

# 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 nearly 1,500 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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Editor: Janice Neuleib  
Copyeditor: Sarah Haberstich  
Publications Unit Director: Tara Reeser  
Production Director: Sarah Haberstich  
Intern: Jessica Wozniak  
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## **INTRODUCTION TO THE BEST ILLINOIS STUDENT POETRY AND PROSE OF 2009**

JANICE NEULEIB

Welcome readers of the youth poetry and prose *Illinois English Bulletin*. This issue begins with a wonderful essay by Illinois Poet Laureate Kevin Stein of Bradley University. I think that I now completely understand the idea of metaphor, especially tenor and vehicle. Thanks so much, Kevin, and thanks for your amazing work for these young poets. Our thanks go also and always to Robin L. Murray of Eastern Illinois University. Thanks for coordinating all the poetry readers and judges, and thanks for your constant commitment to IATE. A sad goodbye and strong vote of appreciation go to Kimberly M. Radek of Illinois Valley Community College for her devoted work with the young writers' prose. IATE is grateful to you for years of commitment and hard work. Finally, hearty welcome to Kimberly's colleague Delores Robinson, our new coordinator of the prose portion of the contest.



The work of these youngsters touches deep threads not just in the minds and hearts of young readers but in all of us. These works deal with questions of identity and loss, experience and growth. Writers as young as Taylor Dirks (grade 2), who defines slavery in vivid imagery and as experienced as senior Kristin VanSpankeren, who describes the love lost in the dementia of an aged grandparent, take the reader into worlds of pain and regret and hope and love. These texts all show the power and energy of the youngsters who produced them. Many thanks to the teachers who labored over drafts and then submitted these amazing finished products. You make a difference in all our lives, not just those of your students.

Finally, my ongoing thanks and deep appreciation go to our leaders and readers at the Publications Unit here at Illinois State University. Sarah Haberstich, assistant director, gives constant time and attention to the *Illinois English Bulletin*, and Tara Reeser, director, oversees all of the Publications Unit's work, both with unflagging zeal.

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

Frank Alletto	Mark Maxwell
Ann S. Ambrosia	Elizabeth Maxwell-Carlson
Kimberly Arndt	Ana Montelongo
James Barnabee	Sara Okey
Amy Birtman	Hilda Raisner
David Burnham	Alisa Remke
Angelique Burrell	Mindi Rench
Diane Clark	Diane M. Riley
Alexis Colianni	Lee Roll
Heather Corral	Judith Ruhana
Dawn Drake	Mike Ryczek
Ann Dudek	Jeanette Saribekian
Mara Dukats	Sara Sher
Tarrie Dullum	Katherine Starnes
Judi Elman	Kate Sullivan
Margaret Forst	Caroline Sweiss
Jared Friebel	Karen Topham
Carol Gallagher	Carolyn Vaughn
Stephen B. Heller	David Widzisz
Cheryl Hope	Jan Wiezorek
Cyn Koukos	Nell Wiseman
Dave Lapish	Warren Wolfe
Karen Lemaistre	Amy Zimmermann
John Lodle	

## IATE POETRY RUNNERS-UP

**Misty Clerk**, “Three Minutes Away From Death,” Grade 10, Carbondale Community High School, Carbondale, Tarrie Dullum–teacher

**Ethan Quang Dam**, “The War...,” Grade 7, Dunlap Valley Middle School, Dunlap, Katherine Starnes–teacher

**Patrick Masson**, “Into the World of Dreams,” Grade 8, Lycée Français de Chicago, Chicago, Cyn Koukos–teacher

**Charlie Maxwell**, “Underdog,” Grade 6, Nichols Middle School, Evanston, David Burnham–teacher

**Ariel Rosen**, “Durability,” Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, James Barnabee–teacher

**Caitlyn Strader**, “A Day in the Life,” Grade 12, Oakland High School, Oakland, Lee Roll–teacher

**Brandon S. Tebear**, “Once in a Lifetime,” Grade 9, Oakland High School, Oakland, Lee Roll–teacher

## IATE POETRY HONORABLE MENTIONS

**Tommy Ball**, "Ten-Minute Spill," Grade 12, Charleston High School, Charleston, Nell Wiseman–teacher

**Brian Barker**, "Satisfaction," Grade 12, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Amy Zimmermann–teacher

**Laura Berman**, "Lipstick 1973," Grade 12, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, James Barnabee–teacher

**Maya Braithwaite**, "My Dream World," Grade 6, Nichols Middle School, Evanston, David Burnham–teacher

**Sage Bruhl**, "Missing," Grade 7, Northbrook Junior High School, Northbrook, Mindi Rench–teacher

**Emily Burnham**, "A Creaky Memory," Grade 7, Northbrook Junior High School, Northbrook, Mindi Rench–teacher

**Chad Cherry**, "Final Pitch," Grade 9, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Amy Birtman–teacher

**Amy Czarkowski**, "Eraser Marks," Grade 12, Maine South High School, Park Ridge, Kimberly Arndt–teacher

**Taylor Duckman**, "Sara Shulman," Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Elizabeth Maxwell-Carlson–teacher

**Caanan K. Espinoza**, "His Closet," Grade 11, Morton West High School, Berwyn, Ann S. Ambrosia–teacher

**Eleni Ethington**, "Guess Who Extra by Milton Bradley," Grade 11, Oakland High School, Oakland, Lee Roll–teacher

**Louisa Fan**, "Memoir of My Grandmother," Grade 9, Libertyville High School, Libertyville, Dave Lapish–teacher

**Olivia Hacker**, "Friendship," Grade 7, Monroe Middle School, Wheaton, Carol Gallagher–teacher

**Sami Hayes**, "Day 9," Grade 9, Oakland High School, Oakland, Lee Roll–teacher

**Victoria Jesionek**, "Leaves in Your River," Grade 12, Rolling Meadows High School, Rolling Meadows, Mark Maxwell—teacher

**Kaitlan Johnson**, "Tears," Grade 10, Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Hilda Raisner—teacher

**Marina Magnelli**, "Find It in Your Heart," Grade 7, Monroe Middle School, Wheaton, Carol Gallagher—teacher

**Orko Manna**, "A Spring Storm," Grade 10, Libertyville High School, Libertyville, David Widzisz—teacher

**Keira McCarthy**, "The Snowflake," Grade 7, Northbrook Junior High School, Northbrook, Mindi Rench—teacher

**Robert Melton**, "Band," Grade 9, Charleston Middle School, Charleston, Dawn Drake/Jeanette Saribekian—teachers

**Elenor Methvan**, "Summer," Grade 9, Charleston Middle School, Charleston, Dawn Drake/Jeanette Saribekian—teachers

**Megan Jo Mills**, "Circus Morning," Grade 11, Oakland High School, Oakland, Lee Roll—teacher

**Shelby Most**, "Grandpoppy," Grade 12, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Margaret Forst—teacher

**Anna Oleksinski**, "2nd," Grade 12, Libertyville High School, Libertyville, Karen Lemaistre—teacher

**Angelo B. Perez**, "Remembering Granny," Grade 8, St. Mathais Transfiguration Catholic School, Chicago, Jan Wieszorek—teacher

**Kevin Ross**, "Tabula Rasa," Grade 8, Conrady Junior High School, Hickory Hills, Caroline Sweiss—teacher

**Sarah Smiley**, "The Performance," Grade 10, Libertyville High School, Libertyville, David Widzisz—teacher

**Aaron M. Smith**, "Old Shoes," Grade 12, Charleston High School, Charleston, Nell Wiseman—teacher

**Kim Taylor**, "Tangerine Forest," Grade 6, Monroe Middle School, Wheaton, Carol Gallagher—teacher

**Patrick Tomlin**, "Song of Myself," Grade 6, Monroe Middle School, Wheaton, Carol Gallagher—teacher

**Kristin VanSpankeren**, "A Woman," Grade 12, Lyons Township High School, LaGrange, Kate Sullivan—teacher

## IATE PROSE RUNNERS-UP

**Kelly Bauer**, “Gathering the Bulbs of Christmas,” Grade 11, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, Stephen B. Heller—teacher

**Katie Beebe**, “A Pumpkin Patch, A Hospital,” Grade 11, O’Fallon Township High School, O’Fallon, Diane M. Riley—teacher

**Anna Begley**, “Sea Glass,” Grade 12, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Amy Zimmermann—teacher

**Laura Casper**, “Descent,” Grade 12, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Karen Topham—teacher

**Jane Chung**, “Where Perpetrator, Victim, and Hero Unite,” Grade 10, Highland Park High School, Highland Park, Judi Elman—teacher

**Jeannet Clark**, “Klavierspieler Hände,” Grade 12, Rockford East High School, Rockford, Sara Okey—teacher

**Jesse Clifton**, “Flamjestafile,” Grade 11, Oakland High School, Oakland, Lee Roll—teacher

**Claire Haffner**, “Mixed Drinks,” Grade 12, Forest High School, Lake Forest, Margaret Forst—teacher

**Eleanor Hughes**, “Mock Essay,” Grade 10, Carbondale Community High School, Carbondale, Tarrie Dullum—teacher

**Adam Kaplan**, Untitled, Grade 10, Highland Park High School, Highland Park, Warren Wolfe—teacher

**Diana Kelterborn**, “Welcome to Jamaica,” Grade 12, Hinsdale Central High School, Hinsdale, Alexis Colianni—teacher

**Hayley Koch**, “Asparagus,” Grade 12, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Amy Zimmermann—teacher

**Christian La Luz**, “Becoming President,” Grade 8, St. Matthias Transfiguration Catholic School, Chicago, Jan Wiezorek—teacher

**Erica Littman**, “As the War Bells Sing,” Grade 6, Edgewood Middle School, Highland Park, Ana Montelongo–teacher

**Austin Manierre**, “Stories of a Writer,” Grade 12, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Karen Topham–teacher

**Josh Reich**, Untitled, Grade 8, Edgewood Middle School, Highland Park, Sara Sher–teacher

**Kevin Ross**, “Rain Clouds,” Grade 8, Conrady Junior High School, Hickory Hills, Caroline Sweiss–teacher

**Emma Rowell**, “Sailing,” Grade 9, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Amy Birtman–teacher

**Sarah Steigerwald**, “Newton’s Theory of Vampires,” Grade 12, Hinsdale Central High School, Hinsdale, Alexis Colianni–teacher



## IATE PROSE HONORABLE MENTIONS

**Brian Bauer**, “Mind Over Matter,” Grade 8, St. Matthias Transfiguration Catholic School, Chicago, Jan Wiezorek–teacher

**Wallerand Bazin**, “Little Ann (A Character Analysis),” Grade 6, Lycée Français de Chicago, Chicago, Cyn Koukos–teacher

**Seth Bearman**, “Who Needs Oars?,” Grade 6, Nichols Middle School, Evanston, David Burnham–teacher

**Jordan Bercasio**, “Taking a Break,” Grade 10, Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Judith Ruhana–teacher

**Lauren Burke**, “Cry,” Grade 12, Lyons Township High School, LaGrange, Frank Alletto–teacher

**Kyle Flagstad**, “Love Stories,” Grade 12, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Diane Clark–teacher

**Taylor Goldenstein**, “Plugged,” Grade 12, Adlai E. Stevenson High School, Lincolnshire, James Barnabee–teacher

**Grant Gonzales**, “The Importance of Multi-tasking,” Grade 12, Belleville West High School, Belleville, John Lodle–teacher

**Olivia Grabelle**, “Dirty Rain,” Grade 10, Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Hilda Raisner–teacher

**Laurel Guido**, “Mumbles of a Disordered Mind,” Grade 11, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Karen Topham–teacher

**Billy Hanson**, “Mountain in My Way,” Grade 12, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Amy Birtman–teacher

**Alyssa Marie Harn**, “You Can’t Live Your Life Dreaming,” Grade 12, Lyons Township High School, LaGrange, Ann Dudek–teacher

**Toby Klein**, “The Last Goodbye,” Grade 7, Northbrook Junior High, Northbrook, Mindi Rench–teacher

**Laura Lindsey**, “The Fruits of Our Labor,” Grade 11, Hinsdale Central High School, Hinsdale, Jared Friebel–teacher

**Erin Malles**, “The Ouija Board,” Grade 9, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Amy Birtman–teacher

**Stephanie McKay**, “Oh, Sweet Virginia,” Grade 12 Hinsdale Central High School, Hinsdale, Angelique Burrell–teacher

**Brian Medendorp**, “Journey to Mecca,” Grade 7, Monroe Middle School, Wheaton, Carol Gallagher–teacher

**Angela Montoya**, Untitled, Grade 11, Hinsdale Central High School, Hinsdale, Jared Friebel–teacher

**Morgan Rawlinson**, “Dreams,” Grade 8, Lycée Français de Chicago, Chicago, Cyn Koukos–teacher

**Erin Grace Roth**, “Miss Tracy,” Grade 10, Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Judith Ruhana–teacher

**Ross Steinberg**, “I Am Safe,” Grade 8, Northbrook Junior High, Northbrook, Heather Corral–teacher

**Nicholas Yi**, Untitled, Grade 12, Lake Forest High School, Lake Forest, Diane Clark–teacher



**METAPHOR:  
SEEING THE LIKENESS OF UNLIKE THINGS**

KEVIN STEIN  
ILLINOIS POET LAUREATE

Metaphor is revelation given body by language. It is the poet's intangible flash of insight given flesh so readers can see and thus share that insight. In short, it is the embodied percept, the idea paraded for the surprise, delight, and edification of readers. If *seeing* is the fundamental act of the lyric poem, so then is metaphor the agent of our seeing. Metaphor brashly declares that X is Y. To the contrary, suggesting that one thing is *sort of like* another remains the milquetoast province of simile. Make no mistake, the poet's saying one thing equals another is an audacious act. There's nothing coy or propositional or timid about it. In making metaphor, the poet asserts a quality of seeing that bristles with electricity. Think of the boldness in play here. The poet of metaphor affirms a wonderfully daring notion—that she,

unlike anyone else before her, sees that one thing *is* another. She risks the poet's tightrope, balancing X and Y at either end of her outstretched arms, teetering high above the wide-eyed rest of us. One misstep spills both poet and metaphor to the ground, the poet thus revealed as foolhardy and her metaphor as merely foolish.

*Look*, the metaphor cajoles if not commands. Really *look*, which is to say, look so attentively that one sees a thing or idea as one has never before seen or understood it. If the poet gets lucky, and the reader does, too, epiphany is sudden lightning within them both. Notice that I didn't say, epiphany strikes *like* lightning. Metaphor insists epiphany *is* lightning: quick and brilliant (possibly even destructive) illumination.

Metaphor's colliding of two ostensibly disparate entities smacks of lightning's surprise. It may shock, sizzle, and momentarily illuminate both poet and reader. Its flash lingers jagged across the mind's eye, a faintly visible trace of one idea charging headlong into another. One is tempted to say that such lightning comes unbidden from the ether to zap earthbound us with its fiery insight. But don't be blinded by its sudden light. Metaphors are made of things as well, and their act of convergence is as horizontal as it is vertical, as much earthly as heavenly. This is metaphor's junction of unlike things made suddenly alike.

