skims back and forth along the opposite shoreline. I eye the men on board; they strike me as predators. My instinct is to slip into the water, glide over to the boat, rise from the depths, and scream at the men. An animal scream, long, low, and full of threat. A scream to summon the river nymphs to support my cause. A scream to make them retreat. Scream.

This is not the first time the river has been sullied. Many boats cruise through, some large and smelling of barbecues, with fat men and women clinking drinks and waving drunkenly to me, squealing with laughter as they toss a dog off the boat and watch it paddle frantically back. Other boats are smaller speedboats that leave the river in chaos, oil glinting on the surface and spreading with the purposeful intent of a disease, a tumour...waves crashing violently against the shore's rocks.

The people, oblivious, smile and wave, shout their greetings at me, the lone girl on the shore. They don't notice as I slip into the water and sink from prying eyes. Without giving a response, I swim to the middle of the river and dive down. Legs kicking and arms stretched in front of me, lungs closing, mind screaming for oxygen, something deep within me reaching out, but my body holding back, turning back...giving into the needs of the human shell I am limited to and confined in. My eyes watching as the rippling, liquid sunshine surface approaches faster and faster. Head breaking the water's surface in a stream of water droplets and ripples. The air sucked into starving lungs that burn and ache with need.

I wonder if the nymphs beneath me laugh at my disadvantage. Do they contort their faces into hateful smirks? I long to join them in their hidden underwater caves, to morph into their beauty and ability. I long to lure the voyeurs to the water's edge to enact my revenge. I want to dive down deeper than imaginable, through and past the mist-like darkness to the other side. I dive down deep and dream.

Sometimes after it has rained, when the river is swollen pregnantly and rushes by me (where is it going so quickly?), I wonder if I will die swimming. Will it be a frantic struggle laced with pain and fear? Will I fight the current only to be submerged and allowed a breath at its mercy? Will I cry tears, adding to my watery hell? Will I lose my mind and adorn myself with great wreaths of flowers, sink willingly into the depths while chanting nonsense sea shanties like the beautiful, doomed Ophelia? Will the nymphs take my hand and guide me to the depths to join them at last?

Will I go as the donkey? Carried along to be lodged in the dam, legs twisted at odd angles, half submerged, and visible amid the foul foam? Or will I be anchored in by the reeds, lain in shallow, murky waters to be feasted upon by my friends the silver minnows?

For now, though, I am just a dark-eyed girl lying in my bed, feeling the waves lap at the blankets and my body, sensing the gentle waves rolling over my old quilt and rocking my pillow soothingly. I smile, close my eyes and slip into the realm of nymphs and fish, escape my mortal restrictions as I sink into the waters once more.

Strokes of a Paddle into the Sunset

by Stacy Knox

Grade 12 – Lakefield District Secondary School

As I placed my paddle into the water and made the initial stroke, my mind became tranquil. With every subsequent pull of the paddle over the calm lake, I was one stroke closer to the setting sun, one stroke closer to our next campsite, but mainly, one stroke closer to my final destination. Home.

That initial stroke, I thought at the time, was going to be the hardest one of my ten days on Lake Temagami – not hard physically, but mentally. I was scared of what was next, always pondering what the next stroke would bring: the knowledge that, together, all the individual strokes, no matter the length or force, would bring me to the next moment, the next hour, the next day. But the thrill of finally being on the extraordinary lake kept me from doubting my capabilities. “I can do this” was the motivation always in the back of my mind.

Being with the same nine people every day, watching them stroke their paddles in identical movement could drive some people crazy from the sheer repetition. However, being out in the scenic purity of the lake, watching the shorelines pass by, no one could give in to their frustrations; the constant blanket of peace around us was too inspiring.

The strokes of my paddle brought many things to my mind each day. The sound of rippling water moving from the paddle to the side of the canoe and the wind whistling past by my face began to overpower the memories of the city noises I had left behind.

When I would lean my paddle to rest at night on whatever tree looked suitable for my small companion, I would feel as if I was neglecting a small part of myself. This was the time when I could reflect on my day, find that perfect spot on some remote island to rekindle my thoughts. West-facing rocks overlooking the water were like a magnet to me. I found myself always seeking such a place to be alone with my thoughts; it felt as though I had not done this for years. This was when I also realized that my persistent adolescent worries about guys, looking a certain way, and peer pressure would set with the sun. My thoughts became deeper. I was questioning my life for the first time – not questioning the presence of it, but the reasoning. Why was I here? What was my purpose? Would I ever see this postcard image again? These thoughts flooded my head night after night. The next morning, I would wake up and go back to where I had left my paddle the night before. I would pick it up, brush it off, and, for some unknown reason, grip it and take a stroke in the air. Not to make sure that I still knew how to do it, but to make sure that it was my paddle, that, even though my thoughts had changed, physically I had not changed, and that my grip on my paddle was the same.

