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Valley Voices
Writing Contest Winners**

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Adult Poetry—First Place

“Rock Opera”

by Dawne Leiker

Five, maybe six, people know why the rock matters.
A quarter moon-shaped blonde chunk of limestone.
It lays now on a bed of river rock. A garden gnome
naps nearby, unimpressed that the limestone
stood solid as trains clattered through Hays City
in the wild 1870s. That it held firm against lightening,
against gunshots, against scorching dry summers.
Hauled by horse and wagon from a quarry south of town,
the limestone chunk joined other native stones
in an impressive three-story structure.
Locally mixed mortar somehow held
the Opera House together for more than a century.
The rock had no eyes to see, but he warmed
to the presence of women in lace-wrapped gowns,
men in smart black top hats gathering within his walls.
He swelled with pride as painted scenery backdrops
rolled across his stage.
When the mortar turned to dust, fellow stones
fell to the sidewalk outside the silent building.
Handbills tacked to the cracked doors read, “Keep out.
Premises condemned by the City of Hays.”
A wrecking ball labored only a few hours to scatter
mammoth heaps of limestone across the corner lot.
Pigeons, rats, mice deserted, searching out a new home.
The rock, though, had no home. It lay atop fellow stones
who had stood with it against the wicked Kansas winds
for more than a century. The trains still rumbled by,
but no stones trembled with anticipation of a fine visitor.
No opera the Sunday morning I climbed
the orange construction fence, searched the rubble,
lifted the perfect quarter-moon blonde chunk of stone
and carried it to my trunk.
A tiny rim of light kisses the limestone’s scalloped edge.
From the rock garden, the stone and I watch the moon lift
above our neighbor’s roof. A light breeze ruffles me
but not the rock.
The rock knows he will outlive me, just as he survived long after
the men who fashioned him into an opera house.
Just as he survived centuries beyond the fishes of the deep
who gave him small regard when he was sediment
in an ancient sea. For this solitary evening, he is king
of the rock garden. A jewel among the gnomes.

Youth Fiction—First Place

“The Concussion”

by Ryan Schuckman

PROLOGUE

It was a hot spring day in Mallet Creek, Ohio. We were down by 7 points against the Jacksonville Bulldogs. We were on offense so Tony, the quarterback and my best friend, told everyone in the huddle the next play . . . he said, “Tired receiver, in, going to 5.” That meant it was a deep pass and coming to me. We broke out of the huddle and jogged to our places. Tony yelled HUT! across the field and the play began. I made a move on my defender that was playing man-to-man. I sorta got around him; we were running right by each other. I crossed Jacksonville’s 20-yard line and I looked back to Tony. Tony had just released the ball when I looked back. I watched the ball as it came closer and made adjustments to be able to catch it. Then it hit my hands. It gave a pleasant sting. I bobbed it for a bit, then pulled it in. After making sure it wasn’t going to come out, I turned upfield. I saw a muscular kid coming at an angle to tackle me. He ran to me and plowed into me, causing me to get hurled backwards. I finally hit the ground, on my head. I crumpled to the ground and blacked out. The last thing I heard was the muscular kid grunt after pounding me to the ground.

Chapter 1: The Concussion

When I woke up, I had a terrible headache. I was in the Emergency Room at Mallet Creek Hospital. No one was in the room. I waited awhile then Dr. Donald came in. “Good to see you finally awake,” he said. “Why am I here?” I asked politely. “Well, you took a hard concussion at your game today,” he said, tapping lightly on the side of his head. That’s when my mom and dad walked in. They gave me a hug, mussed my hair, then asked the doctor how bad my concussion was. “It was a bad concussion which means Rick isn’t going to be playing any anymore football this season. He’ll also miss some days of school,” Dr. Donald said. “I can’t play football?!” I yelled at him. “Calm down, Rick,” my mom interjected. Dr. Donald added, “Well, there’s a possibility you can play in the last game. That’s if you heal quick.” After some more questions, we left. The doctor said not to read, exercise, write, do math, and not talk as much as usual. I could watch TV, draw, play with toys, or sleep. Those things got old quick, though. “I don’t understand why I can’t write,” I told Mom. “It’s really drawing, only the objects that we draw are part of a language. It would be like if a triangle replaced an ‘F.’ I wouldn’t be allowed to draw a triangle, but I could draw an ‘F’ since it wouldn’t be a letter. It’s frustrating.” Mom looked up from making spaghetti to say, “Those are the rules and you have to follow them, Rick.”

