

# Illinois English Bulletin

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Illinois Association of Teachers of English

IATE is a professional organization for teachers of English/language arts. IATE publishes the *Illinois English Bulletin* and the *IATE Newsletter* and hosts an annual fall conference. IATE is organized by districts throughout the state, each district having a district leader and providing local activities to members throughout the year.

IATE also maintains standing committees that address a number of professional interests and works with other professional organizations to further the interests of teachers. Composed of over 1,000 teachers throughout the state, IATE provides a working network for the exchange of teaching tips, current research, and professional development as well as enduring friendships.

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Illinois English Bulletin

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## **INTRODUCTION TO THE BEST ILLINOIS STUDENT POETRY AND PROSE OF 2018**

JANICE NEULEIB

As I write these words, I think with pleasure of an event we added to the Young Writers experiences this year. Thanks to our English Education director, Maggie Morris Davis, we initiated a new event in April. The award winners, runners-up, and honorable mention writers were celebrated, along with their teachers and parents, at a gala luncheon. The writers received praise and appreciation at the luncheon as well as certificates of appreciation and applause for their work. I must give all the credit to Maggie for developing this idea and making the luncheon event such a hit. Thus the readers of this issue will have the joy of knowing that the authors of all these significant submissions were duly honored.

Amazing writers they are! So many of the writers reflected on the challenges and successes of their schools and school experiences. They also wrote about the support and

encouragement of their families as well as the energy these parents put into their school success. I am always so impressed by parents who model writing for their children. We do what we see, and if we see our parents and teachers writing, we also write. I recall my mother writing long letters to her sisters on the West Coast and eagerly opening and reading the return letters. I still have some of those letters and look with awe on the vividness of the descriptions and the depth of insight shown by my aunts.

I saw people writing constantly when I was very young, and I listened as my grandmother read to me for hours on end. Thus I delighted during the luncheon at being able to meet the parents of these young writers. I know the seed of the writers' composing was planted by those parents, as well as most certainly by their teacher-writers. We are all so eager to see these essays, stories, and pieces of poetry come to print in this issue of the *Bulletin*. Each student will receive a copy of the printed *Bulletin*, so I want to say to each one, "Keep on writing. Making meaning, images, and ideas will continue to delight you for all your life." Even more, I thank the parents for their encouragement of and role modelling for these young writers. To the diligent teachers who assigned the work, read the texts, and submitted the final products to the contest goes an even greater thank-you. Finally, I thank the judges who read the submissions and our wonderful coordinators, Robin Murray and Tracy Lee.

IATE thanks you all.

**TEACHERS WITH STUDENTS PLACING IN  
ANY CONTEST CATEGORY**

Jennifer Arias

Christina Kim

Gina Chandler

Cyn Koukos

Jacque Cullen

John Lodle

Jared Friebel

Melissa Mack

Taylor-Imani Gates

Kimberly Musolf

Stephen Heller

Simone Neal

Laura Hosfeldt

Lauren Paz

Martha Keller

Diane Riley



## **IATE POETRY RUNNER-UP**

**Valery Pineda**, “In Shade, Sunflowers Won’t Bloom or Produce Seeds Well,” Grade 12, Major Hector P. Garcia M.D. High School, Chicago, Teacher: Lauren Paz

## IATE PROSE RUNNERS-UP

**Emily Billington**, “The Imaginary Girl,” Grade 11, Pope County Community High School, Golconda, Teacher: Laura Hosfeldt

**Julia Blazejewski**, “How Do You Say This in English Again?,” Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Jacquie Cullen

**Dylan Chae**, “Lessons Learned from the Kitchen: Thai BBQ Sate,” Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Christina Kim

**Isabella Fontane**, “Blood, Sweat & Tutus,” Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Jacquie Cullen

**Helen Han**, “Gauze,” Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Christina Kim

**Paige Mueller**, “Our Home for the Summer,” Grade 11, O’Fallon Township High School, O’Fallon, Teacher: Diane Riley

**August Schwoebel**, “The Wall,” Grade 12, Belleville West High School, Belleville, Teacher: John Lodle

**Rasha Shaibani**, “Macbeth, Tragic Greek Hero?,” Grade 8, Lycée Français de Chicago, Chicago, Teacher: Cyn Koukos

**Nathan Tobler**, “Untitled,” Grade 12, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Jennifer Arias

**Zoe Warren**, “It Gives and Gives and Never Takes,” Grade 12, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Jennifer Arias

**Maya Wolff**, “KMS—the New LOL,” Grade 11, Hinsdale Central High School, Hinsdale, Teacher: Jared Friebe

## LATE PROSE HONORABLE MENTIONS

**Caroline Baldan**, “Rendition of Beauty,” Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Melissa Mack

**Charles Henry Camp**, “The Car,” Grade 11, O’Fallon Township High School, O’Fallon, Teacher: Diane Riley

**Tess Clorfene**, “Reparations vs. Compensations: Similar Meanings, but Very Different Effects,” Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Stephen Heller

**Caleb Harsin**, “Counseled as the Camp Counselor,” Grade 12, Belleville West High School Belleville, Teacher: John Lodle

**Shreya Karpoor**, “A Shoreline of Mathematics and Literature,” Grade 12, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Jennifer Arias

**Kiran Mohan**, “Buddy Up,” Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Christina Kim

**Taleah Moore**, “Be You,” Grade 9, Judah Christian School, Champaign, Teacher: Katy McCue

**Eamonn Newton**, “In Defense of the Unquantifiable,” Grade 11, Hinsdale Central High School, Hinsdale, Teacher: Jared Friebel

**Adrian Perez**, “A Part-Time Punk,” Grade 9, Major Hector P. Garcia M.D. High School, Chicago, Teacher: Lauren Paz

**Jada Powell**, “I Am Black,” Grade 11, O’Fallon Township High School, O’Fallon, Teacher: Diane Riley

**Kaylee Jo Rivett**, “One Act Play,” Grade 12, Marion High School, Marion, Teacher: Simone Neal

**Richard Yin**, “He Speaks, but Are You Listening?,” Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Teacher: Jacquie Cullen

## ILLINOIS POETRY 2018

### INTRODUCTION

ROBIN L. MURRAY

I love poetry and subscribe to a free “Poem-a-Day” service from the Academy of American Poets. Every morning the academy sends a poem by a contemporary or historical American poet to my inbox, providing me with a poignant start to my day. That is my hope for students like those represented in this issue of the *Illinois English Bulletin*. These student poems bring thoughtful joy to readers, and I hope they continue their literary journeys.

Since Robert Frost encouraged its founder Marie Bullock to “get poetry into the high schools” in the 1960s, the Academy of American Poets has been assisting teachers in bringing poetry into the classroom. As an introduction to these wonderful student poems, I point you to the academy’s teacher resource website page at <https://poets.org/materials-teachers>.

The Academy of American Poets also announced this year's Poet Laureate, Joy Harjo. You can listen to Ms. Harjo read her work here: <https://poets.org/text/us-poet-laureate-joy-harjo-pop-interview-reading>.

Please also invite your students to submit their creative work to our Eastern Illinois University Young Lions in Winter Literary Contest. The submission deadline is December 15, 2019, and the LIW Student Reading date is January 25, 2020.

We invite submissions in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction from high school students. Here are a few details:

- Judging will be done by members of EIU's creative writing community.
- Three winners and honorable mention(s) will be selected.
- Winners will be announced January 9.
- Winners will receive a cash prize, a certificate, and an invitation to read their work at Lions in Winter.
- Winning entries will be published online on the Lions in Winter website.

These are the submission guidelines:

1. All entries must be unpublished, original, single-authored works in English.
2. Entries will be defined as follows:
  - Poetry—up to 100 lines
  - Fiction—a short story up to 1250 words. This could be an excerpt from a longer work.
  - Nonfiction—a work of creative nonfiction up to 1250 words (including essay, memoir, and literary journalism). This could be an excerpt from a longer work.
  - Please use 12 point Times New Roman font and number the pages.
3. One entry per person per genre.

4. A cover page that includes the following must be submitted with each entry:

Your Name

Address

Telephone Number

Email Address

Genre (Poetry, Fiction, Nonfiction)

High School

A submission link will be provided on the LIW website.

And we hope your students continue writing poetry!



## ELLIS

After my decathlon win I awaken alone, naked as I was born but  
for the medal slung around my neck. Yesterday I was unstoppable.

Now my back burns as I bend to wash the stench  
of sweat from my hair in the sink and see the body  
I call my own, the curve of an hourglass and its inescapable  
time. My medal blocks the empty space between my thighs  
but not the blood that rushes down them.

Mine is a body that bleeds as well as it runs,  
leaping for gold before dripping red  
onto my shorts, my sheets, and this bathroom floor.  
When they call me sun-kissed goddess in royal blue shorts,  
I will not tell them being a goddess is a knife in the stomach  
I would rather not have, that when I sprint, heart  
pounding in my ears, I am not running to but from,  
that when I crossed the finish line, I was  
wearing a bloody pad tucked in men's briefs  
I bought in secret. They will not notice these  
things anyway, not in the photo of my  
victory where I stand, arms outstretched and eyes  
adorned with mascara nobody will know  
I was forced into. It's a warm summer day and  
most of us see what we want. When  
I rise from the sink, hair dripping and world  
spinning, my back still burns.

