

A kitchen scene with a window, fruit on the sill, and a cutting board on the counter. The window looks out onto a green landscape with a red-roofed building. The counter has a wooden cutting board with a knife and some fruit. The wall is light green with a framed picture.

MUNDELEIN WRITES

ISSUE NO. 01
FALL 2017

“ HOME ”

[Inside front cover]

Mundelein Writes

Issue No. 01: “Home”

Fall 2017



Published by the
Mundelein Arts Commission

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UNDERCURRENTS

By Linda J. Frederick

First Place

Kasper and Frances sat by an evening fire in their humble cottage on the north side of Inowroclaw (Wroclaw), Poland. As their three children peacefully slept, Frances darned socks and Kasper smoked his pipe while relaxing in his high-backed armchair. The house was quiet, except for the occasional snap of burning wood and ticking of the wall clock. Kasper decided this would be an opportune time to discuss the issues that had been plaguing him. Soon the holidays would be approaching; he must share his concerns with his wife of six years before the 1907 New Year arrived.

“Frances, dear, I’ve been thinking about our future. I’m worried. Poland no longer seems to be a good place for raising our family. The Germans have discriminated against us for decades and it’s unlikely to change as long as they continue ruling our country. We can’t speak our language in public and we’re denied fair representation in parliament and the legislature. The Settlement Commission

is forcing many Poles out of their homes and distributing their land to German colonists. Our city is overrun with German emigrants from the east; soon there won't be enough work or housing for everyone."

Frances quietly listened as Kasper unburdened himself. She knew current conditions must be weighing heavily upon him; why else would he reach out to her like this? She didn't involve herself in politics, preferring to focus her energy on matters in which she could make a difference. However, she wasn't blind to the injustices suffered by the Poles. Her own brother, Jynroy, had left Poland in 1899 rather than suffer any further discrimination under Emperor Wilhelm II. It was quite the sacrifice for her parents to support Jynroy's move to America knowing it unlikely they'd ever see him again.

Only twenty at the time of Jynroy's departure, Frances was too in love with Kasper to fully comprehend the enormity of the political situation. Nonetheless, she agreed with her husband; the government's policies were too invasive and harsh. She'd personally felt their impact as beloved Polish priests at St. Mary's Parish were replaced with German Catholic ones and services were now conducted exclusively in German.

"I share your concerns for our future, my husband. I worry about our children's quality of life and freedom of choice, just as you do. We're powerless against this government."

"I've thought long and hard about our options, Frances. I'm saddened by our ruler who's little more than

a spoiled child, prone to fits of temper and hysteria. He's compromising our foreign relations and jeopardizing our safety. He lives extravagantly while we commoners pay the price. He cares nothing about our conditions. His political blunders will most certainly cause war with the rest of the world. I, for one, don't want to see myself, or our boys, serving in the military of a country that mistreats us." Pausing, Kasper took a drag off his pipe before continuing with his well-rehearsed speech.

"Many of our friends have immigrated to America; some were even granted free land for settling there. They live as equals and are free from persecution. Your brother writes of a wonderful president who's concerned about serving the people and taking action for the public good. Mr. Theodore Roosevelt is a man of honor, reform, and strong foreign policy. He's a great leader, Frances. He's making a difference for the American people. I think we should become Americans and be a part of history." Kasper spoke with such passion and sincerity it was obvious he'd contemplated this for quite some time.

Frances had sensed Kasper's preoccupation of late; but his suggesting that they move to another country, leaving behind everything comfortable and familiar, surprised her. Her mind flooded with questions and fears, but also a twinge of excitement. Did she dare to hope for freedom and to be reunited with her brother after all these years? How was she going to answer her husband? How did she feel about uprooting her family and starting a new life halfway around the world?

“This is a big step, Kasper. Are you certain we’re doomed to a life of increasing oppression if we stay? Isn’t it possible things could improve over time?” Frances feared leaving her aging parents and her lifelong home.

“I’m convinced we need to take drastic actions. I wouldn’t suggest a change of this magnitude without careful deliberation. If we wait for the right time, it’ll never come. If we don’t act now, the opportunity will pass us by. In your brother’s latest letter, he offered to sponsor us in America. We don’t need to suffer any longer; a better life is possible.” Kasper seemed filled with unyielding resolve as he continued, “I’ll go ahead of you and the children. We have enough money saved for me to make the journey right now. I’ll find a job and place for us to live, then you and the children can join me.”

Frances was shocked that Kasper would consider splitting up their family. If he was willing to make such a drastic proposition, he must be deeply concerned. It would be a huge sacrifice for all of them; but if Kasper had the courage to suggest it, she’d not oppose him.

“If you’re convinced this move is critical to our well-being and vital to our family’s survival, I’ll support your decision. I know my brother will help us. He’s a good man and we can trust his judgment.”

Setting down her sewing, Frances walked over to Kasper’s chair. She bent down, gently kissing his forehead to show her support. Kasper placed his pipe in the ashtray; extending his arms upwards, he slowly pulled her towards him. Frances came to rest in his lap with her head against

his shoulder, effectively concealing the tears in her eyes. For several minutes, they sat quietly looking into the fire, drawing strength from the warmth of their embrace.

The next several months were spent preparing for Kasper’s spring departure. Painstaking care went into planning every detail to ensure his family had financial and moral support during his absence. Nervous anticipation filled the house as the end of winter drew near.

On that historic day in April, Kasper kissed six-year-old Stanley and four-year-old Stephen lovingly on their foreheads while promising to write frequently. For his children’s sake, there were no tearful good-byes, only happy talk of the exciting journey and great adventures awaiting him. Kasper reassured his sons that tickets for the entire family would be purchased quickly once he found work in America.

Saying farewell to Frances was far more poignant; every ounce of Kasper’s being was channeled into maintaining his composure. After a lingering parting kiss, his eyes locked onto Frances as she cradled their infant daughter, Sophie. Kasper hungrily soaked up every detail about her. As he walked out the front door, that image was permanently etched into his memory; it would have to sustain him until they could be together again.

The Antwerp ports were congested and chaotic. Kasper wasn’t prepared for the myriad of passengers, workers, cargo wagons, and vendors blocking his path. Slowly he made his way through the maze of people and obstacles. The SS Zeeland was a huge ocean liner and quite

overwhelming. She could hold more than one-thousand passengers and needed one-hundred-twenty-two crewmen to keep her operating during this voyage from Antwerp, Belgium to New York, United States of America.

As Kasper neared the ship, he was humbled by her enormity. When he reached the boarding ramp, her two huge smoke stacks completely disappeared from sight. He hesitated at the railings long enough to put down his two suitcases and retrieve his ticket. Glancing down at the boarding documents for the eighth time that day, he reassured himself they were still in his possession. Yes, today was April 14, 1907; and yes, he was at pier forty-seven; and yes, he was standing at the entrance to the SS Zeeland of the Red Star Line.

Kasper was traveling in third class steerage to conserve money. This was the least expensive means of travel but adequate for his scanty needs. Frances had lovingly packed some provisions to help defray the cost of food during the voyage. His budget allowed for one substantial meal each day which would be served in the between-deck dining saloon of the ship.

This would be the adventure of a lifetime – a new beginning for the Dzieminiak (Jim-nak) family. Kasper was scheduled to arrive in New York on April 24, 1907, one day before his thirty-second birthday. Frances had given him strict instructions not to open the bottom compartment of his black suitcase until he was on the train to Minnesota on the 25th. Hopefully, the excitement of traveling through America would minimize the emptiness of being without

his family.

Once aboard the ship, his time was spent conversing with the other third-class passengers destined for various parts of America. There was an excitement shared by all on this voyage. They were bound together by the common element of hope - hope for better jobs and pay, hope for an education for their children, and above all, hope for honesty and justice from a government that valued and protected the rights of its citizens. Each of them had a different story and ethnicity, but all of them had come to the same conclusion; America spelled freedom and endless opportunities.

After ten days at sea, Kasper was weary from the journey. The close quarters and travel conditions made even the most robust passengers yearn for solid ground, a soft bed, and a long soak in a bathtub. Those desires would have to wait a while longer; first, there was the matter of dealing with the U.S. Bureau of Immigration in the Great Hall at Ellis Island.

After disembarking, passengers were separated from their belongings and herded into the brick and ironworks building known as the receiving station. To gain entry into the U.S., all immigrants had to be cleared through the Ellis Island Center. On this particular day, there were a record 11,747 emigrants needing to be processed. The confusion and crowded conditions exacerbated an already fatigued Kasper. He'd come so far and traveled for many days only to face this unexpected obstacle which seemed almost insurmountable.

Somehow, Kasper dug deep within, summoning the stamina and determination that had motivated him to embark on this journey in the first place. Yes, he was exhausted, but he wouldn't allow himself to be discouraged by the long lines and delays. He had safely arrived in America - the land where dreams come true! Swelling with pride, a rush of adrenaline revitalized his tired body.

The lines moved slowly and the hours ticked by. Eventually, Kasper reached an immigration agent who recorded his background information before sending him through for inspection. By providing his brother-in-law's name, occupation, and address, Kasper satisfactorily demonstrated that he had a sponsor, the means to earn a living, and a place to live. Next, he was examined, declared disease-free, and cleared to enter the United States. After claiming his two pieces of luggage, he converted his German marks into ten U.S. dollars and continued on his way.

