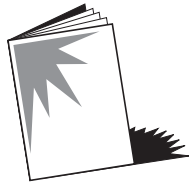


OUR OWN WORDS



**Pierce County Library System
13th Annual Teen
Poetry & Fiction Writing Contest**

**2009
WINNERS**

Pierce County Library System celebrates the wonderful contributions from teenage writers in the Library's 13th annual teen poetry and fiction writing contest—Our Own Words. This year, more than 800 7th–12th grade students competed in the poetry and short story writing contest.

Sixty-eight volunteers, including library staff and Pierce County Library Foundation Board members, reviewed the entries. Noted young adult author Dia Calhoun and poet David Whited selected this year's winners. The judges reviewed the pieces for originality, style, general presentation, grammar, and spelling.

Pierce County Library Foundation awarded the winners with cash prizes and the winning entries are published in this book.

Pierce County Library System gratefully acknowledges the support of the Pierce County Library Foundation, The News Tribune, and other community partners for continued support of the teen writing contest.

2009 WINNERS

Final Judges:
Dia Calhoun
David Whited

OUR OWN WORDS 2009

POETRY WINNERS

Grades 7 and 8

1st **Lost Children**

by Cheyenne Robertson 8th Mann Middle School

2nd **Forget**

by Emily Tomczak 7th Lighthouse Christian School

3rd **I am Here**

by Jasmin Ferrante 8th Curtis Junior HS

Grades 9 and 10

1st **My Cat**

by Diana Choi 9th Curtis Junior HS

2nd **Complaint**

by Leah Cardon 9th Curtis Junior HS

3rd **"Alias-otherwise named"**

by Alyssa Hernandez 9th Cedarcrest Junior HS

Grades 11 and 12

1st **Like Yoda Speak**

by Nathaniel Sheldon 11th Covenant HS

2nd **Oncorhynchus Kisutch**

by Rachel Webber 12th Emerald Ridge HS

3rd **It Started as a Thought - Mar 09**

by Tyler Coghill 12th Harrison Prep

SHORT STORY WINNERS

Grades 7 and 8

- 1st Snow Spirit**
by Mariah Bellamoroso 8th Home school
- 2nd Strawberry Vodka**
by Alyssa Moulton 7th Mountain View MS
- 3rd Eva**
by Erin Haas 8th North Tapps MS

Grades 9 and 10

- 1st Blood Brothers**
by Joel Kim 10th Covenant HS
- 2nd Liberty**
by Matthias Needham 10th Stadium HS
- 3rd Suspicious Company**
by Eric Zils 10th Gov. John Rogers HS

Grades 11 and 12

- 1st Double Rations**
by Thomas Slack 12th Covenant HS
- 2nd The First Raid**
by Nathaniel Shelden 11th Covenant HS
- 3rd A Weekend Job**
by Will Firch 12th Covenant HS

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POETRY

Grades 7 & 8

OUR OWN WORDS 2009

LOST CHILDREN

Cheyenne Robertson
8th Grade

I see the children laying there
With no tears,
They sigh.
Their days counting down
While I live on.
With a sigh
They close their eyes.
With one last breath
They say goodbye,
Weeping families cry and cry
While the children die.
They are braver then I
Dying of disease
While I am fine.
No tears running down their faces
Only mine.
Its not their time
Nor is it mine,
But they are lost
While I am fine.

FORGET

Emily Tomczak
7th Grade

The things I want most slip away,
Along with the errors from yesterday.
The shameful events flood me with regret,
Those I can't seem to forget.

Haunting words come back with a sting,
And I lose control of what's happening.
My mind is playing a game I only seem to lose,
The battle's outcome wasn't mine to choose.

It seems like I've done it all before,
And each time it hurts more and more.
I can't leave it all behind,
The bad wants to stay to tease and remind.

All the happy memories are fading with the sun,
And once again the battle is done.
Next time I know I'll do better,
For I'll cling to what I'd die to remember.

If it's a fight- so be it.
This time I won't quit.
While some of the good fades away,
I know who I am and that will stay.

I AM HERE

Jasmin Ferrante
8th Grade

Memories were lost in the fire of hate
And the fire was lost in the pain
The heart was blinded in the power of love
But its bitter petals quietly scream distress and drown in the rain
She still cries on the ground breathless in defeat
Yet hides it all behind a smile of fake
Forever now shallow words lost in lies
Fight harder to catch her breath
The sky may glisten once again
Love may bloom to no end
Gently whispering summer waits to captivate you
But for now rest
Emptiness may slowly fade and I will be here
I will hush your tears
I will break your shackles that bound you here
She will awake heart stitched close
Tears dried
I will be here
A friend that never sleeps

POETRY

Grades 9 & 10

OUR OWN WORDS 2009

MY CAT

Diana Choi
9th Grade

I taught my cat to clean up my room,
To use a bucket, brush and broom,
To dust my books and picture frames,
And pick up all my toys and games.

She puts my pants and shirts away,
And makes my bed, and I should say,
It seems to me it's only fair.
She puts away my underwear.

In fact, I think she's got it made.
I'm not too happy with our trade.
She may pick up my stinky shoes and socks.
But I clean out her litter box.

COMPLAINT

Leah Cardon
9th Grade

Cleaning makes me want to be buried alive.
Every second of weekends I do it; it drives
Me crazy, so bad that I need padded walls
In my room so whenever my mom loudly calls
With a ton of new jobs that I see no need for
I can go mop our kitchen's nearly-forest floor
Or scrub out the tub filled with dinosaur bones
After staking out work zones with bold traffic cones.
The dishes in our sink, stacked five miles high,
Like slices of onion, make me want to cry.
The mountains of laundry, heaped far and heaped near,
Have to be put on a truck to get here.
It looks like today I'll be in high demand;
Say, would you mind coming to give me a hand?

“ALIAS - OTHERWISE NAMED”

Alyssa Hernandez
9th Grade

The fear i feel when i look in his eyes, is a feeling from my father i truly despise, the way he can throw so much away, he wants to live but hes here to stay, the memories i remember from when i was little, died and defeated, and now my love dwindles, how can i look up to someone who isn't himself, pitiful intakes changes itself, so many beautiful things, but so much hatred inside, while his daughter wastes tears in the corner where she cried, cocked and pulled to the temple of his head, but hes here for a reason because hes still not dead, on my bed there i lay, with a worried heart and nothing to say, while my mom cries because shes scared for him too, i shake and tremble while my heart turns blue, all i could hear was the two voices scream, while my legs criss-crossed and the tears started to stream, what would happen if he died that night, its the same stupid battle i always have to fight, there is no end to this world we all hate, its a constant struggle till the end of the day.

POETRY

Grades 11 & 12

OUR OWN WORDS 2009

LIKE YODA SPEAK

Nathaniel Shelden
11th Grade

Like Yoda speak, the point what is?
To be some Star Wars Jedi wiz?
My nouns to put before the verb?
Confuse all that by me are heard?

