

Essay

1st Place

Out of the Zone

by Chelsea Gentzkow

On the first day of the state meet for the West Fargo girl's swim team my freshman year, I sat by the wall, listened to "Eye of the Tiger" by Survivor and breathed in the familiar scent of chlorine. I glanced around the Mandan pool area and noticed how crowded it was with other competitors. The buzz of excitement in the air made me nervous. Scheduled to start in seven minutes, I began preparing for my race.

My only goal for the meet was to break the school record in the 500 yard freestyle. It consisted of 10 lengths, down and back, and I needed to go under a 5:25.33. I thought back to how hard I worked during the season, always feeling dead afterwards. Every time I went to practice, I focused on this race. I practiced fast turns, kicking off the walls, and building to my finish. I had come close to breaking the record at a meet earlier in the season but I missed it by two seconds which caused me to work even harder. I hoped the effort I had put into my practices would pay off.

My best friend and fellow swimmer, Meghan, popped down beside me. I took my headphones out of my ear and listened to what she had to say. "Chelsea, you can do this! You have worked so hard this season and it all comes down to this," Meghan urged. "You are such a strong swimmer and I know you can break this record. You have so much enthusiasm and energy so put it all in the race!"

"Thanks, Meghan, it means a lot," I said nervously.

"Seriously, go out there and destroy all of those other girls! Show them what you're made of and break the record! You deserve this!" she said.

I took a deep breath and sighed anxiously. "Meghan, I don't know if I can do this. I overheard some of the older girls on the team and they don't think I'm going to be able to break the record."

"Prove them wrong then, Chels. I believe you can do this and you have to believe you can do it too!"

"Heat 3, line up now!" yelled one of the referees.

"Good Luck Chels, you got this!" Meghan told me as she walked away.

As I lined up, I started thinking about my race. I needed to hold 31 seconds for each 50 in order to break the record, which meant streamlining off every wall, kicking the whole race, and pushing myself outside of my comfort zone. I remembered what Meghan told me about believing in myself. From that point on, I only thought positive thoughts. I knew I could break the record if I stayed strong. My heat walked behind the starting blocks and my nerves were skyrocketing. I put my goggles over my eyes and adjusted my cap. The starter blew his whistle; I stepped up on the blocks.

“Take your mark...”

When I heard the electronic beep, I dove into what felt like ice cold water. Keeping a tight streamline, I kicked until I broke the surface of the water. My first few strokes felt as if I was weightless through the water. Breathing to my right, I could see my teammates jumping up and down while swimming towards the bulkhead; on my way back, I could see the Packer green in the stands of parents. I pictured my parents in the stands screaming for me to swim faster. I remembered my dad telling me before the meet that I could do anything if I put my mind to it. I thought of nothing else but my race.

I could feel my body tiring, legs burning every time I pushed off the wall for my turns, and arms stinging every time I lifted them out of the water. I pushed through my pain until I could no longer feel my body. I had gone completely numb. I wanted to give up, but I recalled my conversation with Meghan and I kept going. I believed in myself and I *knew* I could break the record.

With a 50 left, I willed myself to go faster. I felt like I was pulling one hundred pounds of bricks behind me. I swam to the other end, and obtained a huge breath before tucking into my turn. “This is it,” I thought while turning. I pushed off the wall and kicked underwater until I reached the first set of flags. When resurfacing, I caught a breath and prodded myself into gear. I kicked my feet as fast as possible; I pulled my arms with the remaining strength still in me. When I had a few more strokes left, I made them the best I possibly could until I felt my hand touch the solid concrete of the wall.

Tired and out of breath, I looked up at the score board. I cried, though no one would have been able to tell from my red cheeks and all the water droplets on my face. The red digital numbers read 5:21.68. I dropped down into the water and floated on my back staring at the clock. I couldn’t believe I did it! I thought about all the hard work leading up to this event. Standing up, I turned my head to the right to look at my parents in the crowd and saw them smiling and giving me a thumbs up. I could hear my teammates cheering on the bench where my team was sitting. I couldn’t help but smile at that moment, knowing I had accomplished my goal.

The next year I broke my own record in the 500, but it felt nothing like the first time. The motivation Meghan produced taught me if I don’t believe in myself, I’ll never succeed. This one race, a total of about 10 minutes, changed my life forever. I realized working hard at practice, and pushing myself out of my comfort zone allows me to achieve the goals I have set forth for myself. To this day, I look back on this race and remember all things are possible if I work hard and believe in myself.

2nd Place

Battleship Butte

by Benjamin Haugeberg

I am overtaken by the view from the top of Battleship Butte. I am alone with a group of my friends beside me. Battleship Butte is in the Theodore Roosevelt National Park's North Unit, located along the Little Missouri River in western North Dakota. The land looks as though a cougar ran its sharp claws along the earth cutting a deep canyon through the prairie. Early French traders called this wild country the Badlands due to its ability to remain impassible for travelers. The Badlands are powerful, humbling, degrading, peaceful, and mysterious. On top of Battleship Butte, with my friends by my side, I lose myself in its beauty.