Not knowing the language was intimidating, but there were many helpful, well-trained people working at Ellis Island. Agents were on duty selling train tickets and answering questions. They assisted the new arrivals in leaving the island for New York City to complete the last leg of their travels. Kasper had a several-hour wait in the train station before he departed for Minnesota. He faced a two-day trip by rail before meeting Jynroy in Duluth. Unable to fight off his fatigue, Kasper dozed on a hard wooden bench in the depot until the train arrived.

He awoke to the realization that he was now thirty-two years old. This was his first birthday as a free man, making it an historic occasion. Just as his wife had instructed, he opened the suitcase and reached into the bottom compartment to remove his present. His two sons had worked hard concealing the picture they'd drawn as a surprise birthday gift. Frances had kept it carefully hidden in an attic trunk until it was time to slip it into his suitcase for the voyage to America. Staring at the work of art for several minutes, he examined all of the fine details. The boys had illustrated his journey, beginning with the train ride from Poland to Belgium, then the boat crossing the Atlantic, and finally, the Statue of Liberty, in all her glory, in New York Harbor. Kasper was deeply moved by his sons' efforts. He'd cherish this pictorial rendition of his adventure by finding a place to hang it once he reached his final destination.

Tucked away underneath the drawing was a neatly-folded handkerchief that Frances had monogrammed in a regal shade of blue. She'd secretly completed it just days before he'd left Poland. How typical of her to surprise him with a gift that was unique, practical, and easy to transport. He could almost see her embroidering the initials "K D" during their daughter's afternoon naps. He admired Frances' work; every stitch was uniform and precise. As he unfolded the hanky, a note fell to the ground. Picking it up, he read his wife's birthday message:

*Happy birthday dearest -
Wear this close to your heart to remind you
of my love.*

A sudden surge of emotion brought tears to his eyes. It had been a long journey. He was tired and hungry; and now, he'd been painfully reminded of his family's absence. His fingers trembled slightly as he re-folded the handkerchief and placed it inside the breast pocket of his coat. He vowed he'd never be without it while he was separated from Frances.

After forty-five hours of travel, including a stopover in Chicago to change trains, Kasper delighted in finally placing his feet on solid ground. For the first time in nearly two weeks, he stood on something that wasn't moving, rocking, or swaying. Picking up his suitcases one last time, he walked down the train platform to the depot. With furrowed brow, he panned the crowd for signs of his brother-in-law. He barely remembered Jynroy. They'd briefly met during his engagement to Frances. Jynroy was already living in America at the time of Kasper and Frances' wedding.

It was Jynroy who spotted Kasper first and quickly advanced towards him. Extending his hand, they locked in a firm, animated handshake. Jynroy, a handsome man in his late thirties, was well-muscled from working at the Duluth shipyards. His face, weathered by the elements, was framed by brown wavy hair. He had those same playful green eyes as his sister.

"Let me help you with your luggage and we'll be on our way. I'm sure you're looking forward to a hot bath, home-cooked meal, and a soft bed. You'll share my room at the boarding house. I got the landlady to roll in a cot. You can stay there as long as you wish. By splitting expenses, you'll quickly save the money to purchase tickets for Frannie and the kids to join us."

"Jynroy, I can't thank you enough." Kasper was amazed by his brother-in-law's thoughtfulness.

"It's Roy, Kasper. I'm American now; and Roy is a good, solid, American name." He flashed a smile while effortlessly hoisting Kasper's bags.

"Pardon me, Roy. I must learn to leave my European ways behind and become an American." Suddenly, Kasper was energized with anticipation, realizing that limitless possibilities awaited. "I'll learn the language, apply for citizenship, and make a life for my family here. This is truly a great country. I'll respect her customs and laws. It's only fitting to honor her for graciously allowing me onto her soil."

"I'm happy to help you in any way I can, considering all you've done for my sister. It'll be nice to be surrounded by family again. I love my new life in this country, but it's been lonely – until now."

"I'm indebted to you, Roy. I'll never forget your kindness." Kasper embraced his brother-in-law, appreciatively patting him firmly on the back several times. Now his thoughts eagerly focused on getting to that boarding house and settling into his new home.

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GOING HOME

By Nancy Taylor
Second Place

The sun was merciless that August, defying a cloud to block it and baking the ground into hardpan that resembled lava more than earth. What little grass remained turned gray and brittle in the heat. Hundred-year-old trees shed their leaves three months early and entered drought induced dormancy in a desperate attempt to stay alive. During the day, little moved, plant, animal, or human.

Jasper Hansen stamped his boots on the wooden porch before pulling the screen door open and entering the kitchen of the small ranch house he shared with his wife and children in East Texas. Ellie, Jasper's wife, looked up from the potatoes she was peeling and nodded. She wiped her hands on the front of her apron, took a glass from the cabinet and filled it with water from a repurposed milk bottle kept in the refrigerator. Ellie handed the glass to Jasper, who drank the cold water down gratefully. She got a dish towel from a pile of folded laundry, wet it in the sink, and used it to wipe then dust and sweat from her

husband's face.

He sank into a kitchen chair as Ellie returned to dinner preparation.

"Where are the kids?" Jasper asked, leaning back and stretching his long legs out under the table.

"They're at your sisters. She picked them up this afternoon so they could swim with Diana. They're staying overnight. Can I take the truck to pick them up tomorrow morning?" Ellie asked.

"Sure," Jasper replied. "I'm glad they're getting a chance to cool off and spend the night in air conditioning."

Jasper's sister, Helga, had married a lawyer with a very successful practice. They lived in a large home with an in-ground swimming pool and air conditioning, and Helga often brought her nieces and nephew to swim with her daughter, Diana. Sometimes on the weekends the Hansen children spent the night.

The Jasper Hansen ranch had been a successful cattle enterprise for most of the 15 years Jasper had owned it. A small herd of longhorn cattle grazed on the sloping hillside, and under Jasper's care and vigilance the herd had thrived, garnering top dollar at the East Texas annual livestock auction. The family enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle during those years, not the kind of lifestyle that allowed for in-ground swimming pool or air conditioning, but enough income to feed, clothe, and house them with a bit left over for home repairs and occasional trips to Dallas. Jasper and Ellie worked hard to care for their children, their livestock, and the land they owned. They

were proud of the ranch they had built from the ground up, and they had been confident there would be a good inheritance for their children when the time came. Sam was the oldest at 12, already taller than Ellie and nearly Jasper's height. Twin daughters Margareta and Julissa were 10 and miniature versions of their mother with straight blond hair, blue eyes, and thin angular frames.

As a long dry spell in East Texas dragged on for months and then into the following year, it became a drought that showed no signs of abating. By the third year with almost no measurable rain, crop farmers had abandoned their fields, and cattle ranchers watched their herds shrink as cows gave birth to stillborn calves and older, weaker steers lay down and never got back up. The prospects were growing bleaker month by month for the Hansens and most of the others in East Texas who made their living from the land.

Over supper Jasper told Ellie about the day's activities.

"We've got one cow who's still producing enough milk to feed her calf. Two of the old steers look like they might not survive until winter."

Ellie reached over and placed her hand over Jasper's. "You've done everything a man can do, Honey. The cattle get to a point of dehydration where they're too weak to even get themselves to water to drink." She shook her head slowly, her face grim. "I think we've got to face the situation we're in."

Jasper's eyes clouded over as he pushed his chair back from the table. "We're not leaving the ranch, Ellie. We've been over this a hundred times. We put our hearts and souls into this ranch, and it's our home. We can't give up on it." The screen door closed with a loud snap as Jasper left the kitchen and took a seat on the porch. The couple spoke little for the rest of the night.

August droned on, hot and dry. September brought no relief, and when the Hansen children returned to school, their classrooms had empty desks because many farmers and ranchers had left East Texas and their dying land behind. Margareta came home after the first day of fourth grade and somberly informed her mother that she could never be happy again because her best friend, Sandy, had moved to Houston. Ellie hugged her daughter and assured her that she still had many friends, and she was luckier than the other girls in her class because she had a twin sister right in her own house. These reassurances earned an eye roll from Margareta, who often found having a twin sister more a curse than a blessing.

Sam helped Jasper care for the cattle and the ranch after school and on weekends. A good athlete, Sam played basketball on the school team in the fall, and between ranch chores, schoolwork and basketball, he had a full schedule. Although Margareta and Julissa were outspoken and stalwart, Sam was a sensitive boy who seldom argued or complained. One evening in October, Sam returned

from his chores with tears in his eyes. Ellie ran to him, thinking he or Jasper had been hurt.

"Are you hurt? Where's your father, Sam?" Ellie shouted, grabbing Sam by the shoulders.

"Nobody's hurt. Dad's fine." Sam's shoulders shook under Ellie's hands as his grief poured out. "We lost both of the calves. They were so little. Coyotes got them. They were just so weak they couldn't run away."

Ellie was shocked. "Coyotes? They've never come this close to the house before. I can't believe this!"

"Dad says they're getting bolder because they're starving. They saw how little the calves were and they just ran into the herd and risked getting gored by the longhorns for food. Dad said they probably had pups to feed, and their other prey have pretty much been wiped out." Sam was clearly heartbroken. He loved the calves and had taken special care of them since their births. "I should have done more to protect them. They were babies," he lamented.

Jasper came into the kitchen and put his hand on his son's arm. "It's not your fault, Sam. There's nothing you could have done. We've never had coyotes come right down and take animals from our herd before. No one could have predicted this. It's this damn drought!"