Chapter 2: The First Dream

After dinner, I got ready for bed. I looked in my mirror and saw a chocolate milk mustache. I wiped it off, then I put on my pajamas. After brushing my teeth, I fed my fish and flung my Red Sox cap off my bed, turned off the light, and went to bed. I eventually went to sleep after my headache died down. Sometime during the night, I woke up to the sound of a baseball hitting a bat. I looked around and realized I was in the Red Sox stadium. Everyone, except for me and the players, were all fish wearing pajamas. They were all reading books instead of watching the game. I took a book from a fish to see what it was. Surprisingly, the fish grew another book out of its hands. I read the title - “The History of Mustaches.” I thought that was very strange. I opened it up and, sure enough, it was all about mustaches. I decided to go to the concession stand. All they served was chocolate milk. “Want some chocolate milk?” the concession man asked. I took one and opened it up. I was about to drink it when I woke up in my room. My shirt was wet, but it was because when I dreamed I was drinking chocolate milk I had actually poured some water from the drink by my bed on me. I must have startled my fish because he was swimming around the edge of the bowl quickly like he was trying to figure out a way to get out. The rest of the night, I didn’t have a single dream.

I woke up the next morning with the whole house to myself. Sometime during the morning, the doorbell rang. I jumped up and ran to the door. I opened the door and a UPS delivery man was there wearing his all-brown uniform. He handed me a package without saying a word and left. The package had my name on it. I thought that was weird since I didn’t order anything lately. I opened the box and tore off the bubble wrap. Inside was a replica of Fenway Park, Red Sox’s Stadium. Then I noticed there were fish in the stands all reading books. Next, I saw a person in an ocean of fish wearing pajamas and reading. I was about an inch tall! I set the replica of my dream on the counter

in the kitchen. Why would someone send me this if I didn't order it, I thought? And was it just a coincidence that it was the exact same as my dream? Then I noticed a metal crank on the side. I turned it and the replica moved. It showed me taking the book from the fish, the fish replacing the book, me walking to the concession stand, and me getting ready to drink the chocolate milk. That's where it stopped. I looked for who it came from and I found it, but it wasn't readable since it was scratched out. I left it on the counter but kept thinking about it and watched some more TV. Then Dad came home at noon with lunch from McDonald's. "What's that thing for?" Dad asked, meaning the replica of my dream. "A delivery man showed up today and gave it to me," I said. "It's quite odd. Why would there be fish at the Red Sox stadium? And that little figure looks a lot like you, Rick," Dad said. "Yeah," I said, noticing it was me. I ate the rest of my food in silence.

Chapter 3: The Fire

After Dad left for work, I looked at the label from who it came from and wrote it down. It said, "Cle____d p-____ing an_ s_u____n_." I didn't know what it was supposed to say since I couldn't read it, but I saved it anyway. Later in the afternoon, I saw some kids from school go by. I knew Tony would come through this route, so I waited on the porch until he came. Once I saw him, I walked down the steps into the heat of the late spring afternoon and told him to come in my house. "I thought you couldn't walk," Tony said. "Where'd you hear that from? Wait, let me guess . . . Randy?" I asked. Tony nodded. Randy is a big bully in our school. He usually leaves the football players alone since he knows he'd get beat, but must have had a change of attitude because of my concussion. "So, did we win the game after I left?" I asked Tony. "No," he said. "We could have kicked a field goal, but it wouldn't have helped us any. Well, I've got to go - bye," and Tony ran off. I went back inside and had a snack then brought the replica upstairs in my room. Once it got to be around 7 pm, I went back downstairs and waited for dinner to be ready. While I waited for Dad to finish cooking, a huge flame erupted from the pot reaching out to touch the ceiling, but fell short. Dad ran to a closet and got a blanket that he used to hit the fire with it, yelling to get back. He put out the fire quickly. I sat back down from jumping out of the danger zone while dad called Speedy's Pizza Shack. We ate pizza, then I said goodnight to Dad. I went upstairs and turned off my computer which had somehow come on. I watched a late night jogger go by outside then dozed off to sleep.