**E.M. Billington**

Grade 12

Pope County Community High School

Golconda

Teacher: Laura Hosfeldt



## **STOCKYARD DAYS**

I'd offer something I don't understand  
but already the chicks are screaming  
such compulsion to flatten my chest  
and become a screen from which  
brooding young may think themselves  
defiant objects of attention  
are not grotesque only well-documented  
because the best ones dabble in shame  
like roosters can crow at any time of day to coincide  
with dawn is only a matter of reincarnation  
options such is entertainment—thank Google  
for its camaraderie when minor celebrities  
are nearly my age but older I suspect  
this is that perverted pride of a hen  
over her dense drugged breast that curious pity  
for heads that wobble like wine glasses  
on thin stems of wrist and also for not living  
proportionally: next to them we are always  
the flaxen rim of a terrified eye.

**Anna Wang**

Grade 11

Adlai E. Stevenson High School

Lincolnshire

Teacher: Martha Keller

## THE STRENGTH OF A MOTHER

As I stood in front of you I grew, your tired looks got worse.  
My smile grew less and less. I now hold my head held high.  
You've tried to protect me but also  
tear me down from my dreams. I never understood before  
why you kept me from flying but your past  
once did the same, once betrayed you.  
You flew too high and got your wings cut.  
You hold the pain in your eyes but smile bright, looking so innocent.  
I love that you carried me  
for so little time to show myself to stand.  
For you I never give up,  
For you I give it my all, for you I try to fly higher.  
The house you want on the land above Teloloapan, built in your  
dreams.  
I tend to make that my goal.  
To thank you for your rusty but soft hands, for your hard work.  
For all the ways you took to give me everything.

This I believe is why I am here: you were never given a choice to  
live the way you wanted.  
You bent and changed your form for me.  
You made me the strong and independent woman I am.  
I never grew up with the words chase your dreams,  
I never grew up with do what you love,  
I never grew up with the idea of doing what I love.  
I never grew up with getting held while crying.  
I grew up with standing up for myself, to teach myself  
the name calling for things I didn't know.  
My mother's harsh yet wise words: never let myself go down  
without a fight.  
Her tears were the water to set my boat to sail: for her I do what I do.

**Perla Castrejon**

Grade 10

Major Hector P. Garcia M.D. High School

Chicago

Teacher: Lauren Paz

## **TILTED THE WORDS**

As I tilt my words and adjust my eyes I speak the lies  
I hope will get me by.  
My mother stood, carefully listening to my words.

My eyes show nothing and I tilt even more and as I finish  
talking I closely look into her eyes.

I see her thinking. At last my tilted story works,  
I am out the door and my mind laughs with evil.  
One little tilt and I'm free.

### **Hailee Buttrum**

Grade 9

Pope County Community High School

Golconda

Teacher: Laura Hosfeldt

**AIN'T IT A SHAME?**

*(Dedicated to the Scottsboro Boys)*

name's Leroy Wright,  
sentenced to life by an ol' white;  
i paid a terrible price  
for the lies of Miss Victoria Price.

ain't it a shame  
that some of us took the blame,  
starting a gentleman's fight  
with just some rocks, alright.

some said we fought with guns,  
knives and daggers, and some  
they fought with sticks and stones.  
ain't break nobody's bones!

ain't it a shame!  
the whole world knows my name  
i guess i'm a Scottsboro Boy now  
i ain't done nuttin', i vow.

ain't it a shame  
those whites be playin' their game  
just 'cuz i'm black  
in prison, worst of the pack.

ain't it a shame,  
that i don't get no say  
in a trial of life or death  
any moment i'll breathe my last breath

then came that Paint Rock day,  
where everything went astray;  
two girls claimed under oath  
that we had raped them both.

really ain't my fault;  
i did zero assault.  
just 'cuz i look like another,  
they claimed we're all brothers.

**Sophie McBroom**

Grade 8  
Lycée Français de Chicago  
Chicago  
Teacher: Cyn Koukos

name's Leroy Wright,  
sentenced to life by an ol' white;  
i paid the worst price  
for the lies of Victoria Price.

quite a shame, ain't it!

## THE OCTOPUS

Ejecting its  
black cloud to mask  
pain.

An introvert,  
afraid to stand out;  
preferring camouflage;  
it's a chameleon of the sea  
with eight legs, two hearts.

With all of its arms,  
nothing is out of reach,  
but to what purpose, if it  
does not know how to hunt?

In the deep crevices  
of the bottom of the ocean  
it resides, afraid to be caught  
off guard, to be seen.

Cut off a tentacle,  
it will grow anew;  
its spirit will hurt,  
but not for long.

Its rough skin  
may appear frightening, and  
people might assume it  
malicious, but  
there is more to Octopus,  
than what meets the eye.

It morphs substantially;  
no one knows where;  
and thus it knows all the secrets  
of the dark, deep sea: the predator  
or the prey...  
What role does it play  
in this sea of darkness?  
Guess.

**Emma Chung**

Grade 7

Lycée Français de Chicago

Chicago

Teacher: Cyn Koukos





**ILLINOIS PROSE 2018**



## VALE OF LIFE

*My palms are sweaty, my breath is shallow, and my hands are shaking with trepidation as I walk onto the luminous stage. Standing in the glaring spotlights, I'm unable to see the audience well, but the charged energy in the room reminds me of them. I sense inquisitive eyes on me, especially those of my nervous mother and proud teacher. What is she going to play today? I hear all of their murmurs. Taking a seat on the bench of the gleaming black Yamaha grand piano, my nervousness subsides, and I set up today's piece. Valse, op. 64, no. 2, by Frédéric Chopin.*

*I hope he can see me.*

It was a bitter, moonless January night when my mother boarded a plane to Moscow. She was leaving Chicago for two weeks to take care of her father who had recently fallen ill. "Nothing serious," she reassured me, "I just need to help him sort out business and fully recover."

It was the first time my dad and I were left to our own devices, which was a challenge because of our dependence on my mom. She left one crucial rule: I needed to practice piano every day for an hour to be primed for my recital in two weeks.

*I prepare to begin my performance. The world becomes muted as the piano and I become a single entity. I take a cursory glance at the music, stretch out my fingers, and gingerly place them on the keys. Taking a deep breath, I sound the opening chord.*

The next day, I listened to a recording of my piece: a valse by Chopin which I recently started deciphering. My dad was in the other room having a hushed conversation on the phone—to not disturb my practice—I assumed. Though I mastered the technique, I was unable to refine the dynamics;

the result was cacophonous. My teacher confidently reassured me that once I felt the essence of the piece, they would emerge. Until then, I was forced to listen to professional interpretations to receive inspiration.

So far, the only epiphany I had was to feign sickness and avoid practice; whoever said piano was enjoyable was horribly inaccurate.

*The fear of playing in front of a crowd dissipates. I let my muscles, meticulously trained in the weeks past, take control. Imagining the audience has disappeared, I hear my music echo throughout the vast hall. The physical world has stripped away, but subconscious never is. I know I am not alone.*

Sitting at my instrument, my efforts seemingly futile, I shuddered at the cold bursts of wind that blew through tiny crevices in the window. Alone except for my dad, who waved off my frequent complaints regarding his distant behavior with the excuse of work and adult affairs, I anxiously waited for a call from my mom, with whom I hadn't talked in two days. When the phone rang, I lunged to grab it.

"How's my favorite daughter?" My mother's exhausted voice emitted from the receiver.

"I'm doing all right," I replied, then immediately voiced my concerns, "How is Dedushka?"

At this question, my mother apprehensively paused, unsure of how to properly sugarcoat the situation regarding my grandfather, whose "mild health problems," I would later learn, had turned into lethal hypoxia. After a tense silence, she exhaled, "He hasn't recovered much, but the doctors are hopeful; you shouldn't worry."

Her voice broke at the end, as if she started crying but didn't want me to realize it. The situation suddenly became

crystal clear as I listened to the uncanny sound of her tears. "I'm glad he's doing okay. Make sure to take good care of him! I'll see you soon," I chirped, my voice two octaves higher than usual, bewildered at my discovery.

My mother said she loved me and hung up.

The realization that my grandpa passed away came like a blow to the chest. I sat on the piano stool, arms wrapped around my knees, at a loss. My parents were trying to keep the truth from me, let me retain innocence for a bit longer, innocence I had carelessly discarded in favor of wanting to be treated like an adult.

I started to play the valse, one more time, one last time, then I would be done.

*I don't belong to this world anymore. The spotlights are echoes of a distant dream. The audience's whispers are drawn out, hazy. Playing only for myself and the memory of my grandpa, whose passing has helped me understand the beautiful, fleeting feeling that playing a complex symphony brings to one's soul, lighting it up and wanting to share that light with the world, I realize that music isn't a mandated activity, slaving away for hours while others are out, but rather it's the best mode of communication, for it allows one to share her heart with the world without saying a word.*

I finished my run-through. Confused at the sudden heaviness in my heart, I trudged to the basement where my dad was watching the news. "Don't even try to tell me you're done," he scolded me, "I can tell that I just heard a recording."

I stood there, perplexed, "It wasn't."