Autumn moving toward winter brought no relief from the drought. It moved through the Southwestern United States like a tumor, invading healthy country, spreading its tentacles deep into the earth, sucking every drop of precious moisture from streams, ponds, and springs. As

Thanksgiving approached, Andy Beckett, the Hansen's closest neighbor, appeared at the kitchen door with a dejected look on his face. He sat at the table in the small kitchen and told Jasper and Ellie, "We're done. Can't wait no more. My herd's down to a few dozen."

Jasper was sad to hear the news, but not really shocked. It was becoming too familiar. "Where you figure you're headed?" he asked.

Beckett reached into his back pocket and pulled out a flyer. He flattened it on the table and pushed it in front of Jasper. "This is where I'm goin'," Beckett stated, pointing at the flyer, "and they're still hiring. Pretty decent pay if you've got some skills. Hard work, but we're no strangers to that, are we?"

Jasper picked up the flyer and read the banner across the top, East Texas Electrical Aggregate—Now Hiring. "What are you gonna be doing?" he asked his friend.

"Lineman, most likely. That's what they hired me as. But to tell you the truth, I don't much care what they tell me to do so long as they pay me enough so I can feed my family." Beckett looked serious as he told Jasper, "I've got trucks comin' tomorrow morning to pick up what's left of my herd."

"But you won't get hardly anything for them now!" Jasper exclaimed.

Beckett put his hands up in a gesture of resignation, and said, "Look, I know that, Jasper. But I've got no choice. The longer I wait, the fewer head I've got left to sell at any

price, and me and Callie decided now's the time. As soon as the trucks leave with the cattle, we're heading out. We'll take what we can carry in the pickup, get on the road for Cutterville.

Jasper felt at a loss for words. Both men stood. "All the luck in the world to you, Callie and the kids," Jasper said as he clasped his friend's hand.

Ellie spoke for the first time, "Please tell Callie I said goodbye. We'll miss you, Andy."

"Same to you, neighbors. Hope to see you again sometime." With that, Beckett put his hat on his head and walked out to his truck.

After Andy left, Ellie put her arms around her husband and pulled him close. "We'll get through this, Jasper."

Jasper had a distant look in his eyes as he said, "I just never expected things to go this way, not so bad, and not for so long." He shook his head, and grabbing his hat from the peg by the back door, headed out to another day of work.

Thanksgiving had always been Ellie and Jasper's favorite family holiday. They both loved the gathering of family and low-key nature of the day, as opposed to Christmas which, although magical and the children's favorite, could be frenetic. Jasper's sister, Helga, her husband, Richard, and their daughter, Diana, were coming to join the Hansens to celebrate the day. Diana was born the year between Sam and the twins, and being so close in age, all the cousins

were fast friends.

Helga prepared part of the meal at home and brought the covered dishes to her brother's home mid-afternoon. The fragrance of roasting turkey filled the air and welcomed Helga and family as soon as the door opened. The meal was plentiful, and there was laughter and happy chatter at the table as both families enjoyed the feast.

After dinner, Ellie and Helga cleared the table and began washing dishes, shooting the men out onto the porch. Ellie knew that Richard would have a cigar for Jasper as well as one for himself, but this activity had to take place outside. The odor of cigar smoke was repugnant to Ellie. When Ellie was rinsing the last few pieces of cutlery in the big farmhouse sink, the water pressure began to drop. Knowing the preparations and cleanup had put a strain on the old well pump the Hansens depended on for their water, Ellie turned off the tap and decided to finish up later.

Helga and Ellie joined their children for a walk as the sun set and the air began to cool. "Thanks for a wonderful Thanksgiving celebration," Helga told her sister-in-law. "We enjoyed it so much, and Diana loves being with Sam and the twins."

Ellie put her arm around Helga's shoulder as they walked and responded, "We enjoyed it too, and we're so grateful for everything you and Richard do for the children. We're very lucky to live close enough to get to share our lives with you."

After their company had gone home and the children had gone to bed, Ellie finished up the few remaining dishes that had not been washed. Afterward, she mentioned the reduced water pressure to Jasper, asking him, "Do you think our pump is wearing out? I can't recall this happening before. Our water pressure has always been very good."

Jasper told her he would check the pump in the morning, but what he didn't say was what he feared more than the pump needing to be fixed or even replaced. He got little sleep that night.

In the morning, the children slept in as Jasper rose early to examine the well pump. He came into the kitchen as Ellie was placing two cups of coffee on the table for them. Jasper was unusually quiet as he sat and stared into his cup.

"What's wrong, Honey?" Ellie asked, concern in her voice. She placed her hand on Jasper's arm and waited for him to explain.

"It's not the pump, Ellie. The pump's fine," Jasper told her quietly. "It's the well."

"Oh no," Ellie whispered, "not the well. It can't be the well. We've got one of the deepest wells in the county."

Jasper sighed before he spoke. "It's happening all over East Texas. Water tables are so low, even deep wells are drying up. Never happened before, never."

"What do we do now?" Ellie asked. "Dig another well? What will that cost? How will we pay for it?" Ellie was frightened, and Jasper could hear it in her voice.

“Honey,” Jasper told his wife, taking her hand in his, “there’s no point in digging another well. The water is gone. The aquifer is dried up, and wells won’t produce water until the drought ends and we have a couple of good rainy seasons.”

Tears filled Ellie’s eyes as she grasped the full meaning of Jasper’s words. “Oh, Jasper, I’m so sorry. I know what this ranch means to you.” She knew the failure of the well spelled the end of the Hansen ranch, her husband’s dream his entire adult life.

December was a blur of activity for the Hansen family. Jasper made a trip to Cutterville to inquire about work with the East Texas Electrical Aggregate. He accepted a job offer as a Linesman, and headed back home to help Ellie prepare for the move.

By mid-month, the Hansen herd had been sold to a cattle broker for far less than their value. It was a hard pill to swallow for Jasper, who had always taken pride in his herd. The children packed their clothes and a few special possessions and books. Ellie divided the kitchen implements and furniture with a critical eye, knowing the truck would hold only the most essential items. Jasper cut and fitted wood planks over all the windows, nailing them firmly in place, to protect the house against the elements.

There was no point attempting to sell the house or land. No one was interested in buying dead real estate and dried up acreage. Every family that left East Texas during the drought performed the same sad ritual: packing up

what they could carry, closing their house, and driving off without a look back at what they had lost.

The final night in East Texas was subdued in the Hansen house. Through careful conservation, the water had continued to flow at a much-reduced rate, allowing the family to avoid having water trucked in. After the children had gone to sleep in their rooms on blankets on the floor, their beds having been loaded onto the truck, Ellie and Jasper sat side by side on the overstuffed sofa in their small living room. It was too large to make the journey to Cutterville, and so was one of the items that remained in the now nearly empty house.

Husband and wife were both exhausted. The packing and preparation to move had been arduous and heartbreaking. They had said goodbye to Helga, Richard and Diana, as well as other neighbors and friends. The hens and rooster had been rehomed with a family who attended the same church as the Hansens. Margareta and Julissa had both cried when they said goodbye to their school friends. Ellie curled up with her head on Jasper’s shoulder and fell asleep. Their bed was packed, and the sofa would be their bed for their last night on the ranch. Jasper kissed Ellie’s forehead, lay his head back, and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Dawn broke late in East Texas in December, and Jasper and Ellie were up long before the sun rose. After rousing the children, the family ate a final breakfast in the dim kitchen. Then they left their house, Jasper shutting down the power and water, locking the door and pocketing the key. The old truck was full. Jasper and Ellie squeezed

Margareta and Julissa between them on the bench seat. Sam wedged himself into the back under a warm blanket.

“Well, I guess this is it,” said Jasper as he pulled out onto the road that would take them to the divided highway to Cutterville.

“I’m sorry we’re leaving,” said Julissa, waving at the ranch through the truck window.

“Me, too,” echoed Margareta. “I’m going to miss home.”

Jasper cleared his throat, and his voice cracked a bit when he responded, I know we would all rather stay on the ranch, girls, but we have to go. At least we have a place to go, and I have a good job waiting for me. We’re a lot luckier than some folks.”

Ellie reached across the seat back and put her hand on Jasper’s shoulder. “You know, we’re not really leaving home. This is home,” she said, gesturing at her husband and daughters and giving an over-the-shoulder nod to Sam in the truck bed. “Wherever life takes us, as long as we’re together, we’ve got a home. It doesn’t matter what it looks like out there,” Ellie explained, pointing out the window at the barren land they were driving through. “Home is in here,” she said softly, her hands over her heart, “and there’s no place I’d rather be.”

SUMMER VACATION

By Heather Williams

Third Place

It was hard to believe that just a week earlier, the energy in the car had been purely magical. Smiles, bright eyes and words that were woven with kindness were the only things happening in the large, but slightly overcrowded minivan. Before the trip even began, the packing was done without even being asked twice. Inside the house, you saw children busy at work, gathering belongings, collecting vacation necessities and even helping their siblings. Bags were neatly packed, at times done accompanied with jubilant sing a longs. When it was time for the car to be loaded, many helping hands were on deck for any and every need that might have arisen. The whole experience of packing the car, was probably the most helpful the children had ever been. Finally, the last bag was stuffed in and the trunk somehow managed to close. Everyone happily jumped in, not caring who they were sitting with, or how closely that person was actually sitting to them. When the key was turned in the ignition, cheers erupted from the backseat

and chants of “Let’s go!” rang out into the early morning air. The car ambled down their street, and in singsong voices, the little ones bid goodbye to their house, while the older ones looked on lovingly, laughing at the little ones’ silliness, but feeling a sad sort of tug in their heart about leaving their house for so many days. The house disappeared behind them in the hazy morning light, and their focus shifted excitedly to what was soon to come.