To criticize the style I will,
They use it only space to fill.
Their rhymes examples I must make,
And from this you must warning take.

I others to this light must wake,
And to their inmost cores they'll shake
And shivers down their backs they'll catch
Like fingers down a board that scratch.

Oh, what an art form we have lost!
What happened to old Robert Frost?
With snowy wood, and longish road...
Back then each word would bear a load.

So when you write a poem or song,
Just put the words where they belong!
'Cuz if you don't, you're wasting time,
Just twisting sentences to rhyme!

ONCORHYNCHUS KISUTCH

Rachel Webber

12th Grade

The salmon picture on the wall,
Mother loves it,
but the profiles of the three
grey and puce-colored fish
lie flat against that yellow wall,
each staring at me with one protruding eye.
Why would anyone want that there?
Perhaps I could set them free.
Take them to the river and dump them in.
Then they wouldn't be trapped
in that silver framing from '84
and I wouldn't have to look at them anymore.
So orderly.
Unwild.
Trapped under a quarter-inch-thick piece of glass
an inch from the border
one on top of the other,
with three inches in-between.
And they all swim to the left.
With their mouths open.

IT STARTED AS A THOUGHT - MAR09

Tyler Coghill
12th Grade

It started as a thought that blossomed into ideas,
That went communicated amongst a people,
Who formed ideals that then broke into branches,
From which formed factions.
And those factions argued and started to fight,
Trying to decide who was more right,
And war broke out, led by those who wanted it;
Fought by those who don't give a shit.
And when the dust settled,
The land covered with broken pieces of metal,
It was apparent whose idea of ideal had won,
At the point of a gun. We fight like animals,
Yet argue we're the pinnacle of evolution,
And these wars are said to be social revolution.
This cycle has been eternal since the dawn of man
And there are those who try to change this plan
But the easiest way to make change is to use force
War to make peace? Why can't man just discourse?
We fight like dogs with no one around to police us
Not making progress, we've only ever made Congress

SHORT STORIES

Grades 7 & 8

OUR OWN WORDS 2009

SNOW SPIRIT

Mariah Bellamoroso
8th grade

All is silent, save for the quiet hiss of snowflakes settling gently onto the frozen ground. The ink-black sky above is dotted with tiny pinpricks of starlight and glows slightly around the halo of a waning moon. My view is framed by cedar branches, nodding in response to the whispering wind. I do my best to ignore the chill seeping into my joints and huddle between the roots of the great tree. The spicy, clove-like scent of cedar mingles with Luke's cologne and the smell of wood shavings still clinging stubbornly to his coat sleeves. Wrapped in Luke's old coat, I enjoy the winter scene despite the cold.

A barn owl screeches three times, the lonely cry echoing through the tree-tops above me. I do not flinch, listening as the familiar sound reverberates around the valley. In a moment the silence again settles softly all around.

I have known these woods for more than sixty years. Luke and I walked these trails every evening. Though Luke has been dead over five years, I still keep up our nightly walk routine. Tonight, despite the bone-cracking cold, I felt a strong yearning to visit our tree. Perhaps I seek peace; or, maybe I aim to reconnect with Luke through our shared memories of this sacred spot.

My daydreams are interrupted by a step in the undergrowth to my left. Surprised by this unexpected intrusion, I jump. I know these woods, and have never been afraid of anything in them. But, for some reason, the soft crunch of undergrowth startles me. A curious mixture of dread, fear and excitement jostle one another uncivilly within my mind.

A branch snaps. In spite of myself, my head turns quickly, searching for the source, but I can see nothing beyond the sliver of

moonlight in which I sit. Then, my heart racing, I make out the head of a deer moving into the far side of the clearing. Its hooves crunch softly as they break through the fresh snow. It steps gracefully into the moonlight, and I take in a sharp breath as my eyes travel down its pure white coat. The deer I am used to seeing are always brown or spotted. Every perfect white hair on this animal's body makes me shiver. After a few more minutes of quiet observation, I realize what else is odd about this deer. The creature standing before me is beautiful: clean and pure. Ordinary deer are dirty and scruffy-looking from surviving in the wild. There is no dirt on this deer and not a single luminous hair is out of place. The moon reflects off the deer's perfect hide and it seems to glow as if it were made of light.

Halfway out of the bush, head turned skyward, the animal stops for a moment. I have a strange feeling that it knows I am here, but is unconcerned with my presence. It seems to be listening to something just outside my range of hearing. Head still lifted, it moves gracefully out of my field of view, leaving an evergreen branch bobbing slightly in its wake.

I realize I'm not breathing. I draw in a long slow breath, almost choking as the searingly cold night air burns my lungs. The heavy silence returns. Were it not for the line of footprints in the snow, I would not believe that the deer had been there at all. I stare at the place where the deer disappeared and find myself rising. My knees creak as I slowly straighten and hobble stiffly forward, feeling the cold more intensely now that I am no longer sheltered from the gathering wind. I pull back the still swaying branch and begin to follow the fresh tracks.

I walk beside the prints, not wanting to mar their crisp perfection on the white powder. As I follow the deer's trail, the woods become colder and darker. Thick foliage obscures most of the moon's light. With each step deeper into the woods the cold and the darkness seem to soak into me. The rising wind rushes through the treetops like water pouring over rocks in a stream. My teeth begin to chatter. A deep ache throbs in my bones, more painful than the arthritis. It gets worse as I

continue farther into the forest, which puzzles me. I recall walks Luke and I shared on colder nights than this. But, he is gone now, and the icy cold encases me like a dark shroud.

Distracted by my discomfort, I am unaware of stepping on a pair of low-hanging pine boughs. They spring up when I lift my foot, reminding me of a small child reaching up toward its mother. My thoughts drift to Becca's face, radiant with delight as she hands me a wooden block, golden curls bouncing, and a small smile on her chubby face. Remembering, I smile in return. A sudden longing to hold that little girl, to rock her just one more time, almost overwhelms me. Unbidden, tears begin to spill down my face.

A sudden and persistent gust of wind finds its way between the tree branches to my exposed wet cheeks and brings me back to the present. The cold, and something formless but pressing and insistent, urges me on after the deer's tracks. I tuck my memories of Becca away and continue my journey.

After fifteen minutes, or perhaps two hours, for time seems oddly static here, I realize that I've come to another small clearing. The moon shines brightly onto it, bathing the area in dazzling silvery light. I am startled by the moon's sudden brilliance and throw up a hand to shade my face. As my eyes adjust to the light, I slowly drop my hand, revealing what seems to be a human shape in the center of the clearing, silhouetted by the moonlight. I squint to make out who this might be and then gasp in surprise and wonder. It is my husband, Luke!

He holds out a wrinkled hand, beckoning to me. I look down and see that the deer's tracks have disappeared. Hesitating, I look up at the smiling figure. Then, taking one last deep breath, I catch the proffered hand and step forward into the light.