As my friends and I step out of the van, we gaze at Battleship's tan sun baked south side. I look at a vertical wall five hundred feet high. This is the hardened bow of the battleship. Cliff swallows make this untouchable fortress their home. We head east. Our mission: conquer Battleship Butte by foot. The footprints in the fine gray dirt inform us that this is a common trail for most tourists. Fifty yards down the trail rests an amazing feature: cannonball concretions. Tucked neatly in a small coulee created by water erosion are perfectly round spheres of sandstone. They are punched into the earth as though they were shot out of cannons from a pirate ship. No clues are found to answer how this ancient artillery rests there. They seem to have fallen from the sky to sink this battleship. Moving up the uneven trail, the strong aroma of sagebrush tickles my nose. The olive green plant comes up to my waist, flourishing in this poor soil and housing all kinds of wildlife. As we walk around the bottom of the ship, we come across an old gnarled cedar tree with two large trunks growing from one root system. All sorts of birds make this soft needle evergreen their home. Black capped chickadees, finches, mountain blue birds, and the occasional magpie reside there. This juniper tree offer great seasonal home, as well as a berry food source.

Halfway up the trail we come across one of the most spectacular rock formations. This ship has a tortoise on board. Like the cannonballs, a turtle shape has been eroded from the butte with a head, two hands, two feet, and a small tail standing five feet tall. But the turtle has withered away over the years from its beatings from elements of nature. Someday, the turtle shape will be completely washed off of the battleship. As we mosey past the tortoise, we begin the real climb. One hundred feet up, distinct sound of a rattle catches my ear. Vibrating the brush to our left, the diamondback rattlesnake sits in the bottom of its pit, coiled and ready to unleash its deadly venom on any intruder who dares to travel too close. We slowly move past careful not to upset the beast anymore. We are now one hundred feet from the top, the toughest part of this climb. The slippery trail has been carved into the clay headquarters of the ship. All of the loose rocks make it seem as though we are roller skating on marbles. A lizard watches us. With every step, we kick up dirt that fills our eyes and mouths and collects in our hair. The top of the ship is now in sight.

We troopers have made it to the top. We are now in the control room of this five hundred foot clay butte. We sit on top to enjoy the view. We set up camp facing west. Straight to the south is the Little Missouri River. Beyond is a beautiful backdrop of the canyon wall. This river is the sole creator of these untamable Badlands; winding and carving its way across the land like the rattler seen earlier. The river is nearly invisible though, its murky waters almost unseen due

to the forest of enormous cottonwood trees that follow its water supply. The river weaves itself west until it makes a sharp southern turn where it vanishes behind the jagged canyon walls.

Looking to the west my eyes catch the road. It too has trouble twisting through this unforgiving country, rising and falling with the terrain. Every vehicle that has been forced to travel this path understands its pain. The Badlands don't want to be conquered. This road will only be around as long as man is to maintain it. If left unattended, this country would engulf the blacktop, and it would be lost forever.

As I continue to the northwest, my eyes are fixed on rough canyon walls like large mud pies hundreds of layers thick. The bottoms are dark colored clay. Above the clay runs a small black vein of coal. Moving up the wall is the burnt orange scoria. Then layers of sand stone and the prevailing gray bentonite clay make up the rest. These colors repeat themselves in an unpredictable manner throughout the Badlands. I look straight north to a butte that appears to have fallen over. Its front side is strong, but the back side is slumped off, as though the land has had a stroke. The Badlands have a dangerous feeling to them. Every valley is different, the land painted like no other known to man.

The last part of the view is my favorite: the sky. I love watching the sunset from the top of this majestic ship. For now, I close my eyes. The sun's powerful rays beat upon my skin. It feels as if the sun is shooting tiny particles at me. I can feel every ray of sun hit each cell on my skin. I am connected to the particles in the air, to my friends, this rock, the butte, the hawks in the clear blue sky, and the snakes in the grass. I am connected to everything. The wind comes by and plays with my hair. With the wind comes the crisp North Dakota air filling my lungs, pure and untainted like the land we are lucky enough to set our eyes upon. A lark is chirping somewhere off in the distance. I feel alive. This ship has brought life to my body.

As I open my eyes, the landscape is on fire before me, glowing an orange hue. The Badlands perform a last dance before the sun forces darkness on them, painting the horizon with marvelous shades of reds, oranges, pinks, yellows, and blues. Every cloud seems to fit perfectly to this backdrop, and all of them are silver lined. It is silent. It is peaceful.

The sun sets, bearing long shadows that capture all the visible life. The deer come out to play in the shadow's fun, while the bison begin their wait for the sun's return. The loud colors fade in the sky. The arrays of grays and blues slowly transition into the black night sky that hangs over the Badlands.