My dad sighed, irritated at my shenanigans. He was about to say something when I interjected. "My teacher revealed that I'm supposed to feel music, and now I think I

can. But for you to understand, I must confess: I know why Mama flew to Russia.”

No discussion was needed. We sat in silence, grieving separately but grateful for each other.

*I'm done playing but hesitant to return to reality. The applause is muted; the world still hazy; I don't want to say goodbye to my grandfather who I know is watching me perform the piece, who helped me truly understand it. This valse would forever hold his name. Getting up from the piano, my eyes meet with my mother's, tears streaming down her face. We face this moment together.*

**Fanny Borukhova**

Grade 11

Adlai E. Stevenson High School

Lincolnshire

Teacher: Melissa Mack

## UNTITLED

As I got older, I started to lose sight of why I returned to church each week with my family. Every Sunday, after sitting down in the cavernous sanctuary, then standing up to sing, then closing my eyes to pray, and then sitting down again, I would kick back, slouch low in my seat, and settle in to sleep through yet another sermon. I could never shake the feeling I was watching syndicated TV: as the worship team put on another flawlessly choreographed set and the pastor gave another wellrehearsed message (each joke / pop culture reference timed perfectly), my lizard brain would careen further away and further away from Divine Purpose God Meaning Whatever, and my eyelids would droop heavier and heavier. At first, Pi's fascination with religion in *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel seemed just as absurd to me as the live self-help show I slept through every week. When Pi wandered into a Christian church, I warned him (like a moviegoer yelling at the screen) to steer clear of white Jesus. But Pi, ignorant to the tangle of contradictory teachings, questionable interpretations, and boring sermons that lay ahead, entered anyway.

As Pi returned day after day to listen to the priest's story, I waited for the priest to ask for an exorbitant donation or make a bigoted comment that would reveal his true intentions. But each day, he simply welcomed Pi in and continued the story. Gradually, I began to understand what drew Pi to religion. Through his eyes, I appreciated the beauty in the physicality and routine of Muslim prayer. I marveled at the expansive glory of the millions of Hindu gods. I began to understand that the Christian story was about humility. And love. I realized this was the shining truth that inspired the worship musicians to sing their hearts out and the pastor to write his sermon and my family to return week after week.



Gradually, I realized I had great respect for their faith. The Sunday after finishing the book, I locked my lizard brain away and made sure to stay awake, paying close attention for what Pi had introduced me to. After hundreds of pages submerged in Pi's narrative, my perspective shifted.

Just as *Life of Pi* opened my eyes to truths I had ignored, another book revealed stories I had discounted. As a kid, it never occurred to me that my mother wouldn't get along with the mothers of my other Chinese friends. When my father told tall tales of his glorious childhood exploits, I dismissed him for exaggerating. A language barrier makes it too easy to forget that beneath the sideways vowels and uneven syllables, your parents are fully fleshed out individuals in their native tongues. In Jenny Zhang's *Sour Heart*, readers are equipped with a sort of X-ray vision that beams through the language barrier. The Chinese speaking characters who populate *Sour Heart* are filtered through the perspective of Chinese American girls who can toggle seamlessly between languages. As a result, nothing is lost in translation, and every character is given the agency to reveal their story in full clarity. *Sour Heart* introduced me to a vivid cast of brash uncles, overbearing mothers, and bizarre houseguests, each trailed by curling and twisting histories. It wasn't long before I recognized these characters reflected in my two favorite Chinese people: my mom and dad. Though I had a vague picture in my head of my parents coming a long way and leaving a lot behind—an exotic mix of sacrifice, poverty, and an oppressive authoritarian regime—*Sour Heart* made me wonder how much I really knew about them. What had they been like when they were my age? What made them laugh? I had simply lumped every Chinese immigrant story into an amorphous mass of faceless suffering, which completely obscured my parents' individual journeys. Reading a story that aligned so closely

with my own gave me a context in which I could imagine my parents, along with all my aunts, uncles, and grandparents in three dimensions.

Although my experiences were never paralleled as closely as they were in *Sour Heart*, it wasn't hard to continue finding bits and pieces of myself reflected in literature. In *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Ifemelu, a Nigerian woman studying in America, crushes on a white classmate, Abe, who "liked her well enough, who thought her smart and funny, even attractive, but who did not see her as female...all the flirting she did was, to him, merely niceness: Abe would hook her up with his black friend, if he had a black friend." Even though Ifemelu and I couldn't be more different, it felt like that line had been written especially for me. I had spent the better (sadder) part of the year pining over a white boy. And I had never been exactly sure of why I felt the need to smile wider, play it cooler, and avoid mentioning school at all costs around white peers. "I love football," I would say, unprompted, in the middle of a group project that I actually really felt like we should get back to. Suddenly, it was clear: Ifemelu's blackness kept Abe from seeing her as fully human. I wanted to seem less Asian and more human, so I strained to distance myself from stereotypes, to avoid being typecast as someone who just looked like me. I was disappointed that I had devoted so much energy to altering my personality on demand, but I was also immensely relieved that Ifemelu knew exactly how I felt.

Stories provide me with language and perspective that shape the way I navigate the world. As I read, I adopt new narratives, reflect on my past, reimagine my future, and feel less ashamed, less Other. Immersed in the interior space of each narrator, I am plunged deep into secret worlds crammed with complicated truths that reveal thoughts and feelings I've always known I've had, but could never articulate on my own.

**Michelle Cai**

Grade 12

Adlai E. Stevenson High School

Lincolnshire

Teacher: Jennifer Arias

## SEEING IS BELIEVING

My parents and I made our way through the darkening theatre and found our seats for the production of *Silent Sky*. The soft murmur of the audience hushed as the lights turned completely dark. The spotlight illuminated the lead actress playing the historical figure of Henrietta Leavitt—a 1920s woman whose job at the Harvard Observatory was simply “computer.” Throughout her story, my story, the story of a hard-of-hearing girl dreaming of becoming an astronomer, I touched my hearing aid. By the end of the play, I was crying. I was crying because I saw my dreams come true right before my eyes. Henrietta Leavitt was an underappreciated number-cruncher, but she eventually advanced to discover something amazing: the relationship of a star oscillating between bright and dim and its actual luminosity. This discovery revolutionized astronomy—my dream precisely! And like Henrietta, I’ve been told my whole life that science, technology, engineering, and math—STEM—majors are formidable adversaries for a college student, so only a genius can be successful.

In my experience, it doesn’t take genius, just some hard work. Many are scared off by the difficulty of STEM and don’t see themselves realistically succeeding in college. Importantly, more girls are scared off than guys. Despite attempts to spark girls’ interests in STEM fields, more of my male peers are considering this career path than my female classmates. Olga Khazan of *The Atlantic* says in her article on the gender disparity in the science and math professions in Western countries, even though we live “in the United States, where many college men proudly describe themselves as ‘male feminists’ and girls are taught they can be anything they want to be,” males in the STEM fields outnumber the females three to one.

Khazan correctly identifies that Americans preach gender equality. We love to *say* “we are the land of opportunity.” For all intents and purposes, gender balance in STEM should be equal, right? There aren’t any real barriers holding girls back anymore. Well, this has technically been the case since science began. Girls weren’t held back by legal barriers, but rather social ones. They were held back by conventions of their time pushing them towards being mothers, wives, and maybe nuns. Girls today have an open path, but it’s still the proverbial road less traveled compared to our male peers. Unfortunately, this makes sense: why would you want to enter a field in which you constantly hear of the challenges to success? What Khazan does not address in her article is that while girls are told we can be anything, we are also told that it will be a hard journey, and we have scarcely any role models to look to for guidance.

In short, girls aren’t entering STEM because they don’t see it as a *realistic* opportunity for themselves.

Girls don’t see it as a realistic opportunity, but boys do. Every elementary school student is interested in science to some extent. The science fairs, the baking soda volcanoes, the model rockets—all add to the wonder that boys and girls experience through science. Middle school, like in most areas, is where excitement is derailed. There is less wonder to science because you have to learn the history behind it. What keeps kids interested in science? It’s connecting to those who came before, predominantly men, so predominantly boys will connect to it. I recently asked my classmates to name just one female scientist. The results were a resounding “Marie Curie,” then after that... nothing. But if I asked them to name a male scientist—or just a scientist—they replied with Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Stephen Hawking, Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, Ernest Rutherford, Bill Nye.

Their cheeks reddened, eyes averted, heads lowered as they realized how unbalanced their knowledge was. And it's not their fault, because ever since sixth grade science class we've had stories of male scientists shoved into our faces by our school textbooks. Where are the women? Some will say there aren't any women because they haven't made any scientific achievements worth discussing in a textbook. But that's just not true. There are plenty of women we just don't discuss for some reason. Katherine Johnson, Jane Goodall, Sally Ride, Mary Anning, Annie Jump Cannon, Rosalind Franklin and Henrietta Leavitt, just to name a few. Girls need to see successful women just like boys see successful men.

This creates a gap in college. As my sister, who is studying engineering at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, says, because girls have to work twice as hard to get accepted, work twice as hard to be respected, work twice as hard to get a job, the female engineers are the A students, but the male engineers are the A, B, and C students. The stereotype of an engineer not only for prospective scientists, but also for schools and jobs, is of a male.