Edward Hirsch reminds us that the Greek root *metaphora* means, in essence, "carrying from one place to another." The work of metaphor is thus transport—transferring the notion of one thing to another. Metaphor's arrival sweetly insists that hereafter we'll see neither thing in the accustomed ways. Its charge changes us. Its seeing alters our seeing.

How does this happen? It results from the interaction of metaphor's two essential parts, the *tenor* and the *vehicle*. The tenor is the thing or idea being looked at. The vehicle is how

that thing is being looked at. In saying “my love is a rose,” one has hooked the tenor of one’s lover to the vehicle of a rose. This carries the sweetness of the rose to one’s beloved, accruing all the appealing scent and texture and beauty thereof.

Among this year’s splendid group of winning poems, the deft use of metaphor operates in full display. Congratulations to all of these worthy students and their able teachers. Within the four works chosen as Poems of Special Merit, three make particular use of metaphor and one relies largely on simile, metaphor’s cousin.

Abby Tiesman’s “The Hurricane” opens with a bold metaphor pointing the way for the poem that follows. The hurricane, we’re told, “is a raging bull charging blindly in circles.” From there, readers are treated to a *conceit*, an extended metaphor, through which the hurricane’s typical behavior is equated with that of a bull’s charging a “red cloak.” Using metaphor, the poet presents the hurricane’s bullish ways: its thunderous approach, its quiet “eye,” and its sheer brute force. The poem, arriving at its fetching closer, makes use of simile to top off this conceit. The passing hurricane’s just missing a waved cloak is described as, *like* “a child reaching for an apple in a tree” that remains barely “out of reach.” This adds a surprising note of innocence to the bull’s menacing behavior, something lucky hurricane survivors may well contemplate while standing beside their homes blessedly spared from ruin.

Within many poems, metaphor’s best punch comes swiftly, a notion Stefanie Borntreger’s “Complementary Identity” illustrates in good measure. The spritely speaker tells us immediately, “I am yellow,” then leaps to a metaphorical litany of herself as yellow, both tangible and not:

A daisy chain or a minute of May!

A bubble of anticipation

ready to burst into giggles—  
a fit of sunbeams on the coldest day.

This speaker's yellow minuet taps its feet until it gradually becomes tapped out. The speaker tires as the day and she both fade to purples, "like dusk, like dawn," trusting simile to say what she is *like* not what she *is*. In "violet sleep" she dreams of "daisy chain yellow" in whose form she will again awaken.

In like fashion, Allie Perry's "Polish on Her Toes" begins with a metaphor of assertion: "She's a China girl, just a summer peach / Yep, she's a peach parfait." That quick surge of metaphor equates the speaker with her chosen nail polish colors, characterizing the poem's verbal agility as well as its frenetic pace. We readers come to know the speaker's many and evolving moods through the tenor of her nail colors. And we are also left to ponder the deeper if more subtle notion of how the fashion industry and its advertising play upon a young woman's need for self-definition as well as whimsy. What's more, the poem is musically chiming and decidedly effervescent. Through this syncopated beat, the speaker changes colors and personalities, unveiling herself finally as "daddy's girl / In Irish green who's prone to purple"—what she is and what she isn't now concealed as much as revealed.

Among these Special Merit poems, Laurel Guido's "warm hearts and picket fences" strikes a different chord, relying primarily on simile to animate its lines. Innovative in approach, the poem exhibits a willingness to break the rules. Its format blends alternating sections of declarative simile and intentionally enigmatic narrative. The poem opens with an unknown, an *x*, which the remainder of the poem ostensibly fleshes out through simile and narrative exposition: "*x* is like a picket fence, with flowers winding between the wood." Why do I say ostensibly? The answer lies in the speaker's saying

one thing and doing quite another. One gets the impression that the speaker half-wishes to reveal her secret and half-wishes to keep it her own, the private kept private even when on poetic display. The narrative snippets she offers readers are just that, snippets—or, as she says, “a quick snapshot, a frame of mind” conveyed in furtive fragments culled from a larger story to which we readers are not quite privy. There’s something of the forbidden swirling about the poem, something hidden even when flaunted before readers’ eyes. While the outside world may be allowed a peek inside the couple’s relationship, that vision is offered up in “dream, colorful and unpredictable.” In this way the poet’s choice of simile functions exceedingly well, for the formula “x is like” preserves sufficient fuzziness so that her subject retains its life-giving mystery. Even as the speaker coyly lifts the veil, she does so only enough to ensure that readers yearn for more than they ever will know about the pair.

These poems demonstrate metaphor’s mode and allure. Metaphor enables us to see the likeness of unlike things. It does so with flurry and flash and élan. And it does so always with the confidence of its vision. Whereas simile dwells in demure approximation, eyes averted, metaphor boldly looks readers in the eye. As a mode of relation, metaphor is as brusque as it is epiphanic. It is the poet’s *seeing* seen and felt and understood within the reader’s fresh seeing. Metaphor is the poet’s mode of conveyance, a transport of idea and thing from which we readers emerge changed.



**Poems of Special Merit**  
**2009–2010 IATE Poetry Competition**

It is my pleasure to recognize these students' submissions as Poems of Special Merit:

*"Complementary Identity,"* Stefanie Borntreger, Grade 11, Oakland High School

*"warm hearts and picket fences,"* Laurel Guido, Grade 11, Lake Forest High School

*"Polish on Her Toes,"* Allie Perry, Grade 10, Glenbrook South High School

*"The Hurricane,"* Abby Tiesman, Grade 6, Monroe Middle School

Congratulations to these students and their teachers.

## **X IS LIKE...**

ROBIN L. MURRAY

Young Illinois poets write about nature, holidays, love, and identity—universal themes that align them with poets around the U.S. and the world. The emotions a second grader reveals with a poem comparing slaves and leaves are as powerful as the young love illustrated in a high schooler’s “warm hearts and picket fences.” Poems exploring identity connect changes to colors or nail polish. And nature poems highlight both its beauty and its power. All of the poems included here demonstrate not only the strength of these young writers but also the skills of their teachers. Please recognize both students and teachers for the good work on display here. And enjoy!



## COMPLEMENTARY IDENTITY

I am yellow!  
A daisy chain or a minute of May!  
A bubble of anticipation  
ready to burst into giggles—  
a fit of sunbeams on the coldest day.

My words sing  
whisper-light in soprano,  
and through restless hallways,  
my steps are a minuet—  
(tap! tap! tap!)  
encircled by a spotlight  
I've conjured in my mind.  
The glow is warm and lulling; it tires me—  
I fall back and fade...

Until I'm purple—  
like dusk, like dawn,  
and the silent seconds in between.  
Like perfect waking sleep—  
chilled and hushful.

In moments like these...  
epiphanies of purple...

I let the hummm of voices  
sway my mind to violet sleep...  
with daisy chain yellow  
dreams in my eyes.

**Stefanie Borntreger**

Grade 11

Oakland High School

Oakland

Lee Roll, teacher

## **SLAVES AND LEAVES**

One of the saddest things about a slave's life is like when you see leaves get torn from trees like slave children and parents get torn from their own families.

Another sad thing is when you see insects eat the leaves; it's like when a slave doesn't do the right thing their master will whip them to death.

When you see the leaves on the ground just sitting there, it's like when slaves are put in jail for doing something very bad.

When you see the tree get struck by lightning, that is the total death of the slave's life arriving.

When you see the beginning of a new leaf, that is the life of a newborn child.

When you see the leaves swirling around, that is the absolute freedom of a slave.

**Taylor Grace Dirks**

Grade 2

Gwendolyn Brooks Elementary School

DeKalb

Carolyn Vaughn, teacher

## **CHRISTMAS TREE**

This world is like a freshly decorated Christmas tree,  
Shining brightly on a cold winter night.  
The tree's base is the gracious earth and all its glory;  
Though holding beauty of all measures; it adds majestic  
    beauty of its own.  
The endless strands of lights are the trillions of different  
    people;  
Together they make the earth beautiful yet every one of them  
    is unique.  
All the ornaments on the tree are the millions of man-made  
    wonders;  
To some they are ugly or tacky but to many others they are  
    priceless and hold great meaning.  
The presents lying eagerly to be unwrapped are all of life's  
    wonderful surprises;  
Sometimes you may not get what you wanted you may still  
    cherish it.  
And then at the top of the tree, the bright cheerful star is your  
    everlasting life;  
Though just another star to some, it shines brilliantly to you  
    and loved ones.

**Drusilla Marie Dunlap**

Grade 7

Dunlap Valley Middle School

Dunlap

Katherine Starnes, teacher

WARM HEARTS AND PICKET FENCES

x is like a picket fence, with flowers winding between the wood.

we walked along the sidewalk, fingers intertwined. the warm sun joined us, hidden in our hair and our smiles. his beauty captured by a quick snapshot, a frame of mind. i caught him at the moment he laughed. he was beautiful.

x is like a thunderstorm, dark and mysterious and alive.

we sat against the bricks of my house, wearing nothing but each other. my blanket was wrapped around us, the edges muddied from the rainwater. tears came quickly from my closed eyes when he told me he would be gone by sunrise.

x is like a breeze, light and fresh in the early morning.

we were still connected, with calls and letters and little brown packages, like the one left on my doorstep. the *fragile* warning on the side reminded me of his bones and heart. inside was a dried sunflower, which i hung above my bed.

x is like a pulse, strong and splashed with love.

we pressed our aching limbs together, breathing in each other's air. the sun hung low in the trees, haloing his hair and illuminating the relief in his shoulders. we created a rhythm with our hearts, steadily pounding between our lungs.

x is like a dream, colorful and unpredictable and mine.



**Laurel Guido**

Grade 11

Lake Forest High School

Lake Forest

Karen Topham, teacher

**IF YOU GIVE A KID A SUNFLOWER SEED:  
A NUMEROFF IMITATION**

If you give a kid a sunflower seed,  
he is going to want to plant it.  
When he is done planting it,  
he'll probably ask for water to support it.  
Seeing the water will remind him that he likes to swim.  
He'll ask to borrow a swimsuit.  
So you'll drive him to the local pool.  
On the way to the pool, he'll notice a soccer field.  
He'll probably want to play.  
So you'll have to take him to Target to buy a soccer ball.  
At Target he'll see the birthday card display  
and remember it is his mom's birthday.  
Then he'll ask for your phone to call his mom.  
Talking to his mom will remind him he needs to meet his  
sister at Chipotle Mexican Grill.  
At Chipotle, he'll order a cheddar, mozzarella, and chicken  
quesadilla.  
When he is eating his quesadilla, cheese will ooze all over  
his shirt.  
So he'll probably want to go to the restroom to clean off his  
shirt.  
When he is cleaning his shirt,  
he'll notice a vase of roses.  
Seeing the roses will remind him that he wants to go to the  
Chicago Botanic Garden.  
At the Botanic Garden he'll trip and fall over a tree stump.  
While he is on the ground crying,  
he'll notice a sunflower seed.  
And as he picks it up to show you,  
chances are,  
he'll want to plant it.

**Rachel Hirshman**

Grade 8

Northbrook Junior High School

Northbrook

Heather Corral, teacher

**POLISH ON HER TOES.**

*apologies to Sinful Colors, N.Y.C., Sally Hansen,  
Jessica, Pure Ice, OPI*

She's a China girl, just a summer peach  
Yep, she's a peach parfait

She's swimming in a Bali mist, a deep green ocean  
Big money frost, and drenched in purple potion

She's out all night, a radiant rose, dressed in Kashmir cream  
Downtown, lighting, blazing blue, rapid red, a fiery scene

Flashy fuschia, hot magenta, hey, what's your name  
A petal pusher, in cha-cha red, I'm jumpin' jade

Blue streak, dream on, I'm daddy's girl  
In Irish green who's prone to purple

Just a China girl.

**Allie Perry**

Grade 10

Glenbrook South High School

Glenview

Cheryl Hope, teacher

## PERFECT SCORE

She had the eyes of three judges  
And a silent chatter in the crowd,  
The pretty girl on the edge of the beam,  
Frustrated by pressure,  
Finds her footing,  
Sucks in her stomach,  
Tightens every muscle in her strong body,  
Raises her arms upward,  
Lifts up to the balls of her feet,  
Sticks out her rib cage,  
Slightly bends her knees,  
Breathes,  
Concentrates,  
Balances,  
And then, breaking the stillness,  
Thrusts backwards pulling her knees to her chest.

The girl  
Flips up and back,  
Turning,  
Twisting,  
Sticks it,  
Sways,  
Smiles,  
Salutes,  
Shows impatience  
With the anxious pounding of the audience—  
Bum bum  
    Bum bum  
        Bum bum  
The crowd screams with amazement  
As three judges lift their ten-point cards.

**Haley Thomas**

Grade 9

Lake Forest High School

Lake Forest

Amy Birtman, teacher

## THE HURRICANE

A hurricane is a raging bull charging blindly in circles  
The wind blows and the rain howls  
Like a predator about to attack  
The bull's hooves thunder on the ground

Suddenly, all is still  
It's the eye of the hurricane  
Rage leaves the eyes of the bull  
Like water draining from a bathtub

All too soon, the hurricane resumes  
The matador waves his red cloak in front of the bull  
The hurricane is ready for the rest of its destruction  
Rage like a river overflowing floods back to the bull once again

The hurricane bull charges  
Missing the cloak just barely  
Like a child reaching for an apple in a tree  
Just out of reach

**Abby Tiesman**

Grade 6

Monroe Middle School

Wheaton

Carol Gallagher, teacher

## ILLINOIS PROSE 2009

KIMBERLY M. RADEK

In Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, she offers sage advice for beginning writers based on her experience as a novelist and food critic. She acknowledges, without directly addressing, what a difficult job being a writing teacher is. Writing teachers are, after all, part teacher, part boss, part coach, part friend, part partner, part critic, part therapist, and even part parent. They help nurture terrible first drafts into beautiful, poignant prose, and so, Lamott views writing as a gift that writers give to the world. In a fresh and engaging voice, she tells it like it is while providing limitless encouragement and support. The book, which highlights the difficult and complex path upon which writing instructors tread, describes her reaction to someone who reads another's drafts and is not very supportive:

[W]hat if someone agrees to read and work on your stuff for you...and it turns out that he says things about



your work, even in the nicest possible tone of voice, that are totally negative and destructive? You find yourself devastated, betrayed. Here you've done this incredibly gutsy thing, shown someone your very heart and soul, and he doesn't think it's any good. He says how sorry he is that this is how he feels. Well, let me tell you this—I don't think he is. (169)

While writing teachers may well read hundreds of first drafts that might be better suited for a flamethrower than publication, we always recognize that it is our role to provide encouragement and motivation to our beginning students, teaching them to reveal their own hearts and souls—while understanding that in many cases this must occur at the same time that they, themselves, are only just coming to know their own hearts and souls. We know, even if they do not yet, that their next drafts will be better than their first drafts.

We readers at Illinois Valley Community College are once again humbled by the teachers' gifts to us in the nurturing of these young writers, who bravely reveal their hearts and souls to us in these pages, and it is a gift we are delighted to share with all the readers across Illinois.