STRAWBERRY VODKA

Alyssa Moulton
7th Grade

Perhaps it was me. Perhaps it was the way the rain slanted and patted against the roof with the lightness that it always had; never enough to damage, but only to distract. I watched in shy agony as the cars passed with bumper stickers of achievements of children. The window fogged from my breath, and I sketched a single teardrop, the last one I promised myself I would cry over his loss.

Last winter was one of the worst of my life, and I knew it would forever be. Back then, only my mother, Grandpa and I lived in our snug home in Sumner. I was in 6th grade, and everything seemed to be just fine. I was the top of my classes, had a great relationship with my family, and despite my father's death years ago, I was doing fine.

My mom was a snippy woman. Her choppy brown hair curved around her face. She had a straight long nose and glasses that made her eyes constantly angry.

Grandpa was the most like a father to me. He was wise and had experience with any situation I needed help with. Every science fair, the first day of kindergarten, my attempt at soccer- all the moments in life fathers should always be at. He filled the shoes of the father I never knew. He had a bald head and small glasses pushed back against his eyes. Grandpa was a great role model because he never smoked, drank, or had any nasty habits most adults do.

But one day, as the snow created a blanket, slowly, as if tucking a baby into its cradle, I snuck up behind Grandpa as he was lounging in his reclining chair. I grabbed his shoulders. He shot up like a bullet, staring at me with a glazed look.

"Who are you?"

"Grandpa, what's wrong?"

"How do you know my name?" He stumbled over his right leg. I was shocked. What was happening? Grandpa never acted like this. I was too alarmed to say more.

"Grandpa!" He had run into a wall and collapsed to the ground. I sprinted toward him, but as I knelt beside him to see what was wrong, his body began to shake. His eyes rolled to the back of his head and he couldn't hear me.

"Mom!" I screamed. She came running as fast as she could. When she saw Grandpa on the floor, she flipped out her cell phone so fast it nearly flew out of her grasp.

As the ambulance pulled up to the house, the events ran into a slur. All I can remember was the sirens, Grandpa on a stretcher being pulled into a blinking white van, and me being pushed inside behind him. The noise, the hysteria, the panic. And that was it.

I remember waking up in a white hallway on a blue chair, my mother seated beside me, tears silently streaming down her cheeks. I couldn't see why, I'd probably just fainted. Then I remembered: Grandpa.

The maple door in front of us squeaked open, a stinging noise in piercing silence. A thin man wearing a white lab coat clutching a clipboard approached us, a solemn expression on his face.

"Mrs. Clarions?" he said to my mother. She looked up, her eyes as innocent as a child's. Without the smeared mascara, she looked like an angel.

"May I speak to you a minute?" the man continued. My mom nodded, biting her lip, then rose and he directed her towards the door from which he'd come. I was only a 'child' and was forced to wait outside for the duration of their chat.

Seconds passed slower than a cloudy day, and I grew weary with impatience. Curiosity burned at my throat like drinking hot cocoa that was too hot. What was the doctor telling my mother? What happened

to Grandpa? Was he alright?

To my relief, the door opened and there stood my mother, crying enough to water a field. When I asked what was wrong, the only reply I got was my irritated mother saying it was rude to ask.

Three months later, I was suspicious of my Grandpa's frequent visits to the doctor's office for 'prescription refills'. I knew they were lying- he wasn't on medication. But then, in the middle of the night, I awoke to see ambulance lights pulling away. Through the window on the back, I saw Grandpa, breathing through a tube. He was still as a rock.

I went to find my mom. She was sitting on his bed in a tattered blue robe holding her face and weeping.

"Mom?" I called sheepishly. She tried to calm her breathing, then turned to me, tear-struck, and said, "Go back to bed." Feeling too tired to demand an answer, I returned to my room.

I dreamt that I was in a museum. A girl was next to me. We were in the health section, and the exhibit was 'cancer.' There was a large scale poster of cancer-causing products. Near the top of the 'good' side was "STRAWBERRIES AND VODKA: ANTIOXIDANT CAPACITIES" and a picture.

The girl nodded to the top and pointed out, "Doesn't it suck your grandpa didn't drink? He might still be here." I was going to ask what she was referring to, but then I was in bed, the sun seeping in the curtains.

My mother passed by the room in the hall, but saw me awake and rushed to squeeze me. I wondered what had happened that made her upset.

"Alexis," she whispered, eyes wet, "your Grandpa died last night... Back in November, he was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumor. We could have stopped it, there was a chance. But - he wouldn't /et us. He said that, if he were going to get past this, he would have, without it." she sobbed. Grandpa really couldn't be gone, right? No. He was my

life - he couldn't be gone so suddenly. But he was. The pain struck me like lightning, burning my heart. When I glanced in the mirror, the place where my heart should have been was singed.

The following year, I was at a museum with my best friend Stephanie. We came across a poster of cancer-causing products. Near the top of the 'not causing' side was "STRAWBERRIES AND VODKA: ANTIOXIDANT CAPACITIES" and a picture.

"Doesn't it suck your grandpa didn't drink? He might still be here," Stephanie noted, pointing. I turned to look at her. Her face had remorse. I hugged her.

"Yeah. It does."

And it was that day that I realized: losing Grandpa wasn't all bad. I missed him, but if he hadn't passed away, we never would have moved and I would have never met Stephanie. Now when I look in the mirror, my heart is pink with a single stitch. I was glad that everything happens for a reason, even when it doesn't seem fair.

EVA

Erin Haas
8th Grade

Rain splashed on my broken black umbrella as I walked down the street. I knew I should have stayed home to pack my suitcase instead of taking a short walk, but I felt a compelling need to go outside. My parents begged me to wait until the weather improved. But if I was traveling back to sunny California, I might as well say goodbye to the dull weather the right way.

The houses that I steadily passed were beautiful. They were the type that could be seen in one of those home decorating magazines—you know, the sort where with just one look you can see dollar signs hanging off the roof.

As I turned my head, a small house caught my attention. It didn't look like the others on this block. One of the windows had a pale green shutter that was hanging by a single hinge. The shingles covering the roof were made of wood that I supposed were once nice-looking. Now, covered in moss they appeared to be concealed in rotting plants. The house was strangely lopsided and seemed destined to crumble to the ground. Something tugged at the corner of my mind, pulling me away from my casual assessment of the unattractive shack.

My mind was telling me something about the residence in front of me. I couldn't put my finger on it. But the more I looked, the clearer the memories became.

All the faded memories rushed back to me in that instant.

I was eleven. It was the summer of 1962. My mother was walking out of the kitchen, grinning as she set the cake in front of me. The voices that began singing in unison around me were background vocals as I prepared to blow out the candles. I closed my eyes as I thought of my all important wish. I had dreamt of this moment hundreds of times

before. Now the moment was finally here.

"I want a best friend," I whispered as I blew out the candles on the cake. Clapping and cheering erupted. I smiled. My life was finally going to be complete.