With the release of the Oscar-nominated film *Hidden Figures*, we see representation at work. *Hidden Figures* details the lives of three African-American women in the 1960s trying to advance their careers at NASA. Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson are the epitome of strong female role models; the effect of their characters was immediately apparent. Little girls—not only African-American, but also White, Hispanic, and Asian—said they wanted to be Katherine Johnson when they grew up. This movie and the female scientists that came with it increased the love for STEM in young girls.

As the lights came up after *Silent Sky*, I knew I could be Henrietta Leavitt, could work just as hard and be just as

successful. I imagine this is how boys feel when they learn about science. My journey to STEM, space, and beyond did not truly begin by realizing that STEM existed. My journey started when I realized that there were girls like me who came before. There is a stark difference between telling someone that they can do anything and showing them that they can. We need role models; we need female scientists.

**Kayleigh Excell**

Grade 11

Hinsdale Central High School

Hinsdale

Teacher: Gina Chandler

## BIRDS AND LIONS

*(A Modern Allegory in Poetic Prose)*

In a jungle there lived two kinds, but one of them had evil minds. Let's start with the courteous ones, the birds; they were the ones who knew how to use words. The evil ones set everyone crying; a bird was detested by the lion.

Long before, everything appeared fine; the lions were not too out of line! But one day the lions denied acceptance and decided upon a system of separation. In Afrikaans separation was apartheid, but this time you couldn't choose a side. The separation was decided by one's race; they chose who you were by the shape of one's face. The blue birds were cast aside when the orange lions left them mortified.

"You are not like us; you'll be treated differently; from now on birds will bow down to me!" The lions would roar, snap, and sometimes bite, which made the birds want to fight!

From the embarrassment the birds would grow pink, but one bird, Nelson, would just sit and think. One day the birds wanted so badly to fight back, but wise old Nelson knew they should not attack. He called the angry birds into the ghetto and convinced them to march into the luscious meadows. There he explained that getting mad was absolutely useless even if the lions were so ruthless.

These birds were impatient and rolled their eyes. "It doesn't matter if we march; they'll just keep telling their lies!"

Nelson just shrugged his wings and replied, "Can't you connect the strings? They have a roar, but we have so much more. We have a kind voice, which gives us a choice: Should we fight and lose, or sing the Truth? We could sing sense into them or get beaten like a drum."

The shocked birds now stared in awe, thinking about how they could change the law! No more stupid curfew—that



sounded like bird heaven! They could share drinking fountains and bathrooms; no more getting shooed away with a broom!

The birds clumped together and began a peaceful march; no bird questioned Nelson's thoughtful demarche. They sang beautifully and loudly; their chests puffed out proudly. Pride, though, was no match for the evil police as the number of marching birds began to decrease. They all quickly got tossed into a birdcage, yet Nelson still showed no signs of rage.

"I can change the world even in here," he contemplated. And so he waited and waited... even still he waited. Thus, for twenty-seven years, twenty-seven years straight, the lions tortured him and made it so that he barely ate. Yet his mind was still full as he sent out private letters. Soon the entire world knew that these birds deserved better. He was also pleased to have time to think in that horrible jail, and he never once thought about posting his bail.

In fact, when time came he refused to leave, telling his jailers he had something still to achieve. He did not want to get released under his jailers' terms, and he wanted respect from the government that he deserved. No bird said respect was impossible or argued that they should run because "it always seems impossible until it's done."

And in fact it was possible—he earned more respect without losing the dignity he had always kept.

When he prepared to leave jail, he never imagined that he would return outside being a new legend. As he put one wing outside the cage, ready for fresh air, he never ever imagined what waited for him there. Animals! Of every shape and size, practically blinding shocked Nelson's eyes!

He felt the sun for the first time in twenty-seven years, making him warm with happiness to hear resounding cheers. Not only were there birds but lions, too, and different colored animals who had all come through.

Nelson stepped, felt grass for the first time, and found that a podium awaited him, suggesting a speech was no crime. As he stepped up to say what the crowd expected, his eyes met a lion's eyes and quickly connected. While looking down at the humongous herd, Nelson felt brave and as free as a bird.

He could say horrible things 'bout the lions; he could be the one sending them all crying. He could embarrass them a ton, but for him that was not fun. "Resentment is like drinking poison and hoping it will kill your enemies." Yet, Nelson didn't want to be the one to fight for centuries. So instead, he reached out his wing, promising with his smile; a firm handshake was the right thing. But, looking into the lion's eyes, at his petrified face, Nelson's smile said it all: no more segregation of race.

At first the lion hesitated, but Nelson's eyes captivated. So the lion reached out his big paw, and their handshake changed the world and the law.

Some birds asked Nelson, "How can you not kick him in the face? Just look at how he treated us based on our race!"

Nelson calmly shrugged and explained his case. "What good would it do to rub it in his face? It is like a stained shirt, rubbing won't help; all it would do is make him yelp. Taking your anger out on someone else won't help you; look at the lions, who did but clearly didn't think it through."

Soon people wanted him for their president, and, knowing that no education was something he could prevent, after he was elected all birds went to school. And some sat in the same classrooms with lions and used the same tools.

If anyone asked how Nelson couldn't be mad, he'd smile and explain getting upset was bad. "It doesn't help me or you or him or her; it just makes everything an angry blur. Love is easier than hate, can't you see? Or else it wouldn't be so hard to silence me."

**Alexandra Farsht**

Grade 7

Lycée Français de Chicago

Chicago

Teacher: Cyn Koukos

**THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY  
OF A PART-TIME OVERTHINKER**

This is what my brain looks like, a mess. You know that one chair in your room that you throw all of your stuff on? Or that drawer you fill with random things? Yeah, that's all of my thoughts shoved into one spot in my brain. When I need or want a certain thought, I go and make a bigger mess of it. When I realized I was pansexual, it was more of a disaster than a simple mess. Every time I would try to put the puzzle together, all I did was mix it with others. Would my parents hate me? Who would laugh and take me as a joke? Why me? Why would I, out of all people, turn out this way? When I overthink, I don't get nervous. I build a big barrier around myself and my emotions.

That's why I'm rude at times, with a horrible attitude, using my sarcasm and laughing at the worst of times. Eventually I come to be at peace and think about it, so I clean off the chair and organize that drawer. But it will go back to that mess again, every little thought is thrown back onto that chair and shoved into that drawer. Even worse, when some thoughts are all over the floor like my dirty clothes, my inspiration and motivation is shoved to one side of my bed. The extra pieces to puzzles I don't want go to the trash, to hopefully be forgotten.

I would sit on the cluttered bed and think about the school day and everything I did. The frustration is when my relaxation turns into a cloud of isolation that follows me home to my messy room, where I lay down and make a bigger mess. No movement has to be done to watch my thoughts overflow like high tides in the ocean; it all dies down when my mom tells me to go eat or do her a favor. I have to force myself out of bed and put on my chanclas. Walking down the stairs, tired, with my brain on pause, and the messy room has only

become worse. Listening to my mom talk, as it all goes into one ear and leaves the other like a train in a tunnel, sometimes I ask “Mama, am I a mean person?” That’s when her lecture begins, and I am not fully there because another part of me stayed in my room, on that chair, and in that drawer.

I’ll go back as one to my room once she is done; after hearing her words, I try to look for the stuffed animal my dad gave me on my ninth birthday. Okay, maybe I was looking for the thought of it and instead I was finding other things, the T-shirt I wore when Mom came home late that one night, the picture of my brother’s twelfth birthday, and my football from last summer. I made a bigger disaster, a mess, a tornado of anxiety came right through. This happens often, it’s part of my days and lonely nights. You met my brain, my messy room. Let me help you find the doorway out of it.

**Evan Garcia**

Grade 9

Major Hector P. Garcia M.D. High School

Chicago

Teacher: Lauren Paz

**RE-ORIENTING:  
LITERATURE AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

It is 1998. At a supermarket, my mother points at soap and asks for “soup.” She is laughed out of the store.

It is 2007. After enduring months of mockery for his broken English at the hands of his students, my father finally retaliates. He nearly loses his job as a college professor.

It is 2014. Upon hearing of the Yulin Dog Meat Festival, a girl on my swim team passionately declares that she wants “all Chinese people to just *die*, instead of the dogs.” I cower in the locker room, wishing to disappear, wishing I wasn’t Chinese, wishing that there was *some way* to justify my existence.

Time may not erase bigotry, but literature can.

Now, I am not referring solely to such Proustian recollections when I make the claim that literature has the power to transcend culture, space, and time to teach what is fundamentally true about ourselves and what is fundamentally untrue of others. Rather, I draw upon a profusion of first- and second-hand knowledge about the immigrant experience, the American experience, and the human experience as evidence of the power literature has over both the learned and unlearned. Literature has no inherent power of its own, rather, it is the *reader* who gives it agency. Therefore, I posit that in a society of imperfections, literature helps us not to perfect our respective circumstances, but to expose truth, reveal meaning, and forge human connection.