The last few strokes of the ten days brought me to realize that I had grown up and matured, but my paddle had stayed the same. It was always just an object, one that I had relied on to bring me out of that surreal utopian world. It was inanimate, not alive. But it had rejuvenated me; I had completed something I had set out to do. It had paddled me over the water, through the lakes, ponds, and streams; it had accompanied me up mountains and back. Not once had I questioned its reliability. Every stroke it made brought me closer to myself.

Paddling back to civilization and pulling up to the docks with the sun at my back completed my journey. Physically, the path we had taken was a full circle; mentally, it was parallel to what I was feeling. I had started out worried about what was going to happen. I returned knowing so much more about myself and what I could do if I set my mind to it.

Laying my paddle down for the final time, I once again had the feeling of neglect that I had felt many times previously while laying it down at night. However, this time was different: I wouldn't be picking it up the next morning to venture forth again. I would not have to worry about what was coming around the next bend or over the next rapid. I wouldn't have to be concerned about what the next stroke would bring. I had always taken that carved piece of wood for granted, but now I cradled it as the horizon cradles the sun.

2006 Senior Nonfiction Runner-up

Music: Universal

by Nick Pullen

Grade 11 – Lakefield College School

Millions of years ago, someone, somewhere in a cave, banged some sticks together and discovered rhythm. For some arcane reason, the sound pleased him, and he showed it to his friends, who also enjoyed it, and music was born. Perhaps the steady rhythm reminded them of the human heartbeat or perhaps they needed something to pass the long hours around the campfire. It is probably best not to delve into the specifics of it, but the fact is that it happened, and humans gave birth to the most accessible of all the art forms they have devised. It takes no formal training, natural talent, or even any intelligence to respond to music in any of its forms – only a pair of working ears. Indeed, I can safely say that there is no person on Earth who is not capable of being moved by some type of musical experience. It brings people together with no strings attached, no conditions, and no other common link. People who have never met can go to a concert and bond without asking questions, because they are equally enjoying what is happening on stage. Yet, it is a strange element of modern life that such a powerful unifying force has become such a bitter bone of contention between people. Music has always had the power to divide as well as unite, whether it is by race, by generation, or by intellectual conceit, but never have the various genres available been so blatantly balkanized. Picture a glass window that has begun to crack and split over time. When there are just a few cracks in the glass, that is manageable, but when the glass is so filled with hairline fractures and spidery, searching splinters that the edifice threatens to break altogether, perhaps it is time to consider a new window. While not going so far as to say that music is dying, I would like to propose that perhaps the power to inspire, to motivate, is leaving popular music, and something drastic needs to be done to bring it back together.

Centuries were spent developing musical traditions across the globe, with various intricate and unique styles evolving around the globe. Europe, China, and India in particular developed advanced musical traditions, with systems of notation, detailed and beautiful instruments, and even whole classes devoted solely to creating music. We have spent eons learning to make noise from blowing into holes, beating various drums, and plunking or scraping various strings, and we have developed an immense classical structure to support more innovation in this field. At the same time, the less fortunate, who could not afford such artsy pastimes, were hammering out their own cruder, but no less meaningful rhythms on a slightly more limited, but no less useful, range of instruments. This became folk music, which exists in some form in every culture, from Irish reels to Native chants to American Country music. This was the first split in the window, between the music of the rich and that of the poor.

The twentieth century has seen the process of discovering that we could make all of the sounds we'd developed and more, with just some guitars and a drum kit. The evolution of rock and roll took music in a direction that was at once more democratic, as any kid could plug in a fifty-dollar

guitar and have dreams of stardom; at the same time, it became more elitist, as age became a crucial dividing factor in what was good or bad music. Now there were three sections to the window: one for the kids, one for their parents, and one ever smaller space for those dedicated to the cult of technique and skill that classical music was fast becoming.

Rock and roll has since proven itself to be able to play host to an even greater number of styles: Rockabilly, Blues, R & B, Motown, Soul, Swing, Calypso, Heavy Metal, Hard Rock, Punk, Emo, Disco, Alternative, Dance, Salsa, Psychedelia, Folk-Rock, Country-Rock, Speed Metal, Hair Metal, New Wave, Grunge, Rap, Hip-Hop, Art Rock, Progressive Rock, Death Metal, and countless others, all now fall under the banner of Rock, and most of those are completely and utterly opposed. So much so, in fact, that when one considers that if you trace back the roots of Rap, today's dominant black music genre, you will find it shares an ancestor with Death Metal. Both of these genres can eventually be traced back to the Blues, and yet to compare them seems ludicrous, to say the least. Indeed, not only do all of these different camps exist in today's youth music, but there is also a significant group of young people who look for musical inspiration in the music of a previous generation. I fall into this category of people so cowardly, so uninspired, so lacking in originality that they need to be told that their music is "classic" before they can enjoy it. Play us something new, and we will judge it before we have heard even a note of it and convince ourselves that we hate it. This is something new. Never before has a generation ever looked backwards for their musical inspiration. Now the window is hardly even a whole structure anymore, and you would be hard-pressed to find a piece of it that has retained enough integrity that you can look through it to see... what? Is it God we're looking for, some sort of meaning for our lives?