Less than a year after I made that birthday wish, Eva moved into my neighborhood. She was funny, clever, and kind. Eva was everything I dreamed of in a friend. We laughed, ate, and played together. She was constantly over at my house. My parents joked that we were practically sisters. My wish had been granted and I was thankful.

For some unexplained reason, I couldn't visit her house. When asked, Eva would often mumble and change the subject. I struggled to forget these uncomfortable conversations.

As we got older, we spent less time together. We attended the same schools through eighth grade, but during high school, we separated. Eva's parents didn't choose the boarding school chosen for me. She was homeschooled. My school was miles from her home. Both of us were devastated.

Whenever I was in town and had free time, we spent it with each other.

Soon, her parents started to discourage Eva from coming over. They made up inane excuses for why she couldn't spend time with me. The thing that irritated me was that Eva went along with their excuses.

One cold night I was feeling lonely and took a walk to her house. I was feeling terrible. Our increasing distance felt like I was having somebody stolen away from me, and that somebody didn't even put a fight. I stood on the sidewalk in front of her house, my mouth dry and knees shaking.

I felt very vulnerable as I wobbled up the concrete walk that led to her house. My knuckles rapped lightly on the wooden door followed by a pause that felt like forever. Her mother answered as I struggled to form an impromptu sentence.

"I need to see Eva-now," I stated, sounding stronger than I felt at

the moment.

"I'm sorry, she's not here," her mother responded.

What did I expect? That Eva's parents would let me waltz in?

"I need to see her. You've" - I was stopped by a low groaning sound coming out of the house.

Eva's mom stared at me, concerned, then turned her back to look at what was behind the entry. The distraction was all I needed.

I pushed past the door, and searched for the source of the noise. I heard myself gasp as I laid eyes on a bony young girl sitting at the base of the stairs.

"The chickens! Ooohh! Too many chickens," the girl yelled in agony. She covered her face with her thin hands and rocked back and forth. I felt Eva's mom stiffen. "They're biting me!! They're biting me! Make them stop," she screamed.

The girl looked right through me. She seemed familiar somehow...

Eva?

She couldn't be. The girl in front of me was scrawny with glazed eyes.

"Ouch! Put the dogs away! No more cabbage!" She was now flat on her stomach thrashing up and down wildly. Eva's mom and I stood deathly still, side by side while Eva continued her contortions.

I turned toward the woman beside me.

"What's wrong? Can't you make her stop?" I asked as tears streamed down my cheeks.

Eva's mother took me outside and closed the front door.

"We don't know. She's been having attacks like this for some time now. She yells about chickens and dogs. She also complains about us boiling cabbage. But we never serve cabbage - or have chickens and dogs running around in the house! We've tried moving her to different

rooms, taking her to doctors, nothing's worked. But I know it's going to be okay," she whispered unconvinced.

I peered into the side window of the house where Eva continued to writhe on the floor. I watched uncomfortably, then turned without another word and stumbled down the footpath away from her house.

As I stood there, I realized this was my last memory of Eva. Purposely, I had put all thoughts of her out of my mind. My conclusion was that she must've been placed in an asylum. I never heard about her again. The memory was curious though. . .

I walked briskly across the street, venturing up the cracked concrete walk. Feeling like that teenager again, I knocked on the door timidly.

"Come in," I heard an old voice say from the other side of the wood.

I cautiously opened the entry, and nearly stumbled as a chicken fluttered past my ankles. Odd. I hesitated a moment, but then the voice called out again - and I shuffled toward the sound. As I neared the back of the house, a black dog crept out of the shadows and growled at me. I backed up against the wall but resumed walking.

"Come in! Come in," the voice beckoned.

I opened the last door and before me stood an elderly woman stirring a pot of water.

The pungent odor of boiling cabbage burned my nose.

**SHORT
STORIES**
Grades 9 & 10

OUR OWN WORDS 2009

BLOOD BROTHERS

Joel Kim
10th Grade

“Get to the last Shingle!” were the last words I heard before we set off for the beaches. It was June 6, 1944, and I Jason Smith, was headed toward the beaches of Normandy. It was cold day, filled with light rain and fear. As I gripped my M1 Garand, fear caused my fingers to shake until I could barely hold my gun from the sweat. While I was getting into the landing craft, my comrades were swearing as they took their seat, some awaiting their imminent death. Others stuttered Bible verses while trying not to shake and drop their guns.

Yet of all these men, one man, my brother, Scott Smith, was only one who didn't seem nervous. Many times he had saved his comrades and seemed un-phased by the chaos and shock others experienced during this brutal war. After a while, I lost count of how many medals he had earned throughout this war. Yet, through it all, he always seemed to take care of me. During earlier skirmishes, he would always look after me, making sure I was ok.

CRASH!!! A shattering explosion of a mortar shell interrupted my thoughts and brought me back the chaos. Our landing craft swayed back and forth, as bullets recoiled off our craft sending sparks into the wet air. As we neared the beach, my brother grabbed my arm and told me it was going to be ok, that he was going to make sure I would make it. As we neared the beach, it seemed like even more bullets were being fired in our direction.

Seconds later our landing craft stopped and the pilot yelled, “This is it!” He lowered the ramp and the men in our company started to run amuck into chaos. The first few were obliterated as bullets ripped through their bodies, killing them instantly. At this point, our sergeant jumped over the side as he ordered us too also. I hurdled over the side into the cold bloody water, where I began to sink because of the weight

of my equipment. Yet I managed to reach the surface, and started to swim toward the beach.

As I opened my eyes, I could see blood and bodies everywhere. Though I had hoped all this was a dream, that hope was shattered when bullets began to pierce the water right beside me. When I reached the sand on the beach, all I could see were US soldiers running for cover as many of them were mercilessly killed by Nazi soldiers. Fear gripped my heart, and urged me to run for the closest morsel of cover.

As I sprinted, blood and bullets were the only things in my line of sight. The sand was wet with blood and water, and men all over were being shot down without mercy. When I reached the shingle, I was met by my brother who had been searching for me all over beach. His face was covered with sweat, dirt, and blood, but his face showed a small grin, when he knew I was still alive. When I glanced over the cover to see what was going on, my brother jerked me down, afraid that I would get shot. He then looked over and immediately pulled his head down, as bullets bounced off the shingle creating sparks that were shot all over.

As bullets were being fired at us, I knew that we couldn't sit around so with a push of courage I leapt around the shingle and sprinted toward the closest piece of cover. Whilst I ran, bullets pierced the sand around me, making small craters in the ground. Right behind me, of course, was my brother, though mad at my stupidity, only cared about my safety. When I reached the next, shingle, the young man who had already been there looked at me with tears in his eyes. He was scared out of his wits, and neither he nor I could do anything about it. I started to tell him to follow my brother I, when a sniper bullet punctured his helmet sending blood all over the sand. I watched in horror as he slowly collapsed and the expression on his face turned from fear to nothing at all.