We get up to leave. No one says a word. There is no need. Our minds are full of personal thoughts, feelings, and dreams that have no need to be shared. We arrive at the van in the pitch black of night. I look to the heavens and see the last miracle of this place, the stars. In this part of the world, the stars are countless. There is no light pollution to distort the heavens. I gaze at a few of the constellations. I open the door and hop into the van. As I close the door, I hear the song of a lonely cricket in the night.

Racing to the Finish

by Renee Pommerer

On a breezy, cold evening this last September, my family and I sat in the grandstands at the Wissota 100 in Huron, SD, to watch the best racers in the upper Midwest battle it out. Most dirt track race car drivers dream about making it to the Wissota 100, and my sister in law Katie, my nephew Jacob, my niece Jenna, and I happened to be there to cheer on my oldest brother Ryan in the street stock race of champions.

While waiting for the races to start, we observed all of the people piling in through the gates. The faint scent of race fuel drifted through the air, which to a race fan, is like catnip to a cat. The aroma of the food cooking in the concession stands below smelled delightful. Sitting there, we could hear the loud roaring of the cars as the drivers got them ready.

An hour or so later, we knew race time drew closer when the announcer said, “Everyone please rise for the singing of *O Canada* and our national anthem. We turned our attention from the flag to try to find the woman who sang. We spotted her in the announcer’s booth in the infield of the track. She seemed to be a thin, young woman with a high pitched voice. Different areas of the grandstands erupted with applause and fog horns as their favorite drivers’ names and starting positions blared over the speakers.

While we waited, as always, Jacob began dissecting the other drivers that would be in the race with Ryan. “The car that starts right next to dad ranked like twelfth in national points.”

“Who else made the race with him?” I asked, trying to make the time go by more quickly.

“So many of them are in the top ten in points, and Danny Hanson—he drives the number five car—placed number one in points.”

“Wow, who else do we have in there?” I prodded.

“Well we have Swenson, Kollman, Haskell, Ganz, and Babcock. This race is stacked.”

“Wow, he’s going to have to work for this one.”

“Ya, but he does start on the front row,” Jacob said excitedly. “He just has to stay up there.”

“That’s easier said than done. We just need to cheer loud, and hope for the best.”

“At least we’re all here together to cheer him on,” Katie chimed in. “I’m so happy that everyone could make it. It just wouldn’t be the same without all of us here.”

Talking to Jacob helped the time to fly by, and before we knew it, ten o’clock had come and gone. As the temperature plummeted, the four of us cuddled together to keep warm. Jacob and I snuggled up close together wrapped tightly in our blanket as Katie and Jenna did the same. Hours of racing passed, but the anticipation for Ryan to race continued to build.

Finally, after sitting at the track for over six hours, the race that we waited all night to see finally came. The cars lined up, and Ryan started on the inside pole position with Ryan Buer lined up next to him. As we looked back through the field of cars, I turned to Katie, and the look on her face mimicked my concern. The competition level of this race by far exceeded any other race my brother had been in.

As we rose to our feet and dropped our blankets, the green flag flew and the cars roared past the grandstands. Ryan got off to an early lead as he darted out of corner two. Suddenly Swenson, Buer, and Kollman broke free from the rest of the cars. Before I knew it, my brother had some extra company at the front of the race. Kollman who had started twelfth in the race now appeared on Ryan’s bumper after just a matter of a couple of laps. Ryan held the thirty-two-

hundred-pound car tight in his line. Many cars tried to close the gap that he had created between them, but he darted out of corner four to pull away again as each lap passed.

The twenty-five lap race seemed to take forever, but finally the white flag signaling the last lap remained came out. Ryan still held the lead, but Swenson pulled up beside him diving low into corner three. Suddenly Ryan's tires hooked up and he shot out of corner four like a rocket to take the checkered flag. Jacob stood there with tears streaming down his face, Jenna ran down the stairs to congratulate her dad, Katie kept screaming "I love you," and I jumped around clapping and screaming "Way to go Ryan."

As Ryan drove the car to victory lane, the rest of us bolted down the steps to be with him. In utter shock and amazement, my brother received his trophy and said, "I would like to thank my family, because without them I would not be here." Ryan, the underdog in the street stocks won the race of champions. We all cheered as loud as we could to let everyone know how proud Ryan made us.

Realizing that Ryan made a dream that he had come true and being there to witness it truly amazed me. That race showed Ryan that he deserved to run with the top drivers in Wisconsin. We always knew that he was a championship driver in our hearts; he just had to prove it to himself. In addition, our whole family won that night in a much greater way. Racing brought our family closer together and gave us a much stronger bond than any of us anticipated.



Katie Paulson
Spider's Sanctuary

Defining Moments

by April Faucett

Sometimes things happen in our lives that gear us towards whatever our career turns out to be.

All the nights your body kept you awake because it was shivering even though you weren't cold and you felt the need to use the bathroom constantly because you knew there was going to be a fight when your parents came home drunk and then the next morning your dad justified his actions when he showed the gob of your mom's hair in the sink that she 'made' him pull out.

