

**THEODORE GARRISON CREATIVE WRITING AWARDS
2006 CREATIVE WRITING FESTIVAL
WESTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY**

POETRY

1 st Place	Brian Murphy , Pekin Community High School	“Real Civil Rights”
2 nd Place	Kate McGowan , Macomb High School	“Erin and Caledonia”
3 rd Place	Joscelyn Lockwood , Pekin Community High School	“Balance”

Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Josh Fairfield , Winchester High School	“What Is the Rhyme?”
Amy Neill , Southeastern High School	“Seasons Beauty”
Kourtney Parks , VIT High School	“Cowboy”
Hannah Robertson , VIT High School	“The Outsider”
Miriam Rutzen , West Central High School	“Spring is in the air”
Aubry Stapleton , Pekin Community High School	“Ice Queen”
Aubry Stapleton , Pekin Community High School	“Little Toy Soldier”
Heather Stevenson , Monmouth-Roseville High School	“Sweet Serenity”

FICTION

1 st Place	Julia Mindeman , Macomb High School	“Louis”
2 nd Place	Grant Benda , Macomb High School	“The Humanoid”
3 rd Place	Sarah Tisinger , Pleasant Valley High School	“Silent Angels”

Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Kyle Glaser , Macomb High School	“Twilight”
Therese Anne Pircon , Macomb High School	“Table Talk”

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

1 st Place	Katie Gettinger , Macomb High School	“Camille’s Hinge”
2 nd Place	Allison Brummet , Glenwood High School	“Hero: A Feature Article”
3 rd Place	Makayla Trotter , Macomb High School	“What Luck”

Honorable Mention (in alphabetical order)

Ammon Burdick , Macomb High School	“The Road”
Matthew Gossage , VIT High School	“Just the three of us”
Rachel Jones , Southeastern High School	“My 9/11”
Elizabeth Kerby , Pekin Community High School	“The Hazel Gaze”



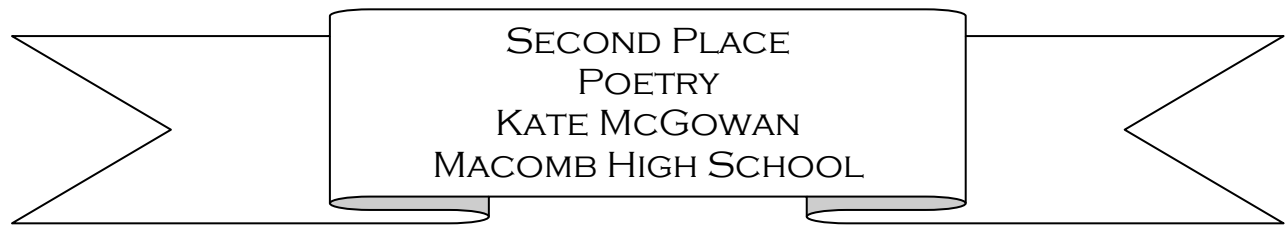
Real Civil Rights

I am a white piece of paper
with blue lines,
wide-ruled
and I am very wise

I carry a message
that could change your life
The problem is
you won't let me try

I am waiting in a whole stack of papers
knowing I will be well received
and you'll have to dry your eyes
before you put a grade on me
But as you pick me up, all things change
I am crumpled and tossed like I were diseased

I know that my dangling ridges were my death
No teacher can tolerate my kind
So now I bleed red ink
"Use loose-leaf instead!"
I am branded a failure
The only familiarity on my scarred body
is my title:
The True Civil Rights Poem



Erin and Caledonia

I

Oh, as down in the glen I rode again
From the Wights and the little folk running
To the sea, and the sky, to the rock shore
The mist was retreating in three.

Oh! What I saw when the Angelus rang
On that morning when unbound ran the sun;
The steeple of Andrew's Church over the hill
And the winding road to Innisfree.

But woke from a dream did I in the night
And with ne'er a forward glance for the day,
Did walk in the grass and lay, that I might
Look east, at my Ireland's stars and say,

"Whate'er I lost when I left, you'll believe
Was ne'er regain'd when of you I took leave."