During the night, I had another dream. I saw a huge building that looked like a computer. I walked in the building and there were computers everywhere. Even the cashier was a computer. Then a group of joggers wearing fire suits ran in the building. I followed them and saw a computer was on fire. They quickly put out the fire with their hoses. Then the dream vanished and was replaced by blackness. I woke up and looked at the clock - 1:00 am exactly. I went back to sleep to the sound of raindrops hitting my window. The next morning, I woke up from the sun shining on my face causing me to get up earlier than usual. I heard a car go by splashing through a puddle. I went downstairs and got myself two waffles, ate them, then went upstairs to finish my history homework. While I was reading about The Depression, the doorbell rang. I looked out my second story window and saw a delivery man standing at my front door. I ran downstairs, but when I got to the door, the delivery truck was pulling away. I picked up the package and brought it in. This one was a little bigger than the last. I tore it open since it was for me, tossing cardboard and bubble wrap to the side.

Inside was another replica and it was of my last dream. It had the giant computer building, the firefighter joggers, and me in the middle of it. This one also had a crank that made things move, me doing the exact same stuff in my dream. I measured the figure of me on the replica. I was exactly two inches. I carried the replica upstairs and also measured me on the other replica - that one was one inch. I put the replica beside the first one. Ten minutes later, Mom came home followed by Dad. "What did you do while we were gone?" Mom asked while she made sandwiches. "I got another package today," I said, trying to avoid telling them I read since I wasn't supposed to. "Oh, really? What was it?" Mom asked. "It was another replica thing," I said. "Where is it?" asked Dad. "I put it upstairs," I replied. Dad turned back to the newspaper. After a lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches and chips, Mom and Dad left for work. I peeled the return address label off of the cardboard box and brought it upstairs. The label was also unreadable but different parts were scratched out from the first one. I used the last one and this one to almost figure out who it came from. Now, combined with the last one, it spelled: Clev____d Pr____ing and S_ul____in_. I put them away in a drawer in my room and packed away all of my history books and homework into my book bag. Tomorrow would be Wednesday so I would go to school for the first time since my concussion.

Later on in the afternoon, Tony came by after school. I went out to meet him. "Hey," I said, "For school, is there anything I need to work on?" "Yeah, homework," Tony said. "Well, besides that," I

said. "Um, there's a thing where you make what you think the Depression or Dirty 30's would look like. And it has to be 3-D," Tony answered. "Is that all?" I asked. "Yup, I think so. He left and I went back inside. I started gathering things together for the project like dirt and twigs from the front yard.

Chapter 4: Returning to School

Dad came home a little while later after Mom had gotten home. After eating tacos, I went to my room. I started putting together my project. I was doing the Dirty 30's so I got some dirt from the front yard and got a little handheld fan that would blow the dirt gently enough where it didn't blow out of my shoebox. Then it was time to go to bed. I brushed my teeth, put on my pajamas, added a few tiny crops to the project, then went to sleep. During the night, I had a dream where I was in the middle of a barren field. There were some people running toward a sod house. I looked around and saw a huge cloud of dirt was heading my way. It looked like it would be here in just a few minutes. I looked down at myself and saw that I was wearing overalls. I checked my pockets and found a handkerchief. Then the dust cloud hit. I heard a scream coming from the house. I struggled to put the handkerchief over my face, but I was able to without getting dust and debris on my face. Little dirt particles pelted me with a sting each time one hit my exposed skin. A bigger rock that was still airborne hit my arm and I awoke in my room. Another strange dream that made me wake up! I looked around and saw my project. That made me think. All of my dreams had things in real life that I had experienced. Red Sox that corresponded to the Red Sox stadium, feeding my fish . . . fish in the stadium stands, late night jogger outside my window . . . jogging firemen and the computer that was on . . . computer building in my dream. I was doing stuff with the Dirty 30's project which made my dream put me in the Dirty 30's era. Now, the replicas that were delivered to me, I couldn't explain. I went back to sleep without getting anymore dreams. The radio came on as my alarm. I got out of bed, changed clothes, then went outside with my project of the Dirty 30's in hand. I waited for Tony and he eventually came. Then we walked to school together. I told him about my dreams and my theory of how my dreams start. I also told him about the replicas of my dreams coming to my house. "That's really weird," he said, after I finished. "I've heard of people who see things in the day then that's what they dream about, but the replica thing, that's bizarre." He kicked a stone into the street then said, "It's like your brain sends a message to the company - or whatever is sending you the replicas - to make what you dream." I thought that was crazy, but I still nodded. We talked about football for the rest of the way to school. At lunch, we were having corndogs, my favorite! After I went through the lunch line, Randy came up to me. Randy said with a sneer, "That concussion didn't make you forget anything, did it? It isn't like there's anything to forget with you." Some of Randy's friends snickered behind him. Then Randy saw Tony with three of our friends, two of them who were linemen, finishing at the lunch line and coming our way. "I need to um . . . go," Randy muttered, then hurried off. We sat down and ate our lunch in peace. The rest of school flew by.