I sat there; shocked and motionless, knowing that man could have been me. I was then met by my brother, who didn't seem shocked by the dead body, laying inches away from his own. Scott then peeked around the corner and fired a few shots at the Germans

stationed at the bunker. While he was firing I also looked around the corner and saw that there was a tank stopper right before the main shingle that our sergeant had ordered us to get to. My heart was filled with joy and fear at the same time as I pulled my head behind cover once more. At that moment Scott threw a grenade in front of us, creating a smoke screen. He started to sprint toward the tank stopper and I followed him hoping that the grenade would cover up our bodies. As I sprinted, I ran past a soldier who had been shot in the leg. He was groaning and crying out for help, yet nobody could do anything for him, in fear of receiving the same brutal punishment he had.

When I reached the tank stopper, I dove for cover and made sure Scott had made it also. As we settled down, Scott told me to sprint for the final shingle as he fired at the enemy for cover. At that moment a stray bullet pierced my leg; excruciating pain shot throughout my body as I dropped my gun and agonized on the ground.

“AHHHHH!” I yelled as Scott turned to see what had happened. Realizing I had been shot, Scott covered up my wound while telling me that I was going to live. He then dropped his gun and threw me over his shoulder.

“You’re going to make it, don’t worry,” were the last words Scott said before he started to run toward the final shingle. As he ran, I could see bullets being fired all around him. Young soldiers were being shot right before making it to the end. While I lied upon my brother’s shoulder, all of my fear went away, and courage and love flowed throughout my body. I looked up, to realize that my brother had carried me all the way the final shingle without getting shot. Sadly, I was wrong. After setting me down, Scott collapsed, as he grabbed his side. He had been shot. While I tried to cover up his wounds, tears started to roll down my eyes, as I watched my brother slowly fade. He then gently grabbed my arm, and pulled me down, so he could speak.

I wiped away my tears, as I said, “You’re going to make it, don’t give in.” As a tear rolled down his face, he lifted his head to speak. His last words were words I would I never forget.

“I’m going home Jason.I’m finally going home.”

LIBERTY

Matthias Needham
10th Grade

"Meet me in the park tonight," she purred in my ear, "Underneath the old willow. I've got something you just *have* to see."

Of course, I had already lost the argument. As soon as the scent of that floral perfume had reached my nostrils, all objections had fled my mind. Nevertheless, I tried to protest.

"Nissa," I implored in a hushed tone, glancing furtively around the classroom, "You know perfectly well that we can't sneak out at night. Not now. Not after . . ." Not after the Bluecoats had caught Allen Jones. No one had heard from him since. I cleared my throat. "Besides, we have to attend tonight's mandatory rally. Hence the word 'mandatory.'"

In response, Nissa flashed me her radiant smile. I could just feel my brains melting inside my head. What had I been talking about, again?

"I'll take care of that," she said, batting her eyes, "You just be sure to get there safely."

And with that, the discussion was over, Nissa returning to her Anatomy notes as if the conversation had never taken place. I, on the other hand, was unable to concentrate for the rest of the class. Bombarded by that flowery fragrance, my thoughts kept wandering back to Nissa's deep blue eyes, to her long, flowing hair, to her soft, unblemished skin.

When the bell rang, finally bringing me back to my senses, I realized that I was staring at a blank sheet of paper. I hadn't written down a single word regarding the lecture! Grimacing to myself, I gathered up my books and steeled myself for my next class.

• • •

Late that night, I stole through the deserted streets, collar hitched up around my ears. Somehow I knew that I would make it to the park unhindered, but habit left me checking my back every few steps. I kept asking myself what would happen to me if I were to be caught by the Bluecoats.

The Bluecoats, formally known as His Holiness's Secret Police, had been very active in the past few months, arresting lawbreakers left and right, no matter how severe (or mild) the nature of the crime. And sneaking out at night was very severe in their eyes, not to mention skipping the weekly rally. That had been demonstrated in the arrest of Allen Jones.

Indeed, in these troubled times, the general public had almost no freedoms. Just the other week, His Holiness the President had released a new list of banned books, items, and organizations. And there would be more such lists to come.

Stopping for a moment in the shadows, I reflected on what I knew about the President. He had been around for a long time, apparently. Some even said he'd already been alive during the Third World War, but that would have made him impossibly old. Yes, there were many rumors circling around His Holiness, the oddest of which stated that he was actually a woman. But who could disprove such rumors for sure? Our beloved President never showed his (or her) face. In my eighteen years, I had not once heard of him leaving his palace in New Washington. Talk about reclusive! Yet he was the most powerful person in the country.

My troubled thoughts were interrupted by the sweet, blossomy smell wafting my way. Spirits lifted, I hurried on towards the old willow right ahead of me now.

"You're late," she told me by way of a greeting, then, unable to keep a straight face, broke out into her heavenly smile.

"I know," I laughed, emboldened in her presence, "So, what was it you wanted to show me?"

Eyes twinkling, Nissa reached into the backpack leaning against the tree, and pulled out a small wooden box, which, when opened, revealed a round, silver-colored piece of metal. I realized that what I was looking at was a coin.

"Where did you get that?" I asked her, fascinated, "I've only seen images of coins before. In fact, you shouldn't even have it at all; coins were rendered illegal over forty years ago. I thought that all of them were collected and destroyed."

But when had that ever mattered to Nissa? Sure enough, her tinkling laugh immediately followed my statement. "Yes, I'm aware that coins are very rare nowadays. But look at the image on this coin," she dropped it in my hand, "It is what makes the coin all the more valuable."

On the upward-facing surface of the coin was the impression of a beautiful young woman in profile. On her head was a crown, and the word "Liberty" was engraved above her.

"Ring any bells?" Nissa inquired. Seeing that I was lost, she continued, "She's Lady Liberty, the personification of freedom from despotic control. Ironically, she used to be the symbol of our country. That was long ago, though. No one remembers her anymore."

"But now, when we are so repressed, I want to make her into a rally point for all those who wish to bring democracy back to our country. Are you with me?"

• • •

Years passed, but I would always remember that night under the willow tree. In the months following our midnight rendezvous, Nissa and I set up a group of freedom fighters, with Lady Liberty as our figurehead. It started out small, with simple acts of graffiti and vandalism. Later, though, when our numbers had grown, we began to speak out openly against the government, fully understanding the risks we were taking.

It was around this time that Nissa disappeared. My grief over her loss was initially terrible, but I reminded myself that the good of the

people was of utmost importance. Therefore, I used the memory of Nissa as a standard. My plan worked; by turning Nissa into a martyr, our numbers tripled within the year. We were winning ground on every side. Yet I was not with my Nissa.

Finally, in the twentieth year since the founding of the underground revolution, I was captured. In prison, I was tortured and beaten for weeks, maybe even for months. Every broken bone made me want to give up hope, every bruise weakened my resolve. But I held on to that image of Lady Liberty, and was somehow able to stay alive.