They made it through the never ending stop lights and, finally, they were on their way. Rest stops were visited, the children excitedly gathering as many brochures to pore over in the car as they could possibly fit in their chubby little hands. Lunch was eaten on the soft, fragrant grass, turkey and cheese sandwiches on pillow soft bread, crisp veggies and the juiciest fruit they had tasted in a long time. Ice cold water was gulped down and satisfied children piled happily back into the car. The car traveled along dusty roads, major highways, small town streets, and over what seemed like magnificent bridges, bringing them to the magical place they had talked about for so many months leading up to today. Doors were flung open, shrieks ensued and whoops of joy became the new family language.

Luggage was tossed into rooms, and the contents of coolers were neatly stacked in the refrigerator and snacks and other food was piled into large cabinets. Doors to the house were opened, letting in the cool ocean breeze and the comforting sounds of the waves. Bathing suits were slipped on, and bare feet scurried happily through the house looking for towels, sand toys and a parent’s hand to

accompany them down to the beach.

The sun seemed to shine gloriously for seven days, and sand between the toes became a new norm. Ice cream became a necessary food group, and meal times were whenever kids padded up to the squeaky beach house door begging for a snack. Bedtimes seemed non-existent; the kids were so exhausted they would just put themselves to bed when they needed. All the fresh air affected them so much that sleeping in became a real thing, for the first time ever in the family. Distractions all went to the wayside for the week, with full attention and eye contact becoming something that actually began happening, electronics were left to sit unattended, and real games were played with abandon, as if no one had ever heard of a cell phone or computer before.

Stargazing every night was a must, with the sound of the waves lapping lazily at the shore becoming the background music to the show. Blankets were sandy but snuggly, and hugs were abundant, even from the kids that now believed that they were too old for them. The family huddled together each night, wrapped up together in the warm blankets, sharing stories that were long forgotten with the distractions of every day life. Laughter wafted into the night, and as everyone crawled into bed, a smile crept over their faces, remembering bits and pieces of the stories shared.

The days were hot, but it didn’t matter. Watermelon was an everyday meal item and the fact that the sweet juice always dripped down your front with every bite didn’t

really matter here. This was especially true, because in the boys' cases, they usually weren't even wearing a shirt to begin with. The house remained empty for most of the day, only graced with people coming in and out with forgotten items or snacks. In one of the rooms, there was a TV in the corner, but it lay dusty and forgotten, the sound of children's laughter taunting it from outside the windows. The children were a joy, smiling bigger and bigger each day, wondering what adventure awaited them on the beach. Rules became lax, and kids became kids of the yesteryear, running around barefoot, hopping on bikes, and most noticeably, not being trailed by a parent everywhere they went.

The adults were content, satisfied and happy. They were able to breathe and take a minute. They could actually rest on each other's shoulder with a relaxed sigh, steal a loving glance or two, or even hold hands. Licks of each other's ice cream were stolen, and if you weren't quick enough, some might even be dabbed onto your nose. Laughter became the common language and conversation became more than the words usually shared while two ships passed in the night. The days seemed brilliant from sunrise, to the golden glow of sunset.

As the days passed, life seemed to slow down, take a different path and be more like what everyone dreams of when they think of their family in the summer. They had achieved that perfect, commercial-like perfection of family in one solitary week at the beach. None of them ever wanted it to end.

One day, a day like none other, where the clouds were hazier, the sun a bit more dim, and the wind a tad bit chilly, something changed. Just like that, it was time to prepare to leave. The family had to do the unthinkable. It was time to pack up the car again and head home.

Right then, things seemed to begin to take a different path.

Packing was done in a grumpy, throw your stuff in a bag sort of way. Bags were hard to zip, even though the same clothes that were brought were now put back in. Zippers were snapped off and tears ensued. Safety pins were scrounged up and bags were fixed to at least make it home.

Arguments started over interactions such as looking at someone else with a "mean look" or "weird eyes" or a "scrunched up nose". Eyes were rolled and parents became frustrated, their loud sighs audible from the other room and the feeling that they were losing patience was the elephant in the room.

Food became a necessity, with children whining that they were hungry moments after they had just eaten. Food was scarce in the fridge as the week of in and out snacking, and meals whenever had depleted the supplies. Loud complaints were heard about the lack of variety and that cereal wasn't dinner. Ice cream was suggested, but everyone was sick to death of it, claiming it gave them stomach aches and headaches.

Sand became incredibly annoying, and quickly made its place as everyone's worst enemy. One child was

even heard crying out in anguish about the sand between her toes. Smiles were becoming hard to spot, but seemed to be replaced with frowns. Hugs seemed to be annoying and unnecessary touching and were now met with grunts and annoyed sighs. Cell phones came out of hiding again, with reception spotty, but still enough to slowly catch up on everything that had been missed while they were away.

The sun began hiding behind clouds, barely showing its face, and the wind picked up, just to show everyone who was boss. The squeaky door became the least charming thing about the house. One child decided to slam it to really show how annoyed they were with it, but luckily, an hour later, an understanding father and some rusty tools finally got it back to where it was, minus the squeak.

Finally, the car was packed, the engine started, and the last day of vacation had finally come to an end. The house began to disappear in the distance, tears were quietly shed by some, and the ones that were too tough to show them, were frustrated with the kids that shed the tears. The car occupants were told to be quiet, and the trip back to where they came from, began.

The charming small towns were revisited again, but just seemed annoying on the way back. The speed limit dropping down to ridiculous lows just because a few storefronts popped up. The dusty roads weren't interesting anymore, just hard on the van's already tired tires. The highways were crowded and when the air conditioning never seemed to be turned up enough, the highways

seemed like sweltering roads to the deepest depths of Hades.

The car seemed stuffier, and more packed than it was on the first trip. Trinkets bought at small shops rolled about, falling out of their bags, getting stepped on in the process. The little toys seemed like junk now instead of the fantastic finds they appeared to be just days earlier. The cooler was empty, besides a few bottles of lukewarm water. When complaints of thirst started up, the children realized that the water would provide just enough for a half a bottle for everyone. That is, if you didn't mind the spit of your siblings. Funny enough, everyone apparently did mind, and decided to go thirsty instead of share.

The rest stops were not thrilling anymore, the thought of collecting pamphlets was just boring now, and the bathrooms inside were definitely not as clean and fresh as they seemed a week ago. Outside again, the air felt thick and humid. There was no breeze as they all crammed into a small shady area under a large oak tree. The sticky (and sandy) blanket we sat on to eat lunch, barely fit us all. We jabbed others in the ribs on purpose to try to fight for our rightful spot on the blanket so our legs didn't start itch from the grass.

French fries from the drive through were handed out with abandon, and burgers were limp and lukewarm as we unwrapped them from their paper. The clean, perky looking family sitting near us looked mortified as they munched their crisp red pepper strips and whole grain turkey sandwiches on what surely was a sand free blanket.

Sensing our unhappiness, they finished up quickly, leaving a trail of glee as they packed into their car headed in the direction we just came from. Someone on the blanket growled.

The weather began to turn and we all piled back inside the car. Light drops turned into heavy torrents of rain as we cruised down the never-ending highway. The raindrops were big and fat and began to lull us into an uncomfortable sleep, only to be jolted awake by the unexpected bumps in the road that we rolled over what seemed like every few minutes. The rain began to slow down, and we all became more alert and crankier than ever. Windows were rolled down and leftover raindrops flew in, enraging the now wet occupants of the car who had nothing to do with rolling down the window. Windows went up again, and the car resumed its rightful place as a sauna. A quiet grumpiness settled over the family, and the car pressed on.

As the car exited the highway, as the sun was just rising in the sky casting a warm glow over the quiet streets. The car ambled down a familiar curving road leading into what they had left seven long days ago. A brightly lit, large wooden sign welcomed them back into town. Their car chugged along on what seemed to be its last leg, and rolled into their driveway.

Car doors opened slowly, shaky legs emerged from its depths. The house stood, looking just like they had left it, but slightly different and strangely unfamiliar as if they had left years ago instead of just days.

Smiles began curling at the mouths of the children. An urgent feeling to get inside the house and look at everything again began building up. They all looked at each other with excited looks.

A tiny voice emerged from the group. The littlest of them all smiled and looked up at everyone with big brown eyes. She pointed one chubby finger into the house.

“Home.”

And with that, we ran inside, the beautiful vacation memories tucked away, and the comfort of being home again being the best feeling of all.

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FIFTEEN, NINETEEN

By Anna Story

We'd walked there, puffy winter coats pulled tight over our just-bought tops — mine simple, black and cropped with long lace sleeves, Malia's ruffled and heavily patterned, so busy only she could pull it off. Hearts pounding, we came in through the back door, like the message said, sneaking alongside the garage as to avoid any neighbors snooping through their floral kitchen window curtains. My insides were warm with Captain Morgan, Malia's parents cocktail drink of choice and what we consequently funneled into plastic water bottles to mix with Diet Cokes come 10 p.m.