I walked home and, as I approached my house, spied a package at the front door. I scooped it up and went inside and took off my backpack. I anxiously opened the box and inside was another replica of my dream. It looked like the Dirty 30's and I saw me in it. I turned the crank on the side and it showed exactly what I had done in my dream. The big storm and everything. Then I got a great idea! I would use this replica of the Dirty 30's as my project for History class. The teacher couldn't argue that I didn't make it because I made up the dream even though some other place built it. I just got the idea started. I took my half-finished project out from my backpack and threw it in the trash. I replaced it with the replica of my dream. This replica was the third one I had received. It was huge; I was four inches tall so that meant everything else was humungous. Whoever was making these were making them larger each time. The next one I could be 6 or 8 inches tall, meaning the replica would be gigantic!

I went upstairs, still puzzled by it all, and started on homework. While I was trying to do math, I kept thinking about the replicas. It wasn't just a coincidence anymore; someone knows what I dream, but how? After awhile, Dad came home. He brought in the mail. "Is there anything for me?" I asked. "No, but there's a letter from Cleveland Research of the Brain Institute," he said. Dad opened the envelope and read the letter aloud:

Dear Johnson Family,

We haven't received any data from Rick Johnson's dream research program. For the past three days no data has been received at our headquarters so we'll need Rick to come here. We will hopefully figure it out. If you have any information on why we aren't getting our research, please contact us.

Sincerely, President Walker

Immediately I thought about the strange dreams and the replicas of them. I asked Dad, "What do they mean with the dream research thing?" He hesitated for a moment, then told me all about how when I was little, I had strange dreams that would keep me awake, so they called the Cleveland Research of the Brain Institute. They put a tiny device in my brain to send my dreams to the Institute before they reached my thoughts, which I didn't understand. Somehow it malfunctioned or it sent the data to a different place. I was absolutely stunned at the news! My mouth was hanging open the whole time Dad was talking. That's when I thought that maybe Tony was right about the device sending the data to the place that made the replicas. After Mom came home, I showed her the labels that came from the replica company. She's really good with word puzzles so she started trying to decipher what the label said. After some time, she figured out that the company was Cleveland Printing and Sculpting.

Chapter 5: Going to Cleveland

After we realized who was sending us the replicas, we sent the Institute a letter explaining what was happening. Mom and Dad decided this was important enough we needed to make a trip to the Institute and miss school. They planned the trip to Cleveland all out. We would go to Thistledown Racetrack, even though there wouldn't be a race going on. Next, we would drive up to the National Museum of Science. After we finished there, we would go to a Thursday night football game of the Browns vs. Redskins. I couldn't wait for the game! The next morning we would go to the Institute to talk to the researchers about what has been happening to me and my brain. We ate a quick dinner of hotdogs, then I packed for the trip, threw my shoes in my closet, and put a pen that was on the floor onto my desk. I flipped off the light and went to sleep.

During the night, I dreamt that I was in a building. I looked around and saw a sign that claimed the building was the Shoe Hall of Fame. There were shoes made of wood, stone, and straw. There were also sandals, dress shoes, tennis shoes, and cleats. I walked out of the building and saw writing pens frozen in mid-air. I flipped a light switch on the outside of the Shoe Hall of Fame, but instead of a light coming on, the pens whizzed by. Then an alarm went off for no reason. That's when I woke up. I looked at the clock and it read 1:00 am just like it had the last two times I had had dreams. I didn't get anymore dreams the rest of the night. In the morning, we drove north until we reached Highway 303 then went east. Once we reached I-271, we turned north then drove through the Cleveland suburbs. I mostly stared out the window on the way to Cleveland. We eventually got to Thistledown Racetrack. No races were happening, but there were some people on the racetrack fixing parts of the track so we watched them for a bit. We continued on to the Science Museum. It was really cool. They had a ball rolling machine and lots of other amazing things. Next on our agenda, we headed to the Cleveland Browns stadium parking lot. We got in line to get inside the stadium. Once inside, we found our seats that were on the 35-yard line and watched the players warming up. I watched the quarterback throw long passes that would float into the wide receiver's hands. I was excited to get to see an NFL game in person!