Kimberly M. Radek,

On behalf of all of the other judges at Illinois Valley Community College

Lori Cinotte

Kaushalya Jagasia

Randy Rambo

Delores Robinson

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## THE GIRL

"Mama, lift me." The girl gazed at her mother with those large hazel eyes. Her voice is feeble, her mother thought. Am I imagining it? What has happened to us?

The mother lifted her daughter and stared at her as though asking where she wanted to go next. The girl gazed out the window at the beautiful day, watching the autumn leaves blow. The mother could not remove her eyes from her daughter. Her look read of concern. These days she was always concerned.

Finally, the girl shifted her head. It rested on her mother's collarbone and slowly angled to her mother's face.

"Let's go outside, Mama," she suggested with a big smile. Her mother said nothing at first, staring at her daughter quizzically. A moment and the daughter spoke again, "It's nice out! Come on, Mama. You always say we should go outside when it's nice."

The mother sighed and smiled at her child who was again distracted. She was right, of course. Somehow she always remembered her mother's little desires, like spending time outdoors whenever the weather allowed. It wasn't often that the daughter wanted to partake in that activity, though. Why now? It's probably not a good idea. But she wants it. She needs it. It shouldn't be worrisome; it's just nature, just the world. The big, hazardous world...

The mother shook every thought out of her head. *I'm* worrisome, she thought. That, both sides of her mind could agree on. After a long silence, the mother spoke, "Yes," she said with all the cheerfulness she could muster.

The daughter's head cranked back immediately. She looked excited.

"Of course," the mother added upon seeing her daughter's face. "Let me get the coats."

"All right, wake up. This isn't that hard. You're pre-med for God's sake!" the professor commanded. "Cystic Fibrosis... anyone?"

"It's a genetic disease," offered a cocky first year. "Makes you tired and full of mucus." The teacher sighed.

"Yes, Wagner's right, it can cause fatigue, but so can those parties of yours last night. Though, I'll give you credit for including the mucus. Can anybody else tell me more or do I actually have to check who did the reading? Perhaps an essay—." Hands shot into the air.

"Cystic fibrosis is a genetic disorder. It becomes pronounced in young children. Its most common symptoms are salty sweat, chronic breathing problems, and intestinal blockage," an enthusiastic student recited.

"Very good, those indeed are many of its symptoms. And, as Wagner said, it makes you tired." The class snickered. "Does anybody want to add anything? A more specific time frame regarding age and progression of the disease, Connelly?"

"Yes, ummm...well, it's diagnosed in babies or young children and can lead to serious developmental problems. It can also give you growths on your nose."

"Among other things, yes. Fatality?"

"With recent medical technology people can live into their forties, but that's the best we can do."

"Unfortunately, that is true. Thankfully, though, those afflicted are able to have a life."

"It compromised his immune system," the doctor stated sympathetically. By now, that was obvious. "I'm so sorry, but he didn't stand a chance against the flu, not with the cystic fibrosis and the drugs already in his body." The hospital room looked empty with only three adults and the bed-ridden boy.

"I understand," sniffed the mother, looking down at her comatose child. His face was pale, lifeless, and reflected the stark outline of his father hovering above him. "We know there is nothing more to be done. Thank you for your help."

As the mother and the doctor spoke of the unfortunate events of the past weeks, the father stared at his child; his only child, a boy who had never had much of a life.

From the beginning he was tiny. He wasn't completely normal, but his parents were not worried until they heard the diagnosis. *Cystic fibrosis*—the parents were horrified when they heard the words.

From then on, they were always concerned about his well-being. For good reason, they watched over him like a hawk to make sure he would not compromise his condition. But they could not prevent the obvious complications of the disease: Matthew grew weaker and weaker as the years wore on and was certainly in no shape to participate in activities of his age group. He was confined to his lonely fight for survival which his parents could do nothing to abate except give him drugs that often made him uncomfortable.

They could not prevent the effects of the disease. Soon after his eighth birthday, Matthew caught the flu. From then, it was a downward slide. All attempts to keep the virus from attacking his body failed. Eventually, all that was left was to watch Matthew's body slowly succumb to its fate. These were his father's thoughts as he stood in the hospital room against a soundtrack of medical noises. He felt guilty that he wasn't able to save Matthew and prayed to God that nobody would ever have to go through that again.

One is surprised by the power of a simple word—

Short and simple, but full of implications.

Take a word with only four syllables that has been around for centuries.

It brings to mind fear or hope  
Distress or comfort.  
It is used everyday  
Not always by doctors.  
A pediatrician's office where kids are at play,  
A young girl sits in a small room  
Gazing at her mother with those large hazel eyes.  
How will the word affect her? Her mother?  
There are too many factors.  
The pain, the cost, the paranoia,  
It is best to know:  
Will it be the same as with Matthew?  
The word will bring understanding and hopefully, stability.  
"May I speak with you?"  
Diagnosis.  
"You wait here honey, I'll only be a moment."  
"And?"  
"There is nothing to fear."  
  
"Thank you."  
"Mama? Can we go outside?"  
"Of course. Let's go."

**Kathryn Elizabeth Abendroth**

Grade 10

Evanston Township High School

Evanston

Hilda Raisner, teacher

## CRACKS

She's massaging her hands in a weary, circular motion, her knuckles reddening as she rubs. The dry cracks split deeper as she flexes her fingers, opening her wounds to the world. Everywhere else she shows no sign of hurt, and I think back to this summer before it all began, before she had to fool anyone. When her hands were tan and smooth, happy as they held his. Then fall came and so did the biting truth that tore them apart. She hides her devastation so well, only letting it show in her hands. Does she know what they share with the world?

"Here," I say, bringing her the lotion as I sit down beside her. Taking her palm in mine, "This will help heal the cracks."

She looks into my eyes, not quite breaking from her daydream. I can feel her summer memories float past me in a warm breeze and I know she is back there, before fall came.

"Thanks," she whispers, pumping a dime size droplet onto the tips of her fingers, spreading the lotion onto her palm, and resuming her silent daydream. I look down at her knuckles and see; she has missed the cracks.

**Allison Beacham**

Grade 12

Lake Forest High School

Lake Forest

Mara Dukats, teacher

## THE DEATH OF A NATION

Is there a weapon so powerful, so lethal, that it can kill a nation? Yes. Although its bloodshed stains the hands of humanity, it is not human-made. Rather, this weapon is a toxic combination of actions, carried out by man, brought on by history. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 left 800,000 dead, with the nation's heart broken and scattered into bloody shards. A month after the genocide broke out, Wole Soyinka, in the *Los Angeles Times*, declared, "Rwanda is clinically dead as a nation." Wide eyes watched and wondered how such mass self-destruction could occur. The answer is simple: the world turned a blind eye, while the perpetrators were influenced by four factors.

In *Murambi, The Book of Bones: A Novel*, Boubacar Boris Diop examines the effects of the genocide. He illustrates a diffusion of responsibility through the character of a moderate Hutu. The man weighs his options of participating in the genocide, arguing, "If he didn't do anything, the Interahamwe were going to come and kill everyone in the house" (88). On one side of the scale are the man's morals and conscience; however, the urge to protect himself and his family heavily rests on the other side. Finally, he picks up his machete and leaves the house, choosing his path among the perpetrators. This diffusion of responsibility aids him in his decision-making process, allowing him to believe he is merely following authority to save his family. Nevertheless, he has Tutsi blood on his hands; he is responsible for his own wrongdoing. His belief that the blame lies in the hands of his superiors fuels his decision to break his morals. Authority has an inextinguishable power over a person, which compels him or her to participate in unspeakable acts that he or she normally would oppose.

Moreover, the reader recognizes the topic of anonymity. Doctor Joseph Karekezi is viewed as a trustworthy Hutu man among the Tutsi refugees. He urges them to take shelter from the Interahamwe in the Polytechnic. However, he describes his plans to betray and murder some 50,000 people sheltered in the school. He reflects, "Tomorrow I will be there.... There will be atrocious pain, of course, but only the weak-hearted confuse crime with punishment" (108). Karekezi does not feel one ounce of guilt over killing such a large populace, which includes his own family. He is able to commit such an atrocious act because he will not come face-to-face with death. The refugees will not know he has double-crossed them until they hear the truth manifested in the screams of others. The doctor's inner evil is disguised by his previously amicable reputation, allowing him to plan and carry out the killings. An individual is more readily able to commit a wrongdoing when disguised, since it offers protection from the consequences of the act.

In addition, Diop regularly utilizes the idea of dehumanization to explain the evil acts committed during the genocide. Faustin Gasana, a member of the Interahamwe, speaks of his father. "I have never heard him pronounce the word 'Tutsi.' He always calls them 'them' or 'Inyenzi,' literally cockroaches" (14). Gasana has grown up in a household that holds extreme views on the inferiority of Tutsis. This belief is deeply embedded in him. Thus, he is able to wake up every morning and reach for his machete with no regrets. Gasana genuinely believes Tutsis are worthless cockroaches, such thoughts contribute to the ease with which he extinguishes them. Uninformed beliefs are passed down through generations, dormant under the shell of a person. When these potent views are released and physically expressed, violence and evil ensue.



Likewise, the acceptance of evil offers an additional explanation as to how the killings continued on for 100 days. Aloys Ndasigwa, an Interahamwe at the front lines of the killing, describes a particular ambush on a church housing thousands of Tutsis. "Some members of the presidential guard arrived.... They flung some grenades and shot several rounds of automatic fire into the pile. Then they signaled to us to go in" (84). Ndasigwa, and hundreds of other young Hutus, witness the presidential guard attacking the Tutsis. They set an example of evil for the Interahamwe to follow. The young men are in an environment submerged in wrongdoing and are ready to fulfill their militant duties. They are sponges, soaking up the poison left out by their superiors. Eager to mirror the actions of those contributing to the foul environment, the Hutus merely reproduce gruesome images they have already seen in Rwanda. When individuals are eager to please a leader, they will follow the wrongful actions created by that leader, especially when they have witnessed those actions.

In *Murambi, The Book of Bones*, Diop showcases some negative aspects of human nature that are apparent within the events of the genocide. The extermination of the "cockroaches" stemmed from prejudicial views built up through the years. Murambi, with dead bodies on the side of the road serves as a macabre backdrop to the killings—killings planned by a coward, who hides in the shadows when all is done. The very killings performed by once innocent Hutu men who have now turned savage. These aspects fueled the killings, which led to the demise of the nation. Now is the time for Rwanda to prove its strengths and stitch itself back up, to wipe away the blood but leave the bodies, so as to always remember. Because, how does a nation reunite? It forgives, but it never forgets.

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#### **Mackenzie Bean**

Grade 10

Highland Park High School

Highland Park

Judi Elman, teacher

## STUCK IN THE TOLL-DRUMS

Nearly two weeks ago, I was driving through the foothills of Maine on buttery smooth roads, flanked by towering pines and aspens: highway bliss. But this bliss was constantly fleeting, as I was required, every thirty minutes, to frantically search for loose change. This change was to be given to a man or woman standing in a big yellow box in the middle of the highway so I could continue my journey north. A romantic would refer to these people as “gatekeepers,” granting passage to the grandeur of our greatest adventures, but I will refer to them as tollbooth operators, or if I’m feeling biblical, collectors.

While my obligatory coin search was a little annoying, what made me dread these booths were the people inside of them, or rather, my concept of the people inside them. The tollbooth operator must stand (or sit, as I’ve noticed the increase of chairs in booths over my lifetime) and make thousands of minute transactions every day, while having little to no interaction with the thousands of people who are on the other end. It may be the least gratifying job I can imagine. I would venture to say that these workers’ knowledge that they can be replaced by little more than baskets doesn’t exactly help. Nevertheless, I found one Maine man who seemed to dispel all notions of sadness in tollbooth operators.

About two hours into this intermittently blissful drive, I pulled forward to an elderly collector. My first thought was “hippie,” but he was so much more than that generalization could encapsulate. Wind gently teased his grey beard of both great breadth and density, undoubtedly taking its place among the finest beards of beard lore: Aristotle, da Vinci, Lincoln, ZZ Top. The follicular masterpiece was bookended by his winding hair braids, dyed in red, white, and blue segments.

Underneath his neon vest (because tollbooth operators are meant to be easily seen, not heard...lest there be an electronic basket, then they should be neither of the two) was a shirt that may or may not have been sewn out of a standard American flag. It was either this or a very oddly placed American flag print on a t-shirt. He wore Malcolm X eyeglasses that have recently become extraordinarily popular with hipsters, and on his little tollbooth table next to the register was a markedly large box of fireworks. It was four months past the Fourth of July. I like to think that a wholesome northeastern family, after purchasing fireworks at off-season prices, saw this old patriot and, along with their eighty-five cents, tossed him a box of Roman candles for good luck. I would also like to think he kept them in case he came across a car packed with unpatriotic wrongdoers, lighting a few for dramatic effect and then aiming for the tires. These colors don't run.

From what I gathered during our fifteen-second encounter, this man led a fairly interesting life. Or at least he did in the one I made up for him, and therein lies the true plight of the tollbooth operator. I would never have an adequate amount of time to inquire about that plight, because in order to have a conversation with a tollbooth operator, I would be holding up traffic. About the time we moved past some casual small talk, the chorus of car horns would be so deafeningly loud that our conversation would have to be discontinued. I suppose I could catch a man or woman in between shifts, but come to think of it, I have never once in my two years of driving and my fifteen years of passengering seen anyone exit or enter a tollbooth. I'm convinced there's an underground tollbooth catacomb I don't know about.

Catacombs aside, the thing that saddens me the most about tollbooths is the potent loneliness. Loneliness so palpable that I am surprised the booth windows aren't fogged

up. I have heard the cliché line about being surrounded by others yet totally alone, hundreds upon hundreds of times, but I'm certain that the tollbooth operator is one of the select few who truly knows the meaning of that phrase. The fact that they can be paid up to almost \$25 an hour<sup>1</sup>, amounting to upwards of 50 grand per year, makes some people furious. I imagine such people have voiced their opinion to these men and women in the middle of rush hour when the gate isn't working properly or the tollbooth operator ran out of change or needed to take a bathroom break or is exhausted from their two other jobs or the booth next to them just closed. I imagine the "you can be replaced by a basket" barb has been heard by many a veteran booth-er. While doing research for this essay, I found a man who retold the common tale of how his friend heated up some coins in his car's cigarette lighter and proceeded to drop them into the waiting hands of a toll collector. This is why I imagine they're paid what they're paid: (1) Unusual hours: the tolling system never closes; and (2) An emotional toll: loneliness and whatever emotion arises when Thomas Jefferson's visage is burned into your palm by someone else's nickel.

The Illinois State Toll Highway Authority makes nearly \$600 million per year in tolls<sup>2</sup>, and with that money has come the marvel of open-road tolling. Before this form of tolling came about, I had always wondered if tollbooth collectors bought I-PASSes. But, even then, they would have some sort of interaction with their fellow employees. This would come

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1. *Median Hourly Rate by Years Experience: Toll Booth Collector*. Chart. *Payscale*. Payscale, n.d. Web. 21 Nov. 2009.