And the time your boyfriend was trying to protect his intoxicated friend who wanted to drive thirty miles home, and you barely ever saw your boyfriend the way it was because you were in high school and he'd been in and out of institutions since he was a preteen, so you decided to ride along—at three in the morning (even though you were babysitting your little sister who was asleep, but still)—and somehow still managed to make it to school the next day, on one hour of sleep while reliving how many times you almost died, and how that cop who picked you up on the interstate didn't really question why you had no shoes on, or why you were in the situation you were (after your boyfriend's friend was home safe and generously let you use his car to get back to town, which broke down on the way home).

Then there was the time you came home drunk and had puked and passed out a couple of times before you staggered in the door with lipstick smears covering your face from when your friend amused herself when you were passed out, and the next day you figured out why people slept naked (because they passed out in the bathtub and couldn't remember how they got into bed in the first place), and your mom didn't ground you, she just thought it was funny you used the bathroom rug for a towel.

And another time when you used to pick up and clean the house before your mom got home from work and you were washing the dishes when your mom came home and shortly after your aunt picked her up, to go do who knows what, and while they were gone you cut your finger so bad it wouldn't stop bleeding, but luckily your friend came over to entertain you, or perhaps you entertained her, until your mom came back—hopefully—to take you to the emergency room, only when she came home she was high—or something—and got angry that you needed stitches, so you decided to walk to the emergency room but the doctor had to call her to get permission and she humiliated you so bad that you explained to the doctor you weren't crying because of the cut.

And how about when you stayed the night at your friend's house, sleeping on the fold-out in the living room, you had a strange dream about pulling someone's hand out of your pants over and over when you woke up and realized that it wasn't a dream, yet when your friend confessed her stepfather had been molesting her she didn't believe your story about his hand in your pants and even after your mom knew she still allowed you stay overnight.

Then there was the time you were thirty-eight weeks pregnant with your second child and had a recurring dream about catching your husband kissing your fifteen-year-old cousin and punching him in the face after he had nothing to say for himself and the dream came true at Christmas time at your auntie's house and you cried so hard; your aunt tried to console you but she was too drunk to think about anything except her 'victimized' daughter who never showed remorse.

Or the time your boyfriend caught you kissing your friend's husband after you'd been drinking over twelve hours and had been recently diagnosed with depression and taking antidepressants, but when you sobered up you didn't feel as bad as you should've because you secretly hated your boyfriend for supposedly getting your archrival pregnant while you were together, and for calling you at the hospital all pissed that the door was locked because it was more important for him to defecate than inquire about how your mom was doing in the hospital, or how you were.

And then there was the time your mom called you and needed you to bring her prescriptions over and when you got there you had to give your mom an ultimatum about going to the emergency room because there was blood and feces all over the bathroom and your mom's hands and feet, plus she could hardly move she was in so much pain, and while she was in the hospital you were cleaning her mess in her bathroom at home when you had a moment of reprieve because you slipped in her feces and shouted "shit!"

How about the time you just happened to run into your dad on your birthday and he didn't realize it was your birthday, but you weren't surprised because he's never remembered your birthday and you still wonder, at thirty years of age, if he even knows when it is.

And on the second anniversary with your current boyfriend he—who by the way is younger than you and who you never thought would date you because you have kids and are divorced—proposed to you on one knee in the park, where you had your first date.

Or the first time you saw your baby cry you laughed out loud because he looked so funny.

And when your Grandma disapproved of you getting married so young, but she had a little shower for you anyways.

Oh, and the time you were checking your final grades one semester and it turned out you made the president's list and you just sat on your bed and cried for a few minutes.

Or the second time you were diagnosed with depression and it turned out to be one of the best things that'd happened to you because it led you to change your college major and you found out nursing was the thing that'd been missing in your life all along.



Laura Freitag
Sunburst

Broken Key

by Stephanie Dean

For any dedicated music student in high school, regional music competition in April is the most important event of the year. All the hard, long practices, stress and motivation throughout the year build students up to one moment. One mistake could make or break any chance of making it to the state competition, the ultimate goal for any student.

Performing in front of people has never been easy for me. I knew that when I was waiting to play my solo at regional music competition last April. We had 65 students from our high school participate at the regional competition here at Valley City State University. The underclassmen unloaded from the two buses and set up their instruments at our camp, a conference room in the basement of the Student Center we used to keep our instruments and music and to hang out. As section leaders, I and the 13 other seniors took head counts and directed the underclassmen to their designated rooms at the right times. Those responsibilities added even more stress to our day.

My first two performances of the day, a clarinet ensemble and trio, had both gone very well, but by the end of the day, I was exhausted. I still had two events left—my bass clarinet solo and my clarinet solo.

The music hall, at about 2:00 P.M., appeared dead silent, which at the moment wasn't the greatest for me. *"There's no way I can do this,"* I kept telling myself over and over. The heels on my shoes clicked against the floor as I paced in front of the performance room. The big, old bass clarinet kept slipping from my hand as I impatiently waited for my band director, Mr. Brandenburg.

