

# Global short stories competition

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April 2010 Winner  
Leo Holdstock  
Resuscitation

His vision of the moment is clear, even now, ten years since. But it's always from the wrong angle, an angle he never could have seen. His brother is diving straight out, his right arm stretched taught, reaching forward, his left bent in front and his legs splayed and slightly bent behind. His torso is stretched full on the right side and the muscles contract on the left, his summer-bronzed skin setting off the definition of his twelve-year old frame, and his blonde hair, normally twisted and unkempt, flies straight behind his arched neck. In his memory Jake sees his brother from above, as a bird would. Sees his body stretched flat below. He's reaching for an object inches beyond his grasp, a paper plane, sharp and straight, classic lines and a matching flight path. So accurate, so clean, they threw it as they would a football, passing it straight down the yard in slow arcs and cradling it as it fell. He sees his brother and he sees the plane, and below both of them he sees nothing, no shadow as there should be, nor any land to house it. And then, when his mind's eye focuses on this vision that was never there, he sees the water that lies waiting far below.

They traveled to the lake every summer. Their mother and father would help the two boys pack days before, their grandmother sitting silently in the background and in the shadow of the house. That is how they saw her always, in shadow, in the cool. It was only when they made it to the cabin that she would allow her frail frame to endure the sun, and only at those times did the boys see her differently. She claimed it renewed her. She would have her ritual dip in the water, always in the evening, both parents bearing her weight on their arms and shoulders as they hobbled down the steep path towards the shore. After that first swim she was different somehow, would sometimes sit in the sun, and would laugh with the boys and read with them on the beach when they were feeling subdued. She claimed the lake was her "Lazarus bath," her fountain of youth. She would joke with their parents as she submerged, saying, "Clean me lake. Make me new." They all laughed, and out of humour or pity Jake did not know.

The brothers were only two years apart and spent weeks improving their soccer skills, re-enacting battles they had read or seen on film, imagining wrongs to right and, most of all diving and swimming in the lake and the rivers that fed it. Jake was the eldest and as such, Caleb adored him and followed him everywhere. All of Jake's ideas were splendid in both of their eyes. The lake itself was massive, and though there were hundreds of properties on its shores, the western portion on which they stayed was difficult to reach and few had built there. As a result, for much of the summer, the lake was theirs and theirs alone.

The boys knew the lake as if it were their mother, and knew all it held. They were awake to see the beavers cross at dawn, clapping their hands sharply to see the small animals slap their tails in warning to their kin. They knew where to catch the trout and watched as they diminished in size year after year as the boys grew. They felt its biting cold in the mornings when they woke and basked in its warmth as they floated on their backs in the evening hours as their parents hollered for them to come to dinner up the shore, well within earshot but blissfully out of sight. The lake was a part of them all summer and for six years straight they had been a part of its sunshine lore and its summertime legends.

It was fitting then that it happened as it did. The boys played daily in the yard at the front of the cabin. The lawn and the cabin both faced onto the lake on a high promontory surrounded by crooked arbutus and giant pines alike. The point was faced with sheer cliffs and there was no distinct way down to the lake, the path being a roundabout series of twists and turns and steep steps. It was a clear and rabid hot August afternoon, as all August afternoons seemed to be at the lake. The boys had spent an hour constructing and discarding, constructing and discarding, until they had fashioned what they considered to be the perfect paper plane. And it was perfect. Clean folded card stock that kept its shape and ascended and floated gracefully on the warm air draughts rising off the lake. They

passed it back and forth for ten minutes across the yard before their mother called them inside for supper.

And it was then in frustration that Jake threw the last pass the plane would ever make and it flew over his waiting younger brother, dutiful and daring, who ran it down as its flight slowed. He must have known the cliff was there and still he pursued and at the last he dived and that's where he hangs still in Jake's mind though he knows he fell like an unwinged Icarus, and all came crashing down with him.

Though the cliff face was sheer, it seems he hit a part of the slope before he reached the water, and it was that contact that must have wrecked him for Jake knew the water never could. His father dragged him out as the ambulance rounded the last turn in their dirt drive, desperately trying to breathe air into his damaged lungs though they all knew he was beyond resuscitation. They brought his brother's body up from the lake, in a stretcher, bare and soggy, un-shrouded and horribly broken. Jake's mother was too distraught to shield the boy and his father still at the beach. Their grandmother had retreated to the house and sat there, back in her shadow, in her cold.

"Won't you let me drive a bit, hun" she slurs, half awake but pretending to be there with him as he rounds the corner on a six hour night drive, pushing onto seven.

"Nah, it's alright. Almost there now."

"Okay Jake, let me know." And she's asleep again and he is left once more with his thoughts and with his memories.

The cabin is not as he remembered it. It is smaller and in bad shape, the bushes encroach on its walls and a screen is hanging from a window—a bear, most likely. After they unload the car she goes inside to clean the cabin. It has been years since any of them have been there and the mice have overrun the place and the couch where his grandmother used to sit reeks of urine and mold and is just as dark and as cold as when he last saw her and he can't bear any of it.

The path down to the water cannot even be called a path any more, it is more a feeling or an intuition and there are no clear lines to follow, nothing clean about it. At the water's edge he sits for a long time, in the coarse sand filled with twigs and soggy from the lapping of the small waves. He hears his wife far above banging something outside, a rug or a broom, and he hears a second bang though now it is across the water, a beaver responding. He smiles in recognition, and remembers instantly an image of his brother he has not seen in years, but almost as quickly he remembers its opposite, that dark memory, and he is brought to tears and he stands and stares at the dim surface of the pre-dawn lake.