No, perhaps not, but the fact remains that music gives humanity something transcendent that we can all hold on to in our lives. Truly great music will always have the power to send shivers up our spine, but we can't be sure today whether we listen to that music because we truly love it, or because we dislike some other type of music and are trying to find a counterpoint for it. The dividing aspects of music now outweigh those aspects that bring us together, and sooner or later, someone will have to come and tidy up the loose ends and bring us back together again, like Elvis or the Beatles once did. I just hope whoever it is shows up soon.

Where My Spirit Rests

by Kira Westby

Grade 12 – Holy Cross Secondary School

“It is important to encounter and acknowledge the life of the land. To know it is to be young and ancient all at once.”(O.R. Melling)

I stand on the shore of the rocky point, staring out at the lake. It is the end of a narrow channel, and before me the lake broadens, stretching as far and wide as my eyes can see. Over the years, I have stood here too many times to count, caught up in the beauty of the world around me. Sometimes, it was in the falling darkness of a cold, windy evening catching a glimpse of the most radiant sunset – the distant shore black against the sky’s brilliant shades of red and orange that faded into inky blackness, etched with wisps of cloud. At other times, it was during the lazy days of summer when I was sitting on a nearby fallen tree, dressed only in a bathing suit and shorts, feeling the roughness of the bark under my bare feet and the hot summer’s sun on my shoulders, while lazily waving at boaters as they pass by. But the summer seems an age ago now. The seasons turn again, and I am bundled up against the cold, westerly wind that blows the water in steady lapping waves against the shore.

The waters of Chandos are deep and wide, and made of many bays. The shore is dotted with cottages – the huge modern summerhouses, and the smaller wooden clapboards that remember another age. But now, in early November, most docks are pulled out of the water in anticipation of the deep freeze of another long winter. The landscape resembles a Group of Seven painting, aflame in the bright colours of the fall foliage – reds, yellows, oranges all mingling together, interspersed by the dark of the evergreens. Fallen leaves fly all about me in the wind, drifting to their final resting places, some floating away on the surface of the water. The fragrant scent of burning wood from our chimney drifts to where I stand, my nostrils flared to capture this scent that is tied to many childhood memories. I remember running around the yard beside the cottage, the cold air burning my lungs as I jump and roll in the huge pile of leaves carefully raked up by my determined younger self, cheeks red from the cold. I can hear the laughter of my grandmother, and for a moment, I am convinced that if I turn around, I will see her again, walking down the hill to me in her jeans and plaid thermal jacket.

The cottage on Chandos is where I have spent nearly every weekend from May until late November for fifteen years of my life. This is the place where my spirit will always rest. Uncountable memories of this place linger deep in my mind: memories of days spent wandering in the surrounding woods; hours spent sitting on the wooden dock, smiling and laughing in the warm sunshine; mornings, watching the mists drift across the smooth flat surface of the water as the sun rises higher; sitting on the dock as the air grows warmer, my feet dangling in the water,

my coffee mug in hand, with the contented thought that the day ahead is mine, with no schedule, no plans, just the spontaneity of another summer's day.

Night opens another world; the shadows grow longer until the familiar is lost to the utter blackness that is unbroken by street lamps. I remember so many nights: nights of campfires, of watching the dancing flames that pop and crackle as the sparks fly upward to the multitude of brilliant stars above; nights of after-dinner porch reveries that seem to last for hours, sitting by the light of the citronella candles, listening to the music of the 1950s and the rising and falling voices of my family that drift through the open windows and screen door; nights spent lying on the dock, gazing up at the heavens. The darkness swallows what my day-eyes know, and it is another world entirely as I look around me. The distant sounds of music from another cottage drifts up the lake, and I hum along as I lie there, all knowledge of light years and gaseous suns fading from my mind until I am lost in the primal wonder of imagining what lies beyond what we know here.