2. Holland, William G. *Illinois State Highway Authority Financial and Compliance Audit*. Springfield: Office of the Auditor General, 2009. Web. 23 Nov. 2009.

in the split second a sensor needs to recognize the I-PASS and subsequently lift up the gate. With the extraordinary convenience of open-road tolling, I wonder if these tollbooth operators feel the least bit obligated to use their sources of employment, giving their fellow booth-ers a miniscule sense of importance, as thousands of cars pass under sensors a mere hundred yards away, each vehicle chipping away at the relevance of their occupation.

While smoothly puttering along a highway, one is surrounded by people traveling at speeds never thought possible a mere century ago, and every car that passes is filled with another life or lives. One false move and those lives could be no more. It's beautifully dangerous, and the tollbooth ends it all. All of the shapely, blisteringly fast metal must come to a halt and wait its turn to pay a fine of sorts, and the nuisance will only increase as people become used to easier methods of paying their vehicular dues. It seems as though the gate keeper will continue to bear the brunt of that resentment through white-hot change and the spitting rage of daily commuters. Quite honestly, I'm surprised they haven't started shooting us with fireworks.

**Austin R. Berg**

Grade 12

Hinsdale Central High School

Hinsdale

Angelique Burrell, teacher

## TALES OF A SIXTH-GRADE BOOKWORM

I was standing at the counter of Comics Galore, where the overweight, greasy-haired manager, a caricature of himself, was ringing up my extensive purchase: a stack of the 15 most recent Spider-Man comic books. When I removed my \$22.50 from my capri pockets and relinquished it onto the counter, the manager, whose name may have been something like Al or Ned, eyed the crumpled bills and then me.

Me, with my capris and carefully coordinated cardigan set and hair pulled high into a bobbing ponytail. I stood out in the little shop, surrounded by the kind of kids whose parents still had to remind them to shower every other day. I didn't belong, and I knew it. I could feel it, under the fluorescent lights, a kind of force field they had generated to keep me from entering their secret world between the panels. So why, why in the world was I there?

I was in love.

Or at least, I had tumbled into the biggest crush of my life. The object of my obsession was Alex, a 4'5" Spider-Man fanatic. I was going to the extreme to get him to notice me.

I had never been a "comic book kid," despite an outward appearance that would suggest this quality. I was pudgy, overly so, with wire-rimmed glasses and unrivaled social ineptitude. There were people, to be sure, who assumed that my walls were lined with stacks of comics, and that I hoarded costumes and paraphernalia like a scrooge of Marvel and DC. Their assumptions were completely false. Even flipping through my cousin's copies of Justice League, I found the stories trivial and the characters absurd.

I preferred text. Dense text, with tiny print and a noted absence of any pictures, where I could delve into a novel like a bold explorer spelunking caves in some exotic region of South

America. My room lacked the posters of the Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears I saw in the rooms of my peers. Instead, there stood a hefty bookshelf, brimming with books. By my bed, a solitary poster of Legolas hung, staring blankly with strange elf eyes. I was “a little bookworm,” as adults loved to call me. They seemed to adore the fact that I was lonely, awkward, and miserable, and the attention I received from adults in classes, in libraries, and even from other parents didn’t contribute to my social situation.

I hadn’t always been the kind of recluse I became in elementary school and junior high. For the first six months of kindergarten, I was one of the most popular kids in class. My family lived in Springfield at the time, and my life, despite the dismal city I lived in, was wonderful. The day my family moved out of our one-story rental and upstate to a strange, small town called Western Springs was one of the most tragic times I can remember. I sobbed the entire car ride and threw tantrums that threatened to drive the car off the highway. I had hoped someone would see my distress from a neighboring lane and come and take me home to Springfield, where my friends were playing with the tire swing outside our house or jumping rope in the alley next to Molly’s. Alas, I lasted the entire car ride, all the way up to driveway of my new home. The next Monday, I started at Forest Hills Elementary.

From the first day in my new class, I knew I didn’t fit in. I had never had to try to make friends before, and here I had to fight my way into already inseparable groups. One day, more out of boredom and loneliness than anything else, I headed toward the bookshelf and read while the other kids played. Little did I know, I had just embarked on the path toward a slow social suicide.

From that point on, all I did was read. I read in my room, at the park, in hallways and libraries, and sometimes



secretly during math class. By the time the second grade rolled around, I was at least five years ahead of my class in reading. While other kids struggled over the word “significance,” I was halfway through *Watership Down*. What else did I have to do? I didn’t know how to talk to girls my age. Boys were completely off my radar.

And so, in sixth grade, when I saw a short boy sitting alone in math class, wearing a Spider-Man tee shirt and flipping through a comic, I thought, I’ve found someone like me. Here was someone who had been ostracized just like me, who would talk to me, and who would understand. We were, in my mind, perfect for each other.

All this had brought me to Comics Galore, where I now stood watching the manager bagging my purchase. I ducked out of the store, into the sunny June air, and walked home with renewed hope. I spent the next week devouring the comics and reading background on the history of Spider-Man, of his origins and of unknown facts for true fanatics.

A few weeks later, I was walking by Alex’s house when I saw him and a group of boys standing outside. I started to wave, feeling queasy and elated, my Spider-Man knowledge right in position, ready to dazzle him. Before I could say a word about the Spider-Mobile or the latest issue of a four-part series, however, one of the boys said, “Hey, weirdo!”

I stopped short.

Then Alex glanced up at his companions and said something I had heard on repeat since kindergarten.

“Get lost, loser. Why don’t you go back to your Lord of the Rings?”

I ran home, tears filling my eyes, glittering like my Evenstar pendant. I collapsed on my bed and pulled out a copy of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which tears of prepubescent rejection would stain forever. I pushed aside my embarrassment, and let my tears dissolve while I escaped.

**Hannah Bulger**

Grade 11

Lyons Township High School

LaGrange

Kate Sullivan, teacher

## CARS, CRAWFISH, AND CONVERSATION

I was 15. Even a year after moving, I longed to return to my home state of Louisiana. I missed the humid air, the misty haze that collected on every pore. I remember the scent of brackish water mingling with boiled crawfish and potatoes emitting from the backyards of smiling neighbors, the carefree summer days of swimming and bike riding with my best friend Luke. Illinois seemed bland compared to this Southern utopia of coastal weather, neighborly families, and wholesome food. I secretly hoped to return to this great land. "Not forever," I thought. "Just long enough to remember it again."

My dad and I would make the trek alone. After 14 hours on the road, he would go to his convention while I would stay with Luke for the weekend. "This trip will kill me," I thought. "Fourteen hours of awkward silence in a cramped car." This seemed inevitable.

My father and I never connected. I remember a few years back before living in Louisiana. He was stationed in Corpus Christi, apart from us. My mother, brother, and I lived in Oklahoma. A year apart created tension.

"It'll be okay," my mom said. "We'll get through this."

These comforts didn't help her. I remember walking down the hall to my room and hearing her cry at night; I never fully understood why. I matured during that time, and so did my mom. At the end of that year, she seemed tired, older. My best attempts didn't help her that year. I didn't feel a difference when we moved to Louisiana.

After the move, the man-of-the-house title passed hands once again. My father assumed his role, and I was quietly dethroned. Rules became strict, as my dad realized that his family was "disorderly." This angered me. He seemed to have

forgotten what I did the past year. I was hoping for sympathy, but received none. Dad would come home from his long days at work and disappear. I wondered whether our family was reunited or not. This continued, and it seemed the only times my dad seriously talked to me, I was either in trouble or he wanted me to do chores. My dad wasn't a bad father, I just never felt I knew him, that is, until the trip.

It started at about 5:00 a.m. The sky was bleeding a slight pale as the sun inched up the horizon. We loaded the car in light military fashion as my dad wanted and packed some sandwiches. I slid into the car, preparing for the journey, and plugged in my headphones. I remember a few coffee stops the first hour, as my dad looked for a cup worthy to touch his lips. "Not very good, eh?" I said jokingly.

"No, not really!" he said happily. "People just don't make coffee anymore. It's just loads of syrup and milk nowadays."

"Amen!" I said, remembering the robust aroma that filled our house every morning. "What has the world become?" I went on explaining how kids would go to Starbucks and buy the expensive frozen milk/syrup concoctions. I remembered mornings at Luke's house. We would ascend the stairs after a sleepover. His kitchen had a heavenly scent of black Community coffee and sizzling bacon. His father poured us each a cup, saying good morning in his thick Cajun accent.

"Want a little radio?" my dad asked, snapping me out of the memory. "I know you probably don't like talk radio, but today is special. It's Rush Limbaugh's 20th year on radio."

The radio crackled and a voice appeared, invoking memories of sitting in the back of the car listening, hearing words I didn't understand. I remember the headaches of listening in the musty backseat. Something was different today. I didn't mind, and my dad noticed this.

“What do you think?” he asked, looking at me.

I realized he didn’t want approval. He wanted my opinion. It seemed like a strange request coming from him. For the first time, I felt equal. I expressed my opinion without restraint. “I like some of what he says,” I said. “He states some truth about the country. He can be extreme at times though, but at least he explains his beliefs.” I looked up to my dad wondering if I had said something wrong. I hoped what I said was okay.

“I was hoping you’d say something like that,” he said smiling. “I don’t want you to answer what I believe. I want you to say what *you* believe. I definitely don’t want a Kool-Aid drinker for a son. Jacob, what you say matters. Don’t ever let anyone tell you different.”

These words gave me strength. For the rest of the trip, we debated issues. Not once did I ever worry about what to say. As long as I believed it, I knew my dad would listen. The day flew by as we laughed and joked. I learned more than ever that day. I always imagined something like this happening but never believed it would.

I stepped out of the car and grabbed my luggage. I breathed in the salty air and could taste the seasoned crawfish permeating from Luke’s backyard. He appeared from the side of their house, giving me a high-five as he approached. I turned back, waving to my dad. Luke led me to the back where I was greeted by the rest of the family. I sat down in a vacant chair and turned towards the sun. In a couple of hours, it would sink down below the horizon. The spicy scent of the crawfish tickled my nose and the soft grass cushioned my feet. The heat radiated from my skin, and I sighed after drinking the warm, dark coffee I was handed. Luke and I talked for hours about events and people I missed while away. I reunited

with my old friend, but at the same time felt as if I left another behind. "*Not for long,*" I thought.

**Jacob Campbell**

Grade 11

O'Fallon Township High School

O'Fallon

Diane M. Riley, teacher

## HOLD FAST TO DREAMS

One autumn day, as a strong gust of wind blew the fallen leaves away from the sidewalk, a short, brown-eyed girl peeked through the window. Cassie turned away from the glass and sighed. She silently stared at her blank page, the one where she was to write a personal essay about the person she admired most. Deciding to take a break, she placed her hands on the wheels of her wheelchair and rolled up to the fridge.

She studied the photograph taped on the wall, a picture of her wearing a Speedo, poised to dive. Slowly she looked away and recalled the night of her accident...

*The driver of a city dump truck chatted on his cell phone to his boss about his job and his future with the company. Cassie stood poised at the curb, waiting for the pedestrian signal to allow her to cross the intersection. Her future was all laid out for her. She was about to reach the highest swimming level; she would eventually attend the Olympics. It was a dream come true until the truck hit her.*

*The next thing Cassie knew, or rather felt, was excruciating pain radiating from her legs as though an elephant had just stepped on top of her. After this tragedy, she remained partially paralyzed. Her future now was five months of intensive rehabilitation and a lot of homework...*

As she fought back her tears, her mother entered the room. "Hey, Cass, finished with that essay yet?" Cassie's mother glanced across the table and quickly realized it was nowhere near completion.

Cassie whimpered, "I'm sorry, Ma. I just don't know who to write about. I know you'd like me to choose between

Obama or those guys who invented a cure, but I cannot stop thinking about my first choice."

"Honey, we've already talked about this extensively. Bethany Hamilton is not an option. Your teachers will prefer hearing about an interesting politician and not an athlete."

"Mom, she was bitten by a shark while surfing, lost her left arm, and went back to surf again! How is that not interesting? She is so inspiring; I wish you could understand how I feel."

As the mother left the room, she fumed, "Not an option!"

Cassie rolled back to the table. Hot tears fell down her red cheeks.

It was a new day, and Cassie was moving down the street as the sun spread its rays upon the sidewalk. The breeze remained light. Unfortunately, the small fight she had with her mother the night before left her feeling dull and isolated. As she passed near a brick building, a big, red flier suddenly caught her attention. Cassie wheeled closer, read the poster, and smiled.

Later that afternoon, she called her mother to explain that she had taken a position helping the public librarian. "It's near the brick building," she said. When Cassie returned home, she seemed happier; this was a positive surprise for her parents. At dinner her mother asked what the librarian was like. Cass responded mysteriously, "She really opened my eyes to something new."

From that day on Cassie "worked" late afternoons at the library. Her appetite returned; she ate full meals. Her depression just evaporated. When her mother inquired about Cassie's weight gain, Cassie simply answered, "It's thanks to those healthy meals you put on the table."



One snowy February, Cassie told her parents she was attending a field trip with her class the entire day. *How weird to have a field trip on a Saturday*, the mother thought as she waved goodbye to Cassie. She returned to her usual chores. That same day she decided, as a reward for Cassie's good behavior, to clean her room. As her mother began, she noticed a big, red flier sticking out of Cassie's backpack. It read, "Disabled Athletes' Committee: Hold Fast to Dreams. Meeting: Weekdays from 4:00–6:00 p.m. Don't miss it!"

At that very moment, Cassie's phone rang. Her mother furiously grabbed it and read the text message: "See you soon. Don't forget your Speedo."

Cassie's mom finally understood. All the clues were there, but she never put them together. Her daughter did not assist the librarian, nor did she gain weight because of her "healthy foods." She rummaged through Cassie's belongings and found the address for which she was looking.

Jumping into her car, she impatiently drove like an ambulance driver. She was determined to attend this "field trip" and bring Cassie back, even if it meant dragging her.

She entered the swimming facility, looking intently for her child. The crowd was loud, and it made it more difficult to concentrate. As she gazed across the pool, she saw Cassie. That became the moment when all her anger and confusion vanished. It was also the moment when she wanted to forget Cassie's deception and just smile.

For the first time in a long while, her daughter wore her "altered" Speedo. A big, bold slogan had been added: "Hold Fast to Dreams." Her black, shiny goggles hid her eyes, but her smile radiated. Cassie's mother remained in awe. The crowd's encouraging chants seemed to complete the picture. Vaguely she heard someone fire the starting pistol, and then Cassie dove into the pool, swimming.

Finally, her mother validated her daughter's dream. Cassie now competes for the Special Olympics and "holds fast to dreams."

**Marie Le Cannellier**

Grade 8

Lycée Français de Chicago

Chicago

Cyn Koukos, teacher

## FALL RESPONSE

Taking a deep breath, I fall into a rhythm as my feet hit the trail one by one. As my cross-country team heads north on the bike path, I wish that I had my iPod for the seven miles ahead. Instead, I distract myself from the distance by reflecting on my day.

Mentally reviewing these events, still fresh in my memory, I regretfully recall the actions that could have used more attention, the words that should have remained unspoken, and the awaiting mountain of applications that makes me avoid the subject of college.

