

## Adult Essay Honorable Mention

### The Tidal Basin Before Dawn

By Rebekah Richards, Washington, D.C.

I sit on a bench, cozy in my winter coat, my old Nikon in my lap. There's just enough moonlight to make out the trees hanging lush and full with cherry blossoms. White petals carpet the ground, a softness more exquisite than the finest rug in any palace. Lights twinkle across the water; nearby, other photographers are setting up tripods. I'm not alone, but it feels like I could be on another planet, in some enchanted, dreamlike forest. Except it doesn't feel like dreaming but like I've awakened into a deeper clarity.

It's a little after 6 a.m., long before I usually get up, but I'm not sleepy at all. I'm here early because I wasn't sure how long the bus ride down 14th Street would take. Before long, color will streak across the sky and infuse the translucent blossoms with a golden glow. Crowds will descend, tourists and locals alike.

Like many others, I'll mostly be looking through my camera lens. Maybe I miss something this way; maybe there's something to be said for direct, unmediated experience. But I've found that photography, rather than distancing me from reality, teaches a discipline of searching out beauty: clouds reflected in windows, the texture of a rusty dumpster, the shimmer of traffic lights on wet asphalt. Golden hour, blue hour, I am familiar now with the different varieties of light.

This feeling, though, cannot be captured in a photograph. Sitting on the bench, in this deep, dark stillness—it sustains, is sustenance, something I didn't know I hungered for. My worries feel distant and small. The clatter of my thoughts, silenced.

The Tidal Basin, crumbling and sinking into the Potomac, needs renovation. And the trees, twisted and knotted, are not graceful. Yet somehow, that delicate loveliness moved through these gnarled branches, crept up those crooked roots that jut from muddy ground. The alchemy begins before you know it. In the bitter, bleak winter, the trees draw power from the soil, cells divide and divide again. The guarded magic swells. It is more audacious than water into wine.

The sky has become a deep blue-gray. It's almost time to pick up my camera and consider aperture, shutter speed, ISO. Instead, I think about that holy, liminal space between creation and realization. In the darkroom, the latent image waiting to go in the tray of developer. The orchestra, instruments raised, about to erupt into song.

I think about the people who planted tree cuttings here, more than a century ago. Some of those trees are blooming around me now. How animals, unknowing, transport seeds across continents, new flowers bursting open in their wake. And all the secret, infinite possibilities we carry within us.