

1st Place, Writing Division

Our Voyage through the Valley By Jack Reidy

We slide out of my mom's dirt flecked suburban onto the River Run parking lot. It's mid-day, and as the sun reaches its apex over the valley, the dry heat amplifies my impatience to begin our voyage. I walk to the back of the car and push the center button to open the hatch. The door lifts to expose our five tubes compressed firmly into the trunk. The tubes are packed like doughnuts in the pink boxes from bakeries, forming a tight vertical row across the back. I slide my arm between the tubes and wrap my hand around one of the holes. The tube resists my pull but finally releases itself with an elastic snap. I grab a coil of yellow rope from the back and wrap it around my tube in a knot. Each of my friends removes their own tube from the back. Before I can close the hatch again, my mom twists to look at me and reminds, "Hey Jack, have fun, but don't do anything stupid on the river." She smiles, but her quietly adamant tone reveals her seriousness. Embarrassed, I glance tentatively at my friends and then my mom, "Don't worry, we won't."

With tubes wedged underneath our arms, my friends and I walk through the parking lot towards the trail. The crunch of gravel between our Texas and the asphalt mixes with our eager chatter about the trip. Amy asks, "Is the water cold? I don't want to get wet." Max and I laugh; we both know that she is our first target. We step onto the trail, and our crunches transform into silent steps over the moist dirt along the river. As we progress, the path bends through a thick stand of aspens lining the water. It is difficult to see beyond the foliage in the forest. Young trees lock their branches in one continuous wall of vegetation beside the trail. My eyes trace the chalk white bark of one tree from its base upwards. The blue of the bare sky outlines the soft green of the tree, and the jagged edges of each leaf are exposed in contrast. As the forest opens, a slow warm breeze drifts over our bare bodies and swim suits. "Wow," I whisper to myself, "we picked a great day for tubing."

Within a few minutes of walking, the trail ends with an abrupt termination into the river. I drop my tube in the yellow grass that leans over the path and inspect the water. Crests of dark liquid rise up from the river and fragment the sun's glare. Beneath the water, smooth rocks blanket the river bed in shades of brown and grey. Hesitantly, I squat just over the surface of the river and sink my hand into the water. The river immediately greets my touch in a cool splash. A current drags my hand with a sluggish pull across the pebbles resting on the bottom. The water is refreshing, and I am ready to start. Drawing my hand from the water, I pull my tube from the grass. "Hey you guys, let's get going. The water is really nice." As I wade into the middle of the river, the current tugs on my legs. I bend my knees and upper-body to avoid slipping. When the water reaches my knees, I stop and position the tube behind me. My friends gradually stride through the water towards the deeper section. As the group assimilates to the temperature, we begin our voyage down the river. In one synchronized motion, I lean back into the tube's opening and lift my feet from the river bed. With my added weight, the tube drops low into the water, but quickly floats back to the surface. The tube rocks unsteadily in the rolling river, so I slide myself deeper into the hole for stability. From it, water jumps up onto my lower back. The first

splashes are uncomfortably cold, but gradually the sting weakens. I glance back at my friends; their tubes float alone in the water, separate entities along the same current.

Having launched, I notice immediate trends between our tubes. Max's tube and my tube sit high in the water and glide smoothly over the river bed, but the girls' tubes snag in shallow water. Around the first bend in the river, we jam our feet against the rocks to allow them time to catch up. Small waves form around us; Max and I lean upstream to negate the river's unexpected current. The girls arrive and Clare apologizes, "Sorry about the wait, these tubes don't float!" Her explanation is hesitant, as if expecting a harsh response. "Don't worry about it, we're not in a hurry" I assure. Relief softens her expression. We lift our feet and resume our float down the river.

With a few rapids along the first turns, my attention drifts to the river's surroundings. The slope of an imposing Mountain begins along the right bank of the river. Up its valleys, thin streaks of shale scar the terrain. Along the left, a low ledge traces the river. Roots protrude from the dirt wall in bundles of contorted wood. Above the ledge, aspen and cottonwood trees compete for the sun's rays through the dense forest. I close my eyes. I am so glad I live in the Wood River Valley.