As the wet streams flow down his cheeks and into the lake at his feet he removes his shirt first, and then his shorts and walks slowly into the water. The lake is cool and calm and it surrounds him completely and welcomes him as an old friend. He swims hard and far into the centre and floats on his back and relaxes his arms and gives himself up to the water. He stares at the blue-gray morning sky and feels the lake envelop his chin and his brow, and it is as gentle as he remembers. "Clean me," he whispers. "Make me new."

## Highly commended Leo Holdstock Envy

See the lake, calm and dark in the early dusk light. So vast its breadth and length, so confused its shoreline, and so broken by islands its surface, that the one lake often seems many and mainland and island are at times indistinguishable. Daylight forms blend into each other as the light fades, and the reflections of the tall trees surrounding its shore are more like shadows in their blackness. See the line of geese on the horizon, long travelled, soon to settle in a berth like this one, a respite amongst the dense wilderness that even for them and their vantage must be limitless still. See the creatures of the shore slide, slip almost, from beneath the lake's surface, the beavers and the water rats, black and sleek and serpentine as they wind and wiggle and disappear softly amongst the brush and the trees as if they were diving gently into another water—of the earth and on a different plain. Now see that other creature, that unnamed that emerges from the bush, almost equal parts plant and mammal if one would count the burden of leaves and twigs it wears on its body and in its matted hair.

The creature is large, larger even than the bears that swim from one end of the lake to the other, paddling for hours at a time and resting on the islands past any point of return. It walks upright, but stoops to clear the boundaries of the forest, graceful despite its size, as if protecting its ravaged outer coat from the leaves and twigs that lie thick in its fur and have done so for weeks. In three large strides it reaches the water and stands on a bare rock above the lip of the lake, the water brown and murky just below it.

The creature tests the water with his toe as a child would, or a cat, and hesitates briefly then drops first one leg and then another into the water. Slowly the water surrounds him in slow ripples as he wades into the deep and soon he is submerged as cleanly and as silently as the beaver and the rat had exited. Submerged, much of the detritus floats to the surface and the murky brown is filled with sticks and leaves and coarse black hair.

And there is something else. A yellow shape appears beneath the surface and floats lazily upwards, an apparition, intangible, unreal. But when it hits the surface it is recognizable for what it is—a ribbon, a bright yellow ribbon.

See the family in their car, the parents in the front, father navigating while mother drives. The kids in the back, the boy seated with his silence and with his thoughts, and the infant girl sprawled across him, sleeping, exhausted.

At the campsite they are alone save a German couple and the Park guide, they have beat the shoulder season rates by three weeks, plus the rains have been heavy.

The parents set up a small two-man tent for themselves, but the children insist on sticking it out in the old canvas six-man. Shaped like a circus tent, and for the two of them almost as roomy and nearly as entertaining.

The campsite is beautiful and secluded and all the parents hoped for, and all the boy hoped it would not be. He pouts wistfully over videogames and comic books left behind. But the girl is oblivious to either's expectations or the excitement and disappointment. Content merely to continue her imaginary games amongst the different terrain of the mountain wilderness, she is at ease in their camp and laughs and frolics around the boy as he sits sullen and discontented and perhaps she makes him more so.

When she settles she sits cross-legged on a flat rock, miming puppets with her bare hands. She smiles, so pleased in her world, unburdened by the limitations of age and knowledge, and the boy frowns in the background. Idly whittling a stick he ignores her theatre and daydreams, and begrudges her easily attainable pleasure.

On that first night, with the children in bed the parents sit around the dying embers of the fire, their faces illuminated in stark relief, red and black, lit from beneath as actors playing phantoms might choose. When they hear their daughter giggling and laughing they know their son has no part in that conversation. The parents confront the infant girl and there is no one there with her, and she is happy. They wake up the boy and tell him to stay awake with her till she sleeps and he does and they all sleep well, the man with one arm over his sleeping wife, the boy curled around his younger sister, her bright blonde hair now marred with those stray coarse black hairs that in the dim light no one has noticed.

And it is on the second night when the parents are in their tent and again they hear the child talk and laugh and again they know their son is no party to it, that they raise and race to the other tent but they are too late by seconds. The bushes have closed around her even as they round the bend and look in on the open tent door. The boy sleeping soundly still and the canvas flaps waving slightly and open as theatre curtains. And that bare canvas floor where an infant should be.

See the surface break as the creature rises, black like nothing else around him in that fading light, blacker than the almost-night sky, and made blacker still by the wet. See the hair hanging in twisted points as the water beads off the greasy fur, see the leanness of his sinewy arms as the lake unmask his shroud of thick hair. See the infant, no longer human, a plaything now, a doll of sorts, black as the creature, coated with the silt and with the clay of that preserving lakebed. Still clothed for the elements, for the wild, mouth ajar, unmoving. The creature places the child on the rock and manipulates her arms and her legs so she is seated as she sat countless times and as he saw her once. He talks to her in his way though the sounds he makes bear little resemblance to speech and he waits and tries again and many times more. And he moans a sad and cruel note when she does not answer back, and he moans again into the night for he knows vaguely in his fog that she never will again.