*Who am I? You know who I am. Or you think you do... So please to meet you... I'm the one you call Yellowbelly... I'm the one you don't see at all—we all look alike. I'm the one you see everywhere—we're taking over the neighborhood. I'm your nightmare... (Julie Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*)*

Like Otsuka's Family, my father was an IDP. Forced to flee from his ancestral home at the tender age of 4, pushed into an industrial labor camp, his parents hunted by the Communist Party for being college professors, he grew up removing himself from his bourgeoisie identity, knowing the stories but not the faces of his relatives. Hearing the tale of my father's tumultuous journey prompted me to rediscover, and reclaim, the narrative that I occupy as a product of Asian American immigrants, much like Julie Otsuka sought to redefine the internment experience from the perspective of the interned.

I embarked on a literary adventure, seeking characters and stories that formed a bridge between my life experiences and those of my ancestors. I clearly remember, as a fourth grader, curled up in a corner of Half Day Library, cradling a copy of *Falling Leaves* (Adeline Yen Mah) and *Bitter Melon* (Cara Chow) in each arm. For the first time in my relatively short life, I had discovered Asian characters with *real* stories to tell, stories that evolved beyond the broad stroke of white generalization and cultural dampening. I was ecstatic. Relatability is a precious commodity when you grow up a minority. So I searched further. I found solace with the *Red Scarf Girl*, laughed and cried with the mothers and daughters of the *Joy Luck Club*, reeled alongside Iris Chang as she explored the *Rape of Nanking*.

*"Don't touch me," said the girl. "I want to be sick by myself."*

*"That's impossible," said her mother. She continued to rub her back and the girl did not push her away. (Otsuka)*

However, Otsuka's *Girl* taught me that my search for my identity ought not to be a solitary investigation. I learned that literature is meant to be shared. Life, at any rate, is a series of connections made and connections missed. Literature is one of many conduits through which gaps can be bridged, fissures sealed, relationships healed.

On a recent trip to Xi'an I experienced the meaning of a connection irretrievably lost. I had traveled more than seven thousand miles to meet my 奶奶, or paternal grandmother, for the first time in my life. She died the day I arrived. I could ruminate on the travesty of memories missed, affections made absent, life lost. Instead, I strove to understand my grandmother not through mourning, but through literary familiarizations: her favorite books, favorite philosophers, favorite poems. Through literature, she came alive: I discovered her favorite Chinese proverbs, her book of notes on Lao Tzu's teachings, and her rather amusing opinions on the 四大名著, or Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

I remember smiling fondly, as if I had known her all my life.

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I often think of how literature can be used as an agent of change both socially and systemically. I have found that this requires the diversification of the literary metanarrative: Eurocentricity and its pervasiveness in the literary world have, for too long, limited the exposure of minority experiences to the general population. I look to my philosophy class, for example. Why did my teacher choose to skip over the only chapter in the textbook devoted to the Asian Sages? Why, in my history class, was the Nanjing Massacre addressed only as a footnote? Why was Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor Was*



*Divine* the first work of an Asian author to ever be taught in my entire school career? Countless studies have taught us time and time again that to prevent the roots of bigotry from ensnaring one's psyche, one must learn to engender empathy. In a political climate blighted by dogmatic distrust, the voice of the minority matters more than ever.

*[We] never stopped believing that somewhere out there, in some stranger's backyard, our mother's rosebush was blossoming madly, wildly, pressing one perfect red flower after another out into the late afternoon light. (Otsuka)*

Literature is the rosebush from which we pluck our perceptions, strip ourselves of intolerant thorns, and blossom in our understanding of the world around us. Literature infuses hope into the voices of minorities, giving them the chance to explore their self-identities, crafting common ground. Literature, then, is not inherently *powerful*, rather, literature is *empowering*.

**Claire Huang**

Grade 12

Adlai E. Stevenson High School

Lincolnshire

Teacher: Jennifer Arias

## ON SOLITUDE

The average age for the start of solitary living has risen dramatically over the past few decades. Kids have become so much more dependent on their parents' support, and their desires to live alone or with their friends and just have fun have decreased, even from periods as recent as the 1980s and '90s. Now, most kids get their first taste of solitary life after they leave for college, where they first learn to take care of themselves instead of having a parent or guardian watch over their every move, ensuring that they grow properly. This trend, while debated over by parents and children alike, has shown a series of generally positive effects, such as the increase of academic participation and college graduation numbers, the increase of overall success after college, and the increase of happiness in both American children and parents.

I was one of those kids who had never experienced solitary life and who was on track to experience it for the first time in college, where my friends would still be around to support me in times of hardship.

My mother was diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer when I was in fifth grade. Nobody could believe it, considering how healthy a lifestyle she had dedicated herself to and her cheerful demeanor. She never showed the slightest sign of discomfort to her friends, her parents, and, least of all, her children. Her pain festered inside of her. Her affliction grew within her every day, but she would never show us how much she truly suffered. She lived fairly comfortably as her cancer receded over a period of five years. Then, this year, it suddenly metastasized to her spine and hip.

She spent her nights crying in agony. My mother was rendered a ghost, barely alive and floating between radiation treatments. She maintained a passionate faith in God and

believed strongly that he would never do anything to detriment or hurt her, but her condition only got worse, despite her deep religiosity and frequent radiation treatments.

At first, she fed me and my sister gentle lies in order to ensure that we wouldn't be too stressed. She claimed that she would be out of the hospital that weekend. That they were just running some tests. That she would be okay soon enough.

Then that weekend came, and she said she would be out of the hospital the following Tuesday. That Tuesday became the following Friday, which became another week, and then two more, and then another month. She describes her time there as hell on Earth, where nurses flow in and out of her room to haunt her with tests, where her arms swell and become sore because of the repeated insertion of IV needles, and where she remains trapped indefinitely, despite how much she wished to just get up and run away.

During this time, I was wracked with stress. It is a tough time for anyone and was especially tough for someone who was undergoing the hardest year of high school and was suddenly tasked with learning how to live alone and care for himself.

It came upon me one day, when I was tired and decided to wait at the granite bar we have in our kitchen. Old photos faded in and out on our TV screensaver. Happiness lit up our faces: my family was younger and unstained by the horrible disease that afflicted our mother. My friends were still living these photos; they were still illuminated by that innocent joy, that passion for life that carried them on, while I had lost all of that over the course of a few weeks of solitude. My friends had started their junior years as normal children; I felt like a former shell of myself.

The realization that your closest peers have no way of relating to the issues that plague your life is difficult to

overcome and is what perpetuated my solitude. I longed for social interaction, for support, and for someone to tell me that everything would be alright. I needed someone to understand, but nobody could.

Fencing provided somewhat of an outlet for my healing. I've always found my deepest connections with other people to be with athletic rivals and friends who could at least relate with me over our sport. I found exercise to help temporarily with forgetting the sorrow that filled my life. The more I would sweat, the happier I would feel. And so, with each touch, I forgot another piece of my story: first, my mother's diagnosis, then my chores, and following that my thoughts, my sorrows, my inability to find someone who truly understood me, and the insignificance of my suffering in comparison with my parents'. I would gain point after point, not thinking about anything but how I would get the next touch. After bouts, I would feel genuinely happy, and I would genuinely connect with my teammates. Fencing brought true joy and light into my life, but it was only temporary. The moment I walked into my house, took my shower, and fell, fatigued, on the couch, reality would manifest itself again.

I wore a happy facade at school and took it off at home. I felt small. Helpless. Insignificant.

On cold mornings, when the snow falls and the sky is grey, or when the pink sky just begins to show as the corners of the sun rise over the horizon, and when I am the first of my family to arise out of my bed, I feel those feelings that I thought had left me. I feel the woes of isolation, the depression that infected my soul during those days of loneliness. No matter how hard I try, I believe that I will never heal completely. I also know that to learn to accept these feelings, like I have done, is to grow. And to become an adult is to accept my solitude.

**Aaron Kim**

Grade 11

Adlai E. Stevenson High School

Lincolnshire

Teacher: Christina Kim

## MY SMASH BROTHER

Scarfig down the rest of my ribs, I look over to my older, half-brother and see his face slathered in barbecue sauce. My mom points out that he needs to wipe it off as I laugh hysterically at the sight. My brother, David, looks surprised but eventually gives in to Mom's orders and cleans his face. "Can we please be excused?" I say on our behalf. (See, we were not totally absent of manners in the Kulig household.) My suspicious mom checks to see if we have finished our plates, and eventually allows us to leave the dinner table. (Finally!)

We race to the basement door and hurry down the dark, dimly lit stairwell. It opens into a room with a dusty Samsung television and a cube-shaped video game console, the aptly named GameCube. At this point, my brother is somehow twice as excited as I am, flapping his arms wildly as he talks about beating one of the levels in a video game. He hurries to the stack of video games and chooses his favorite, *Super Smash Bros. Melee*, but he checks to see if it is what I want to play also. I give a silent nod.

He boots up the ancient piece of hardware and hums along with every note of the iconic GameCube introduction. (I tried to keep up, but I was too enticed by the flipping cubes.) After what feels like a century of beeping and flipping cubes, the game finally loads and we are able to choose our fighters. David allows me to choose first, but I know by now not to choose his favorite fighter, Mario. I see the relief in his eyes when I select Luigi instead. During the game, David's voice rises almost to a fever pitch at times as he talks back to the characters or the action on the screen. His face flushes from the intensity of the competition, and his eyes dart back and forth as he takes in all the characters'

movements. A loud laugh bellows from his chest as Mario finishes a smash attack and, in a childlike way, he asks me if I would like to play again.

