

could—would—do anything about it, which is what you might think. No. It was because... I was part of that careless world. I didn't care that she had almost killed herself, or even that she was going to eventually succeed in killing herself. I simply didn't care. And I hated myself for that."

"Hmmm ..." God grumbled. "So you killed yourself because you cared too much about not caring?"

I screwed up my face and took a few moments to try and figure out what He had just said.

"Yeah," I nodded. "That's exactly it."

"Hmmm..." God grumbled again. "That makes things rather difficult. You're a writer?"

I nodded.

"I was working in an office doing filing work to make ends meet though."

"Usually we have a special section of Hell reserved for writers, but your case is...difficult."

God chuckled to Himself.

"That was a joke, by the way."

"Oh," I said in a small voice.

"But what are we going to do with you. Basically, you need to learn how to truly care before you will be truly happy..."

God suddenly looked up. He gave me a keen look.

"I know," He said softly.

I was suddenly back on the corner, but something was different. I was no longer behind the young woman, but directly to her right. I could see her face now. Her brown eyes were sunken beneath thin eyebrows. Her mouth was tight and small. Her face was round, and it made her look younger than I would have expected.

I gradually became aware of my own body: of the pain that flared up intermittently throughout my legs. I felt very tired. I then realized that I was gripping a walker between my blue-veined hands.

Then, I watched it all happen just as it had before. The girl stepped out in front of the truck and it missed her. This time, I could see a tall and ragged man holding a briefcase as well. I watched him pace off down the street towards a tall apartment building. I felt some pity for him stir in my heart. He, out of all of us standing on the corner, seemed to be the most shaken.

I used my walker to move down the street until I came to a dingy building. I placed my three grocery bags into an empty bin marked "Donations." I turned and walked away.

Then, I was back on the corner. This time I knew I was the man with the mole on his nose. I was conversing heatedly with the blue-eyed businessman. Suddenly I knew why: he was my father. I barely noticed the young woman until she stepped out into the traffic. After it was over, my father and I crossed the street. When we reached the other corner, I turned to my father and spoke two words:

"Forgive me."

I was back on the corner. I was the older businessman with the wrinkled blue eyes. I listened to my son pour his heart out to me. I listened and then watched in horror as the young woman was almost hit. When we reached the other side, I heard my son ask those two words. I looked back at him.

"Of course."

I embraced him and tried to pretend that it was just the wind that was causing my eyes to water.

I was back on the corner. I could feel my emerald earring dragging my earlobes down. My mind was racing, trying to sort out the complexities of life. The young woman stepped in front of the truck. I couldn't see what happened next because of the tall man in front of me, so I was afraid she was hit. Then,

thankfully, she walked back onto the corner.

It was not far from the corner to the bus stop, and I did not have to wait long for the bus to arrive. When I reached my own neighbourhood, I got off and began to walk towards my own little house. But I stopped, instead, at the house next to mine. An empty wagon stood in the front yard. I slowly walked up the steps and rang the doorbell. A pale, red-eyed woman opened the door. She had tears running down her face. I reached out for her and let her sob into my shoulder.

There was suddenly a wheel before me. I was in the cabin of a truck. It was strange how easy it was to push on the accelerator—like the truck was an old friend of mine. I found myself in love with the way it purred beneath my touch.

I was driving through an older part of town: past apartment buildings and run-down restaurants. I felt like I knew the route well and had driven it everyday. It was one of those streets you could see all the way down: all the lights were green.

The girl stepped in front of me.

I slammed on my brakes and swerved.

For one sickening moment I thought I had hit her. Then, I saw her walk calmly back onto the corner. The other people on the corner stared at her: two businessmen, an old woman, a short woman, and a tall, ragged man.

I smiled at the man, but he didn't see me. He was too shocked to do anything but walk numbly across the crosswalk...to his apartment.

"So?" said God.

"I think...now...I really do understand what it means to care."

He nodded solemnly.

And with that, there was nothing left for me to do...so I died.

First place entry

Story Noir

by Dallin Mendenhall

I was baking bread one balmy October afternoon. The sun shone in the same struggling manner it had for weeks now. I stared out the window, silently contemplating the way adventure always seemed to find me. It seemed there were always broads with missing husbands needing my help, some of whom who could be very, very ... thankful. With a melancholy sigh, I turned back to the recipe in front of me.

"Set bread to rise in a warm place," the book instructed.

Hmm, I thought, is my house warm enough?