We didn't knock, just let ourselves in per instruction, and were met with an eerie stillness; no bodies, no shoes lined against the wall, like when parents held birthday parties for children and required all muddy sneakers to stay by the door. Faint voices and music pulsed from down the hall, back behind the kitchen where we couldn't quite see. Malia grabbed my hand, still chilled from the November night, and pulled me through the foreign house, carelessly bumping into chairs and a giant potted ficus—probably

drunk, in hindsight, but what I mistook for immaturity, a complete and utter disregard for what I expected to be the most transformative night of our adolescent lives. We were invited to a party, the drinking kind, with upperclassmen and the self-proclaimed cool kids who had oversized homecoming groups and their own cars. We found the basement. Hot and nervous, I hastily unzipped my parka and threw it on an unsightly green ottoman stationed next to the sofa for safekeeping.

“Ready?” Malia squeezed my hand and pulled me towards the night.

And it felt like a movie. The lights were just dim enough to cloak everything in shadows, the music just loud enough to set a thumping score to the picture in front of us. It was familiar and not, what I expected mixed with something else. I knew nearly everyone there, former lab partners and crushes and community league soccer teammates all together in one humid basement. They all dressed in their usual styles, maybe with a nicer pair of jeans, or maybe an extra touch of eyeliner to encapsulate an evening vibe. Conversations buzzed from all directions, a constant chorus of laughs and screeches challenging the stereo, setting its own tempo.

No one noticed our arrival, not right away.

“What do we do now?” I could feel myself grinning too wide, looking too eager.

“We just . . .” Malia gestured vaguely to the room, “hang out.” We found a spot on the wall, leaned and waited, drinking what was left of our rum and Diet Cokes.

I pursed my lips when I swallowed, an attempt to hide my reaction to the taste, the burn. If I acted like it was easy, it would be easy.

Malia noticed, took the bottle from me and replaced it with a sweaty can of Miller Lite. “Drink this, I’ll find some more Coke or something.” And with that, she left me to fend for myself.

I stayed put. Classmates floated around, a few stopping by me, slurring hellos and offering up sloppy, enthusiastic hugs. Sandra, whom I’d only talked to once in Algebra class, gushed about how great it was that I could make it, that she was so thankful people showed up. I couldn’t stop smiling, the warmth emanating from my stomach and cheeks leaving me giddy, almost glowing. Every now and again, I’d catch Malia flitting around, taking a turn in beer pong, flipping her hair around as some football player or another sized her up, took her in. The party gravitated towards her, her own little temporary universe forming. She found her footing without a hitch, and I guess I’d found mine, too, up against the wall, letting the action fall over to me when it was ready. It was nice to watch, to learn and grasp what I was now a part of, what I was accepted into.

The text came in at 10:37 pm, the bark of the phone shattering the dark stillness of my naked and frankly unwelcoming room. The sound boomeranged off the dusty

blue walls, the stacks of boxes concealing just where the sound was emitting from, fueling the agitation I already felt just by being here, being home.

It was Malia; we were going out.

How Malia, who had been back in Rauver's Point for no more than twenty minutes, already knew about a party, I couldn't explain. Her connections never failed, friends and acquaintances never too distant—emotionally, at least—to think of her when an open house sprung up or a bar conveniently “forgot” to ID. My heart and head hurt thinking about reuniting with everyone I had failed to keep in contact with come college — an anxiety attack slowly brewing, surely, as I was confronted with new-and-improved versions of people I thought I once knew. Still, the familiar twinge of longing got to me; I wanted to be out, uncaged, seeing what there was to see. San's had never failed me before, a constant comfort waiting for me at the end of every week in high school. And with that thought, I agreed, throwing on a nice black tee and eyeliner for good measure.

And I'm back where it started.

San's house hadn't changed, the family portraits still teetering on the fireplace mantel in rusting silver frames, a fake plant stood up tall in the furthest corner of the living room, next to the ugly ottoman with the Captain Morgan stain down the side. We slunk down

the stairs, were greeted with the usual scene. The liquor table sloped against the same wall, underneath the framed and autographed Bears poster, and I posted up in my usual spot right next to it.

It all looked so familiar—*déjà vu*, in a way, but the view was so redundant, too mundane to feel the chilling jolt that true *déjà vu* brings. I leaned against the same exact wall, with the same exact crack running vertically from baseboard to about mid-wall—no larger and no more webbed than it had been a year ago, or two years, or three. While the brand of beer had changed to something even cheaper than what we drank at fifteen, now that we paid for it ourselves instead of copping it from parents' basement fridges, the weight of the can in my hand felt identical to the first can, just without the excited tingles of budding delinquency and true “teenagerdom.” My forehead even still had pimples, still strategically covered by drugstore foundation and shaggy, home-cut bangs.

Everyone else looked the same too, vaguely distorted versions of their 15-year-old selves, in the same basement with the same music, same friends; everyone was just stretched an inch taller, wider, sported a different but-not-too-different haircut to symbolize newfound college cultivation and edge. I pictured children playing make believe—fake beards, temporary hair-dye, sharpie tattoos, outfits chosen from the dress-up box—all in an effort to prove that they'd changed in some significant way.

For all the shit talked post-graduation, all the resolute decisions to move on from toxic friendships or

melodramatic partners, everyone melded right back into place, regardless of facial hair and patterned pants. Camilla looked a shot away from vomiting, as she did every weekend before. Dancing was still minimal, the boys still stacked their empty cans in a pyramid, the girls still rolling their eyes at the boys building a pyramid. A couple people sported RPHS tee shirts, a jarring visual after 9 months of seeing nothing but the Dayton logo embroidered on everything.

This wasn't for me anymore. The high school pride, the reconvened cliques and shady looks and self-conscious flirting—at least in college people were direct, didn't care about rejection or embarrassment or causing a scene. Here, everyone cared so much, every decision calculated to project a precise image, conjure a precise reaction. The basement, once a safe space perfect for its sloppy misconduct and imperfections, emitted only what it knew: awful, unadulterated teen angst and a nauseating desire to fit in. This was the pinnacle of my adolescence, a physical manifestation of every favorable memory I made until I left, and I couldn't stand to stomach it any longer.

Nothing was familiar. Or, more accurately, nothing was comfortable. I was hyper aware of myself, my posture on the wall awkward and forced, as if I was posing on purpose, leaning against it as to mimic a corny 90s movie poster. The beer felt too cold for my hand, despite it being room temperature when hitting my tongue. My hands shook, and the thick, dank air felt thicker, constricting, like I was caught in a fog.

The room shrunk to half the size, the air hotter by fifteen degrees. I turned to tell Malia I needed to go, but she'd found a friend, was shotgunning her third last-drink-of-the-night, and I was alone. Even with a crushed beer can up against her face, she still exuded perfection; I noticed this in my panic, an unnecessary reminder of my own inability to relax and enjoy home as my chest tightened like a fist closing in around my lungs. I wormed my way around the pong table and to the stairs, careful not to make eye contact on my way up and out, in search of space and maybe time.

I made it to the back porch. Technically off-limits, I'd learned to keep the light off and use my phone and the glow from my lighter as visual aid. Finally alone, finally breathing, I collapsed onto the bench; my body was met not with the cool hard wood, but with something soft yet solid, lumpy, and apparently sentient.

"Oh shit," I yelped, "sorry, fuck. Sorry, Nate." I sat back down, carefully, this time, and leaned close to the edge, away from Nate so as not to crowd him, or give way to the idea that I was out here for him, the way I'd sneak out here before when we were just starting to talk, and again after he'd unceremoniously dumped me. Settled, I pulled my bag into my lap, rummaging through it, looking for nothing in particular. Just stalling. My fingers grazed the ragged edge of a granola bar wrapper, and I took it out, not at all hungry.

I offered Nate a piece, expecting him to decline but instead being met an uncharacteristic, enthusiastic

yes. There was no food at the party — snacks were never in the budget — and he was starving. Chewing on our respective granola bar halves, we remained quiet, silent, letting the stillness creep over us, wash us of the chaos of the basement.

“It’s funny,” I said finally, balling up the sticky, empty wrapper. “I expected things to be so different, and weird, because everyone was gone for so long and had changed and grown up and stuff, but actually no one’s changed and that’s what’s making things so fucking weird.”

Nate fiddled with the cuff of his shorts, an old habit, and snorted. “They’ve changed a little bit, most of them for the better. Being back here just . . . you know, people just act how they think they should that’s what they’re doing now, that’s what they did then.”

I paused, thinking for a beat too long. Nate got up to return to the scene, to immerse himself in the recent past. Already, I felt too alone to manage, and so I followed suit, stood up and puffed myself up to combat whatever lurked downstairs. We went back, not necessarily together, not necessarily me following either, and nothing in the basement looked different than it was minutes before. Nate joined the pyramid guys, smiling as he sauntered over, so light on his feet and relaxed in his shoulders that no one ever would have guessed he’d come from an awkward one-on-one conversation with his panicking ex. The thought of joining them flickered across my mind, but the knots in my stomach kept me anchored to the edges, watching again, or still.

I thought about what he said, about the pretending, the reversion, unconvinced. I stared at the dull silver top of my can, warm to the touch, unsure of where else to look, what else to do. They were having fun — they danced, kind of, and toasted to the summer, and drank and giggled and sang with reckless abandon. They were having the time of their lives, and so I tried not to look.