Suddenly, a flash of lightning engulfs the sky outside and a deafening boom shakes the house. David flies off the couch and switches the TV to Channel 4, listening intently as a charismatic meteorologist points to a colorful graphic of the storms over the St. Louis area. David yaps about tornadoes as he gestures wildly at the television, touching the screen and pointing out the dangerous parts of the storm and explaining the storm's path. (Being in kindergarten, I didn't understand a word and only thought about playing some more Smash)

Eventually my mom peeks her head around the basement corner with my two sisters peeking their heads a few feet below hers. She doesn't look nearly as nervous as David and assures us that we are safe from the storms in the basement. She still tries to keep an eye on the weather but can barely hear the meteorologist over David's boisterous weather commentary. My mom walks over and hugs David which gives him some comfort, but I can tell he doesn't feel fully reassured.

As night continues and the storm rages on, with thunderous booms and flashes of lightning that engulf the night sky, David's agitation increases, and my mom and I share a worried glance. She walks over to him, guides him to the couch, and focuses his attention back on the television. His leg begins to jiggle nervously as he rocks ominously backwards and forwards. Once again he launches into a lecture on storms, hail, tornadoes, lightning, and all things weather related. My mom and I listen and nod, interspersing comments here and there, but we know his mania only stops once the weather system passes.

David is on the autism spectrum. I never knew the name for it growing up, but I knew his behavior was unlike that of

my friends' brothers or sisters. His quirks made him unique but sometimes confused my younger self.

Despite this, I always looked up to David as my big brother. We built massive structures out of Legos, giggled at the morning reruns of *SpongeBob*, and played hide-and-seek with my two sisters in our backyard. David was the best big brother anyone could ask for, and the little things we did together established a bond that exists to this day.

David lives in Carbondale now, in community housing with other disabled adults. Although he loves it there and I know it is for the best, I sometimes wish I could scramble down the basement stairs, flip on the GameCube, and duel with my big brother, just like old times.

**Sean Kulig**

Grade 12

Belleville West High School

Belleville

Teacher: John Lodle



## ROOTS OF HOME

Marking the neighborhood's end, a singular, gigantic oak tree rises from a mixture of dirt and pebbles lying underneath. Its thick, brown branches stretch endlessly towards nearby homes and are never bothered by the clamorous Ford trucks that circle around the tree's base to drive off in opposing directions. A concrete curb separates the foundation of the tree from the rest of the street, allowing it to stand alone in its own small world. The tree's bushy green leaves remain the same color despite the scorching heat of summer and the numbing winds of winter. Subtle scratches and chips appear in its protective bark, but none of the imperfections detract from the tree's immense size. The air brings the scent of a freshly mowed lawn and with it memories of summer days.

Clattering against the metal frame, the chain link of my bicycle echoes through the air, but the noise cannot be heard over uncontrollable laughter. The sun's distant amber glow fades into the horizon, triggering a quick glare from the street lights lining the street. Shadows of darkness engulf our neighborhood, forcing my brother and I to rely on memory to return in time for dinner. A golden retriever with a bright red leash fastened around its neck steps along the sidewalk, but the metallic spokes of our bike wheels quickly propel us past the dog and his owner. As I turn the corner, my eyes lock onto the girthy branches of the oak tree at the end of the street, which tell my brother and me one thing: we are home.

Now my trusty bicycle lays abandoned in the corner of the garage with cobwebs tangled in its frame. Taking its place rests a brand-new Honda Civic with a red bow tied around the hood reading "Happy 16th Birthday!" The thunderous roar of the engine sends adrenaline flowing through my body. Beads of sweat trickle down my spine as doubt occupies my

mind regarding my capability to drive on my own. But with a turn of the key, I'm off. My clammy hands tightly grip the wheel as I steer out of the driveway, heading towards the towering oak tree at the end of the cul-de-sac. A gust of wind enters through the rolled-down window as I pick up speed. Circling around the tree, I'm at ease solely because of the familiar sight of the rough textured tree trunk solidly planted in the mixture of dirt and rock. From the rearview mirror, I see my mother—already left behind—waving as I drift away from my house.

Flipping through a discarded box of abandoned photos on my garage shelf, I notice a picture: a little boy with light blonde hair standing next to a skyscraper of a tree; the leaves of the oak still green, its branches stretching toward houses, and its roots still firmly planted in the exact same spot.

**Logan Lowery**

Grade 11

O'Fallon Township High School

O'Fallon

Teacher: Diane Riley

## RED ORANGE YELLOW GREEN BLUE PURPLE

Whenever I'm untasked, say, sitting in the waiting room at the dentist or looking quietly out of the passenger-side window during a long drive, I like to play a game with myself called Red Orange Yellow Green Blue Purple. The game is simple—identify one object of each color of the rainbow in your immediate surroundings, then go again. The only rule is that you're not allowed to repeat any object between rounds, which forces you to look more finely at your environment and notice the smaller nuances of color, say, for orange, which doesn't appear casually in nature.

The first couple rounds of Red Orange Yellow Green Blue Purple usually go pretty quickly, which leads to an almost rhythmic chant as I go through the colors one by one in my head. Red

Orange

Yellow

Green

Blue

Purple

Red. I am seven years old and at my grandmother's house, and she has placed in front of me a bowl of sliced beets, once frozen but now room temperature, drowned in their own liquid. They are as dark as the dirt they grew from. We are sitting, watching *Goosebumps* on her cable TV when, all of a sudden, I make a move to get up and the folding table that I am eating off of collapses, spilling the contents of my bowl. The red soup splatters onto my grandmother's carpet and seeps. I stand paralyzed in shock. I wait for my grandmother to turn around.

Orange. The color of the dress that I don't want to

buy. We're in the gift shop of Starved Rock State Park, and I see my older brother pick out an eagle stuffed animal as a souvenir. I ask my mom if I can get one, but she says she's already picked out two dresses to buy for me. As a little girl, I despise dresses. I learn that day that my age determines how valid my opinion is. The clothes sit in the bottom drawer of my dresser, balled up and pushed off to the side. They sing a hole in my memory every time I look at them. I don't open up my bottom drawer for months.

Yellow. Behind the Nashville skyline, there are these giant yellow radio boxes that blast country music down the streets 24-7. They mock us, singing of bright days and dry fields, as my family and I tour the city through the most torrential thunderstorm I've ever experienced. Dirt flanks the sides of the pale box, and water fills up around the edges as it begins to flood. It's more muddied-brown than yellow at this point, but I take what I can get and still count it.

Green. On our first stop along the coast of Ireland, we enter a gift shop to ask for directions. Meanwhile, I survey the contents of the store. It's small and decorated with countless trinkets that litter every wall and shelf, but my eyes are drawn to a four-leaf clover necklace. Something about the gold chain captivates me. I turn over the clover in my palm. It's £20—my entire allowance for our ten-day trip. It doesn't take me long to make up my mind. "Are you sure?" my mother warns. "I'm sure."

Blue. When I realize blue eyes are dominant in my family, suddenly I feel very isolated. I see that everyone has inherited a little bit of my grandmother's Irish American lineage. She had flawless pale skin and pure-white hair that was thick with natural curls, but instead of those things, they had taken her eyes. Her blue eyes, pale and passive.

Purple. The sky is a deep winter purple outside the

window of my grandmother's hospice room in Batavia. The room is lit with bright fluorescent lights that contrast the outside. Inside, a few members of my extended family crowd around her bed. She had been losing her memory for years, but tonight is different. My family members are singing "Amazing Grace." I remember listening to the soft chorus of voices in that dingy little room, tears filling my eyes as I watched my grandmother's chest rise and fall, each time slower and shallower than the last. I remember us finishing the song just as my aunt got up to turn off her respirator. And I remember everyone in my family raising up their hands in prayer toward the dark purple sky.

**Caili Murphy**

Grade 11

Adlai E. Stevenson High School

Lincolnshire

Teacher: Kimberly Musolf

## THICKER THAN WATER?

Elbows linked, skipping side by side, Sophia, Melanie, and I strode into my house. We had burst from the doors of Monroe Elementary School anticipating the three ready-made grilled cheeses complete with chicken tenders that awaited us at my house. Sophia was my longtime best friend while Melanie and I had just met. We stepped inside the house, and Sophia and I headed for the kitchen. Melanie lingered in the entryway staring intently at a picture of me and my sister. "Olivia, you don't look anything like your sister!" Melanie declared. Barely suppressing a giggle, I replied, "Well, duh, I'm adopted!" I watched Melanie's expression of incredulousness contort into puzzlement. My friend Melanie didn't know what adoption was. I remember for the first time realizing that, although I knew I belonged with my family, not everyone else knew. It crossed my mind that, from an outsider's perspective, I appeared like I didn't fit.

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines "parent" as a father or mother while the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines "parent" as a person who brings up and cares for another. Neither mentions genetics. "Real" is defined as having objective, independent existence. The fact that people mesh these two words together is unthinkable to me (I mean, after all, who has fake parents?). I can't tell you the number of times I've gotten asked the question "Have you ever met your real parents?" I respond automatically, keeping my voice steady, with, "Yeah, and so have you; in fact, I live with them." My parents *are* my real parents. No question. My birth parents, on the other hand, just happen to be the people that got me into this world. In my case, John and Mary Rayis are the only parents I've ever known. I was adopted from China when I was eleven months old

and brought to Hinsdale by my mom and dad. Waiting there were my siblings Julia, Marc, and Frankie.