I knew in just a few moments, I would be sitting on stage playing for an audience and a judge. I glanced down at my crumpled piece of yellow sheet music and sighed. I knew this piece by heart. What was I so worried about? It wasn't the music. It was the people.

Finally, my band director casually walked down the hall. He was so calm, which made me panic even more. "How's it going, Steph?" asked Mr. Brandenburg.

I looked at him for a moment. Just this morning I had told him and my best friend, Chelsea, about my worries concerning regional competition. "Well, do you remember how I was freaking out last night? Take that times 100 and that's how it's going right now," I answered, fixing my grip on the bass again.

"You're going to do just fine. You know the music. I don't understand why you're so nervous. You've done this before."

"Yeah, and you remember how well it went the last time," I said slightly under my breath, but loud enough for him to hear. Last year I competed in regional competition only on clarinet. The result of that performance didn't turn out as well as I wanted.

"Just take a deep breath and quit worrying."

I started fiddling with my neck strap. "I tried that already and it didn't work. Can I just forget the whole thing and not perform?"

Mr. Brandenburg shot me the angriest look I had ever seen on his face. "No. You're going to perform."

Well, I had to face the facts and perform whether I wanted to or not. I heard the door to the room open and my name called. I glanced back at my band director, who gestured toward the open door. Slowly I entered the dimly lit room.

The click of my shoes echoed loudly in the room as I entered. Already a small audience waited for me to perform. I faked a confident smile as I quickly met with the judge's table to give her a copy of my piece. I nervously walked to the front of the room, carefully placed my music on the stand, and sat down. Mr. Brandenburg nodded his head and played a tuning note on the piano. I closed my eyes, internalized the pitch in my head, and played the same note on my instrument. Once tuned, I gave Mr. Brandenburg a nod to start.

As I played through the piece, my fingers started to steady and I started to feel better about the performance. I was over half done with my solo when I lost the ability to play some of my notes. I couldn't figure out what was going on with my instrument. My instrument played fine a moment ago. I started to panic as my solo started to fall apart. I quickly decided that panicking wasn't going to help me one bit. I remembered the one rule every musician lived by: keep playing, don't stop. I struggled through the rest of my solo.

After I finished, I hung my head. I put so much work into that solo, but it ended with disappointment. No way was I going to qualify for state competition now. The judge came up to the front and asked me what had happened. I shook my head back and forth signaling that I had no idea. Mr. Brandenburg came to my side and glanced at my instrument.

Taking a deep breath, I unhooked the base from my neck strap and laid the bass on my lap. I ran my fingers down the instrument hoping to find something that showed it broke. As my hand ran down the bottom of the bass, I found the problem. The bridge where the bell of the instrument and the main joint connect was misaligned.

I walked out of the room feeling not so confident in my musical ability. I put the bass away and picked up my first instrument, my alto clarinet. I had to focus on my final event for the day, my last solo. My final performance turned out average, making me feel a little bit better.

On the bus ride home, I realized that no matter how much preparation you put into a solo or performance accidents can happen. It is impossible to foresee what's going to happen and control things like a broken key. What we can do is make the best out of a situation and in the end be happy with the job that we did and not worry about the mistakes we made.



Michele Lutz
Blue Eyes

The Day I Felt Dead

by Megan Locken

It was a beautiful August day. The leaves were still green, not yet changing into yellow or orange. I had just woken from a good night's rest, early, and was ready to start my day. I was excited. It was the first weekend of the new school year and I planned to spend it with my family. We were going to see my aunt, whom I had not seen for a month or more.

I bounded down the stairs, hungry as I walked towards the kitchen. I was the first up, along with my mother. We talked as I made my breakfast. Everything was going fine until...my father pulled into the drive, dust from the gravel flying behind his loud car. Mom and I feared something had happened to him to make him come home early from work.

I sprinted out and greeted him by his car. As he hefted himself out of the car, I could see the worry and sadness in his eyes. He told me to go back inside and wake up my brother. Being the respectful daughter, I did as he asked. He waited until we all assembled before breaking the news.

As soon as I heard, my heart stopped, my breathing hitched in my throat. How could this have happened? My aunt died in a fire the night before. My uncle called my father and asked if he would break the news in person instead him doing it over the phone.

My mother broke into sobs, my father and brother bowed their heads in mourning and I did nothing. I did not cry nor did I mourn. I was at the young, naive age of thirteen. I couldn't comprehend how this could have happened.

That afternoon, only three hours after we heard the news, we went to her house. There was nothing left. All of it was black from burning; even her car was charred from the outrageous fire.

"At least she lived alone, luckily," my brother spoke up. We didn't say anything in return. We just sat there in our car and grieved in our minds and our hearts.

Seeing her house, it made my heart harden. I couldn't let my emotions show because I didn't want to worry my family. I built walls to protect myself. The only time I cried was when we buried her remaining ashes a week after the tragedy.