Then, after they had completely crushed my willpower and my mental stability, the floggings stopped. I was told that I would be taken to New Washington, to have an audience with His Holiness the President. The very next day, I found myself being escorted into the President's heavily-guarded office.

At the desk in the center of the room sat the leader of our country: a woman (I was able to note, despite my near-insanity, that the old, seemingly far-fetched rumors had, indeed, been true). She was a beautiful woman, with deep blue eyes and long, flowing hair. When she flashed me a radiant smile, my injuries seemed to fade away. I began to wonder, searching my memories, if I had ever met her before. And then I smelled the floral perfume.

SUSPICIOUS COMPANY

Eric Zils
10th grade

As the glistening sun began to drop below the canals of Venice, the city began to calm and its people set about closing their shops, even the vendors who sold everything from fresh produce to clever Rolex imitations. A popular place to visit during the day was the famous Risotto & Sons Canal shop. The Risottos had been in business almost as long as Venice had canals. Their time-honored traditions of woodworking still made wonderful gondolas, oars, rudders, and everything in between. But there was something about that store at night that kept even the most hardcore tourist at bay, an aura of fear guarding the building like a vigilant hawk. Rumors had spread that the Risottos were not as legitimate a family as everyone believed. Naturally this had an effect on profits, but hardly a significant one; the Risottos were the finest gondola masters in all of Venice and no one could get around without them. The thing about rumors is, sometimes they're true.

Giovanni Risotto looked, on the surface, like anyone else in Venice; he cut a wiry figure at 5' 9", had jet-black hair, dark eyes, and a cheerful disposition. But when the sun disappeared over that fair city, it marked the end of his innocence, mentally transforming him into the cold, fearless mob leader Slade. He was the head of *L'Ordine del Falco*, or The Order of the Falcon. Giovanni collected his henchmen from every corner of the world; former intelligence officers looking for revenge, *yakuza* hit men looking for extra money, mobsters with a debt to pay, he'd take them all. Within two years, he'd created a small army of criminals with skills ranging from pickpocketing and arson to murder and genocide and everything in between. And he'd accomplished all this by the ripe age of 25. Giovanni had inherited the business from his father, but his father had either fired or killed all his henchmen, forcing

his son to start anew. Much of their business was carried out in the basement of Giovanni's shop. His ancestor Tobias, the store's founder, wouldn't have approved of this change of family business, but times had changed quickly. Giovanni was quite satisfied that his empire would stretch for another 30 years or so. That was before he met Atticus Cooper.

One night, as Slade was starting a meeting of his "lieutenants", a man walked in robed in a midnight blue traveler's cloak. He was just a few inches shorter than Slade, but carried a powerful presence. In his left hand was a wizened staff of oak; at his side glinted the hilt of a sword, silver adorned with a lone sapphire glinting in the dimly lit cellar. Just then, he spoke with an American accent, "I hear you're the new Risotto head bird." Slade responded, "Yeah? And who might you be? We don't allow tourists in this neighborhood." Calmly, the man replied, "I go by many names, none of which I prefer to use. However, I am often referred to as Atticus Cooper." Slade chuckled, not a good sound to those who stood in his way. "Ok, 'Atticus' what do you want? Money? Information? Bodyguards?" Atticus maintained his calm, steady voice and said, "No, I have come to make an offer. I have been granted access to the launch codes of America's newest missile, and I am willing to give you those codes if I am allowed to synchronize our bank accounts and become a partner in this order." Slade was genuinely surprised. Very few people ever asked to join them, and he couldn't resist the missile, so he said, "Welcome aboard, Mr. Cooper. Do you have the codes now?" "I'm afraid I don't," Atticus replied, "but we shall make the exchange tomorrow night, the Marozzo warehouse, 9 p.m. sharp." "Very well," Slade agreed, "I guess good things come to those who wait." Only after he died did he realize he should have waited longer.

The following night, Slade and two of his bodyguards arrived in the warehouse at two minutes to nine. Slade called out, "At-ticus, where are yooooou? I have the account if you have the missile codes." A sharp rap on the back of his head told him that Atticus had snuck up behind him. This time, Atticus was holding an aluminum case. "The codes are on this computer. I'll hook them up and we can begin the

transfer." Atticus then pulled a cable from the case and connected one end into Slade's computer, plugging the other end into his case. Slade opened the laptop and stared greedily at the screen, waiting for the codes. He saw a box on the screen saying "Download Complete." Slade was impressed. No computer he knew could take so little time. He pulled up the codes, but all he saw was a video of clowns. He had been tricked! "What is THIS?!" Slade roared. "Your account is being siphoned as we speak. The video was a distraction." At this Slade nearly blew his top. In his foolishness, he had instructed the guards to come unarmed, in good faith. "This isn't over, traitor! I'll hunt you down to the ends of the earth!" Slade cursed. Atticus merely chuckled and spread his arms wide. "You want to pursue me? Very well, let the hunt begin." At that moment, there was a slight whistle in the air and Slade and his guards were shot in the back as the poison in the arrows took hold. Atticus strolled up to the crippled mobster, saying, "You didn't stand a chance. Your mob will topple and justice will be served. You should've stuck with making canoes, fool. You don't belong in my world." With that he strolled off. Slade, meanwhile, was dying so quickly he didn't have time to flash before his eyes. All he saw was a bright light and one dying thought: *Tobias, forgive me.*

SHORT STORIES

Grades 11 & 12

OUR OWN WORDS 2009

DOUBLE RATIONS

Thomas Slack
12th grade

"Isa, we must leave now!" said Mama quickly gathering some blankets and sweeping up my little sister Kaptcha. My father seemed frozen, creaking back and forth in my Grandpapa's old rocking chair. Gunshots were getting closer and closer.

"Papa, we must leave before there is no time!" she said.

"Time," he said, the fire reflecting in his eyes, "Time is no more. Time! God has left us, the best we can all do is just die."

Mama's head bowed in a mix of fear, anger, and submission. By then we could see the fires of the Bolshevik's dancing on the walls inside our cabin. My mother dropped to her knees and almost, it seemed, fell over. Quickly, I ran to hold her up. Instead she grabbed my tunic and pulled me close. Tears were glistening on her face.

"Isa, my son, you must take you sister and run, I will stay here with your papa."

"No, Mama, I want to stay with you." I wrapped my arms around her shoulders. I could feel my shoulder grow wet with Mama's warm tears. When we broke our embrace, my mother had forced Kaptcha into my arms. She wrapped me in a wool blanket and handed me a little black book and asked me to my take care of sister as she grew up.

"I promise Mother."

She ushered me out the back door saying,

"Don't stop till you come to the Ikova's farm, they will take care of you."

"Yes Mama."

One last kiss and she shewed us out toward the creek. When I turned around she was still there, her silhouette darkened by the fire

inside the house. As I looked, the front door was slammed open. Mama turned around and shut the door behind her. I heard only two more shots.