In *Baby Love* Rebecca Walker says, “I don’t care how close you are to your adopted son or beloved stepdaughter, the love you have for your non-biological child isn’t the same as the love you have for your own flesh and blood.” This is heartbreaking coming from someone who has been adopted. It’s heartbreaking to think that this woman is so mistaken in her thinking. The love for an adopted child and a biological one can and should be the same. In my case, it is the same because my parents were there for everything. From having their heart swell at the first sound of their baby’s laugh. From witnessing their infant’s first steps and imagining where those steps will take her. From walking their child to the first day of school and having to pry her arms away from the embrace. From my mother helping me read my first chapter books and my father coaching me on my first soccer team. From my mother consoling me after not getting invited to that birthday party in middle school and my father driving me to my first travel soccer tournament. Everything I experienced, I shared with my parents, just like any other family.

Proponents of Walker’s close-minded point of view might say that giving birth to a child is an “irreplaceable” experience that “instantly” bonds the child to the parents and establishes a love with which adoption cannot compare. Although I agree that giving birth creates an attachment between the mother and child, this does not mean that giving birth is in any way superior to adopting a child. The absence of this experience does not take away from the love between a parent and their child. While other parents prepare for having a child by buying prenatal vitamins, maternity clothes, and books on giving birth, my parents prepared by having the home inspection, getting the family member interviews,

and filling out copious amounts of paperwork. While other parents felt the baby's first kick, my parents saw my picture for the first time and knew in their hearts they loved me. While other parents were in hospital rooms waiting for their child to be born, my parents were on a thirteen-hour flight anxiously awaiting the first time they would get to meet their daughter and take her home. Sure, the initial process is different between biological and adopted children, but the result is the same: unconditional love.

Rebecca Walker is horribly mistaken not only in asserting that a parent's love for an adopted child is not the same as for a biological child, but also lumping adopted children with stepchildren. Stepchildren are a completely different matter. Stepparents meet their children later in life, and the process of caregiving has already taken place to some degree. People become stepparents as a result of love for their spouse, not because of their desire for a child. This love is a kind that grows and develops over time. People adopt because they yearn to share their love with a child. This love is instantaneous and only deepens over time. Therefore, the bond between stepparents and their stepchildren should not be compared to that of adopted children. Although I agree the love between a stepparent and stepchild is not the same as a biological child, that does not mean that adopted children fall into the same category.

That day back in third grade, I realized that from a stranger's point of view it might look like I don't belong with my family. Now I realize that to the people who know me, it's easy to see I do belong. It's obvious that I get my bullheaded stubbornness from my father, I wear my heart on my sleeve like my mother, and I am the perfect combination of my older sister's nerdy overachievement and my two older brothers' cool reputations and lax attitudes toward school. As far as my family is concerned, I am their own flesh and blood.



**Olivia Rayis**

Grade 11

Hinsdale Central high School

Hinsdale

Teacher: Jared Friebe

## FLOWER CHILD

*Do you think I am playing a game?* There was a stillness on both sides. If hatred were seen, the air would be scarlet. Eyes wide, breath jagged and harsh, he bared his teeth, all crooked—the space between his dry, cracked lips resembled headstones in an abandoned cemetery. I didn't think we were playing a game. Games were supposed to be fun. Games were supposed to make you smile.

*He kept me trapped in his game.*

*Do you think I am playing a game?* His target pivoted towards my mother. She didn't think he was playing a game. She was old enough to know. She had played many games in her life.

Her anger was built up as a shield for pain, deflecting all of his blows and returning quite a few. I learned how to build my shields from her. Her steel exterior was assembled to invite attacks, sustain the impact, and reflect it upon him. Unfortunately, my shield withered too quickly, and the red welts encompassing my body would pay the price.

From the outside, it was a perfect marriage. As if. My mother hid the purple and red “flowers” that blossomed over her legs. On skin as brown as hers, they were harder to spot, but they were there and stung with every breath. The torture had clearly taken a toll her; her face was battered and etched with the deep crevices of life. Once I asked her why she cried when the flowers changed colors. She said even beautiful things inflict pain.

There were nights I lay in my bed listening to shouts of terror. My mother screamed and the endless game of bloody ping-pong would begin. She cried, he seethed, and I smothered my face with the long toy bear my body cuddled

into, furiously attempting to drown out the noise. I prayed that when my mother would leave, I would leave with her, flee the war once and for all. And one day she did leave... but I remained right where I was, with some knitted cotton to protect me from the terror.

*The game kept me close, held me tight.*

*Do you think I am playing a game?* I did not see it happen. I did not see him hurt her. But had he hurt her? Or had she hurt herself? And yet she was hurt. Her body sagged in defeat, legs pulled towards her chest as a fragile defense. A swollen eye, a bloody lip, and flowers.

Weeks after I found her unconscious, the flower that had begun as a purple stain around her eye had sunk into the socket itself. I sat in her lap and began to tap the flowers on her cheek.

“No,” she said, “it still hurts.”

I had forgotten. They were beautiful so they must hurt.

The hues of red had faded into her body. *Where had they gone?*

I pressed deeper and gasped as another flower grew; kissed with shades of mauve, crimson, and lilac. All over her arms, her legs, her hips. She was a painting.

“Can I have one?” I asked. As if they were rusty tin tobacco cans from my father’s favorite drug store.

“You shouldn’t want one—they hurt.”

But I wanted to feel her pain.

*I wanted to be like her.*

*Do you think I am playing a game?* He asked me again. I replied no. Again. But I think he thought it was a game; that’s the only reason he kept hurting us. Because he could always start all over. And we let him.

His fingers dug into my waist as he dragged me across the tan carpeted floors and tossed me onto his bed, his room's monstrous interior closing in. More flowers. Slowly his face lowered towards mine, mottled a deep red, veins threatening to bulge out of his forehead. His words spat with the ferocity and savagery of a machine gun fire.

"If what I did to your mother spreads, I will kill you."  
His words confused me.

How would he kill me? I didn't know anyone could die so young. How does someone die? Was it like how my mother almost killed herself? Would death be my savior? The door slammed closed.

*I was trapped.*

*Do you think I am playing a game?* The words repeat like a prayer, a mantra. *Do you think I am playing a game?* I don't think you are playing a game, I never thought you were playing a game.

But the game never ends. It follows me everywhere. Sometimes I drive in my car late at night, there is little traffic, and I am going fast, wanting to wrap my car around a pole rather than think of his crooked teeth sneering at me, his cracked lips howling at my mother.

But I remind myself: I shouldn't be bitter, I shouldn't be vengeful—I should be thankful. My father gave me a gift. I always wanted flowers to reciprocate the beauty that my mother diffused, to show others that I could endure pain and still be the most spectacular painting that had ever been created.

*I will be beautiful forever.*

\*\*\*

*My feelings are raw  
I am long past using flowery elegant words to describe my experience  
Pain is pain  
Anger is anger  
Breaking is breaking  
And the damage is done  
I want you to see all of me  
Broken. Breathing. Surviving*

**Vrushali Thakkar**

Grade 11

Adlai E. Stevenson High School

Lincolnshire

Teacher: Jacquie Cullen

## UNA SERA D'AGOSTO (AN AUGUST EVENING)

If I close my eyes, if I allow that memory to wander in my mind, I can still perceive the fresh and pungent breeze of that sea, so blue and mysterious, caress my pale skin.

I recall how the moon shone high and majestic in that starred sky, white like the soft and delicate snow that falls from the sky in those cold and humid winter mornings, when the heat issued from a little fire animates the fireplace, warms your soul.

I recall how, on that remote day of August, I could hear some music originate from the other side of the beach, where people laughed and joked in delight, where they enjoyed the last soirees with their friends, appreciating the life by the seashore, the humid heat of Sardinia that enters houses on the first days of June until the last days of September, when days start being shorter and sunsets are not as rosy and full of warmth, when at dusk you can't help but admire those cherry red and canary yellow shades painting the sky.

I recall the satisfying feeling of the fresh and wet sand under my feet, that feeling of freedom and insouciance which raids your body and soul everytime you walk by that endless blue surface.

I recall the sweet singing of the swallows in the sky, who start migrating south with the end of summer and the beginning of autumn, towards the hot and humid Africa which hosts them till the death of the cold winter.

If I stop for a moment, I can still hear the sound of the foamy waves of the sea crashing against the motionless rocks with so much rage, with so much wrath, that it was like hearing its voice, furious and impetuous.

And in all this turmoil, on that evening of August, I recall how a golden butterfly flew right in front of my visage,

twirling with lightness in the air while the moonbeam reflected on those fragile gold-colored wings which looked so delicate that it seemed a simple blast of icy wind could easily break them.

It was a simple evening of August, and yet it was so much more.

It was the reuniting with oneself after wandering alone and bewildered for a long time, peering at sunrises and endless sunsets, watching the stars, distant and luminous, float in a Prussian blue sky that wrapped the earth like a warm and silky cloak, perceiving every variation on the temperature on one's skin and enjoying the shivers caused, as if they were warm and soft hands on a cold and motionless body.

