

The Oval

Volume 5
Issue 2 *Staff Issue*

Article 20

2012

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Recommended Citation

Jarrett, Nicole (2012) "Sweeping Sidewalks," *The Oval*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/oval/vol5/iss2/20>

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Sweeping Sidewalks

By Nicole Jarrett

All his work seemed to be pointless. He would sweep the curb alongside the road into a pile of dirt the color of smoke, and the wind would blow it back, lacing itself into the fabric of his shoes. Over and over again I watched him sweep, until it seemed he collected all of the dirt from the passing cars into the very soles of his shoes.

The sun seemed relentless as it gazed down while sitting on the crest of the Mission Mountains. The Hummingbird Toys & Treats shop opened their doors and hung every dream catcher and kite in the store, outside on the sidewalk. The wind danced with the pink, blue, yellow and orange plastic, sending the ribbons of the kites to tangle together. Blue caressing yellow and pink embracing orange, a fisherman's knot never to come undone. The Montana Rug Co. hung the black and sand rugs in a row outside their front door. The owner's dog was resting in the shade behind one with the outline of a hunter in the center.

The man crossed the parking lot and began to sweep the other section of the curb facing the road.

I have passed through Arlee a number of times on my way up to the lake and back. It has never seemed to catch much of my attention except that it is the half an hour mark back into Missoula. A mark where the Salish were moved from the Bitterroot Valley, designated a "conditional reservation", to the Jocko a few miles north of my half an hour mark.

My Granddad bought a new windsock a couple of years ago and hung it at the end of his dock. He said it was to keep away the squirrels. The old one he replaced was a rainbow and there was ribbon on the end, one for each color. We used to jump off the end of the dock and try to grab one of the ribbons. Our wet hands would slide down the slender plastic leaving small fragments of thread between our fingers. Then the other one of us would squat down still on the dock and say which color was grabbed, opening our palms, the color was clarified.

I watched the man walk around back as he delivered the dirt from the dustpan into the dumpster, then he came back and started sweeping again.

My sister and I once sat out by the lake as the sun released its last grip on the Mission Mountains to free-fall until the next morning. We sat crossed legged facing each other with a Bible splayed open between us. The wood of the dock was still warm from the day. We shared the same sun freckles kissed upon the bridge of our noses. We discussed the attributes of being humble as the gnats hatched over the water and if we stopped talking, we could hear them creating a unified hum that breathed with the swell of the waves continuously reaching for the shoreline. Then we looked in James 1 for the answers. We were told to see 1 Peter 5:5 which also quotes Proverbs 3:34. The footnote there said to see James 1. We concluded humbleness is daily practice.

Every morning as I drive down the hill, I ask that the purpose of my life would be found in humble offering. The pasture on the corner has had the same white horse with the grey marks down the right leg for almost nine months. Every morning he stands with all his weight on his front legs and nibbles on the fence post by the aspen tree. I have tried stopping to feed him my apple core before, but he does not recognize me and the moment I reach out my hand, he retreats as if I offered him his own front foot.

Arlee has no reason to remember me. No reason to recognize my brown eyes and button nose. No reason to converse with me and liberally speak of the plans for next year's Fourth of July celebration. I know everything on Arlee's main road. I know every store and every stoplight. I recognize the bowling alley and church that share the same lot on the right side of the road. But I have never walked Arlee's soil or tasted their drinking water. I have never petted the owner's dog, nor have I offered Arlee anything but money for my gas and licorice.

The man placed his broom on the ground and picked up a small hand brush. He swept up the remains of what the broom had left behind into the dustpan. Down the street the kite ribbons continued to swell with the wind, beating their

frayed edges, fighting each other for which one was able to reach toward the horizon, the elegant tangle, ceaseless.