Chapter 6: The Institute

The beginning of the game started rough. At the half, the Redskins were up 21-0. The third quarter brought the Browns back into the game with a 79-yard return at the kickoff. On the kickoff after Cleveland scored, it looked like the Redskins would get another 7 points, but at the 30 yard line, the kicker tackled the runner from behind. Somehow the ball was knocked loose and the kicker picked it up and ran. He got brought down soon after. Nothing interesting happened at the beginning of the 4th quarter, but with a minute left, Cleveland successfully punt blocked and got the ball at the 25. They quickly did a no-huddle drive until they finally scored. They could kick the point after and go into overtime or they could go for two points and win the game. They decided to go for two. They faked it, then gave it to the player going right. He started to run through the middle, but at the last second, peeled off to the right and threw the ball to one of the open receivers. The player caught the ball and Cleveland won 22-21!

After the game, we drove through heavy traffic to our hotel. When we opened the door into our room, we were disappointed that it reeked of dirty and stinky socks. There were little pebbles on the floor. We were all exhausted so quickly headed to bed. A truck horn blared outside. I buried myself under the covers and went to sleep. I had another dream . . . I started walking and the pebbles I was walking on grew to a boulder size. Then a giant horn appeared. It honked and a disgusting smell came out. A blanket and some sheets then fell on the smell and made it stop. That's when I woke up in the hotel room. I couldn't go to sleep for awhile after that. After packing up, we headed to the Cleveland Research of the Brain Institute. We didn't have to wait too long to get in to see the doctor.

The doctor did some tests on me and came back. He said, "It seems that the redirecting chip in your brain has malfunctioned and sent the data to Cleveland Printing and Sculpting's online website where it ordered the replicas that you said you received. The tech guys are working on it right now. Was there any time that you had a severe headache or a concussion recently?" I said, "I had a concussion playing football . . . Um . . . 5 days ago." The doctor looked at his clipboard and said, "Yes, that would match when we didn't get any data." Then I heard a buzz and five short clicks. It was weird. It didn't sound like it was coming from outside my ear. It sounded like it was in my brain. Then someone yelled, "OK, we're finished." "Well, I guess we're finished," the doctor said and opened the door. We walked out of the red brick building and climbed into the van. I felt relieved that I wouldn't be getting anymore replicas.

Once we got back home in Mallet Creek, after school I met up with Tony and we walked home together. "Did they have to do a Frankenstein surgery?" he asked. "No, I didn't even know that they were fixing the thing until it was almost done," I replied. "Oh, that's no fun. I thought they'd do a super surgery that would take weeks," Tony joked. Once we reached my house, Tony kept walking down the street to his house. Outside on the porch of my house were two boxes the delivery man had left. I cautiously opened them and inside were two more replicas of dreams I had had. The first one had my dream of the Shoe Hall of Fame. It had probably been delivered while we were driving to Cleveland and the other one was of the truck horn, probably delivered while I was at the Institute. The last one was super huge - I was at least 10" tall! I put them in my room since they were so big and started on my homework, relieved that those two were the last I was going to get, I thought. I let out a big sigh of relief . . . it had been a crazy week, that was for sure.

Adult Autobiography—First Place

"Memories Of My Grandfather"

by Janice O. McIntosh

Six year old Oscar Olson was all smiles as he cheerfully kissed his mother, Brita, goodbye. She gave him his metal lunch tin with an apple and a slice of cheese. He waved to her as he headed down the path to his first day of school.

Several hours later, he returned with tears running down his cheeks and his face covered with red blotches.

Brita rushed out, her crisp white apron flapping in the wind, and gathered him up in her arms.

"What is the matter with my little one?" she cried, wringing her hands on her apron. Between gulps, Oscar tried to talk as tears flowed down his face once more. "The children all laughed at me and said I talk funny!" he finally blurted out.

Brita suddenly knew what the problem was. The family all spoke Norwegian at home. Her husband William was learning English as he talked to other farmers, yet he, too, spoke Norwegian with the family. She had been in America for eleven years, but she had yet to learn its native tongue.

She squeezed Oscar tightly to her as she brushed his blond, curly hair off his face.

"Oscar," she promised with a big smile, "from now on, our family will speak only English. And you, Oscar, will be our teacher!"

A slow smile crept over Oscar's tear-streaked face. "Oh, Mama!" he cried happily. "I will be a good teacher. We will learn our new language together." Hand in hand, they walked back to the farmhouse.

Oscar took his new teaching job seriously. Every evening after supper, the entire family sat around the pine table with the kerosene lamp, while Oscar said about ten Norwegian words and then repeated them in English. He was very patient and before long, his mother and his three younger sisters were using many English words. No one was more proud of them than Oscar.