And in this inertia, in this missing of forces, not realizing or changing with the changes of the world.

Looking at my own image mirrored on that shiny and deep sea and, for the first time, truthful in showing who I really was.

Not simply seeing a girl with a pale and bright skin, with chestnut colored hair on which gold shimmers appear every time the sun lays on it its lukewarm morning rays, with eyes as green as the foliage of a tree in the middle of the spring, when cherry blossoms flourish and landscapes get adorned with thousands of colors, with delicate pale pink lips.

Seeing, for the first time, beyond.

**Silvia Usai**

Grade 11

Pope County Community High School

Golconda

Teacher: Laura Hosfeldt

## EYE OF THE TIGER

Fifth Place International Chemistry Olympiad winner. Fifth in the world against sixty-seven countries including China, Taiwan, and Russia—all known for their academic excellence. First of 17,000 US students looking to participate in the international competition, let alone place among the top ten. The achievements of my older brother, Harrison Wang, are endless. From a young age, my parents have bred this spirit of excellence; they entered him in a Diaper Derby (a race for toddlers) and, to no one's surprise, he won second place. In this Asian American household, discipline is drilled into you with the end goal of attending an elite institution and, later on, succeeding as a doctor or scientist (jobs commonly associated with Asian stereotypes).

This message was well received by my brother. Rather than getting a license and driving around with his friends on the weekends, he was content with his permit, staying home on Fridays and Saturdays to rigorously prepare for the Chemistry Olympiad. He was always on top of his school work and extracurriculars, had a strict bedtime, and regularly worked out. This work ethic eventually led my brother to attend MIT, pursuing a degree in biochemical engineering.

My brother is my role model. He has the drive and intelligence that I, like any other high schooler, wish to have. Unfortunately, this dedicated work ethic is not reflected in my own character. However, I would consider myself academically above average. I receive A's in all my honors classes and fives on all my AP Tests—an uncommon feat. To my parents, this isn't enough. Last year when I was awarded a 101% on my AP Physics test, a test where not many people receive an A, let alone over a 100; I was ecstatic. I was so



proud of myself and yearned for my dad's approval. After I rushed home and flaunted the score to my dad, he was satisfied but said something that has stuck in my mind ever since: "That's good, but you should get over 100 on every physics test."

This expectation of excellence isn't unique to my family. In the family of Amy Chua, more popularly named "Tiger Mom," she "refus[ed] sleepovers and playdates, drill[ed] academic activities for hours, insist[ed] on lengthy daily practice of the piano and violin, including weekends, high days and holidays." These draconian rearing methods were solely implemented to develop one asset: work ethic. With this work ethic, both her daughters, Sophia and Louisa, became Harvard undergrads. Do the ends justify the means? Yet another example is Alice Park, an Asian American writer for *Time*. In "The Tiger Mom Effect Is Real, Says Large Study," she recollects similar experiences of discipline that include "Saturday[s of] back-to-back piano lessons, music theory and ballet classes" that led her to become "a more organized and confident adult," and she "begrudgingly" admitted that "Tiger Moms may be on to something. [...] Hard work does pay off, albeit at the cost of some self-esteem."

Although this type of "Asian" parenting might be seen as objectively successful, it creates an environment of emotional and social stress. Kids are put on the grueling task of practicing piano, reciting the times tables, or studying for their next Chinese school test rather than developing social skills and enjoying the fun of their youth. However, people like my parents argue that fun isn't a necessity because once you're past college, you can enjoy your life. I feel as though having no enjoyment creates an individual who might have a work ethic and intelligence but does not know how to have a good time or interact with others.

My parents hold high expectations for me, wanting me to be as high-achieving as my brother and constantly comparing me to him. The truth is, I am more social and less hardworking. I would much rather have a license to drive around on a Friday night than staying at home studying, but, since my brother didn't want a license, my parents think that it is unnecessary for me to get one. They want me to wait until college applications, something my friends find to be brutally restrictive. Similarly, I would much rather spend my Saturday nights chilling with my friends than working on my UChicago research paper; but, since my brother didn't even want to go out, my parents don't see a need for me to either.

This social constriction engulfs my life. They urge me to spend five hours at UChicago on Friday, stay home studying to get an A+ on Saturday, and spend yet another five hours at UChicago on Sunday. If I bring up the notion of going out with my friends, they reply with: "You shouldn't go out so much as you need to focus on college." This not only places additional stress on my social health but makes me jealous of those who have the freedom to go to parties on Saturdays with their license. Coming from a culture that values academics more than anything else, my parents don't understand the importance of social health; they keep comparing and restricting, hoping to create a second Harrison Wang.

Despite this, I know that their intentions are genuine. They are striving to make me a diligent individual, instilling an unrivaled work ethic in me. But even though hard work is part of who I am, I will always seek the social path: learning the people skills that stand in stark contrast to my grade-obsessed culture. I just hope that my parents accept me as who I am: not a second Harrison Wang, but Herbert Wang, unabashedly myself at the cost of a little bit of hard work.

**Herbert Wang**

Grade 11

Hinsdale Central High School

Hinsdale

Teacher: Jared Friebe

**CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS TO  
*THE ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN***

As the written forum in which Illinois English teachers share their ideas, the *Illinois English Bulletin* welcomes all kinds of materials related to the teaching of English.

We seek articles dealing with literature, writing, language, media, speech, drama, film, culture, technology, standards, assessment, professional development, and other aspects of our profession. Any combination of research, theory, and practice is appropriate. Some articles take a formal and conclusive approach, while others are informal and exploratory.

Book reviews, poetry, black-and-white photographs, and line drawings are also welcome.

When you are ready to share your work with your colleagues across the state, please consult the submission guidelines on page 76. We look forward to hearing from you. If you have questions or suggestions for the editor, please

don't hesitate to get in touch (contact information on page 78). Thank you for reading, supporting, and contributing to the *Illinois English Bulletin*.

### **Submission Guidelines**

(See page 78 for the editor's contact information.)

- Via U.S. mail, send one clean, paper copy of the manuscript to the editor. See below for manuscript formatting guidelines and information to include in your cover letter.
- Attached to an e-mail message addressed to the editor, send an additional copy of the manuscript in an MS Word or PDF attachment. See below for manuscript formatting guidelines and information you should include in your e-mail message.
- In your cover letter (mailed with hard copy) and in your e-mail message (with electronic copy attached), include the following information: your manuscript title, name, mailing address, institutional affiliation, and phone number. Also indicate whether you are currently a member of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English (IATE). State that the manuscript has not been published or submitted elsewhere.
- Manuscript formatting guidelines: follow either the current *MLA Handbook* or the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* guidelines for parenthetical in-text citations, the works cited section, and other technical elements; follow NCTE's "Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language"; place page numbers at the top right corner of every page; type

and double-space throughout (including quotations, endnotes, and works cited), with one-inch margins all around.

- With both your paper and electronic manuscript submissions, please also include a biographical blurb of 50 words or fewer. (Blurbs for manuscripts with multiple authors should total 50 words or fewer.) Blurbs usually mention institutional and professional affiliations as well as teaching and research interests.
- The *Bulletin* editor will acknowledge receipt of your manuscript via e-mail.

### **Submission Deadlines**

You are welcome to submit your materials at any time to the editor of the *Illinois English Bulletin*. Traditionally, the *Bulletin's* spring issue features shorter articles based on presentations made at the previous autumn's IATE annual conference. Summer issues may be themed or all-inclusive. The fall issue presents the "Best Illinois Student Poetry and Prose." To be considered for inclusion in the spring issue, materials must be received by the editors by the previous November 1.

To be considered for inclusion in the summer issue, materials must be received by the editors by the previous January 15.

To be considered for inclusion in the fall issue ("Best Illinois Student Poetry and Prose"), materials must be submitted electronically through the IATE submission manager ([iate.submittable.com/submit](http://iate.submittable.com/submit)) by the previous January 31. Please see page 79 for the two-page special submission guidelines for fall issues.

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**CALL FOR STUDENT WRITING FROM  
ALL LEVELS FOR IATE'S BEST ILLINOIS  
POETRY AND PROSE CONTEST**

**DEADLINE:** Submit all contest entries electronically through the IATE submission manager ([iate.submittable.com/submit](http://iate.submittable.com/submit)) no later than January 31, 2020.

**FORMAT:** Accepted file types include .doc, .docx, and .rtf.

**COVER LETTER:** The "Cover Letter" field must include:

- Full name of student
- Student's grade level at time piece was written
- Full name of school
- School's complete mailing address
- Full name of teacher (indicate if IATE member)
- E-mail address of instructor



**IMPORTANT:** The student's name, the school's name, and the teacher's name must not appear anywhere other than in the "Cover Letter" field.

**LIMITS:**

- 1) Five prose and ten poetry entries per teacher.
- 2) One thousand words of prose per entry; forty lines of poetry per entry.

**SOME SUGGESTIONS FROM THE JUDGES:**

- 1) Please see that students abide by the line and word limits. Have them revise and shorten pieces that exceed these limits.
- 2) Please emphasize to students that prose and fiction are not synonymous. Encourage them to explore the possibilities of expository essays, arguments, and personal narratives.

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IATE Prose Contest

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