The wind picks up as we cross 9th Street, and I remember how much easier life was in the summer: wake up at ten, go to work at the pool, hang out with friends until all hours of the night, go to sleep, and repeat. The weather was warm, the days were long, and the freedom of being young was delightfully overwhelming. As excited as I was about senior year, I was disappointed to see my favorite season and its carefree atmosphere dissolve before my eyes.

With fall comes the return of routines, where my schedule and my stress level reach simultaneous breaking points. Fall is the time when I doubt that my survival as a high school student is worth the time and apprehension, but when the rush of relief after running a race or practicing piano overpowers the amount of stress that the activities primarily added, I realize that maybe fall is not a season of anxiety, but a season to appreciate your blessings and talents and to share them with others.

As a squirrel chases the leaves blowing across the trail, I am reminded of the distinct natural aspects of fall: leaves change from happy summer green to more mature oranges and reds, eventually falling to be crushed by the feet of runners; animals diligently prepare for hibernation over the

cold months ahead; and days become noticeably shorter and cooler. As much as these images connote death and the end of another year, this fall scene can be seen as a new beginning.

Passing 5th Street, the group increases the pace and I look up, opening my lungs to the fresh air. Observing the bare trees, I see how much potential they hold. As plain and unaccomplished as they look on the outside, a passerby would never know how beautifully these trees will bloom in the spring. These trees need their own period of rest in the fall and winter, just as I had in the summer, so that they may reach their full ability and beauty when it is time to shine this spring.

I see the great state of Wisconsin, Russell Road, our final destination, straight ahead. The autumn winds blow as if they are encouraging me to persevere, as if they know how hard I have worked to get this far on the bike path and on the path of life. I personify the season of fall because it seems to understand my current situation, not only the difficulty of a cross-country practice, but the complexity of the day's conflicts and the need for me to fulfill my own potential. This fall presents me with a new beginning and the inspiration to do my best. Just as no one sees how much energy a tree commits to make each individual leaf, in the end, regardless of the numerous obligations, no one will care about the obstacles I have overcome to be successful. People only appreciate the achievements of the final outcome: the model student; the mighty oak.

**Sabina Cashin**

Grade 12

Zion-Benton Township High School

Zion

Mike Ryczek, teacher

## THE OBVIOUS TO BLAME

In the play *Romeo and Juliet*, by William Shakespeare, it is evident that Friar Laurence is the most responsible for this disastrous love story. Whoever said, "With age comes wisdom," has apparently never heard of Friar Laurence. Although his intentions may have been good at the time, he just really messed up. It is obvious that Laurence is to fault for the tragic fate of others in the play by lying and evading, forgetting essential details, and managing the circumstances after Juliet wakes up.

One reason Laurence is to blame is that he evades and lies to cover up the truth. The only reason he says why he's marrying Romeo and Juliet is that it will bring peace: "For this alliance may so happy prove, / to turn your households' rancour to pure love" (52). Can he really be so ignorant as to think that each family is going to feel "pure love" when they find out that their only offspring, their pride and joy, has married into their mortal enemy's family, without them even knowing? Even after he marries the rash, young couple Laurence still doesn't tell anybody or try to persuade Romeo and Juliet to tell their parents. What is he waiting for? For Juliet to get pregnant? Now, that would be a more delightful conversation starter! There are plenty of occasions where Laurence could have said, "Hey, Romeo and Juliet are married. Surprise!" Instead, he keeps covering it up, making it harder and harder for the young couple and their friends and families to deal with their marriage. For instance, after Laurence marries Romeo and Juliet, Paris asks him to marry him and Juliet; and Laurence responds, "On Thursday sir? the time is very short" (103). I don't know if Friar has picked it up yet, but people in Verona don't like to wait long to get married. Perhaps a more appropriate and suitable answer would have

been to sit Paris down and tell him Juliet is already married. Like so many other situations though, Laurence turns to his classic lie-and-evade strategy to save his own butt. Isn't there a commandment that says something about lying? Isn't ironic how a Friar keeps "forgetting" that?

Another of the many mistakes Friar makes is giving the letter to Friar John to deliver to Romeo. How could he rest the fate of the two young lovers, their families and friends, and possibly all the people in Verona onto one man other than himself when he is clearly capable of doing so? Now he's just getting lazy. In fact, Laurence doesn't even tell John the importance of the letter until after John gives the letter back to him: "The letter was not nice, but full of charge / Of dear import; and the neglecting it / May do much danger"(127). Now he decides to tell Friar John that? As a result, Friar John says he couldn't deliver the letter: "I could not send it,—here it is again,— / Nor get a messenger to bring it thee, / So fearful were they of infection" (127). Perhaps if he had been aware of the importance he would not have stopped at the sick house on his journey that caused him and his friend to be quarantined. Balthasar went back and forth across the border to tell Romeo the news, so it could not have been an impossible task. However, due to the lack of attentiveness to details when trusting others to complete important tasks, Laurence has failed once again.

Finally, perhaps the biggest mistake of them all is how Laurence handles the situation at the end of the play. Instead of getting Juliet out of the tomb where Romeo and Paris are lying dead, he clearly points them out to her! He may as well have had a red flashing arrow: "Thy husband in thy bosom there lays dead; / And Paris too" (135). He doesn't even give her time to grieve, but instead shoves the tragedy onto her in a rush. As if that isn't bad enough, he tells her how she'll

spend the rest of her life: “come, I’ll dispose of thee / Among a sisterhood of holy nuns... / Come, go, good Juliet”(135). Learning that her one, true love is dead and that she’ll most likely be forced to become a nun is a lot to take in for a 13-year-old girl just waking up. Then he leaves her! He left someone as unstable as her alone with dead bodies and weapons lying around! It’s obvious Laurence lacks common sense. Clearly, along with many other things, dealing with hasty and critical situations is not one of his fortes.

If Laurence had not been in the play *Romeo and Juliet*, this love story would have had a “happily ever after” ending. However, due to his lack of common sense and logic, he destroyed and ruined people’s lives. Through lying and misleading others, forgetting important details, and directing the situation when Juliet wakes up, there is no doubt Laurence is to blame for the outcome of the play *Romeo and Juliet*.

### Work Cited

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**Justine Clark**

Grade 9

Aurora Central Catholic High School

Aurora

Alisa Remke, teacher

## **ALL THAT REALLY MATTERS**

I round the corner and check my watch, "Oy gavult," I say to myself. It is 6:00 and I must get home to prepare for the Sabbath. I hurry home and step inside. As I walk in the door, I am pelted with a barrage of yelling.

"Mordechai, where have you been?" screams my mother, Ester.

My father, Asher, adds, "It is the Sabbath, you must be home to help with the holiday meal."

"I am deeply regretful," I say as I run up to my room, not letting on to what I was really doing.

There is only one bathroom in our apartment. I run into it and throw the door closed, hearing it click behind me. I stare into the mirror. A small 14-year-old boy with long, curly hair, a blue yarmulke, and tzitzit dangling from his waist stares back. The conversation I had with Chaim over lunch rings through my ears. "Do it," he says, "Don't look back; follow your heart wherever it takes you."

Two lovers dance on the deck of a ship as it passes the Statue of Liberty, trying to forget the horrors of the war. Through Ellis Island and on to Uncle Avrahm's in some strange place called the Lower East Side. My grandparents go on to bear my father and raise him in the ways of the Torah.

"Mordechai, come down for supper," my mother yells.

"One moment please," I reply. I have some unfinished business. I'm not letting my parents disrupt this plan. My



mind races back to my conversation with the rabbi last week.

“Be who you are and do not be afraid,” he said.

A father has a child. A beautiful baby boy. This boy will be everything the father wanted himself to be, the town rabbi. The baby is me, Mordechai. Ever since I can remember, I have learned Hebrew and Yiddish, prayers and folk songs, everything that one needs to be the leader of our Orthodox congregation.

As I walked through Central Park one Saturday afternoon, I spotted some boys my age playing a friendly game of baseball. I joined and soon discovered all that I was missing out on. I learned the beats of hip-hop. I learned of the new online social scene. I learned of some new way of life. Hurrying home to tell my papa of these new experiences, I paused. What if he did not approve of these things? I figured it unlikely and ran home. I was surprised at the look on his face after telling my story. He yelled, “Mordechai, how could you participate in these things? Have I not taught you better than that?”

I replied, “But they are so much fun. You don’t know what you’re missing out on.”

“Quiet,” he said sternly, “and go to your room.”

I became silent and scurried off to my room.

“Mordechai,” my father screams, “We are waiting on you, hurry up in there.” I choose to ignore him. I have plans that I wish to accomplish, plans that will forever change my life.

“Family,” my father once said, “will always be behind

you, no matter what you do." I can only hope that this is true.

I stare into the mirror. A small 14-year-old boy with a long, curly hair, a blue yarmulke, and tzitzit dangling from his waist his stares back. It is time. With a pair of scissors at hand, I begin my work. Tzitzit fall to the floor and I remove my yarmulke. I hear footsteps coming up the stairs; I ignore and press on. Hair falls to bathroom floor as a razor moves over my head, turning my long, curly hair into a buzz cut. I stare into the mirror. A short boy with no yarmulke, no tzitzit, a buzz cut, and a hand on his shoulder stares back. I look up into my father's eyes. "I am proud of you," he says, "You have chosen what you want to be in life and that is a great thing." He continues, "Remember, your family will always support you through both thick and thin."

"I love you," I reply.

"I love you too," he responds.

A father and son embrace. Four thousand years of Jewish history and tradition broken in a single move. Yet the papa approves and the son is happy, and that is all that really matters.

**Benji Englander**

Grade 8

Northbrook Junior High School

Northbrook

Heather Corral, teacher

## THE ANGUISH OF STANDARDIZED TESTS

Hurry up. The time is ticking. Only five minutes left, and still ten questions are left to be answered. Each second seems to fly by. There's not enough time. There's no possible way to finish. It's the agony that all high schools students have to go through: the pure torture of standardized test. And the big problem is these tests that are supposed to gauge what/how much one does not and does know are one of the main gateways of getting into college, and being successful. Now this may sound all a little harsh, but from personal experience and knowledge, all of this regarding standardized tests could not be more true. It's a dilemma that faces most high school students in this day and age, and, without a change of ideas and actions, it will be for many years to come.

The root of this issue is that people actually believe one multiple choice test can represent what someone knows or, to be blunt, how smart they are. In the grand scheme of things, it won't matter whether someone knows the correct location of a comma or if they can identify the independent variable in an experiment. What will really matter is whether or not they can express their own thoughts, connect with others, and find ways to make this world a little better for the people of the next generation. Standardized tests, to put it simply, test kids on trivial bits of information that will prove useless later on in life.

Another large flaw these tests carry with them is that time is of the essence. High school students are expected to read three passages and answer 25 questions in 20 minutes and complete 40 math problems in 30 minutes. Whatever the numbers are, it's ridiculous. Who on earth came up with the idea that having kids rush through exams is the best way to test how much they know? If anything, the time limit severely

alters the results, making them very inaccurate. For example, sophomores in high school recently took a test that is supposed to be a decent representation of what the ACT test will be like. Nearly every person felt rushed for time, and almost every person was not finished with the test when time was up. With that said, lots of guessing and random answers were chosen in order to finish the test, which will greatly affect the results. Most people also said that if awarded more time, the test would have been very easy. That just goes to show that the difficulty of the test was due to the time constraint, not the actual material. That doesn't sound like a well-made test.

The third component that plays into this is that students everywhere receive enormous amounts of pressure to do well on these tests. They are told that if they don't do exceedingly well, then they won't get into the college of their dreams. And the terrifying part is that statement is quite true. Any individual could do very well during the school year and receive good grades for cumulative reports, but if they do poorly on finals or the ACT or other standardized tests like that, all of that hard work that was put in before is primarily washed away. People wonder why teenagers get into drugs and fall off course; it can be explained in one word: pressure. Each year the pressure builds, and expectations get increasingly higher. Expectations get harder and harder to reach, like trying to master how to take a standardized test (it's now a key component to anyone's future).

Teenagers are taught to suffer in silence. If one complained about the "testing industry," one would simply be told to study more. If one refused to take the test, one would only be hurting oneself. People are so set in their ways that it's going to take lots of persuasion to change how high school students are evaluated. In the meantime, everyone goes through their days, listening to their figureheads with

no objection. People take these tests and complain to themselves, but don't object to their imposed situations. The lack of outward dispute has led to a passive, unsatisfied culture. Individuals are going to have to take matters into their own hands and stop the unjust situation of these tests. A test should never convey the notion that four years of hard work can slip away in four hours of an exam.

**Blaire Frett**

Grade 10

Evanston Township High School

Evanston

Hilda Raisner, teacher

## VOLUME

*"The mind is for seeing, the heart is for hearing."*

—Saudi Arabian Proverb

The loud voices of aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents, slipped in from the outside room. I used to imagine in my head what they were saying from the word or two of Portuguese I could latch onto. The couch I sat on was fading yellow, its comfort vanishing as well. In the corner opposite me, Thais gazed through the translucent glass doors that allowed us to see only the outlines of figures laughing around the dinner table. She fidgeted with her shirt that was too short. She kept pushing the hair behind her ears that always came out of place, because her hearing aid sat in the way. I watched her fidget as I crossed and uncrossed my legs. I shifted in my seat and stared blankly back at the small TV.

I jumped as the door slid open with a rusty screech as my mom appeared through the door. Thais and I briefly looked outside at the rest of our family soaking up the conversation. Their Portuguese-language bubbles tiptoed in as my mom took a seat in between us, not saying a word.

New lyrics flashed across the screen as Celine Dion's song from *Titanic* began to saturate the air. I quietly began singing the lyrics, wondering if Thais could hear the song.

"Should we see if she can hear it?" my mom juttled into my thoughts, already standing to turn up the volume on the TV. Her steps resonated on the tile floor. The volume clicks soon disappeared and music swelled into all corners of the room. It seeped under the doors and warmed the air. My eyes darted back and forth between my cousin and the TV as I urged her to hear something, anything.

Then, she heard. Tucking her dark curly hair behind her ears, she started to pay attention to the music that filled the

room. She looked at my mom, who was still standing next to the TV, a brief smile crossing her face. A grin crossed my own face as Thais glimpsed at me and then proceeded to study the letters as they continued to cross the screen. We sat in the song for awhile, indulging silently in the lyrics and notes.

As the song came to an end, silence returned to the room. My mom lowered the volume, glancing at Thais and me. We shifted ourselves on the couch, trying to hide our discomfort. My mom went back outside, and I watched as her figure faded into a blur through the glass. The Portuguese chatter floated back inside the room, bringing with it the chilly winter air.

**Bianca Kapoor**

Grade 12

Lake Forest High School

Lake Forest

Amy Zimmermann, teacher

## A FACE FULL OF FLOOR

I sat there, the after-effect from my first practice ringing in my joints. The TV commercials passing, unregistered through my exhausted brain, bored me. The smell of my mom's chocolate chip cookies kept me alive, as I fiddled with my teeth and thought of the embarrassing practice I just had. I always thought mouth guards were silly in basketball until I literally fell flat on my face in an unfamiliar crowd of giants. The exhausting workout pained me and sapped my energy. Afterward I realized that some things aren't going to come easy to me; I am going to have to struggle for them.