This is my favorite story about my grandfather. Even as a child, his kindness and patience shone through.

When I was five and recovering from a bad case of the measles, my grandparents came for a visit. Grandpa spent lots of time reading stories and playing games with me. I still treasure the times he gave me his full, undivided attention. My dad was at school teaching his history classes. My mom and Grandma were busy cooking, cleaning, visiting, and keeping the house neat. But Grandpa was all mine! I'll never forget the precious hours he spent with me.

When we visited my grandparents in Kansas during the wheat harvest, my favorite job was to take cookies to Grandpa in his workshop. I walked down the wooden sidewalk he had built, carefully carrying the cookies and the pitcher of lemonade for "our morning break."

I always crawled up a high stool in his shop and proudly talked to him as he stood tall at the table. He was wearing blue striped overalls, a red handkerchief around his neck and a blue striped engineer's cap over his snowy white hair. His bright blue eyes twinkled with love for me, his only grandchild. Many times the floor was covered in wood chips and they brought the scent of the Wisconsin forest indoors.

All too soon, I heard Mother calling me, and slowly and reluctantly I slid off the stool and gave Grandpa a goodbye hug and walked back to the house.

How wonderful it would be if every child could have a Grandfather like mine!

Adult Essay—First Place

"Less Generates More"

by Suzanne Waring

I awoke just as early morning's sun rays filtered through the trees. I peeped through the curtains next to the bed and discovered a white powder had thoroughly dusted everything during the night. I wasn't at home to see this tranquil sight but instead in our trusty little camper.

My husband and I had taken a five-hundred mile round-trip so I could attend a conference. The conference had adjourned in the afternoon and we had started homeward. When it had gotten dark that late October day, we pulled into a USDA Forest Service campground. Unlike what is normal in the summer, we were the only people sharing the campground with the wildlife. With snow on the ground, the quiet was an astounding contrast to hearing planes take off, trains rumble by, and cars hurry to their destinations on the Interstate a mile from our home. The sights and smells made it imperative that we take a walk before we resumed our travels. Recent fallen leaves provided a bed for the bedspread of snow. It was so quiet that the hidden leaves rustled under our steps. What a wonderful way to start the day.

Some years ago we acquired an eight-foot camper that fits into the bed of our pickup. We live in our camper at least two month of the year when we travel to see our children and grandchildren in Alaska and Montana and to spend time with my elderly parents in the Midwest, but we also take other trips for both business and pleasure.

I have learned how to pare down on needed possessions and to be content with what our camper can hold. A new haircut demands use of only a pocket-sized comb for styling. A tinted moisturizer and lipstick take care of makeup. Casual clothes dominate. A spit bath in a wash basin works well for several days. I find that standing in a basin of warm water to wash my feet is a nightly pleasure.

My kitchen cupboards contain no microwave, mixer, or toaster. They hold one saucepan, skillet, coffeepot, muffin tin, cookie sheet, and teakettle. Instead of a refrigerator, we have an icebox. As long as we do the simple act of feeding it ice, it works great. I have a three-burner stove and a small oven where many a muffin and biscuit have been baked and served hot. We do just fine all the way to Alaska with ten gallons of water. Eating most of our meals in the camper, we have learned to make them simple, such as a main dish, vegetable, and some fruit. For doing dishes, I hand pump the water, heat it, and wash a handful of dishes. I have two tea towels.

Our camper has no air conditioning so we use a small fan, though it is rarely needed because of the destinations we choose during the different seasons. The camper does have a furnace, and we have slept there when it was -30 degrees F. outside.

We were able to attend the weddings of two nephews and a niece over a thousand miles away because of our little house on wheels. We took our wedding-attending clothes and dressed in our home away from home. The truck and camper fit into a traditional parking spot so we can park as if we were driving a sedan.

Personal space is something we give up in the camper. My husband and I often dance around each other, and we have learned a system for getting up in the morning and going to bed at night. There are times one of us goes for a walk to give the other one room. I do admit that having some alone time is something we each enjoy when we get home, but then we wouldn't have the special memories from our trips if we hadn't found a way to be compatible in our small camper space.

We have driven across the Mississippi River on one of those high swaying bridges, and we have tucked the truck and camper into the hold of an Alaska Marine Highway ferry as we journeyed to and from Alaska.