In those few hours, I felt anger for her dying and leaving us alone, I felt sadness for losing the one person who understood me, and I felt unbearable pain as if my heart broke. Having lost many loved ones before this, I had handled it well because it was usually for the best or I was too young to know what happened. But when my aunt died, I had just turned thirteen. It was like a ton of bricks fell on me.

My family never talked to me about it, not even my own mother. It was too painful for all of us to speak of. Not talking about it, however, only made things worse. In the months that followed, I shut off my emotions to the world, fearing that I would be hurt in the end.

I shied away from my friends, the only people that actually asked and cared about my well-being. I told myself over and over that it was for the best that I was isolated away from them so I couldn't hurt them or bother them with my trivial problems.

I felt like everyone in the world was out to get me and that the world was a place that would eat you alive if you weren't careful. I felt paranoid. I hated that feeling but everything changed one day not too long ago.

My friends saved me for doing something drastic. They let me open up and make me feel that I do make a difference in people's lives. It took me almost two years to feel that way and now, I'm slowly breaking the walls that I had put up.

I felt for a long time like I was drowning in my sadness and hatred and I wanted to die but then I was saved. I don't feel sadness over her death as much as I used to. I know she's in a better and safer place.

I will never forget this experience because it has defined the person I am today. I can go through life with a positive attitude now and I will never look back on the past. My heart is alive again.

The Old Coot

by Mindy Olauson

This past summer while out at the family cabin on Lake Ashtabula, it seemed that one specific topic kept coming up in conversation. This topic just happened to be Larry. Though he has been gone for five years, it seems that this summer, more than any, was full of talk and memories of him. It always seemed when something would go wrong or if we needed to blame someone, it would come back to Larry. When it comes down to it, it's not just when I'm at the lake that I stop and think about him, it's just about every other day that he comes into my mind for one reason or another.

Larry had many problems in his life. During his early life, he had to deal with being raised mainly by his mother. His father spent a lot of time out of the house because he was always out with friends at the bar. "His mother raised him because his father was too busy going out with his friends and drinking," my grandma informed me when I asked her about his childhood. She figures that his lack of a father figure, as well as his attitude towards women, contributed to his lack of parenting skills. "Since his mother did everything for him growing up, this was probably the reason he had such a macho attitude towards women," my grandma remarked about the subject. Having his father as an alcoholic who never spent much time is more than likely what led to his unfortunate life as an alcoholic. Although he had his problems, he loved his children very much. Larry was also many things to me. During the 13 years that I knew him, I learned that to know Larry Busche was to know a very smart, hard working and admired man.

Larry may not have been the greatest looking man, and when you took a look at him, he didn't come off as a very smart guy. However, he was a large man, though he never had to take advantage of it. He stood a solid 6 feet and weighed upwards of 250 pounds. His face was weathered and almost always covered in white scruff. Thinking about it now, there was always a lot of grey hair on his head, and never a bald spot, impressive for a man in his 60's. His usual wardrobe consisted of an old t-shirt covered by his blue collared, long sleeve, work shirt. For about one week of the year he wore shorts at the lake but the rest of the time he sported worn and faded jeans along with a pair of Velcro strapped tennis shoes. Like most men, never a day went by that he did not have a baseball cap on. It was always fun to see which hat he would wear, seeing as he owned about two dozen caps. However, the look was never complete unless he had a beer or glass of Boone's farm wine in hand.

Though he may not have looked the part, when it came to smarts, Larry had them all. Not only did he have book smarts, he seemed to have acquired street smarts, common knowledge smarts and any other smart a person could obtain. I always looked up to him for that reason and

wondered how a single person could be so knowledgeable. Larry attended College High School in Valley City and had a year of college at VCSU under his belt. He dropped out of college when he became a father, but I can only imagine what could have become of this man's life if he had finished college. I envision him being one of the best teachers a student could ask for. When I questioned my grandma about how he came about being so "all-knowing," as I liked to think of him, she credited it all to reading. "I remember once, when he and I went to the Heritage Center in Bismarck," she started, "we would go look at the different displays and he would read every single word. I would just look at them and walk to the next, but he would read every line, every word of every single display. It would take him hours, so I would just go sit in the car." After being told that, I realized that every night I would catch him sitting in the living room reading a book of some kind. They weren't small books either; they were very thick and being mostly early Western stories, it made me wonder how reading could be useful. However, as uninteresting as they may have seemed, I slightly regret not picking one up to see if I could get the same knowledge out of them that Larry did.