Sports have always come easily to me. In earlier sports and teams I've played on, I've always been one of the best players. For example, in fifth grade I led my flag football team to an 8-0 season at QB. On my travel baseball team, I was the starting shortstop. And finally, even in basketball, I was the starting point guard. Though now, the 6' giants I play basketball with have humbled me. When an eighth grader puts his hand in my face for a jump shot, it's different from a smaller kid my age reaching up half as high as I leap in the air. My thoughts coming into the practice were nothing like the truth. The night before, I boasted about the practice and how easy it would be. Boy, was I wrong.

Before the practice I received a last minute call from Alex Galvin, my teammate and good friend. He needed a ride and luckily we were on the way past his house. But taking the extra five minutes to save a friend affected my arrival time, and I was late. Those five minutes cost me five "suicides," which are where you breathlessly sprint to the free throw line and back to the baseline. Then you run to half court and once again to the baseline. Next the victim runs to the other free throw line and back. Finally you run across the court, and then back



to the baseline. All of that counts for one suicide. My lungs stung like they did after I climbed the Rocky Mountains, and I could hear the congestion in my chest rising to my mouth where it would become a nasty wheeze.

We were constantly running, and the giants surrounding me glided easily up and down the court as I slowly limped across the slippery floor. I heard remarks to go faster and bend down more on the brutal defensive slides. I dragged my limbs across the floor, struggling to go the extra mile. I was forced to do defensive slides and stare into the burning eyes of the player shuffling across from me. He, too, gasped for air after bending down to touch the baseline on either end of the court. I wanted to keep up with my eighth grade teammates and intense coaches. I couldn't stop because I didn't want to stand out, but my lungs had other ideas. Suddenly my size-ten feet and uncomfortably large shoes became heavy and seemed to double in size. My legs started to curl and exhaustion crept in. Somewhere, halfway across the court, I locked my feet in a sailor's knot, and tumbled and fell. But my hands didn't catch me, my teeth did. The balls stopped bouncing and the concerned coaches turned towards me. Now *I* was the center of attention. The smell of blood filled the air and the sharks swarmed. My hand shot directly for my mouth and felt for a difference. My teeth were crooked. My senses returned and the dirt on the sweaty floor lived in my mouth. I looked above me, and the coaches and players formed a huddle, towering over. Friendly teasing stirred above. But that was of no concern because I was tending to my shifted teeth.

I quickly decided that my reputation was more important than my pain. I couldn't stop and make a big deal about my excruciating teeth. If this had been fifth grade basketball, I would have whined and sat out. But, because I wanted to make a good impression on my teammates and coaches, I

“toughed it out” and I hobbled and grimaced through the entire practice, not daring to complain.

Though my teeth are healed now, I was more embarrassed than hurt. Falling on my face temporarily wounded me, but my embarrassing moment hurts me forever. When you have a goal, it has to be met by pursuing and working hard. Building up endurance for an exercise like that was something I had to work for, and I’m proud to say I haven’t tripped and fallen on my face lately. I have earned my spot on the team, and when my name is mentioned, my teammates don’t laugh; instead, they respect me as a part of the team. Falling on your face really hurts, but sometimes it’s necessary.

**Charlie Maxwell**

Grade 6

Nichols Middle School

Evanston

David Burnham, teacher

## HOMEWORK: A CATALYST OF CHAOS?

Each day, teachers and students alike rise to the call of diligent alarm clocks, dutifully surrendering the warmth of their comforters to the chill of pressed slacks and ripped jeans. Lesson plans and scribbled schoolwork in hand, they make the early commute to their institution via dull-colored cars and routinely yellow buses.

They come together in conformity each morning: sleep weighing down on their eyelids, lead weighing down on their fingertips. They arrive with caffeine in their veins and words on their tongues. They often execute their days in such a formulaic manner, structured with timed awakenings and coffee grounds and due dates to mark their way.

But students' days, like my own, can be much more than this.

Ever since I began my education in a bright, windowed room with a soft carpet stretched before a dusty blackboard, I have been a unique child—I delight in learning and acquiring knowledge, in exploring and mastering new ideas.

One of my first memories is me in that room, practicing three-digit subtraction (and I loved how the numbers marched onto the page and lined themselves up, ready for my pencil's quest into new mathematical wonders). There was a student teacher, or perhaps it was an older student, who aided me. The chairs, which sat straight-backed at attention by the small, round table at which we worked, were too short for his tall stature.

On the edge of these memories, I have only blurred recollections of the other preschoolers who learned a simpler trade from scratchy chalk and the gentle rug.

Nowadays, my ventures stretch far beyond arithmetic dabbings. I dive headfirst into fresh precalculus waters. I

excavate syntax and anecdotes, scrape at the surface of Benjamin Franklin and the American Revolution, piece together physics' laws and vectors. I dream *en español*, and my lips and fingers know how to birth Copland and Mozart from mazes of sheet music and the body of a flute.

I have so much praise for the intelligence that is available to me. Educators have put close-to-infinite opportunities within my reach, and I commend their efforts. Students are able to stretch their schedules with honors and Advanced Placement courses and to fortify them with extra classes as they see fit (for me, this includes a journalism course and two extra music courses).

However, I feel that there is an overlooked outcome that arises from the tightly packed schedules of honors students: often, our days become so muddled down with assignments that due dates become cluttered in our once-neat, compartmentalized planners, inspiring chaos rather than structure; caffeine forfeits its place in our morning rituals and becomes a round-the-clock necessity; we are awoken further before dawn each day by the heavy pull of homework that must be completed to aid our pending successes.

Our days become hard to navigate, difficult to organize and understand—like a drippy watercolor painting whose tears have run its hued edges together, our days become blurred and abstract.

A fitting solution would be to change the amount of homework required to be done by students. Some may argue that homework aids in learning and is a necessity to mastering knowledge, but studies have been conducted, and they have shown that too much homework can be counterproductive in education.

“There is some evidence that the relationship between time on homework and academic achievement may be

curvilinear: pupils doing either very little or a great deal of homework tend to perform less well at school than those doing 'moderate' amounts" (McPherson).

With this, I suggest that students be given the option to select which homework assignments they do and how much of the assignments they complete, the effectiveness of which can be measured by test grades.

For example, a math teacher once told me about a pupil, who was quite audacious and dually intelligent, who argued that he should not have to do homework if he didn't need extra help or further practice on the topic. The student made a bet with the teacher: if the student could get an "A" on his test for the unit, then no points would be deducted for homework that he did not do. He got an "A."

By giving students options like this, they not only gain time that would otherwise be spent on homework in subjects in which they are already proficient, but they also will not become frustrated by having unnecessary amounts of work to do.

If a system like this could be implemented to some degree, students would surely feel less stressed and more secure.

So each night, teachers and students alike can leave at the school bell's timely ring, with knowledge on their minds and fewer assignments in their hands. They can lay themselves to bed at night, huddled in the warmth of their mattresses, excited like a young preschooler for the adventures and knowledge that the next day could bring.

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**Margaret McCarter**

Grade 11

Rolling Meadows High School

Rolling Meadows

Mark Maxwell, teacher

## THE MAN WITH THE CLOCKWORK HEART

A faint ticking echoed off the plain walls of Flint's apartment. The sound was nothing more than a faint drop of water. Flint was used to it and continued to sleep until an erratic tick escaped from within the noise. Flint sat up in his bed and glanced from side to side, eventually falling upon his sheets, haphazardly entangled around his body. Sighing, he roused his limbs out of bed and clambered drunkenly to the bathroom. He felt for the two latches, each under a nipple, and unfastened them. His chest opened up into a hollow cavity, and Flint groped among his ribs, pushing them aside gently as glass jars on a teetering shelf. He lowered his head, but he could not see enough to make out exactly where his hands were placing themselves, and sighed as he looked up at the cracked ceiling.

He plucked it with barely a flinch from his chest, and brought it out in front of his face. Its surface was metallic—its coolness numbed his fingers and the sweat made his grip slippery. Tick, tick, ta-tick, tick, tick.

There was, indeed, something wrong.

Flint closed up his chest, taking care to lock it securely, and glanced at the clock. It was a slow Saturday, and he did not have much to do.

He stopped in his usual coffee spot, and the barista, Alexei, nodded at him with a smile and placed a steaming cup in front of him. "You okay, Flint?"

Flint sipped his coffee, burrowed deeper into his armchair, and shook his head. "I wake up and this is the first thing I hear." He gently placed his heart on the table.

Alexei bent down and studied the heart. "Hmm. That's strange," he muttered, standing abruptly and shrugging. He spun on his heels and said over his shoulder, "Get that checked, man."

"Yeah," Flint answered, if only barely. He grabbed his heart again and turned it over, looking for damage, but there was none. He sighed and entered an unintended staring contest with his coffee before taking another drink.

Flint's eyes wandered to the counter and settled on a girl. Her eyes sparkled with youth, and her lengthy hair drifted over her shoulders. She waltzed up to the counter with a smile and ordered a black coffee. As soon as her order was filled, she sat at a table not too far from Flint's, and began to stare dreamily out the window, eyes lost somewhere else and brought to earth only by the occasional sip of coffee.

She pulled a folded magazine out of her purse, a copy of the newest *Biker's Monthly*. Flint gasped as he realized that he carried the same copy in his coat pocket.

Could it be, he wondered? Perhaps this was just the fix he needed! He began to stir his coffee irregularly. He thought of the bike he had bought a few months back, how he had no one else to share this glory with. He tapped his foot nervously. He wanted to speak to her, but didn't dare intrude on her thoughts, her solemnity, her own kingdom, so separate from his own.

He ran up to the counter and tossed his money to Alexei. "Got to go," he mumbled.

He practically jogged to a park about a block away. He often sat there to think, but today he found it a hiding place. He sat on a bench, nearly panting. He felt for his heartbeat instinctively when he realized that it wasn't there. He jumped from his seat and walked briskly back to the coffee shop.

"Alexei," Flint breathed, pointing to the table he'd been at, noticing in alarm that his heart was gone.

"I dunno, man," he glanced. Flint grunted and power walked his way back to the park to think. He had to find it.

He closed his eyes, then suddenly stiffened. Somehow, he knew—she must have his heart. She had, after all, been



at the table right next to him. He slammed through the door and ran down the sidewalk as fast as his heartless body could take him, back.

Soon, he came upon the girl and an unexpected guest, a man about his age. Flint was embarrassed for himself and them, feeling that he had spied on an intimate moment. He couldn't just walk up to her while she was with him, that would be cruel. But the agony he was putting himself through was cruel enough.

He tried to read, but his eyes only scanned the pages while seeds of thought sprouted, withered, and died inside his mind. He flipped pages back and forth when he looked up and saw the girl, walking back on the path, this time on her own.

Flint shuffled the magazine back together and stuffed it back into his coat pocket, standing up as he did so. He felt wobbly.

"Excuse me," he said in a weak whisper. He coughed, then raised his hand and nearly yelled, "Excuse me!"

Flint shuffled nervously toward her. Her eyes met his, and his veins pulsed with fear. "I think you have something of mine." The words spilled from his mouth.

"Oh?" she perked, her face twisting with curiosity.

"It's small and kinda round. It sounds irregular." Although Flint stopped talking, his hands kept moving in circles.

"I think I know," she replied, digging into the purse that hung at her side and that Flint had not noticed before. He heard clanking and other offbeat ticks as she pulled out his heart.

"Sorry," she smiled, handing it to him. "I always seem to collect these lonesome things. Be more careful with it next time."

Flint took it, wordlessly, and she glanced at him once more before walking away. A pigeon cooed overhead and the grass trembled in the wind. Flint stood there, holding his heart, and could not help but feel as though it was still missing.

**Jane Merker**

Grade 11

Lyons Township High School

LaGrange

Frank Alletto, teacher

## THE THINGS WE REMEMBER

We went to the zoo once, Mom, Dad, and me. Mom decided on a whim that going to visit the fluffy animals would be a better idea than going to school. I was too old for the zoo. After twelve years, my fascination with exotic creatures had run its course. But in Dad's attempts to get on Mom's good side, he overenthusiastically accepted the idea of playing hooky from work to spend time with the family. If only it wasn't the last time he decided to do it.

We packed the car: picnic basket filled with the lunch Mom prepared, sunscreen, water bottles, jackets, just in case, and the camera. Mom loved taking those embarrassing pictures your parents show your girlfriend on the first date. While she busied herself with calling the attendance office, telling stories of my sudden illness, I posed my question to Dad.

"Why are we doing this?"

"Well, why not?"

"I don't like the zoo."

"Just pretend for your mom's sake."

So I climbed into the back seat, wishing I really was sick with a fever and a horrendous cough as she told the school. It was stifling. The leather seats made my butt sweat. Mom and Dad sang those elementary school songs parents sing to keep their kids entertained without losing focus on the road. I listened to my CD player instead.

"The wheels on the bus go round and round..."

Dad pulled into the lot, paid the \$5 parking fee, and stopped the car in section C11 next to a blue minivan with two car seats in the back. The line to get in, surprisingly, was not that bad. We waited behind a group of seven-year-olds from Long Grove Elementary, or so their matching neon yellow t-shirts told us. Mom perused the map Rene, the ticket taker

in the red polo, gave us. I felt her eyes watch me as I passed by. I was too old for this.

We walked in a big circle—to make sure we wouldn't miss anything. So we passed the monkey cages, the zebras, and the savannah animals to the reptile house. Between the snapping turtles and the boa constrictors was a python. He must have been at least ten feet long. Mom was pretty fascinated by the creepy crawlies. Monty, my slithery friend, was fast asleep under a rock ledge cooling off in the shade. Where his tail was too long to fit, his red scales shimmered in the light. He was by far the coolest animal in the zoo. But Dad in his usual killjoy manner requested we move. He wasn't a fan of the slithery serpents.

We walked past the butterflies and on to the exotic birds. Their cages were messy, too messy for Mom to handle. But they were gorgeous. There were birds with long bright tails and names I can't remember now. One of them had a certain fondness for Dad, shown by the nipping his ankles received from the pretty parrot. We only escaped when a zoo employee restrained the creature in the back room. Dad's forehead was wet with perspiration

Next we saw the big cats. Lying on the sidewalk was a snow white tiger on a leash connected to a trainer. A tranquilizer gun was hidden behind a nearby table, just in case. He was big, probably as tall as I was if he stood on his back legs, probably weighed as much, too. Apparently we could pet Jake if we wanted to. The line was short; not too many seemed excited to pet the gentle creature. I wanted to do it. My sudden burst of daring had nothing to do with the pretty blond girl in pigtails standing off to the side between her parents, I promise.