On one occasion, we drove up the mountainside to an out-of-the-way campground. We were late getting there, and no camp spots were available. We remembered that this particular campground had closed off sites. We decided to try the rough, unmarked road and neglected camp sites. When I got out of the truck to walk around back to get into the camper, I happened to look up. With no light, including campfires, the heavenly bodies put on a breath-taking display. The sky was so bright that it reminded me of seeing a large city at night from an airplane. The stars and Milky Way completely covering the dome of the sky caught me in awe, and I felt that I might be able to reach out and touch them. Because there are lights that dim the heavens almost everywhere these days, it was a sight that few people enjoy.

That moment will forever be etched as a favorite memory. I would have missed that unusual experience if I hadn't been willing to travel with less in our little camper.

Felicity Ashton wrote about the joy of living with less in *Along in the Antarctica* after her solo trek across the Antarctica, "Pleased as I was to be home...I regularly found myself longing for the compact security of my yellow-and-green Hilleberg. In the tent my few essentials were arranged conveniently within arm's reach, made simple by the lack of surplus. I found that, at home, I missed that simplicity and convenience. Going about my life it seemed that nothing I needed was ever where it was supposed to be—it always involved a journey, be it to another room or to the shops or to another town."

Living sparingly on the road has taught me to improve my life at home by also living with less.

Adult Fiction—First Place

"A Plug of Days Work"

by Keith Schlaegel

"What if it was your last day on earth?"

I looked over the top of my coke bottle lens glasses at Joe and tried to look intelligent and thoughtful.

"Whatch ya mean?" I asked. "Like you mean you, like you died?"

Joe nodded. "Well yeah. Last day on earth? What else could I mean. Like you were a soldier and got killed when somebody tossed a hand grenade in your fox hole. What if you knew that was going to happen and you could do whatever you wanted?"

Joe was one year older than me and was getting ready to move up to eighth grade...junior high. He usually talked down to me, but this time he seemed to be asking me my opinion on something. I needed to come up with something smart.

"I guess if I knew ahead of time, I'd not be in that foxhole."

Joe scowled. "No, you can't do that. You can't change how you'd die, you just know ahead of time." I shrugged.

"Yeah, you can't change how you die or where, or when I guess. What would you do? What I'm trying to say is what would you do ahead of time?"

"Well, if you was in the army, fightin' in some war, you probably wouldn't have too many choices."

Joe shook his head. It was a hot day in August, just a couple weeks before school started and we were sitting under a big cottonwood tree. It was on the edge of a pasture which marked the place where town turned from urban to rural. Joe had planned on swiping some cigarettes from his dad, but that hadn't happened, so instead we were tearing off pieces of chew from a plug of tobacco which Joe had found next to a mailbox beside the grocery store. He told me there was nothing wrong with it, nobody had bit any off yet.

"Alright. Let's forget the army guy. Let's say that you knew you were going to have a heart attack. What would you do the day before?"

I thought hard, not wanting to give a poor answer to such a deep and intelligent question.

"I guess I'd come up with something fun I'd always wanted to do. Something crazy I guess."

Joe scrunched up his mouth and then took a bite off the plug of Days Work. That's what it said on the label, Days Work, and Joe said he thought it was pretty good stuff, as far as plug tobacco went. I nodded in agreement although my knowledge of plug tobacco was limited to looking at it in the displays at the grocery store.

"Something crazy," he said, his mouth still scrunched up. I could tell he didn't think much of my idea of what I would do during my final hours on earth. "I guess that might be alright, depending on what it was, but I wouldn't want to waste a lot of time if it was something like climbing the water tower or running naked down Main Street. You weren't meaning something like that, were you?"

I shook my head, although I had always wanted to climb the water tower and running naked down Main Street did sound exciting. "Nah, I wasn't thinking of something like that. Like you said, that would just be a waste of time."

Joe looked at me, half smiling. I was expecting something sarcastic, but then he nodded.

"Yeah, I think it would have to be something worthwhile."

"Like what," I said. "What ideas would you have?"

Joe leaned back against the tree and paused for a moment, then spit a trail of tobacco juice off to his side.

"Well, I'm thinking I would probably give Jeanne Plumer a kiss." For emphasis he gave another sploosh of tobacco off towards an anthill a few feet away from him.