My eyes wandered from the pop top, something magnetic drawing them up and around, making them restless. Cora Miller stood on the wall opposite of mine, looking tired, unenthused — a far cry from the sweetheart smile in her senior yearbook photo, or any photo, for that matter. Her left hand tugged at the fringe on her shorts with so much aggression that I could feel the frayed strings digging into my own fingers, like sympathy pains. A friend must have called her name, because her head jerked up and her face wiped itself of the sour, sad look, replacing it with the eager, youthful grin of a drunk teen, living. She stopped mutilating her shorts, brought her fidgeting hand up to meet the cup in her right hand. In an instant, she belonged again, and I suddenly knew what Nate meant.

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THE LAST SHOT

By Jessica Motyka

Robin didn't know where anyone ever got the idea that people saw stars when their head was knocked around. Silly stars would be more pleasing than the scary, swirling black holes threatening to swallow her up that she always saw. Brett stood above her and he was silent. She liked it better when he continued to scream at her so she could grasp onto the sound and surface from beneath the darkness. But silence meant she had no way to ground herself to reality.

In the fog swimming through her head she tried to recall what she said to set him off. She probably ran her mouth and forced his hand. Brett could have shoved her against the wall or punched her in the stomach but he had chosen her face for one very specific reason. She was going out with her friends tonight and she would have to explain away the damage. It gave him a high knowing she would lie through her teeth to protect him. Robin got her a high knowing her friends and family knew she was an abused woman and that she wouldn't admit it. The helpless,

concerned faces they would display while she lied always plucked little, excited strings inside her. That's when she knew they cared.

Robin managed to finally look up at Brett through her bangs after the world stopped spinning. Her piercing blue eyes met his defiantly. She was playing with fire by having the audacity to look at him that way after he'd put her in her place. He knew it too but he only spit on her face and walked away. Robin let herself sink to her stomach on the floor and used her sleeve to wipe off the spit.

Later while she was at the bar with her friends she kept losing track of the conversation and realizing she was absently rubbing her slightly swollen jaw. It always swelled but it never shattered. She was a little disappointed that there were no other physical remnants of earlier that evening. No one could even see the little bit of puffiness that was there. Robin wasn't sure it would have mattered though, since she showed up for girls' night last week with the blackest eye she'd gotten so far and nothing was said. She could clearly see on their faces when they recognized what it was and she saw just as clearly when they decided to ignore it. Apparently they were done caring. *I guess I need new friends*, she thought and sighed.

Robin arrived home earlier than Brett had expected and she found him sitting on the couch with a red eyes and a tear stained cheeks. She bit her lip to keep from grinning. This was a great part of their ritual as well. This guilt and anxiety over having let himself hurt her again. The best part of it was that the sadness he felt was real! It wasn't an

act and he really meant it when he would promise over and over to never do it again. He believed it, she did not.

The next morning she woke to his delicate kisses on her eyelids and the tender jaw. I'm guessing this time it's blueberry pancakes, she thought as she simply smiled up at him. He wrapped his arm around her middle and helped pull her up and led her down the stairs. Brett treated her like he'd broken every bone in her body instead of just her face. But she was wrong. It was gourmet donuts and coffee but it was good all the same.

Brett's tenderness had worn off by the next day and Robin was getting a little bored and lonely. Any time things were "normal" she would feel lonely. She wanted intensity and passion and she didn't really care if it was good passion or bad passion. She thought maybe she should wait a few more days before she provoked him so he wouldn't have a heart attack after he realized he hit her again. However, as she was bouncing down the stairs to the living room, Brett came around the corner of the staircase and without thinking he slammed his hand into her sternum and she was launched back and sideways to hit the wall. She gasped but no breath came or went. She blinked rapidly and tried not to panic while she waited for her wind to come back to her. He had growled something at her about getting out of the way and he had cursed. He only cursed when he was dangerous. *Well I guess I'm not going to have to do much work to set him off at the moment*, she smiled inwardly and turned to go back up the stairs.

Robin stood on the landing and looked around.

The door was open but she could see the garage door was closed so he must be pattering around in there. She whirled around to the kitchen and opened a cupboard door. She had been debating doing this for a while and it seemed like a good time to try it. She looked up at the carefully stacked shot glasses he collected. There were dozens of them and he prized every one. Directly behind them stood an ancient toaster and she would tell him their other had shorted out. She reached up and felt for the cord and then...she yanked it.

The shot glasses rained down as she hopped out of the way. Robin looked up when the crashing was done and saw she had managed to knock every last one of them off the shelf and to the floor. She glanced at the door again trying to gauge how much time she had and decided not to chance it. She quickly knelt down in the glass to make it appear this was all just an awful accident. She immediately felt some of the fragments sinking into her soft flesh. The realization hit her that depending what Brett decided to do to her, the glass would make it worse if she landed on it or was pulled through it. But she shrugged away the thought already lost with headed anticipation.

A moment later the door opened and Robin and Brett both froze staring at one another. His eyes were growing dark and she could see his jaw tensing. She was holding her breath as the very real terror started to fill her stomach and chest. Although she sometimes provoked this, it still filled her with dread every time. The thought what if he kills me this time, was always ringing clear in

her mind. Brett was to her in three hard stomps and one of his boots stopped directly on her hand, trapping glass beneath it. She yelped as the glass sliced into her palm and she felt the warm blood start to seep out around her hand. Brett grabbed her neck and squeezed. He pushed her head back against the cabinet below the sink. Looking up into his face she saw his cheeks and forehead red with anger and his green eyes, full of rage, glaring down at her. Robin moved her bloody hand and was about to start grabbing at his hands around her neck but her hand knocked a piece of glass against another piece. Brett looked down when the glass clinked; a large portion of the glass had broken and landed less than an arm's length away. He looked at it for two dreadful seconds before he flicked his gaze back to hers and clenched his teeth. Robin's eyes widened as she realized exactly what he was thinking and she started to struggle to get out from within his vice grip on her throat. But it was too late. Brett jerked his arm and with all his strength brought her head down squarely onto that large, jagged piece of glass.

Stars or swirly black holes would have definitely been better than the unending darkness that overcame her. But Robin didn't think that. Robin did not think anything.

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SNOW IN MARCH

By Tomoko Funahashi

It's cold outside. I pinch the collar of my waterproof jacket and shrink my neck into it. Five in the morning, still dark in early March, everyone in my neighborhood seems to be sleeping. To enjoy my quiet time, I turn off my cell phone. A ringtone is just not suitable.

Surrounded by low hills, this small town in the suburbs of Kyoto feels like January. *January. I visited Chicago in several years ago.* The trip was a gift from our son for our anniversary. I appreciated his kindness. Ice frosted Buckingham fountain and the milky foam on the roaring waves of Lake Michigan were one of the precious wintry scene. But it was close to torture. It was dead cold. *I'm glad I'm here in Kyoto now.* Blowing into my hands, I still wish for warmer weather. *A warmer place.* The images of green palm trees and blue sky seep into my brain along with the floating melodies of a Hawaiian steel guitar. Suddenly, a gusty wind blows my scarce hair, hitting my scalp. It completely shatters the images of the tropical islands. As I shake my head, my stubble scratches against

my collar, pulling me back to reality, winter.

I rummage into my pocket and pull out a black ball of yarn, a beanie and a pair of gloves. I swiftly cover my bald head with the warm cap. As I squeeze my hands into the gloves, my right pointer finger goes with middle finger. *Ugh, not again.* Patiently, I pinch the tip of the tube to let my fingers escape from the suffocating small space. Despite my best effort, nothing immediately warms me up. In the dawn, outside of my house, every single joint of my old body has become immovable, as if it is coated with sticky brown oil.

I don't mean to complain, but while I am struggling with my gloves, my toes begin to become numb. I wiggle them and step out to walk. Walk, walk! This is my first task of the day. Walking for one hour in the dawn. Walking for exercise, for good health! But today is so cold. Too cold for March. March is supposed to welcome bugs crawling out of the dark ground and to encourage the soft buds to breakthrough to flourish with the sun's ultimate power.

Daybreak is approaching. In the east, the outline of a mountain is brewing the moving ripples of morning. When I raise my face, the cold air invades inside my shirt and tickles my bony chest. I regret I don't have the warm scarf my granddaughter gave to me.

I stop walking. Finding my nose running, I snort once and look for a handkerchief in the pocket of my sweat pants. It's wrinkled, but it's OK. No one else uses this old cloth anyway. I blow in it, and resume walking. As if I were standing in a valley of the houses, the dry sounds of my

footwear lightly echo and fade in the grayed community. I spot no one walking, even though some houses gleam the lights like cat's eyes. Brrr. My cheeks are cupped by invisible icy hands! I walk faster, hoping this action will warm up my sleepy body.

Soon, I start to pant. The vapor comes out with a precise rhythm. Yes, I'm a steam engine, choo, choo! My footsteps also pick up the beat. Yet, my toes are still stiff they must have transformed into ice cubes in plaster.

As I start to feel exhausted, my knees begin to tremble, laughing at my old body. I need to slow down. I growl and stomp on the gravel. Just then, a tiny cold ball hits my nose. A snowflake. I look up. Surely, the darkness yields to the dawn, the silky ceiling is dyed with milky amber paint. Similar to the one that melted on my wrinkled face, the fluffy scales are falling over the silent land.

"Snow in March. No wonder my body can't warm up!" I exhale. The haze quickly evaporates along with my voice. The chilly, morning air is dense and hard to breath in. Maybe it is only my delicate lungs that cannot absorb such cold air. I stop walking, shutting my eyes, and solemnly raise my arms upward. I'm a statue standing in the snow flurries.

