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## Swirling

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## SWIRLING

ERIK JOHNSON

2ND PLACE WINNER

I sometimes watch the water while I canoe across a lake. I plunge my paddle in, straining to push it behind me (kind of like regrets), and pull the dripping paddle out as I watch the lake bottom float by. In that moment of ascension, where the paddle ceases its intrusion on the lake, two tiny whirlpools are left behind. They go careening through the glassy surface, confident and crazy in their finite swirling. I feel like that sometimes.

My companions and I are only beginning to dry ourselves from the hormone bath that is adolescence. We have this vague sense that somewhere in ourselves we contain an essence, the very core of who we are. It still feels soft and unformed; it's our eighteen-year embryo, and if only we could define it — feel its boundaries — we'd really know ourselves.

We sit alone on our dorm-room floors, staring blankly at a catalogue of classes. We don't understand how we're expected to anticipate our future when we are only beginning to understand ourselves. In our frustration we pick rashly. History, English, art, and photography— one of each sounds good.

We're overcome with frustration. We have life; we feel and we sigh. We see people in movies, on the street, in buses, all living with a confidence, a recklessness, an intensity we envy. They seem to have defined themselves; we have not. We're still timid and hesitant. We know we're made of the same stuff as those we admire, but how can we live our essence if we cannot define it? Such are our thoughts as we fling ourselves into our beds. We sigh as we fall asleep discontent.

Then something happens. We go to our classes on myriad subjects. Some classes we adore, others we loathe, and in the end we're left with the very thing we could not find— the beginnings of a deeper identity. The edges of our essence are felt by our likes and dislikes, our passions good and bad. The way we respond to our classes illuminates the veiled characteristics we never knew we had. Maybe we're nothing more than we ever were, but we see more clearly.

We are not yet the twisting, dancing, careening souls we wish to be. The paddle is still in the water and we are not ready to live crazy, glorious lives. But we revel in this exploration, this process of defining ourselves. Like children who've grown to peer over kitchen countertops, we grab and chew each subject and concept we can. We feel more defined, we see ourselves for what we want to be. This is merely a beginning.

I want to careen through a placid world with turbulence. I want to spin until I no longer can. But now are the moments for explorations and definition. Only when I know the essence that is me can I leave swirling.