"Isa... Isa wake up!" said Kaptcha, shaking me awake.

"What is it sunshine?" I have called her that ever since Mama and Papa died, that's what Mama called her.

"Isa, it is time!"

"Time for what?"

"To go get our double rations!"

"Alright, go save our spot in line, I will be along in a minute."

It had been three years since the night we left. We had been staying at Nani's Orphanage, a few hours walk from Moscow. I can't help but smile whenever I am with little Kaptcha. I am twelve and she is four and the joy of my life. While I had been working at the factory she had been diligently learning to read and write. Such a large mind in such a little body.

I put my cap on and slipped my fingerless gloves on over my callous hands. A beautiful day greeted me as I opened the door. Kaptcha has often read me Psalms out of the little black book which described the "Glory of God" shown through His handiwork. The cold nipped at my nose as I ran toward the town center.

First thing first, I thought. A snow covered trail to the east led to my friend's house. My friends were actually an organized gang. The cold had driven us to it, or so we said to ourselves. Usually, large or sickly families would send their children to fetch their rations. Those were our targets. However, we took it a little too far. We would just throw their bodies into the icy river and be done with it. Mama and Papa would be ashamed of me.

Knock... knock, knock I tapped.

"Who goes there?"

"Isa"

The door opened and shut after me. After the bright, it was hard to see on the inside of the building, but I knew it by heart.

"Isa! You came just in time," Gorchav welcomed me, and put his arm around me. My shoulder became wet with some warm liquid off of his hand.

"We found a girl along the road, she was carrying double rations for two, come! Take your share!"

Several boys were seated around the table savoring the few precious mouthfuls of bread they took. I sat down among them and grabbed for my portion.

Lots of boys were huddled together in a corner to ward off the piercing cold of the Russian winter. In the corner furthest from me, there was a lump covered in fur. *Most likely that little girl they found*, I thought, *Poor thing, but the weak must give way to the strong*. Or so Gorchav had taught me.

"Isa, come, help me dispose of the girl", he said, "and earn your bread."

"Yes Gorchav."

I slowly marched to the corner. A coat, stained with still wet blood, covered all her defining features. Out into the cold we trotted, our vision slightly covered by the mist of our breath. Rushing water sounded closer.

Then it happened, it was very icy and I slipped on a rock. The girl landed next to me.

"No..." I whispered the air knocked out of me.

"Come on, get up Isa, it's cold out here!" Gorchav yelled.

"No! Kaptcha! Kaptcha wake up! KAPTCHA!"

"Shut up Isa! What has gotten into you!" Gorchav snapped raising his hand as if to strike me.

"No, no, my little sunshine," I cried, holding her limp body close to mine. I held her head to my chest and cried into her hair.

"Look what you turned into Isa, you little snot! Bah! She's yours and if you ever come back the same will happen to you!" He spat on me and turned on his heel.

"Mama! Papa! Kaptcha! I have failed you! I am all alone now

what more can I do?!" At that same moment the black book fell out of her coat.

"The heavens declare the glory of God," I recited, "and the sky above proclaims His handiwork." For a while I stayed there, staring between the book and her face. Hours must have passed. Snow began to fall, and the creek crashed against the rocks beyond.

"The Glory of God." I said, tears nearly frozen to my face, "Kaptcha, your love was how God showed me his Glory. I will love as God loves me." Back to the orphanage I went with her in my arms. Outside the orphanage, I dug a hole to lay her body into. The moon was shining off the snow. A midnight wind hushed through the trees. I prayed, just like Mama used to do.

I felt life return, hope breathed life into my soul, unlike anything I had ever felt. God's love awakened my senses.

A rooster crowed a long ways away, with a new day, a new life started also. I lifted my head to see the skies lit up with the dawn.

I heard a little girl run out and trip in the snow. She was sobbing and pounding one fist in the snow, while the other pulled her hair. Walking close to her I asked,

"What's wrong sunshine?"

Her face, all red from the cold snow, she said,

"Some mean boys took my bread yesterday, and again today. I'm hungry."

With my hand I brushed her hair from her eyes and tucked it behind her ear saying,

"Come with me to town, I get double rations today."

THE FIRST RAID

Nathaniel Shelden
11th grade

Seagulls shrieked and swooped around Dale's head as he heaved the last sack of barley onto the deck. The cold wind from the Danish coast whipped around his shoulders, blowing a strand of golden hair into his face. With a sigh, he sat down on the sack and gazed fondly at the boat. She had taken two years to build and was their finest ever, with her graceful prow curving into the head of a sea dragon. The women of the community had been working on the striped sail all winter.

"We're off!"

Dale was jerked out of his reverie.

Soon they were sailing away from the coast, the waves splashing around the hull, and the sails snapping in the strong wind that was now behind them. Dale's spirits soared. This was his first raid. He stood proudly beside the helmsman, surrounded by dozens of wooden shields that lined the sides of the ship.

Someone spoke next to him. "First raid, eh?"

Dale turned to look at Bjorn, a short, muscular man who had blonde hair and sea blue eyes. His nose was half gone, and what remained of his right ear looked like a wolf had chewed it off.

"Yes," said Dale.

"Let me give you one piece of advice, Dale. No mercy."

"Don't worry. I care nothing for those bastard monks."

Seven days later, the mist-shrouded limestone cliffs of Essex appeared on the horizon. Men hurried about the ship, donning their armor and sharpening their broadswords and battle axes.

The sun was setting as the band of Viking raiders crept up to the small, walled monastery with its few outlying huts. The peaceful sound of chanting monks floated across the air from the chapel. The bell began to chime for evening prayer. Woodchips flew as the Vikings began to smash the gate with a makeshift battering ram.

"Eulalia!" yelled Dale, Bjorn and their companions, charging into the grounds as bewildered, unarmed monks stumbled out of the buildings.

Dale felt exhilaration burst forth as he watched Bjorn dismember the first monk with one sweep of his ax.

A young boy ran screaming in front of Dale. Laughing, Dale stuck his foot out, tripping him. This was thrilling.

But something stopped Dale from killing the boy. Something in the bloody, tear streaked face. "What have I done?" he cried.

As Dale hesitated, another monk—this one full grown—stumbled out of the chapel. His left arm dangled limp at his side. In the other arm he held a large book.

"Don't kill Eric, please!" he yelled, in a hoarse, aged voice. "He is only a boy. Kill me instead."

"I care nothing for age." Dale retorted scornfully, "Do you think that anything you say can stop me?" But inside he wondered

"I am willing to die," said the monk. "I know where I am going, but you..." he trailed off.

Eric lowered his ax, beads of sweat breaking out on his palms. He looked at the others, hewing monks and looting buildings. He had to prove himself.

Then Bjorn was next to him, panting and wiping his sweaty face. "Dale," he said, running his hand up and down his ax handle, "Remember—no mercy! All of the other bastards are dead; now you can prove your worth!"