When I look around, I see a glowing spot out of the corner of my eye. Between the brick fence and a dirt filled planter, a patch of snow sits on yellow weeds, appearing as if it were a special confectionary that the wintry wind had secretly left last night.

While I'm admiring the quiet showcase, an image

of a temple with velvety frost over its dark ceramic roof seeps into my mind. A shot of early spring. My heart urges me to see the temple. Yeah, Komyoji temple is near here. I tell myself, *I can make it, it's only about a half mile walk.*

The Buddhist temple, Komyoji, is famous for its Japanese maple trees. In November, the sightseers are visiting there, walking under the autumn colored arcade. As it's winter, not in the peak, I might become the only one who is lucky to view the tranquil scene.

I'm heading west, to the temple. As I'm crossing the street, I hear a faint siren. It echoes among several apartments, coming close, signaling an alarm to the sleeping community. Tails of red lights emerge in the darkness. From behind the naked concrete walls of a condominium, an ambulance appears, swirling its warning beams like burning flames, arrogantly trespassing on my poetic world.

What a terrible noise! Cut it out! Even though I feel irritated, I don't want to offend authority. I try to swiftly yield to the special vehicle. But I cannot. I stay there like a real statue with my feet nailed to the ground. The ambulance honks. The loud buzz startles me. The blinking red lights blind me. As if I receive an attack of red clamorous birds, I can't move, only my knees are hitting each other as my legs tremble. Without thinking, I cover my face with my palms. With a rush and gust, the blasting truck quickly passes by me.

Immediately, the siren lowers as the vehicle drives away. But its long nasty buzz is still ringing inside my head.

Seconds later, I notice it's my heartbeat, not the siren. "Ah, it was close! It scared me!" I say it out loud to no one but to the falling white petals. I need to vocalize something, otherwise my fear might melt me with those flurry pieces. As I sigh, I see my breath. Time to resume, visualizing a beautiful temple with snow.

Before I notice it, the sky is lightly lifted, painted in milky blue. The snow has stopped. Cars occasionally appear and drive with weak headlights on, and bikers with sporty outfits rush down the hill toward the main street. When I arrive at the faded wooden gate of the temple, it's almost six o'clock. As I pass through the entrance, I wonder when I last visited this local attraction.

I look up at the wide stone stairs. They are one of the most notable destinations in Kyoto and it's literally a photogenic site. Photographers and film makers love to come to shoot scenes with them. Here, I'm a lucky audience, booking the best seat to observe a special clip in the film.

In the morning mist, the stone stairs appear to be endless. But I know about the temple that remains standing on the top of them. The Buddhist temple must be glittering with silky snow. Now it's time to climb more than one hundred steps.

With a wide stride, I start the first one. Since each stone is only about two to three inches high, it should be easy for me to climb the flight of stairs. But soon, I realize that they are wide and deep, demanding I take longer strides.

I'm old and my legs are short, and I can no longer make a rhythmical march. I start to huff. My forehead perspires. My eyes lose focus. My view is swinging. As if I'm rocking on a chair. But I can't stop. Just like a coil inside of me were wound up, I force my legs forward, up, and forward.

While I puff and huff, I desperately search for a glimpse of the temple. When I stand at the top of the stairs, it finally comes into view. It blurrily sits behind the icy mist. The temple is already awake, modestly lighted up. A wooden drum is heard inside. I am downhearted that I can't see the precious statue of Buddha, but instead, I can see the flames from the candles and incense flickering near the sliding partition.

With short rustling sounds, a chilly gust sweeps over the roof. The ivory powder is stirred, excitedly dancing in the air as if it were waking up from a dream. Suddenly the sharp orange sunlight pierces the mist, spreading the particles of the diamond dust.

Instantly, the mist clears away. The temple emerges. The remnant of snow is gleaming like a thin satin cloth over the top of the roof. The wooden walls are smoothly blackened, while the center of the steps and handrails are shining in gold. Near the religious building, the leafless trees are standing at monochromatic color. The breathtaking scenery reminds me of a huge charcoal drawing.

"Ah," I exhale a satisfied sigh. "Now I can go home. I'm done." I am ready to step down. Suddenly, my right knee creaks and pain pierces through my leg. *Oh, shoot.* My kneecap is frigid like an ice pack. Slowly, I go down the

limestone stairs, and soon both my legs have become too fragile. I'm upset. I approach a handrail on the sidewall of the steps. Leaning on the bar, I become a snail, slowly going down.

Carefully, not to fall! My brain projects a scene that I fall, rolling all the way to the bottom, bleeding. *Then the ambulance comes back for me and people will say how foolish and reckless I was!* I exhale a big breath. *I won't accept becoming such a shameful man myself!* Like an abrupt gusty wind, my decision closed the gate of my mind, shutting out everything. I completely forget about the beauty of the snowflakes, the misty temple, and the reason why I am walking. All that concerns me is to arrive at the exit of this property, without hurting myself.

How long will it take for me to get there?

Reality sprouts inside me. I want to know what time it is. I sense that I have been outside longer than I'm supposed to be. I bring out my phone and turn it on. A line of missed calls pops up. My wife was trying to contact me. I wonder, "Why did she call?"

Just then, my cellphone rings. I jump. I believe it's my wife's fifth call, but it's not her.

"Thank God, Dad!" My son's loud voice splashes, raking me out of my depressing, imaginary scenes. "Where are you? Are you OK?"

"Well," my voice sounds dry. I clear my throat. "I'm OK. What's up?" Still, it was raspy. Somehow, I cannot make it a spirited bird's chirp.

"You know, Mom was calling you. You didn't

answer.” He pauses and says, “It’s seven o’clock. You’re supposed to be home by six, right?” Then he adds, “She’s calling your friends asking if they know your whereabouts. So I tried to reach you.”

I remember that we discussed several diseases including Alzheimer last week. No wonder my son sounds half concerned, half irritated. He may think I’ve ended up with it. I want to laugh at his words, but I cannot. I say, “I’m at Komyoji.”

“Komyoji? What are you doing there?” with a low voice, he becomes skeptical. “Are you OK, dad? Can you come home?”

“Um...” I look at my knees. I’m not sure I can walk for a mile with these knees on such a cold morning. But despite my feelings, I respond to my boy, “Yeah, yeah, I can. I will stop by a café and warm up my knees for about half an hour. And...”

Before I finish, my son cuts in, saying with a clear voice, “Dad, stay there. I’ll be at the temple in five minutes. Ok?” Click.

I stare at my phone in my black glove. My left hand is still holding the handrail, and my knees are slightly bent. My toes are frozen. The stone is still wet even though the snow stopped some time ago. I look up and find the soft, peach colored morning sun reflecting in the windows of the houses. A ray of sunshine stretches down on the next step to my feet. It shines warm like home. It’ll be a good idea that I wait in that pool of sunlight.

I stick out my right leg on the bright spot. It is

energetically warm, sharing the planet’s generous heat onto my old feet. Looking at my battered shoes, I imagine my crystalized toes loosening, reshaping into nice human feet. I want to thank the sun. I want to appreciate everything that makes my heart warm as the first day of spring will come soon to my hometown.

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HOME SWEET HOME

By Robert Williams

Home. It's been said that, "Home is where the heart lies." The word represents a universal concept shared by every member of mankind and is timeless in nature. EVERYONE has a home but the concept is as diverse as all the earthly plants and animals combined. It represents not just a physical location or structure, but a sense of belonging, of ties to others, shared memories and experiences, states, smells, hopes, sounds, dreams, fears, love and loss.

For me, "true home" is a small blue-collar farming and manufacturing town in north central Ohio named Fremont. The area was originally a Wyandot Indian village and in 1750 a French Trading Post was established there. It was much later known as the Cutlery Capital of the World. I say, "true home" because every time I visit the city it conjures up the same intense visceral feelings and memories, each and every time. A sense of calm and belonging that isn't found in the other places I've felt in my decades of wandering this magnificent country. Mendocino, CA comes close, but then I never lived there

and what does a visitor really know?

The town was named after John C. Fremont who was the ultimate Rambler, soldier, politician and explorer. He was a brazen, bold and courageous fella which was probably typical for the time period around the mid 1800's. This was before indoor plumbing and medical care involved tools more suited for carpentry. This is a fella who hung out and travelled with Kit Carson exploring virgin wilderness areas as vast and wild as the north winds.

Ironically, he was appointed Governor of the Arizona Territory by President Rutherford B. Hayes from 1878 to 1881. President Hayes had a home in Fremont which is now a Presidential Library and Museum, along with some of the most beautiful grounds one can imagine. It's one of my favorite places and the older I get the more I appreciate the immense American history tied to the area.

The War of 1812 included British war boats and local Indians led by Chief Tecumseh sailing up the Sandusky River from Lake Erie for a standoff at Fort Stevenson commanded by Major George Croghan. Sandusky comes from the Wyandot word *saandusti*, meaning water within water pools. The Shawnee called it *potakihiipi*. The muddy Sandusky snakes right through the heart of the town and all hundred thirty-three miles eventually dumps into Lake Erie. The fort location is now the site of the town library.

Across the river is a set of high cliffs named Blue Banks. On top is an Indian burial ground where as a young boy my best friend Dennis and I would run the hills and valleys each summer. Engaging in activities like fishing,

finding Indian artifacts, building rafts, skipping stones, hunting, camping and just being young adventurous boys. I recall many conversations we had over the crackle of an evening campfire wondering what it would have been like running the hills two hundred years ago. The imagination of young boys can easily fill in the blanks as to what adventures must have surely been lurking everywhere. We always camped on the very highest bluff and close to the edge with a sheer fifty-foot drop to the muddy river below.

