

THE GATEWAY

Literary Contest Winners

SHORT FICTION (1,500 WORDS OR LESS)

“Raven’s Story”

by Andrew Thompson



Raven stopped walking. He stared up at the sky and spread his arms. Opened his eyes. His mouth. Let the bitter cold rain-water sluice over him, washing away some of the slime of the city.

The greasy sky swirled lazily, weaving in and out of the grey buildings.

Raven was tired. Of the city. Of his life. Of himself. He ran one hand through his long, wet, jet-black hair, flicked water onto the ground. The dampened hand crawled to the safety of his dry, ratty pocket, taking comfort in the razor blade. His one-way ticket. His get-out-of-jail-free card.

And he could use it any time.

But not tonight. No, tonight he had a little bit of money. He thought of the first hit that would come from the syringe and smiled warmly, the ghost of childlike ignorance sprawling across his grizzled face. He started trembling gently.

Soon everything would be alright. But not yet. Not yet. NOT YET. DEAR GOD PLEASE STOP THE TREMBLING OH GOD I CAN'T TAKE IT. He flipped open the plastic top of his cup and hurriedly guzzled down the last of his coffee, the bitterness anchoring him to reality.

Ok. There.

Everything's fine. Tonight, everything would be okay. Tonight, and tomorrow. And tomorrow, and maybe even tomorrow.

He would take the medicine his veins screamed for. Perhaps find a body with which to share apathetic warmth.

And he'd get a glance, just a little taste, of something he'd lost years ago. He smiled numbly and kept trudging.

A little boy named Raven swaggered down the street, leaving the late afternoon's dust trailing in his wake. On his tiny head was a huge, badly frayed straw sombrero that kept falling down over his face. Over his eyes was an expensive black silk handkerchief — one he had permanently borrowed from his mother — replete with two oversized mismatched eyeholes and a tattered length of twine holding the ends together at the back of his head. In one of his grimy fists were a few coins.

He stopped to squint at the angry red sun, then flashed a gap-toothed grin and started humming the Lone Ranger theme song to himself in gleeful falsetto.

He was on a mission.

And this was a mission so brave — so bold — that John Wayne and Superman would have both fainted dead away, had either of them been asked to go in his stead. He was going to the store to get hamburger for dinner. Alone.

It had taken all his six years of wisdom and bravery to get the quarter mile from his parents' trailer on the

reservation to the suburban outskirts of the small town. He had hiked through tall grasses and down quiet residential streets, clutching a beloved stick to his chest like a rifle, shooting Indians and Not-sees dead.

He was The Lone Ranger.

But even the Lone Ranger felt a twinge of trepidation when a small, shiny car sidled up to the curb, its engine purring like a hungry stray cat.

That morning, it had hit him, as it had many times before.

Raven was killing himself. He had to stop. He had to change. But couldn't they just see that he wanted to make good?

So he cried. He swore to himself to stop using drugs. He prayed to God, bared his soul.

He howled for forgiveness, reciting tattered fragments of a long-neglected prayer in a long-forgotten language borne upon his uncle's sweet booze breath. He pledged with all his heart.

And he meant every word of it.

As he had all the other times.

Then he dried his bloodshot eyes and dragged himself out of his cheap townhouse and went to work.

Raven came to a stop, suddenly feeling very small. Nobody on the poor reservation drove a shiny car like that. Not even the rich white people in the town drove cars like that. Raven stared, his thumb embedded firmly in between his chapped lips, while something bitter and green tugged at the back of his mind.

It would be many years before the small boy understood the meaning of envy.

The car's tinny engine stopped grumbling, and the tinted passenger window rolled down.

The first thing Raven saw was a great quantity of wiry white hair, the texture of reindeer moss ooze its way over the windowsill. Two hard cobalt eyes followed, nestled in gray, wrinkled leather. Raven gawked. His finger, with a diligent mind of its own, began excavating his tiny nose.

The man stretched his thin lips away from slimy yellow teeth. The boy stared for a few seconds, thinking that perhaps this was a skoooom — the little-boy-eating bear-man born from the sour fumes of his uncle's stories. Then he realized the man was smiling.

Raven smiled back uncertainly.

The man, apparently encouraged by this, withdrew his hairy face with alarming speed, and barked knife-edged words into the car.

A second later, he whipped his shaggy head back around, and smiled again. A long, pale arm, mottled with black spots and little blue webs, slithered out of the car, clutching an ice cream cone.

Trembling with equal parts excitement and trepidation, Raven's chubby little hands shot out and took the proffered gift. The man withdrew his hand, his face still wearing the same grin.

Raven looked up at the strange man, looked down at the

melting goblet of ice cream, and dug in. A long black telephoto lens inched its way out of the car and blinked quietly at the little boy eating ice cream.

Then the tinted window rolled back up and the shiny little car pulled away from the curb.

Raven didn't know that the man was an acclaimed European photographer on vacation, or that he would win several prestigious awards for the photograph "Little Brown Zorro Eats White Ice Cream."

Nor did he know, as he walked away eating his ice cream, that he had dropped his coins.

Raven stood quietly outside of the drug house, his body tense, as he listened to the city around him. What was he doing? Who was he?

He pondered those questions as he massaged a slender roll of crisp paper money.

He looked up at the quiet moon, smelled the musty moisture in the air. Took a few bold steps forward, pushed aside a flimsy metal screen door, and stepped out of the night, into the gloom.

The skinny little German guy — who called himself Glossy — sat in a corner, rocking himself back and forth, muttering anxiously. He jerked his head back, stared at the ceiling, his eyes wide and glassy, as two weak streams of dark blood carved tracks through the white powder on his upper lip.

Somebody sneezed, and Raven jerked his head towards the sound. A small figure was seated directly in front of a television, watching two masked cartoon men engaged in a silent gunfight.

Raven took a few more steps into the house. A tiny head swivelled around. Raven looked sadly at the child, his brow furrowed.

Raven skipped happily down the street, the cold sticky treat coating his throat and his grimy fingers in equal measure. It was a while before he realized the coins were gone.

Panic fluttered through his chest as he dropped his ice cream cone and stumbled awkwardly down the sidewalk, looking for the distinctive ruddy glint of the coins he dropped.

His head whipped around, and the sombrero fell over his eyes. He tore it from his head, letting it fall to the ground with a dry rasp. The awkward eye-holes of his mask restricted his vision and he tore it off, letting it flutter to the pavement.

They were gone, he realized with a pang of fear and sorrow. He looked back at the ice cream, melting sullenly into the sidewalk, and started crying.

Blubbing, Raven was the Lone Ranger no more. He stumbled for home a sad little boy.

Raven strode through the night, clutching a small, shivering bundle to his chest.

"Where we goin', Rav'n?" asked the child.

"Somewhere better," said the man.

"Kay," said the child, and went to sleep sucking its thumb.