I walked up slowly. Jake raised his head a few inches and flicked his menacing tail. I held out my hand to touch the back of Jake's neck. He purred softly, soft enough only I

could hear. I don't know how long we stood there, just looking at each other. But I stared, and he stared back. Mom took a picture with her fancy digital camera. I still have the picture somewhere. The girl with the blond pigtails is in the corner of the frame, a big smile showing her pearly whites while her parents stand with dropped jaws. My eyes are plastered open and Jake's mouth is slightly ajar, making it seem like he's eating my hand. It's pretty cool. I look at it when I want to remember the day at the zoo with my parents. Despite my many complaints, I had a great time. I wish I could have more of those days, just Mom, Dad, and me plus a car and a mini-vacation, playing hooky from work.

**Brittany Meyer**

Grade 12

Rolling Meadows High School

Rolling Meadows

Mark Maxwell, teacher

## UNTITLED

*"I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts  
filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I  
promised myself. I won't be what I'm not."*

—The Joy Luck Club

Amy Tan

As I step into the rental minivan, I take one last look at freedom. For the next seven days, I will be stuck with four aunts and my mother on a road trip across the eastern United States to look at colleges. Making my way to the backseat of the car, I hear my aunts already talking about my future, arguing the path I should follow for my future success. With growing annoyance, I turn on my iPod and prepare for the long trip ahead.

Getting out at the first stop, Georgetown University, I follow the parade of little Vietnamese women through the tour as I feel the sympathetic gazes of fellow tour members on the back of my head. Already, my aunts and my mother have begun their slew of questions for the tour guide, bombarding her with doubts they have about the college, monopolizing the conversation. I try to step in and save the poor girl from this disaster in the making. Gathering courage, I pull my aunts to the side, pleading with them to allow the guide to speak. I am met with stunned silence and wish I could take back the last fifteen seconds. I feel myself sucking in my breath, letting the chill suddenly filling the air enter my lungs. My aunts turn towards my mother in shock and anger, wordlessly communicating their disapproval. To them, my mother and I had failed at fulfilling our roles: my mother for not raising me properly and me for my willful disobedience. As my aunts return to the tour without a glance in my direction, my mom pulls me away for an angry tirade on the lack of respect I have

for her and her family. Listening to her, I am torn, as always, between the desire to respond and the understanding that I should accept the scolding without remark. Choosing at the time to follow my mother's wishes, I follow her back to the minivan.

Tension fills the car ride as we drive away from the campus. I feel my mom and my aunts' anger and disappointment in me as I attempt to hide away in the back. There is nowhere to turn for support, as my dad is hundreds of miles away, unable to back me in my decision to speak. The independence I have been taught by my father, a man thoroughly proud of his American "tell it how it is" attitude, goes against everything my mother and her family have been raised to believe. To them, respect and deference are more important than all else; right and wrong are dictated by those older and, therefore, wiser. Living between the realms of both cultures, I find myself shaped by the conflict between the two, stuck between differing ideologies. Sitting in the back of the car, I realize I am not the deferential child my mother wishes I would be, and though I may try, I probably never will be. The respect I have for my aunts, so important to my mother's culture, is firmly ingrained in my nature; however, I have also been taught to stand up for myself and my beliefs. I break the silence in the car to explain to my aunts I cannot be the meek young girl they wish I would be. I can only be myself: a headstrong girl hoping to make her family proud of her for who she has turned out to be.

**Peggy Moriarty**

Grade 12

Lyons Township High School

LaGrange

Kate Sullivan, teacher

## A BUILDUP TO MENTAL DESTRUCTION

1. My mom told me she would kick his butt.

“You’re fat!” he said as I straightened my eyebrows and stuck my tongue back in my mouth.

I probably should tell the teacher on him but I don’t want to be a tattletale. I think I am supposed to just walk away; that is what my mom told me to do. Okay, I’ll just do that ‘cause I’m not fat, I think.

2. Hiding is the best answer.

I can feel the eyes piercing my body as I race to take off my shirt. A little too fast, my arm gets stuck in the neck hole and now I just look like an idiot. A half-naked idiot. I remember in elementary school when all I had to do was put on my gym shoes. Now I have hundreds of people staring at me as I undress. Isn’t this illegal or something?

I squeeze myself up against my locker to hopefully hide as much skin as possible, pulling my gray McClure gym shirt down to cover my flower underwear. Which reminds me, I need better undergarments. This plan gives me enough coverage until I get on the obnoxious red, too short, shorts. People should thank me for sparing their eyes from my body.

3. In high school, things should change.

His arm spreads out over her shoulders. My eyes are glued to the TV. I think this movie is about a girl that died, holds a grudge, and is killing people. Probably, because it is called *The Grudge*, but who knows? I can hear the sound of her scooting closer and closer to him with every fake scream of terror. She is a pro at this guy stuff. It must be a pretty girl thing. That’s why I can barely talk to guys or maybe that’s why they barely talk to me. Whatever, all I know is that I like



this guy that is all over my friend and, well, he is all over my friend. I'm glad I am good at pretending to be happy for her. Her first eight boyfriends gave me good practice.

My mom told me a story once about her and one of her best friends. My mom was the "ugly" one and her friend was pretty, always surrounded by boys. I guess my mom must have hit puberty then, because her freshman year all of a sudden she was getting all the guys and her friend had none. It is probably bad to wish this would happen to me and Gabby, so let's just say my birthday candles made me wish it.

4. I had a boyfriend.

It was the first week of my life I've ever felt pretty.

5. It's official.

The paper on the doctor's bed makes that crackle noise as I sit down. I hate that noise. In fact, I hate the doctor all together.

The nurse walks in. She looks nice enough.

"We are just going to have to weigh you really quick." She no longer is nice.

She walks me to the death trap and I take off my shoes. The frigid metal freezes my toes. I clench my hands into fists as she moves around the little knobs, trying to find that magic number. Anxiety rushes up my spine to my forehead where I am already breaking a sweat. Finally she finds that number and I'm not too shocked. I was figuring it would be a lot worse.

After I've sat on the irritating paper for a couple of minutes, the doctor walks in. His cheekbones look like they are about to pop out of his skin, the child molester look. He walks right to his paper-lined desk and sits in his squeaky swivel chair.

"Allison, I am a little concerned with your BMI, which stands for Body Mass Index." Yes I know what it means, moron. "It is very close to the overweight line. Maybe you should try exercising and eating better."

Like I haven't tried a diet already. I just failed all the dozen times I've tried, just like I fail at almost everything.

6. I'm good at not showing the inside on the outside.

"You look so pretty in that dress!" She's lying.

"Thanks! You too." I smile back.

7. I hate using the word depressed.

*How to Talk to Teenagers, Causes of Depression, Easy Solutions.* I wonder if this lady has ever read any of those books that are collecting dust. Maybe she is writing a book of her own, because her pen hasn't stopped moving since my mouth started spilling my secrets. I would like to know what her little book contains. Maybe it's documentation that I am another statistic, another teen who has fallen to the depths of society. I don't want my book to end in a dismal escape. In fact, I would like it to end in complete and utter bliss. Never again caring about who thinks what. Making the smile on my face real. Though, first I have to pull out the roots of my issues. Which is the severe self-consciousness that lingers inside my skull, at least that is what my therapist said. Though, how I go about yanking out that root, I still do not know.

**Allison Moskus**

Grade 11

Lyons Township High School

LaGrange

Kate Sullivan, teacher

**(NOT REALLY)(MUCH MORE THAN)WATER**

Jay was perusing the items on the grocery shelves. As he approached the water aisle, he scanned the prices, but his heart spiked when he saw, on the single bottle rack, a three-dollar price marker. This was for a smaller bottle! He couldn't just pass it by; this was a true oddity, and he was dying to find an explanation.

It said *Fiji*. (Actually, *Fiji* was written on there. The bottle did not speak the word *Fiji*.) *Not a very common brand. This may be a very expensive special water*, Jay thought.

As Jay continued to analyze the bottle, he saw that *Imported from Fiji* was written on it. Jay had read about the country of Fiji in *National Geographic*. To him, "good country," was written all over the article. He thought, therefore, the water must be good.

He took one bottle home, and, after cleansing his palate as if the water were wine, commenced the tasting.

Tasting result: amazing.

Jay immediately drove back to the store to buy more Fiji. He took a 36-pack home for 100 dollars (saving eight dollars!) and had Fiji with his dinner that night.

Soon, his obsession with Fiji grew. Jay refused to drink regular water, and developed the habit of clearing the kitchen counter of clutter like mortgage statements and credit notices. By disposing of these distractions, he made the counter a peaceful place to enjoy his Fiji.

A few months later, Jay's wife, Charlina, picked up a letter out of the garbage. As Jay was enjoying his lunch and Fiji, Charlina gritted her teeth with frustration.

She muttered, "Ooh, this is not good. Look at this." Charlina passed the letter to Jay, and he looked at it. It said *Foreclosure Notice*. Jay knew that the Fiji expenses had driven

him to bankruptcy, but did not regret the Fiji—he knew that good water is worth the cost.

As Jay was watching the news one day before he and his wife had to move to the poor side of town, he heard the anchor say, “In other news, false advertising laws may be more lax than you think. Many companies are lying, without breaking the laws, that their product is imported. Among many of these products is Fiji water. Fiji is actually sourced from the same plant as Costco water.”

Jay sipped his Fiji. It tasted terrible.

**Scott Mutchnik**

Grade 7

Northbrook Junior High School

Northbrook

Mindi Rench, teacher

## THE FREEDOM OF FLIGHT

"Do you appreciate *anything* in this world!?"

"Are you kidding?" I groaned.

"Get over here!" my mom shouted.

"What?! No."

"You must be joking! You don't even care, do you?"

"Yeah, *that's* it! I don't care!" I snarled back at her.

She has no idea what she's saying, does she? Her angry voice was now just a blur running in and out of my ears. The sudden urge to simply get away from the pissed-off voices ran through my veins now. I yearned for fresh air, I needed a breeze against my face to clear my head.

"Where the hell are you going? See! This is what I mean! You just don't care about anyth—."

My mind reduced her voice to a faint rumble. I stomped my way into our mud room, where my back door is. She was still yelling at me. I slid open the big, white closet door and flipped the light switch. On the shoe rack sat my gray running shoes. There was a red trim along the ankle and on the laces that pulls my eyes in. The rubber treads were worn and had blades of grass and dirt lodged in the cracks from so many steps in the muck and grime. Inside the shoes, where my heel rested, there was a large hole from the friction that comes side-by-side with running. I slipped the shoe around my foot.

"Are you serious? You're leaving!? What the hell are you thinking!?"

I double-knotted the laces and moved to the next shoe.

"If you leave... I'll—I'll... I don't even know! *Goddamn* it!"

I slipped on my second shoe and stood at the door, looking through its glossy, translucent window into the wet, fall

landscape scattered with splotches of brown, red, and yellow. I looked back behind me where she stood, just yelling. I grabbed a sweatshirt from the hooks by my door and opened it. Each step put me one step away from a fog of pure outrage that engulfs everyone in its path and spreads like an epidemic.

I ran along the stone steps leading to my gate and unlatched the metal handle. I stepped out onto the wet asphalt dotted with puddles, then reached over the other side of the gate and latched it back up.

I was free.

I planted my feet on the concrete sidewalk, its puddles bombarded with drops falling from the large maple tree above, each drop radiating ripples like a shock wave. I looked out and scanned the gray, cloudy landscape.

Off I went.

The small pools of water lodged in the depressions of the streets and sidewalks splashed drops of water up onto my legs with each step, dampening my shoes and socks. It was a bit cold to have shorts on—but I didn't care.

I just ran and let the cool air run through my hair, on my face, and into my half-zipped-up sweatshirt. I was running abnormally fast, but I didn't even realize it until I came back to my driveway. Even though I was focusing my strides in the middle of the street, only a few cars drove past me.

I drifted off the street and onto the sidewalk, and eventually into the local park. A flock of geese stood gathered together, romping around the vast field that stood beside the playground that was filled with children intoxicated in laughter and happiness in the field, romping around the grassy

park. The sidewalk split the flock of geese in two. When I reached them, they retreated to the safety of the air in a burst of honks, flapping wings, and flying feathers.

I'd gone about a mile when I decided to slow down, turn around, and go back the other way.

The relief of simple fresh air was truly staggering. I had left my house where I was near the point of screaming, and after less than ten minutes, the weight of frustration on my shoulders was reduced to a dust with every stride.

I felt like it was only seconds ago when I left this brick house with grey siding that I've come so well to know. No other place would put food on my plate and clothes on my back, but more importantly, no other place can appreciate and love me through anything.

I walked up the front steps with heavy, fast breaths to supply my quickly thumping heart. I gripped the doorknob, but hesitated. Do I really want to go back to this? I debated with myself—but then pushed it open.

My mom must have heard the door squeak open because she said "Hey."

"Hey," I replied.

"Dinner's ready."

"Okay."

**Tommy Ott**

Grade 8

Northbrook Junior High School

Northbrook

Heather Corral, teacher

## SIBLINGS

When Julie first learned she was having a little brother, she could not understand why. They had her after all, and she could not think of any reason her parents would want to replace her, especially with a baby. She could not comprehend why anyone would want one anyways. To her, babies, especially boys, were the most annoying, snotty, and loud creatures on earth. When she went to the house of her friend Samantha (who had two little brothers), she did not really notice them; but now that she thought about it, she could vaguely remember Sam yelling at them to get out of her room. The rest of the brother-sister love was a mystery to her.

As the months went on and her parents were getting ready for the baby, no one seemed to pay attention to her. When relatives and friends came over to congratulate her parents and bring presents for the baby, no one ever talked to her. It seemed as if, overnight, Julie had suddenly turned into the “invisible” girl. So, as the time went by, she stayed in her room, sulking and waiting for all the “excitement” to be over. She still could not see what the big deal was.

When an only child gets presented with the idea of now having to share his/her life with another sibling, the idea usually repels him/her. All he/she sees in it is being forced to share toys with the annoying baby who will probably break them anyways, so there is completely no point in doing that unless one decides that his/her toys are babyish. However, as the due date arrives, the excitement usually rubs off on him/her, because he/she knows that from then on, he/she will have someone to blame his/her mischief on.

A couple months later, Julie went to visit her mom in the hospital. When she walked in, she first noticed an odd sound coming from a white basket. She looked inside, and there she



saw a little baby boy screaming his lungs out. His bright red face made a strange contrast with the light blue blanket and hat he was wearing. Her hate for him left and was instantly replaced by some strong, other feeling deep down inside her. Feeling confused, she finally found out she did not hate her brother after all; she loved him. She immediately proceeded to examine him. She scratched his ear, stuck her finger up his nose (resulting in a loud crescendo on his part), and said in a very serious voice, "This one's a Paul."

At first, a younger sibling seems like the worst possible thing that can happen to an older child. As time passes though, the younger sibling grows and develops a sort of adoration for his/her older sibling. The older sibling becomes a role model in the younger sibling's eyes, and that level of admiration is hard to resist for the older sibling. For many, a younger sibling is the best thing that ever happened to the elder, for the younger one comforts the older sibling when the older sibling is sad, rejoices when he/she is happy, and provides annoyance at all other times. Even though older siblings often pretend to hate their younger siblings, they know that deep inside they depend on their younger siblings and love them.