My tube begins to bob and I return my attention to the river. Ahead, the mountain thrusts into the river, forcing water to bend around it. The collision agitates the surface, and bubbling waves splash upwards. I shift my body to look back at my friends. "Hey guys! Check it out!..." The girls pull themselves up and look ahead. "Rapids!"

As we float towards the undulating water, the current beneath us accelerates. I shift my body in an upright motion to absorb the erratic rolling of the river. Apprehension twists my stomach, but exhilaration overcomes most of my anxiety. The tube's smooth rubber leaves my hands empty. Without handles, I slide my arms around the sides of the tube and squeeze. In my semi-stable position, I crash into the first rapid. Water droplets explode from the contact and shoot onto my face. In one simultaneous motion, the tube tips back as it rises up the incline. At the crest, the tube rolls forward and thrusts into the next rapid. Propelling beyond the peak, I fall into its subsequent trough. I roll through the remaining rapids and eject onto the still water beyond.

Wet hair runs down the contours of my face and over my eyes. I raise my hand and push back the thick brown curtain above my brow. Beads of water dot my skin, reflecting the sun in minute sparks of light. I kick my feet and turn to look at Madie's run through the whitewater. She exits; a smile stretches across her face. "That was fun!" she exclaims. "Yeah! I reply. I tilt my head back over my shoulder. "It looks like we'll have to wait for the next set though." From my slanted view, I see the river flow gradually around a distant bend. The rest of our friends ride through the rapids and exit with similar enthusiasm.

Wanting to reach more whitewater, we quickly resume our voyage down the river. The water's slow current seems to resist our anticipation. The flat section refuses to provide our group with any excitement. During the lull, I remember my plan with Max. I catch

his eye and point towards Amy. We both grin in silent understanding. As she approaches, I cup my hand above the surface. Amy recognizes the trap, but is already floating between us. Pushing against my palm, a wave of water jumps up towards my target. As the wave breaks across her body, she screams. Amy's shriek is promptly followed by retaliation, splashing both of us at once. The silence surrounding the river is broken by our shouts. Amid chuckles, Max teases, "Got ya Amy!" Spraying him again, Amy counters "I got you more!" The fighting continues as we drift around a turn. Floating just ahead of the battlers, Clare stands up in the water. "Hey guys, look at this!" We pause our skirmish and stand up as well, "Jeez," I exclaim, "those are big rapids!"

As the river flows out of the right turn, it swiftly twists left against a steep wall of dirt. Because of the sudden impact, the rapids are intense. The fast water cuts deep into the soil, exposing roots from the tree above. "Hmmm, I don't know if we should do it!" I say. "C'mon man, it'll be awesome!" Max cries. With a broad smile and wide eyes, his expression is convincing. I look at my tube and then at the water. This could be a good story. "Fine." We site in our tubes and prepare our descent. I look at Max and he looks at me. I see uncertainty in his face, and I'm sure he can see it in mine. Silently, we both lift our legs and plunge into the turn. My tube catches the current before Max's, and I'll be the first one through. I slam into the first rapid and skip over the top, crashing into the next. Hitting the water, my tube spins into the wall. A distinct hiss cries out from the tube. My raft loses its substance and I sink lower into the water. I keep my sitting position as the rapids spit me out into the familiar calm water beyond. Max crashes into my back. He doesn't have his tube either.

We stand up and climb to the river bank, rubber corpses dragging behind. "D***, that didn't really work." Max says with a smile. "No, not really!" I laugh. The girls wade down to us. "Are you guys ok?!" I reply, "Yeah, but the tubes aren't." I untie the rope from my flattened tube and lay it on the ground. "So...what are we going to do?" Amy asks. I respond with a chuckle, "I think we're gonna make a raft." Hesitantly, I take the girls' tubes and lay them down in a triangle. With the rope, I weave between the three holes until I run out of cord. I finish off with a complicated looking knot in the center. I have no idea if it's useful, but it's so big, it must be. My friends' expressions illustrate their doubts. "You guys, this is gonna work," I explain, "and it's better than walking." I drag the raft over grey river rocks and push it to the water. Climbing aboard, I lay across the tubes. Apparently convinced, Max wades out and leans back onto the raft. "See guys, it works." I say confidently. Max nods his head in agreement. Undecidedly, Madie, Clare, and Amy slosh through the water and climb on. All aboard, we begin our journey down the valley, united on our single craft.