"But think of your soul, Dale," quavered the monk, "Don't condemn yourself."

Behind the protecting arms of the monk, Eric let out a sob.

"Threva!" Bjorn swore, "I thought you would turn out better than this. What will they say back at home? That Dale, the son of Ethelbert, is a coward?"

"You're right," said Dale. He clenched his hands once more around the ax handle. Taking a deep breath, he brought it down. Once. Twice.

"It is done," said Bjorn, "You have made your first kills, and this is rightfully yours." He picked up the blood spattered book and handed it to Dale.

Feeling sick, Dale stumbled past the dead bodies of the monks, through the battered gate, and across the sand. In a daze, he watched flames rise high above the monastery as the Vikings completed their work.

All that night they celebrated, drinking and singing tales to the accompaniment of a harp. Many of the toasts were to Dale and his first successful raid. The bard was already composing a song about it. But Dale stared into the fire.

Killing in cold blood? All his life he had been told that the monks were fair game. But the look on the face of Eric and the pleading voice of the nameless old monk still haunted him.

Dale looked at the book. His treasure. His share. His battle prize. But what was it? He couldn't read the Viking language, let alone this, but he could look at the pictures.

And what amazing pictures they were. Beautiful illuminations of winged people, stars, and lambs.

One picture kept drawing Dale's attention. It was the picture of a man, nailed to a cross. Around him stood soldiers, and in the distance were weeping women. But what jarred Dale to the core was the look of utter serenity and peace on the face of the dying man. How could someone be so joyful in such suffering? Perhaps this man, like the old monk, knew where he was going.

No matter how he tried not to, Dale envied that man. There had to be more to the afterlife than Valkyries. Maybe this man had the answer. What would it be like to have utter security? To know that

even death could not destroy you? What did the words around the picture say? Dale had no idea.

A week later, they arrived back at the village. For the next months Dale was a hero. People praised him for being as valiant as his father. All the young girls followed him around, giggling every time he looked at them.

But all Dale wanted was to hear what the book said, and over the next few months he formed a plan.

On the eve of a Sigurdsblot, Dale took some loaves of bread, a flask of water, a dagger, and the book, and set out to find a monastery.

He felt no sadness as he left his home of nineteen years. Not since he had seen the vile deeds that his people loved. He knew that no one would miss him for long. As soon as the next raid came, they would find a new hero, if not before.

Days later, Dale stumbled into the walls of a monastery. He was parched and starved not only for food and water, but also for the truth.

A WEEKEND JOB

Will Firch
12th grade

"The bench is old, it will need some work," said my father methodically polishing his glasses. "We first have to take the bench apart, so we can scrape away any old glue from the joints. Then we should add some extra bracing under the seat to make it stronger."

I walked over to where the old dusty radio was sitting on the windowsill and flipped it on.

"Don't have it too loud," my father reminded me. "Listening to rock 'n' roll while you are working can get you distracted."

I took a chisel from the workbench and started scapping off the tough pieces of glue; they looked like raindrops frozen onto the wood. My father came over to see how I was managing. He guided my hands using the proper motions.

"Make sure you are moving the chisel from side to side," said my father as he picked a chisel. His movements were fluid and natural.

My father, a workingman still in his prime; from many years of carpentry, had acquired a grip that cut off your circulation. His hands leathery and callused, his beard that was once bronze, is now gray. When looking into his brown eyes, it is as if they told a story of simplicity and happiness, his look was always genuine. At the same time my father is mysterious, only talking when necessary. There is never a drone of constant chatter. As I have observed over the years, my father through his silence, has given light to wisdom.

"Dad, you want to come look at my work? I think I finished cleaning them up," I said.

For as long as I could remember, I'd always like to get my father's approval on my work.

"Those look good," he said. "You were careful not to chip away

any of the other wood. Now we can start gluing."

Grabbing some old steel clamps, I following him into the next room of the woodshop. I wondered why my father would take several hours out of his busy schedule to help me earn some money, when he had more important projects to work on.

Together we lifted the pieces of our project up onto the workbench.

"When clamping," he said, "you want to make sure the clamp is centered so that it applies even pressure to the joint that is being glued."

The bench held by the reinforcing clamps now began to take shape.

"It is now time to put the legs on," said my father scratching his beard, a smile emerged. "When working with a hard wood like oak, you always want to put some wax on your screw to make it go in easier."

"Man this screw won't go in any further," I said, straining to finish the job.

"Don't force it in any further, if the screw is twisting back it will break off," said my father quickly.

"All the assembly and prep work is a slow process," I said, looking up at the little clock on the wall.

"When working with wood, it takes a lot of patience," said my father thoughtfully. "It is rare to have the wood act the way you want it to."

The seat was now in place. Next we needed to attach the arms to the backboard of the bench.

"The bench looks nice," I said pleased with our work. "Could I go sit on it? Would it hold me?"

"We haven't added the bracing to the underside yet," said my father. "Even though it is assembled, that doesn't mean it is strong enough to hold you."

The knee braces and corner blocks add support to the frame, so it will

last many years. When looking at the bench you can't see our new additions unless the bench is turned on its side.

"Here, you can start cutting out the braces using this block as a pattern," said my father as he rolled the band saw out. "You might want to wear these ear plugs," he said handing me a pair.

I put on my earplugs. The machinery buzzed and roared as I carefully guided the wood around the saw, trying to follow the line. The musty smell of white oak drifted up into the air. The blade was quite wide so it was hard for me to make the sharp turns our pattern required.

"I messed up," I said, tossing the wood on the workbench.

My dad looked up and, picking up the piece of wood, he went under the light to give it a closer look.

"You just need to get a file, and some sandpaper to clean up the edges," he said. "You didn't do a terrible job."

"So I didn't ruin it after all?" I asked.

My father has always bound me to his highest expectations. When I feel I haven't met his standard, I feel as if I had failed. Anger and my father could never be friends; he has never held a mistake against me. In the worst case, I'd have to make a new one.

The bench was now solid, assembled and undergoing the final inspection. While my father made the last adjustments, I thought of my newly acquired skills and knowledge. To my dad, this project was not just about strengthening an old bench but strengthening a friendship between him and his son. He showed love by the way he instructed me, the little bits of information he shared about his passion, and the way he sacrificed his time to teach me some new skills. He cared about me, wanting me to be successful and to learn something in life.

I stood in awe of all these new thoughts. True character is formed over your lifetime. What has my father really done for me?

Each scrape and cut I made was not just rebuilding an old bench but building a stronger structure with my father. It was also a fun weekend job.

"Well what do you think?" asked my father looking up at me.

I walked over and dusted off the seat with my hand and smiled. My eyes caught my fathers, for a moment I couldn't speak.

"Strong, that's what I think," I said.

My father got to his feet and walked over to me. He placed his hand on my shoulder, giving me a firm squeeze, saying.

"It sure is strong."

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