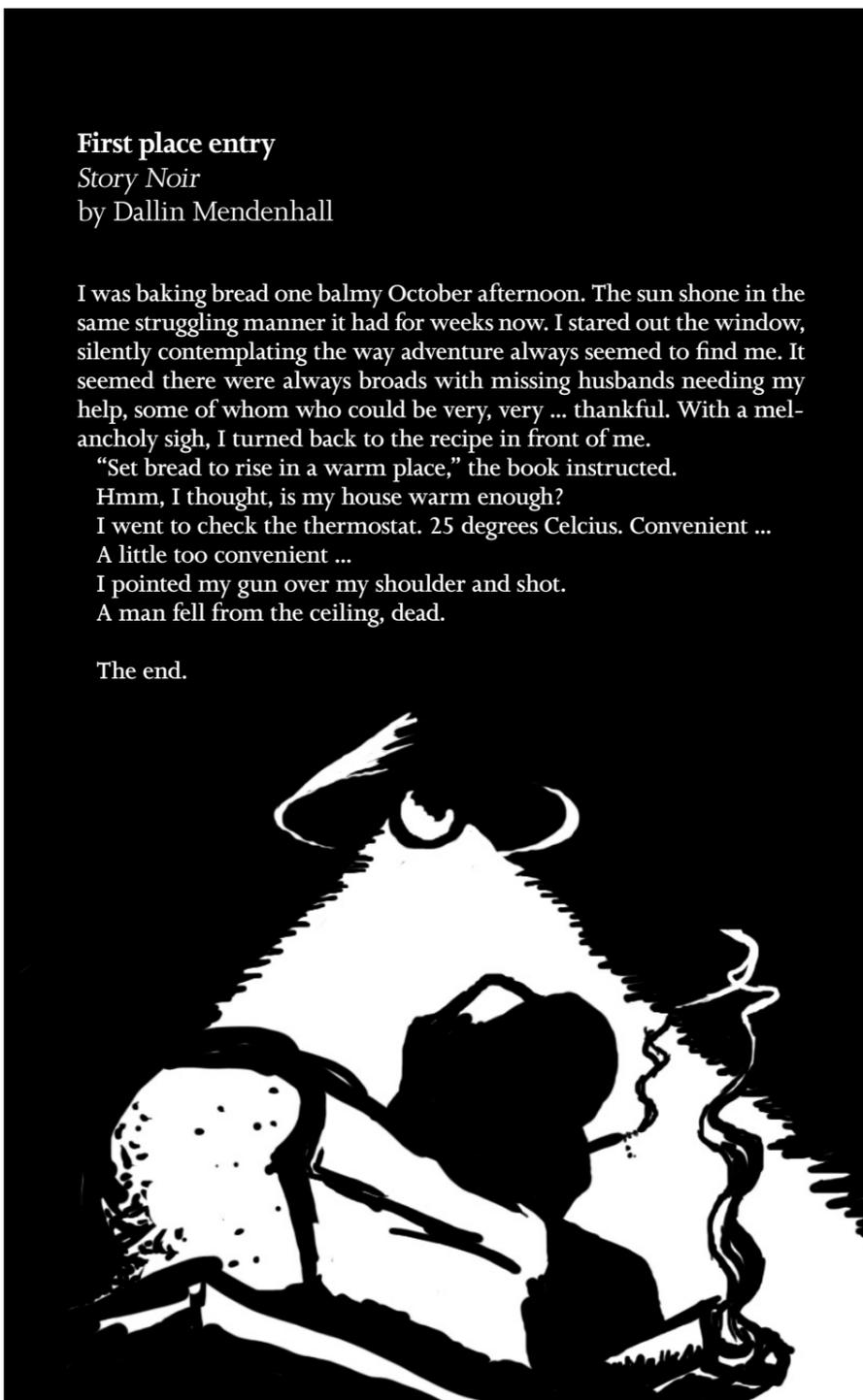
I went to check the thermostat. 25 degrees Celcius. Convenient ...

A little too convenient ...

I pointed my gun over my shoulder and shot.

A man fell from the ceiling, dead.

The end.



Really Short Fiction

150 words or less

Runner-up

A Pirate's Guide to the Ocean

by Jessica Faulds

The fish towards the top seem happiest. They spout mist. They can feel the sun, divided by the water into neatly discernible rays, sliding over their backs. In only a few million years, they could crawl ashore, and in a few million more they might watch television on infinitely high-resolution screens.

Below that, in the upper-middle levels, there are dark fishlike shapes. These are probably fish. Seaweed strangles the light.

Still further down everything is black, but there are probably a lot of those cleverly evolved fish that look like piles of dog vomit. The water feels like someone pressing the tips of pencils into your ears. It's impossible to slide your ankles out of the cannonball chains, and there's nothing there at the bottom that you can use to cut off your feet.

Runner-up

Untitled

by Sean MacDonald

I knew that I should have sped up. Now I'm stuck in that awkward zone five meters behind, and the inevitable is about to happen. Well, I've only myself to blame. His head turns back and the situation demands that our eyes meet. If I slow down and decline, those pleading eyes will taunt my conscious. If I speed up and accept, I'm forced into coughing up some pathetic appreciation. Damn it, experience should have taught me to avoid the awkward gap. His fingers slowly start to slip one by one, and his eyes soften and plead for my acceptance. This gracious offering from my peer only has a moment left before it expires and I hate myself for caving. I cringe as I skip a step and accept: "Gee, thanks a bunch bud," and I grab the door before it closes.