I've been back to that spot a few times over the years and closing my eyes can recall the events with amazing clarity down to the smell of camp fire smoke and maybe a couple young boys laughing hysterically. Laughing about something surely silly like we were in a scene from the movie *Stand by Me*. It was a magical place and time to begin the journey to manhood. Things were loose with few rules and certainly not choked with the repetitive and mostly boring responsibilities of grinding out an existence as an adult.

Working and fretting takes up a lot of glorious free time and can slowly strangle a person until the kicking eventually stops as a last breath is drawn.

Dennis was laid to rest nearby in a quiet cemetery next to our grade school Lutz, protected by a canopy of immensely robust oak and hickory trees. I didn't attend the funeral service. We used to ride our bicycles through there after junior high football practice sessions and drink the sweet, pure, ice cold well water from a black cast iron hand pump. The pump squeaking in anguish as we took turns

pumping God's good nectar from the sacred and pure bowels of the earth. It was primal, immensely refreshing and oh so wonderfully simple. Simple is always good, and maybe the best.

Gone in his 30's like a flash to an excess of cocaine, weed, pills and a generally wild and unbridled lifestyle. In his prime, he claimed to have shot and wounded a man in Toledo, Ohio or a deal gone bad. He was a modern Kit Carson I guess, fighting demons rather than wild bear and Indians. Life at home for Dennis wasn't good growing up I'll just say that for now. I visit his grave when I'm home, which for years sported only a small pink granite rock I'd brought back from Michigan. Now his marker is a beautiful black marble piece with his face sculpted into the surface and probably good for a thousand years or so. Stone last a long, long time.

Fremont has generated its share of famous personalities and athletes. Actually, the list is quite impressive given the town population of about thirty thousand. I suspect at its core is a solid blend of Midwest values involving hard work and discipline that drives this process. Numerous NFL players like Shawn McCarthy of the New England Patriots, Rob Lytle of the Broncos, Charles Woodson and Bob Brudzinski. One of the more interesting individuals was Everton Conger who capture John Wilkes Booth.

Fremont is a farming and manufacturing community. Nothing highlights this more than the autumn harvest of vast quantities of tomatoes. These plants belong

to the nightshade family and are used locally to produce Heinz ketchup. That heavenly red goop that highlights family gatherings and sporting events all over the country. It's American at its very core. The entire community shares this calming yet invigorating crisp and organic aroma in the air during the fall season. It measures and conveys the passing from summer to fall in an olfactory kind of way that is pleasant, subtle, yet deeply powerful. One whiff and you know that the howling, sleet filled gales of November are looming on the horizon. It's one of my most precious memories of true home. Somebody should make an air freshener in the scent.

During that same season, each Saturday evening echo the distant roars from, "The Track That Action Built." It can be found within the barb wire fenced perimeter of the Sandusky County Fairgrounds and sports a one-half mile dirt oval where locals race stock cars and the highly specialized spring cars. Although I'm not a "car" guy I can appreciate the raw unbridled power of these vehicles. Eight hundred horsepower machines gulping exotic race fuel and clawing at the claim in an effort to hurtle man and machine around the course at insane speeds. It's a wild and precarious ride I'm, sure and not for the faint of heart. It's always entertaining to attend and watch not only the faces but the fans. They filter in from local villages like Lindsey, Woodville and Oak Harbor. Cheap hot dogs with all the fixings, popcorn in the red and white striped tubs, nachos with cheese and perhaps a huge Coca Cola dominate the menu. Of course, multiple beer taps that will

most certainly NOT include a micro-brewery with floral ales and specialty summer beers. Fish fights in the pits are routine and accepted as part of the culture, although the police are always present. Any fella bold enough to hurtle one of these machines around isn't afraid to throw a punch or two if things don't go his way.

After the racing ends some hard-core fans drift slightly south to a pub called the Copper Penny. It's a country bar, nothing fancy and known to be rough and tumble. Kind of place with a dilapidated quarter condom dispenser in the men's room, along with a pungent smell of urinal cakes and a general sticky filth. I helped brick the front of the establishment as a young man working for Freddy my brick mason neighbor. I will say that I started work at seven in the morning and some folks were already inside "enjoying" a gin and tonic or whisky straight. Freddy was a tall fun-loving lanky guy who loved his smokes and PBR (Pabst Blue Ribbon) beer. The winter after his divorce I watched from a concerned distance as he proceeded to fill an entire dump truck bed full of empty beer cans in his shop. He passed away in his forties from a stroke shortly after his young daughter was killed in a freak accident. Someone late at night missed a turn, drove a vehicle through the house and into the bedroom where she slept.

One morning a rather weathered looking chap stumbled out the door into sunlight, onto the sidewalk and vomited little sausages all over the entrance. He promptly returned to his "business" inside without a single word

spoken. I was seventeen, in utter shock and will never forget the powerful yet revolting moment. Alcohol can be a very bad drug regardless of where one calls home.

Small towns can be rough and calloused places, but they also harbor a beautiful simple elegance and spirit that is unmatched. I recall at about fourteen years of age walking Janet home on one of those sultry, humid and hot Midwest summer evenings. She was a young, petite and vivacious blonde who lived a dozen blocks away.

Under the steady hum of the street lights, lightning bugs danced to the beat as we slowly walked towards her home. Our steps were deliberately slowed and shortened without words as we both sensed a desire to prolong the experience. No need to rush an evening with no agenda or urgency. Nothing else to do, nowhere else to go. You can find that kind of pace sometimes in a small town and it's wonderful.

Her dad was Big Jim who ran a tree trimming service and always sported a heavy gold chain around his neck and his sleeved rolled up revealing a set of enormous biceps and forearms that rippled with each movement. He was a hard-working gregarious guy but I wouldn't have wanted to cross him or insult his family. I knew that for sure.

The conversation on our walk home was light and youthful, full of optimism and reflected a general goodness and innocence that only youth can harness. The world was our oyster that night.

She was pretty, skin smooth and flawless, long

hair that the summer sun had danced over and her gentle giggle wonderful and delightful, highlighting the dimple in her cheek. Youth is God's grace, artistry and pure magic at its very finest. He's a genius.

Todd. He was one of the most interesting, unique and genuinely fun guy I ever met. His father Pete was a school teacher and wife Kitty the salt of the earth, although we did catch them once in the backyard pool at night without clothing. Kitty shrieking and laughing as Pete begged us to turn the outside lights off. Pete loved his fat cigars and they always arrived in a nice aluminum screw top tube lined with cedar. Kitty and Pete were some of the finest folks I've ever met, simple, humble, lots of fun and very loving to all the kids in the neighborhood. Small towns are full of people like those two. They're no longer with us, only in memory, but I smile thinking about them.

They had a number of younger and older children but Todd broke the mold. Todd was my age and as a young man drove around in a powder blue 1969 Plymouth with studded steel snow tires. With a cigarette dangling from his lips and a cold Pepsi between his legs he'd entertain anyone within range to a burnout that spayed a shower of sparks off the rear tires. The strain on the car's drive train must have been enormous but it held together.

It was hysterical, always predictable and just good clean fun. He later bought a burgundy Ford Cougar that he would shine with lemon Pledge and called it, "Whisker" but then that's a story all its own.

Life in a small USA town is full of these experiences.

I've been blessed with a plethora of them, including good, bad and sometimes ugly. That's life. I could write an entire book on my time in Fremont, Ohio. In fact, it reminds me very much of Mundelein, IL which I've called HOME for the past twelve years. It's a nice little town filled with good ole fashion values. Hard work, honesty and a unwavering optimism even when things are not going especially well. A hope for the future and a willingness to sacrifice to get there. It's what's made this country great and I wouldn't want it any other way.

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JUDGE BIO

Contest Judge Richard Thomas is the award-winning author of seven books: three novels—*Disintegration* and *Breaker* (Random House Alibi), and *Transubstantiate* (Otherworld Publications); three short story collections—*Staring Into the Abyss* (Kraken Press), *Herniated Roots* (Snubnose Press), and *Tribulations* (Cemetery Dance); as well as one novella in *The Soul Standard* (Dzanc Books). With over 100 stories published, his credits include *Cemetery Dance*, *PANK*, *storySouth*, *Gargoyle*, *Weird Fiction Review*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Arcadia*, *Qualia Nous*, *Chiral Mad 2 & 3*, and *Shivers VI* (with Stephen King and Peter Straub). He has won contests at ChiZine and One Buck Horror, and has received five Pushcart Prize nominations to date. He is also the editor of four anthologies: *The New Black* and *Exigencies* (Dark House Press), *The Lineup: 20 Provocative Women Writers* (Black Lawrence Press) and *Burnt Tongues* (Medallion Press) with Chuck. He has been nominated for the Bram Stoker, Shirley Jackson, and Thriller awards. In his spare time he is a columnist at LitReactor and Editor-in-Chief at *Gamut Magazine*. His agent is Paula Munier at Talcott Notch. For more information visit www.whatdoesnotkillme.com.

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The Village of Mundelein Arts Commission, established in August of 2016, hosts a biannual writing contest for Lake County residents. Winners and Honorable Mentions are featured in an issue of the *Mundelein Writes* publication. If you would like copies of the publication or are interested in participating in a future writing contest, please visit the Arts Commission website at: www.mundelein.org/government/mac for more information, or contact:

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