Although he was always a man of leisure, Larry's hard work and dedication to accomplishment still to this day astonishes me. He was employed in the Water Department at Valley City Public Works for 41 years. Even though his job was operating machinery to clean the sewer system in town, the leisure in him kicked in whilst driving around town finding familiar faces to visit with. The work was never done, though. If he wasn't working in town, he was keeping himself plenty busy at the family lake cabin at Lake Ashtabula. Most times, a person could find him puttering away in his work shed, keeping the shoreline and lake clean or tending to the garden. "He was always so proud of his garden," my grandma told me. I know this to be true. He would spend hundreds of dollars on the most beautiful flowers. He would buy marigolds, snapdragons, orchids, tulips, daisies and wave petunias and then spend hours planting and caring for them. If it weren't for his life-long dedication, the cabin we have come to know and love wouldn't exist. Larry retired from the Public Works department in February of 2005, four months before his death. When I asked my grandma what she thought his best accomplishment was, she paused awhile and finally decided, "Working one job for 41 years."

With his smarts, hard work, wits and overall likability, Larry quickly became and stayed one of the most admired and well-liked men in Valley City. I grew up admiring many people, and as I get older I think I start to admire the man he was even more. Anyone who knew Larry had an appreciation and respect for him. At his funeral at Trinity Church in June 2005 there wasn't an open seat to be found. I'm almost positive that that many people don't come to a Christmas Mass. Seeing how many people admired, respected and were affected by him was both heart-warming and heart-breaking considering he had been taken away way before his time. If everyone could be as loved as this man was, we would all be the happiest people in the world.

I interviewed my grandmother, Linda Olson to get the information about Larry. In the time it took me to ask her all my questions, I learned a number of things about Larry. I was informed that Larry was born in Glendale, CA on April 28, 1942 to Earl and Eleanor Busche. When he was two years old, his parents moved him and his older brother Keith to Valley City, and when he was in his mid-30's Larry gained a step-mother, Avis Busche. Then, just when I thought all the surprises were over, I was told that during his life, Larry married twice and helped bring into the world four children. He was first married to Mary and had two sons Corey and Kenny. He then divorced Mary and was married a second time to Diane. This marriage brought two more children, Suzy and Steve, the son and daughter that I got to meet throughout the years. The reason I finally got to meet his son and daughter was because Larry did not care to talk much

about his marriages, but did like to talk about his children whom he loved very much. I have never met his other two sons for the fact that up until now, I didn't know they existed. I was also informed that Larry's oldest son, Corey had committed suicide many years ago.

The reason I chose my grandma to interview is because she and Larry were together for 20 years, but never married. When I inquired as to why, she laughed and said, "We had it all planned out. We were going to get married after we both retired and I could collect widow's pension. It was all a matter of financial issues." Hearing those words for the first time in my life broke my heart knowing that if he would have lived six months longer, I would have been able to call him grandpa.

When I asked my grandma if she could make a quote about Larry, she had a look on her face as if to say, "How do you put a sum up in words the being of this complex man?" Finally, she simply said, "I called him an Old Coot, but I believe he broke the mold. He broke the mold when he was made." Then she added, "The world couldn't have handled two of him."

Soon the family and I will be heading out the lake to wrap up the season and we will be taking out the docks, cleaning up the garden and calling it a year. During this time, I know that Larry will be in the back of the minds of everyone there. I can't quite say why, but there's just something that brings back his memory every time we work at the lake. Even though the fall may fade soon and winter will approach, I know that Larry will remain in our hearts and minds always.

I Call Him Black Wolf

by Richard Wright

A couple of weeks ago, I heard the chilling cries of a pack of coyotes on the hill right by my farmhouse near Luverne, North Dakota. They triggered many different emotions in me. At first, I experienced bloodcurdling fear just as I was about to fall asleep for the night. The next consisted of a mixture of envy and admiration at how they were so free to do what they wanted and also how well their different howls, the pups' high pitched yelping and the adults' deep howls, blended together. The main emotion, though, was one of sorrow over the departure of a new friend about three months ago. Although Ken, whom I nicknamed Black Wolf, could sometimes be annoying, and we had very little in common, we became the best of friends in a few short months because of the times we shared, the passion he showed for his interests and friends, his ability to put things into perspective, and his calm and relaxing presence.

On the first day of school my senior year at Starkweather, I never would have guessed that Ken would become my best friend. Ken was our foreign exchange student from Taiwan, and he didn't really fit into any of our "cliques." He wore black clothes, secluded himself, and made little eye contact. It didn't help that he was one of the smallest kids in our high school at about five feet tall and no more than 120 pounds, nor that it was hard to understand a lot of what he said, although this became easier as the year progressed. Everyone avoided him, for the most part, for the first couple of days. I did too, but then I remembered how it felt to be lonely. I decided to talk to him.

Ken's eyes widened in surprise as I walked over to the table where he sat. I introduced myself, and it seemed like I freed him from a cage. He opened up, and we started talking about

our interests. I found out he loved to break dance, the color black, WWE, and wolves, especially black ones. Of these, I only agreed with his adoration of wolves, but that didn't prevent us from bonding.

Over the year, we became inseparable—he was like the little brother I never had. We enjoyed many different games together, including a fun card game called Dutch Blitz, which is a combination of Uno, Skip-Bo, and Solitaire. We rollerbladed around town, and we played catch, soccer, kickball, and basketball. We even came up with nicknames for each other. His was Black Wolf, and we decided that mine would be Gray Wolf.