I was awestruck. Why hadn't I thought of that? Jeanne Plumer was without a doubt the most desirable girl in eighth grade. For her to even look at a boy in the eighth grade was considered a major accomplishment and for a seventh grader it would be out of the realm of possibility. She was "going out" with Darren Doherty, a boy who was going to be a sophomore. And Darren wasn't one of your run of the mill sophomores. He had started two games for the basketball team last year and got to go to pasture parties with some of the senior boys. My friend Rod Davis, had even seen Jeanne and Darren holding hands walking around the fairgrounds during the carnival two weeks before.

Although Rod wasn't always known to tell the truth.

"Yep, I'd give her a kiss. Maybe two or three and then we'd see where it'd go from there."

I couldn't concentrate with thoughts of kissing Jeanne in my head, but did manage to regroup enough to ask a question.

"What if she didn't want you to? What if she didn't like it?"

"It's your last day on earth, so if it hurt her feelings, what does it matter? And if she tells somebody you were a bad kisser, so what? You ain't going to be around anymore."

I nodded at this sage logic, still admiring the choice of kissing Jeanne Plumer during one of your waning moments on earth.

"How about punching Bill Barton in the nose?" I said, then shrugged to show that I didn't think it was such a great idea, just in case Joe scrunched up his mouth again. Bill Barton was the mean kid in seventh grade and was well known for picking on kids weaker than him. The ones that others ignored and hadn't developed physically yet. He deserved a punch in the snout, but no one really wanted to do it just in case he was really tougher than anyone thought and he might do you damage.

Joe's mouth didn't scrunch. "Not bad, I guess. The bad part about that would be if Barton is really a better fighter than we all think and he hurts you. It wouldn't be too good to spend your last hours with a broken nose or missing teeth."

I nodded, seeing the logic in his argument.

"What then," I asked.

"Well let's see." Joe reached into his mouth and pulled out the Day's Work, inspected it, then stuck it back in. "You know out east of town, that farmer who has two mail boxes? One of them is down where the mailman can reach it and the other is probably 10 feet in the air? Says 'Air Mail' on it. I might write a letter, take it out there and climb up and put it in that mailbox, the one in the air. Then probably, who knows, maybe 10 or 12 years later, someone will look in there to see if there is any mail and my letter will be in there."

I grinned as that seemed like a pretty neat trick, but I wasn't quite sure if that was how I would spend my last moments alive.

"What would the letter say?"

"There ya go." Joe said. "That's the good part. I'd tell people how I knew it was my last day on earth and how I'd kissed Jeanne Plumer. Then I'd admit to all of my transgressions," Joe had learned about transgressions in Sunday School last year and he liked to work the word into

conversations whenever he could, "and then I'd say who I wanted to leave all my earthly belongings to. Finally, I'd make a prediction or two about something that would happen in 25 years and then just stop. I wouldn't sign it or nothin'."

Joe finished and nodded, happy with his final act on earth.

"Why wouldn't you sign it?" I asked.

"Ya see, it would be a mystery when the letter was found. Who was this mysterious man who kissed that beautiful Jeanne Plumer girl and left behind these predictions? And why was the letter in the Air Mail mailbox? It would be a mystery through the whole town. It'd be my legacy."

I nodded, although I wasn't sure what a legacy was. Besides that I was starting to feel a little queasy from the tobacco juice that had drained into my stomach and I really didn't feel like talking much anymore.

Joe seemed happy with himself and leaned back against the tree again, after sending another tobacco offering at the ant hill. Sunlight filtered down through the leaves of the cottonwood tree creating a jigsaw puzzle of sun and shadow on Joe, moving slightly across his body as the breeze blew the limbs. A smile playing across his lips as he imagined, behind closed eyes, kissing the best looking eighth grader in school history and leaving a mysterious legacy that would be found in a mailbox after being suspended in the air for 10 years.

It's doubtful Joe was ever able to act on his plans. I don't think he ever had knowledge that he would die when he was 22 years old from complications during a bout with pneumonia.

Jeanne Plumer remained the most beautiful girl in school throughout her senior year. I'm pretty sure Joe never kissed her, but then I don't really know for sure. I saw her twenty years after she had graduated and she had a couple of kids in tow and had put on a number of pounds. She looked tired and didn't recognize me when I smiled at her, just as it had been in junior high.

I prefer to remember her when she was an eighth grader moving up to her freshman year.

The two mailboxes are still there, just east of town. The words "Air Mail" have weathered away and someone at some point has put the flag up, signifying that there is mail in the box to be delivered. I've considered stopping and climbing onto the hood of my pickup, opening the door and seeing what's inside. But I never do.

I'd like to think that Joe's legacy is there, waiting for the right person to find it.