**Olivia Perce**

Grade 6

Lycée Français de Chicago

Chicago

Cyn Koukos, teacher

## THE LITTLE CERAMIC BANK

I remember a promise once made to me by my father. I was about to turn five, and he told me I could have a puppy for my birthday, so I would have someone to play with. But that birthday I only got an amazing cake and a beautiful new bike. As I lay awake that night in the dark, I listened to my parents arguing in the room below. My mother thought I was not old enough for such a responsibility. Though she didn't know it, my father's words had me determined to prove I was responsible and worthy of a puppy.

For a little while, I was determined. However, like any five-year-old, my resolve held while I was consciously thinking about it, but then I would be distracted by some temptation and I would forget all about the promise I had made to myself. Eventually my stubborn pleas for a puppy fell down the list of desired Christmas presents, overtaken by the latest game or doll, until I had completely forgotten about my previous "life-or-death need."

One day when I was eight, my mother came home from work with a surprise for me. Excitement welled up inside me as she extracted the parcel from her work bag. I tore off the wrapping paper without hesitation only to find a ceramic jar with a slit in the top. My face fell.

"What's this for?" I demanded of my mother.

"Well," she said, smiling a sort of wishful smile, "I've decided that you need to start valuing what you have more and learning to make good decisions and to stick by those decisions."

Slightly confused by her words, which she seemed to think were incredibly wise, I took the little bank grudgingly back to my room and put it on my desk, where it stayed untouched for quite a while.

A few weeks later I was out running errands with my mother when I saw the most amazing thing I had ever seen. In a store window there was a TV playing a video clip of a kid (who looked older and definitely cooler than I did) riding on a scooter. But it wasn't just any scooter, it was electric and the kid seemed to be zooming along effortlessly going who knows how fast. I knew at that moment I had to have it. I turned to my mother and jumped up and down and shouted at her in my excitement, trying to convey just how important the scooter was. She seemed to miss the point and asked me if I still wanted that doll I saw yesterday, or those color-changing markers I saw the day before.

"But you don't understand!" I said impatiently, as if she was a first grader trying to learn my superior second grade ways of climbing on top of the playground's highest slide.

"Obviously I don't," my mother replied calmly, "but if you want it so much why don't you buy it?"

I was so taken aback by her willingness to give in to my request that I was momentarily speechless. "Really?"

"Do you have enough money? Do you even know how much it costs?"

"Oh," I said, my voice full of sudden comprehension. She wasn't going to buy it for me, she was going to make me buy it myself. I turned from her to gaze longingly at the kid on TV and then to the price tag on the box in the window. I groaned. Why was it so expensive? I felt as though the sun had gone behind the clouds as I looked up into my mother's eyes, silently begging. She only took my hand and pulled me gently away, back to our car. Hopeless disappointment flooded through me during the drive back home, and I remembered my fifth birthday. I remembered how determined I was to prove myself responsible, and how I had failed. I stared out the window at the setting afternoon sun behind the trees. I met my mother's gaze through the rearview mirror.

“Do you still have that bank?” she asked quietly.

I nodded slowly, thinking. I thought about how I knew I could save enough money for that scooter if I really wanted to; it would simply take a lot of effort and willpower. I suddenly felt older than my age, but I was confident in that feeling. I would save up the money and I would stick to my decision and I would get the scooter and I would be happy. I knew it.

When I got home, I found the little ceramic bank buried under a pile of dirty clothes and placed it high above my bed on a shelf next to my soccer trophies. I turned to dig up last week’s allowance, what was left of it anyway, and put it through the slit in the bank, enjoying the clink of the coins. I realized that even if I didn’t spend any of my allowance, it would still take me weeks to save up for the scooter. I needed to get myself a job.

Over the next week I worked hard every day after school, cleaning the playroom, doing laundry, sweeping the floors, dusting: everything I hated doing. Each time I added the small wages I earned from my mother into my bank I would feel accomplished for a split second, until I realized how far I had left to go. It was hard as well to see other toys my friends had and want toys just like them. Each time I became envious I had to remember the scooter and how cool I would look riding it. That always brought a smile to my face.

I was very grateful when the leaves began to fall for that supplied me with a new job, as jobs around the house fell short. I liked raking our neighbors’ leaves because they tended to be more generous with the pay. When the first snow began to fall, I shoveled that like I did the leaves. After what seemed like forever, I had enough money saved in my little ceramic bank to buy the scooter I wanted so badly.

After school I rushed home, knowing that was the day I would go to the toy store. I ran up to my room to empty the

bank and shoved all the money into my favorite pink purse and made sure it was zipped up tight, so that none of my earnings could fall out. My mother wasn't home yet, and I had no intention of waiting for her to return from work. She would be home when I returned and I would already have the scooter. On the way out of my room, I tripped and stumbled on a doll I had received a past birthday, which at the time I thought was amazing. Now I looked down at it wondering how I thought it was so special only a few months ago, when now I had all but forgotten about it. Picking it up, I smoothed its hair and straightened its clothes and then placed it gently on my bed. I turned slowly and walked out of my room, down the stairs, out the door. It would not take me long to walk to the shops.

When I returned home a little later with a huge grin on my face, my mother's worried look changed to shock and then to amusement.

"I shouldn't even be surprised!" she laughed.

I grinned and looked down, the little puppy barking happily from my arms.

**Alaina Rolfes**

Grade 10

Evanston Township High School

Evanston

Judith Ruhana, teacher

## THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

Space has always intrigued me. Galaxies of wandering stars, unexplored planets that hold beauties unbeknownst to the human race and vast amounts of anything you could think of.

And no, I'm not one of those hippies with a screw loose claiming I was probed by a soon-coming alien predator. And I'm not one of those dreamers hoping to land on the moon one day as an astronaut hero.

I don't want to risk my life to be a glory hog. I want to be the guy in the back, discovering the places the astronauts go to land on. I want to be the guy who is able to say, "Oh, yeah, I found that planet about three months ago." I want to be the guy in the back who makes sure there are shots to be called. I want to be an astronomer.

I will admit, when I was a little kid, I wanted to be an astronaut. I wanted to be a moon walker. There has always been an interest in the moon, but I always like to stay close to home. At least that's what my mom always says.

Mom. That's funny. Here I was, writing this to keep my mind off of her. I guess even my journal wasn't a sanctuary to my worries. I was waiting inside of the hospital while my mom underwent surgery. She has a malignant brain tumor and it is my current arch enemy.

It consumes everything I do. I can't watch TV without thinking about the problem. I can't read without thinking about it. I can't even stargaze without thinking of it. But now I'm writing, and it's even consuming that. I just want this to be over with. For my mom to be safe. For everything to go back to normal. But apparently, it wasn't happening anytime soon.

So I write. And I wait. With my Dad. And we wait.

Until a ray of hope shone upon me. The operating door room opened, and my dad stood up immediately. He must have been feeling the same way I was. He rushed over to the doctor, and I stood up, too. My stomach was wrenching. We needed an answer.

The doctor walked out, and I could see the sadness in his eyes when he saw me looking inquisitively. It was a horrible sign. My dad asked quickly, worriedly, "How is she?"

The doctor looked down. "We did everything we could..." My dad turned white and hit the wall. He ran his hands through his hair and started sobbing uncontrollably. I knew what was wrong.

Seeing him cry broke me and I started crying too. I felt so cold. I felt so alone. I felt like a part of me died. I felt like I was trapped on the dark side of the moon.

**Kevin Ross**

Grade 8

Conrady Junior High School

Hickory Hills

Caroline Sweiss, teacher

## GONE

Thud, thud, thud, thud. The bass pumps life into my body, up through the relentless muck, through my slipping rubber soles, through denim-clad legs, flowing out from my skyward arms. The crowd is packed closer than sardines. The electric pulse emanates from a neon stage, pulling in everyone it reaches. My eyes are stuck in place, the movement of dancers and flashing lights hypnotize me. Thousands of silhouetted heads bob up and down to the beat, interrupting my line of vision, but only as framework to the focus, one endless, pulsating mass. My hips float slowly side to side, unconsciously, familiarly. Another pair of hips match mine, his body is pressed close. I can feel his warm breath tickling my ear. The arm wrapped tightly around my waist holds me steady as my feet slide around in the muck. The electric guitar soars and the crowd goes wild.

I'm pulled out of my trance by a boy running past, slamming hard into my shoulder to reach some unknown destination. The hand at my waist shoots out protectively in front of me, the other holding me up once more. I follow the boy with my eyes, his green sweatshirt weaving in and out. He joins a large group and then I see that more are joining. It's a familiar sight, the jeering blob. My mind flashes back to cafeteria fights and dance battles, wondering which scenario is causing this convergence. I wordlessly twist out of my partner's grip and begin to follow the path of the green-hooded boy. With each step my feet sink into the ground. I edge up to the group and squeeze in between bodies, shuffling my muddy feet, mumbling *excuse me* after *excuse me*. Then I see the body.

I don't know what it is that leads us to make bad decisions, detrimental ones even. Part of me thinks that there is



a traceable root for every negative outcome, some conscious force that guides us along a certain path with a definite outcome. But sometimes I wonder if maybe it's little less than chance at play, holding scissors up to her puppeteer's strings and cutting at random. A situation. A fluke. An unforeseen influence that changes what we would normally do and only gets us into trouble because it happened at *that* moment. And if we really are puppets at the hand of chance and fate, it is only reasonable that regardless of whether everyone else is doing it, some of us will have our strings cut. Some of us must fall.

First my eyes find the lank hair spread on the ground. The long, auburn tresses are weaving together blending in with the soft brown of the ground. Her pale white face is rolled to one side, her nose pressed into the mud. Her left arm is bent awkwardly from underneath her, outstretched and covered in freckles. The other arm slumps across her body, barely covering her exposed midriff. Her outfit might have been cute, I don't know. The same muck that I had been so disgusted to get on my shoes covers her, slashed haphazardly from shoulder to foot. Her pink Converse look out of place with the earth's dark camouflage. I have the same sneakers, I realize. Her skinny knees are pressed together. Finally able to lift my eyes a fraction of an inch away from her tormented frame, a realization hits me; she is alone. Bile rises in my throat. She is alone.

*"Hey, Mom, did I tell you I'm going to that concert in Tinley Park?"*

*"Tori, I'm on the phone."*

*"Okay, well I just wanted to let you know."*

*She holds the phone away from her mouth and covers it with one hand, "You're not going. Don't interrupt me."*

*"Mom, I told you I'm paying for it! What is the problem?"*

No response. "MOM."

"I said no. Hold on one minute."

"I'm going. I'll fill out the Denver application by Friday so you have no reason not to let me go."

"YOU'RE NOT GOING! I'M ON THE PHONE!"

"Yeah, we'll see about that."

Maybe she had an argument with her parents like I did. Maybe they told her she had to be home by midnight and that they were going to smell her breath. Maybe it was her first time drinking. Or maybe not. Maybe they told her she could have a party at her house. And her friends...maybe they laughed loudly about what a lightweight she was, while pushing another can into her hands. Maybe they only left out of fear. Maybe she was the only one drinking and she wandered off by herself. I don't know her story.

Paramedics swarm in around her and my throat tightens. My foot moves forward, crunching down on a beer can. One of the paramedics lifts her off of the ground and the inexplicable tug I feel strengthens. Her head lolls from his elbow, the muddy hair swinging sickeningly. I expect her eyes to flutter open, for the dark lashes brushing her muddy cheek to rise. Nothing. She is so drunk she can't even stir. I wonder what color her eyes are. They begin to strap her down. Her body is still there, but she is gone.

**Tori Sims**

Grade 12

Hinsdale Central High School

Hinsdale

Alexis Colianni, teacher

## DON'T BLINK

*"Trust me friend, a hundred years goes faster than  
you think...so don't blink"*

*—Kenny Chesney*

She is sitting alone at a tiny square table when my dad arrives. The room is blank and white, much like the faces of the people sitting in it. Sagging bodies with no reason to talk rest at the other tables. The old priest with his eyes closed cries IT ALL GOES DOWN FROM HERE...DOWN, DOWN, DOWN. Once when I talked to him a few months ago, he told me he used to love to golf. Another woman I met named Edna sits silent, eating the most disgusting Salisbury steak that could ever be. She came from Italy on a boat a long time ago.

My dad sneaks up behind Nana, puts his fingers to her scalp, and starts scratching. OOOOHHH, who is that? she asks. Santa Claus, my dad says. OOOOOOHHH. It's friendly when he teases her like that.

He pulls up a chair beside her. WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? WHO ARE YOU? There's no point in telling her, but he tries. He always does. It's always worth the chance of her remembering those trips to Lincoln Park Zoo, ice cream runs to Biel's, bicycle rides down Maple. He'll take anything. Steven...Ken's son. Ken is your son. He is my father. You are my grandmother. NO, SILLY. YOU WORK HERE.

He stares at her, holds back the water in his soft blue eyes—he always felt special he got them from her, that he was the only one. Okay, he replies.

My dad places a small piece of pumpkin pie and a purple helium balloon in front of Nana. The pie's burnt orange color is like the autumn leaves beyond the nursing room windows. OOOOOOHHH, she says. My dad begins to feed her, and she eats slowly, barely curling her grayish-pink lips

around the tip of the spoon. The pie is just soft enough for her decaying teeth—tiny black stubs in her mouth. At least she is eating...that time when she stopped, we thought she was going to die. The balloon simply makes the room look at little cheerier; when she asks what it is, my dad tells her to just eat more pie.

He came here today only to stare at her pale, ghostly skin. Or, maybe, he would try to talk about the weather, the show on the dining room television...things you talk about when you meet a stranger. There's not much else you can do to try to make her happy, but I don't blame her...I wouldn't last one day in this place. She even tried escaping once. A 105-year-old lady walking down the street—now that would be a sight. My grandpa and dad and uncles say that if they ever grow old that way, just kill 'em off, because it isn't even living. He counts the memories in her wrinkles.

I wish now that I could have gone with him that special day. But really, I guess, any day can be her birthday.

**Kristin VanSpankeren**

Grade 12

Lyons Township High School

LaGrange

Kate Sullivan, teacher



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

DEADLINE: Postmarked no later than January 31, 2011.

FORMAT: Typed copy is preferred. 8<sup>1/2</sup> x 11 paper is mandatory (one side only). Copy must be clear, legible, and carefully proofread, and must not include drawings or illustrations.

LABELING: Each entry must be accompanied by its own cover sheet stapled to the entry, which states:

- 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)
- Email address of instructor

IMPORTANT: The student's name, the school's name, and the teacher's name must not appear anywhere else.

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.

REQUIRED ENCLOSURE FOR STUDENT  
POETRY AND PROSE ENTRIES

When submitting manuscripts, include a signed statement to read:

To the best of my knowledge, the enclosed manuscripts were written by the students whose names they bear. I have submitted work by the following students (give complete list of students represented):

---

(Name) (Title) (Grade)

---

(School) (Instructor's Email)

---

(Teacher's Signature)

MAILING: Send prose to: IATE Prose Contest  
Delores Robinson  
Illinois Valley Community College  
815 N. Orlando Smith Ave.  
Oglesby, IL 61348-9692

Send poetry to: IATE Poetry Contest  
Robin L. Murray  
Department of English  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Avenue  
Charleston, IL 61920