Ken's passion for his interests really impressed me, but it did get irritating once in awhile. Ken's two main loves were WWE and break dancing. I never have been a fan of either, but I watched WWE with him and smiled when he danced. I actually enjoyed WWE with him, though. I didn't care for the actual wrestling, but seeing Ken's reaction to every move, especially one of John Cena's, amused me, particularly when he tried to copy them on an invisible opponent. However, he repeated these moves way too often for my liking. His dancing also impressed me, but I didn't like his spontaneity; he would just break out wherever, at any time: he did it in the lunch line, in the hallway, even in the classroom. Although it usually never amounted to anything more than a Michael Jackson moonwalk, it still became annoying.

His passion for his friends never annoyed me, however. On the contrary, it was amazing. In January, roughly copying the Lord of the Ring series, Ken gave me one of eight rings he distributed to his closest friends. He called us the "ring bearers," and said each ring symbolized something different. Ken explained that mine symbolized rain, which he said was peaceful and calming. He told me he admired how easily I could get my emotions under control.

I, on the other hand, admired him for how well he could put things into perspective. All he did was ask how important whatever had happened really was, and then smile at me knowingly. One time, I bombed a physiology test, and I was very, very upset. However, Ken put things in perspective by asking how much this one test would affect my grade. He just smiled when I realized that it wouldn't lower my grade more than a few tenths of a point. I thanked him as he patted me on the back on our way to another dreadful lunch in the school cafeteria.

Little things like that symbolized Ken as a true friend. He could always tell when I was down in the dumps, and would try to cheer me up. In December, my classmate Ashley and I had a heated argument about what we should give our music director for Christmas. She made some snide comments about how I didn't care enough to buy him something nice. Later, when I talked with Ken, I shared all of my negative feelings with him. The way he listened without interrupting really helped me recover. His calming presence was all I needed.

In July, Black Wolf needed to return to Taiwan. He didn't want to leave, and I didn't want him to either. Knowing neither of us had a choice in the matter, I helped him pack all day at the Beuchler's, his host family's, house. Our constant reminiscing made us take twice as long to pack his bags.

He left for the airport in Grand Forks around 11 p.m. We said our last goodbyes under the light of an early full harvest moon. Before he climbed into the Beuchler's silver Pontiac Grand Am, he crouched with his right foot two feet in front of his left, arched his back, threw his head back, and let out a howl to the moon. We both smiled at each other as he reluctantly pulled the car door shut. I waved goodbye until I couldn't see the car any more.

Parka

by Jenni Lou Russi

I'm wearing the best parka I've ever owned. Each time I put it on I think about my parents. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because my mother made parkys and my father wore the best parka in the world. My mother didn't make his. He had coyote fur around the ruff. Or maybe it was wolf. It wasn't dog. His parka had pockets and zippers everywhere. He was as big as a house in it – and the pockets were like rooms – some with secret hiding places – others were like gathering spaces for friends and family. In his parka my father was warm. You knew this because when other people would hesitate to go outdoors, he'd put on his parka and go – just go – like there wasn't any chill or biting wind.

In fifth grade the temperature in Anchorage dipped to -60 with the wind chill factor. Wind chill factor was big in those days. Now we say, "but it will feel like ...," which sounds more subjective. When the temperature dipped, school was cancelled in the middle of the day, and parents came to pick up their children. We couldn't leave without a parent. I wasn't sure I'd get to leave. Most of the parents who came were fathers in parkas. I looked at the line of parkas in the hallway, and had a fleeting thought. How could I be blamed if I mistook someone in the wrong parka for my father? I just wondered what it would be like to go home with a different dad. My father spotted me – and I felt good to have been called upon ... recognized ... claimed.

During a Chinook in sixth grade, a friend and I were walking to Mt. Spur Elementary School with her little brother. Beverly's brother was in kindergarten, and my parents told us to hold his hands so he wouldn't blow away. They watched through our kitchen window as we climbed down the back steps. We got halfway across the field when our hats blew off, and we let go of hands to replace them. Joey's feet skimmed the ground as he scooted across the field. We ran after him. He cried and screamed in terror. My father's parka appeared and I felt safe. He reached into one of his zipper pockets, took out his special mini camera, and snapped photos of Joey suspended in the air.

Eventually we caught up with Joey when a gust died down, and he touched the ground. The three of us made it to school, safe and sound, but winded. My father's parka, my father, and his camera soon disappeared from my life.

I found my parka in Park City, Utah. I was shopping for a woman's parka – but none were warm enough, so a clerk suggested I try on a man's parka. I zipped up the front, pulled up the hood, explored the many pockets and thought, "I'm wearing the parka now, Dad."

About twenty years ago I was reunited with my father, and realized that the parka had been a facade, a protection in many ways. This is good to remember each time I step outside in my own parka. It protects, but it doesn't hide. Good to know.