But now the time has come to close the cottage again for the long, dark winter ahead, when the deep freeze locks the lake and the deep snow silences the woods in a quiet thoughtfulness. I stand on this shore and try to absorb every detail of the scene before me into memory. I bend down and trail my fingers through the icy cold water one last time. The wind seems to die for a moment. Suddenly, I feel as if I am alone on the lake, the only human being for miles. The haunting cry of a loon rings out, echoing across the lake, resonating through my body. It is a cry that speaks of loneliness, of solitude – a cry of the north. It reminds me that even as I say goodbye, there is another opening weekend to come, another summer to look forward to. I tuck my hands in my pockets and smile as I turn away from the lake and walk through the tall grass towards the tree-covered hill that climbs up to the cottage, my whispered words of farewell caught up and lost in the wind of the Canadian north.

2006 Junior Nonfiction Winner

The Road at Night: Through the Eyes of a Child

by Katie Menendez

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One of the most whimsical experiences in the world is driving at night. The lack of light gives you the feeling that you are the only living thing in the universe, travelling outside of time to an unspecified destination. No lights, except for an occasional burst when you pass through a town, gone almost as soon as they can be registered. The silver stars and the moon are the only objects to focus on, though even they tend to blur and lose their sharpness. This is especially true if you are not wearing glasses and find yourself in that state of semi-wakefulness, so easily brought on by the hum of wheels on pavement and the late hours.

One late-night ride that I hope never to forget occurred many years ago on Highway 7 between Kaladar and Peterborough. My three cousins, two sisters, and I had been spending a week at the cottage on Mazinaw Lake with my grandparents. My Uncle Nigel had arrived in our station wagon to chauffeur us all back home. Just as day was deepening to dusk and the mosquitoes were beginning to whine, we all crammed ourselves into the car and left. Six children carry a lot of luggage, and we were also bringing home the canoe, life jackets, and paddles. Fitting in passengers was a huge challenge. Luckily, our station wagon had two seats facing backwards in the trunk. In went my cousins Emily and Fiona, along with as much stuff as could be squeezed in around them. The rest was piled at the feet of those in the back and the passenger seats. The car was so full that I could lean forward and rest my head on suitcases that were squished in behind the passenger seat in front of me. I do not believe that another toothbrush could have been accommodated.

So off we went, late at night, six girls and a carload of gear, on a drive of an hour and three-quarters. For the first little while, it was very noisy in the car. Six cousins can make a lot of noise, especially given the excuse of too much stuff in too small a space. But as the night grew darker and the stars began to appear, the hubbub slowly calmed until we were travelling in that lovely cozy silence of a summer's evening spent in the company of those you love. I do not remember if we spoke of anything significant, or even if we spoke at all once peace had descended. However, it is most likely that very few spoken thoughts troubled the comforting atmosphere. The only thing I really remember clearly is sitting with my legs drawn up on the seat and my body leaning over, resting on the mound of luggage in front of me. It made a perfect bed, and I must have fallen asleep, for I was hardly aware of a thing until we were home. Even then, I probably only woke up enough to pull on a pair of pajamas and fall into bed, the steady motion of the car still felt in my bones, rocking me to sleep.

The only thing that could have made that ride more complete would have been a song or a lesson from my father. Most long family car rides involve some kind of discussion. I believe it has something to do with the fact that our lives are normally so busy that we never have time to really

talk without someone thinking about what they should be doing instead. But in a car, there is nothing to do but listen to music or talk to each other. This is especially true at night when you cannot really see anything outside the windows. Family conversation runs from the subject of expensive medical treatment for premature babies to a lesson on the history of world civilization. Sometimes, the topic will come from something heard on the radio or a question from the backseat; but wherever it comes from, the theme is certain to be lectured, deliberated, and discussed by all and at great length. For some reason, however, my father seems to have the greatest role in this, perhaps because he knows so much or just because he enjoys giving his opinion. Whatever the reason, the measured cadences of my father's public speaking voice are certain to fill a car at any opportunity.

Another activity to which my father puts his voice is song, especially on late-night car rides when everyone else is asleep. There is nothing as comforting as dozing in a moving vehicle with your cheek pressed to the cool window and your father singing to himself as he taps out the rhythm on the steering wheel. The songs he sings are old family favourites that I rarely hear anywhere else. They are timeless and simple, yet carry the entire range of emotion in their melodies and lyrics. Many of them do not seem to have been written at all, but have emerged, like a landscape over thousands of years. Even if some inspired soul did create them, it is certain that the versions I know are not the ones originally put down on paper. My family and our experiences have embellished them, adding rich memories of warmth and peace that make these tunes the most beautiful ones on Earth. Each of them is an album for a host of memories, including many long car rides through the night.

Although, each journey is unique; no matter the season, destination, or road, they all carry the same magical qualities that make them such memorable experiences. For where else can you find such security and comfort as when you are curled up, speeding to your destination in the dark under the moon and silver stars?