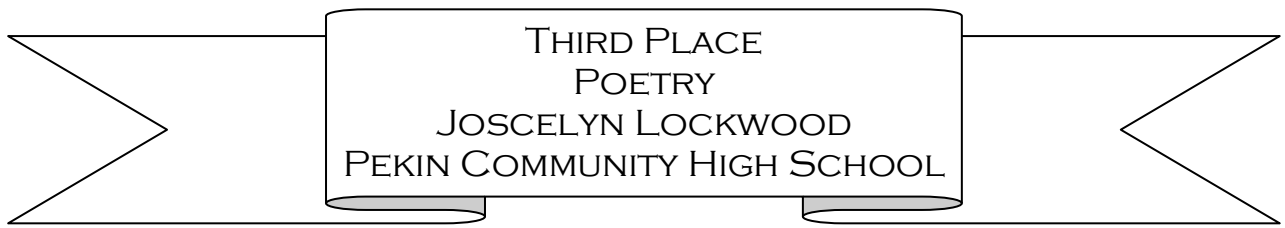
II

All o'er the moors the war pipes were calling
Down to the coombe and up to the highland
And out o' their wills, horses stand stalling
To hear the lamenting cry, O! And then

Riding with forward turn'd back I could not
Have resisted the call that bade me stay,
And turned to rest my eyes upon the spot
Where pipers played, on hills so far awa'

Caledonia, stand tall and proud
That we might see your face and cry to be
Home, for all my head lies crying, forward bow'd
Until again my homeland I can see.

"For a swing of the kilts and a sight of the shore
Shall I dream, and I'll long for the light evermore."



Balance

My shadow tells me to smile more,
That laughter is contagious

Clothed in white with onyx wings,
She is the complete opposite of me

I wear black because I hate stains
She wears white because she hates lint

Some days I hate her
But some days she is all I have, all I trust

Without her, I know I could never be complete



What is the Rhyme?

What is the rhyme; what is the rhythm
In a world scarcely given
A chance to let its mind run free
Controlled all the while by the powers that be?
Desiring the world outside of his restricted vision,
Man, not grasping his life's mission,
Writhes for a chance
to run
From a dark future
into a brighter one.

HONORABLE MENTION
POETRY
AMY NEILL
SOUTHEASTERN HIGH SCHOOL

Seasons Beauty

I like the sounds of crickets throughout the night,
The dancing fireflies giving out their light.
Who knew of such a beautiful sight?
I love this summer night.

Do you see what I see? All the piles of leaves,
All the orange, reds, yellows, and greens.
The pumpkins have all grown from their tiny seeds.
Oh how the fall is one of my needs.

Look at the blankets of snow.
They give off a certain glow.
I don't like the wind that blows.
I'll go home and eat some cookie dough.

What a beautiful day.
Oh how I missed my Blue Jay.
He sings for me every day.
Springtime is nice, wouldn't you say?

Back to the hot sticky nights,
When I get all my itchy bites.
I love sleeping at camp on these shimmering nights.
Thank you for all these summer nights.

HONORABLE MENTION
POETRY
KOURTNEY PARKS
VIT HIGH SCHOOL

Cowboy
You say it like it's a bad word
You don't understand how someone could love a man who works hard and loves what he does
A man who loves to see the sun rise and set over his land
See the breath of a newborn calf in the cool night air
A man who has calloused hands and a rough face
A man who loves a woman who knows that under his rough and tumble exterior
Is a heart that beats for good friends and strong coffee around a campfire on a cold night
A heart that beats with good intentions
That wants to do the right thing
That loves life even when he can't find the right words
Cowboy
To you it's a bad thing
To me it's the best way to be



The Outsider

Whispers.

Swarming busily surround her,
as she confidently walks to class.

Of course she hears them.

Impossible to escape the scorns.

She feels the wrath of despise,
their eyes,

peeling the layers, walls assembled around her heart,
barriers from the world, so judgmental.

Whispers.

Louder than bellows,

more piercing than screams

Twist the tears from eyes of girls, like water from washcloths,
but she remains serene.

Calm, collected, and soothed with assurance,
there is more than this life.

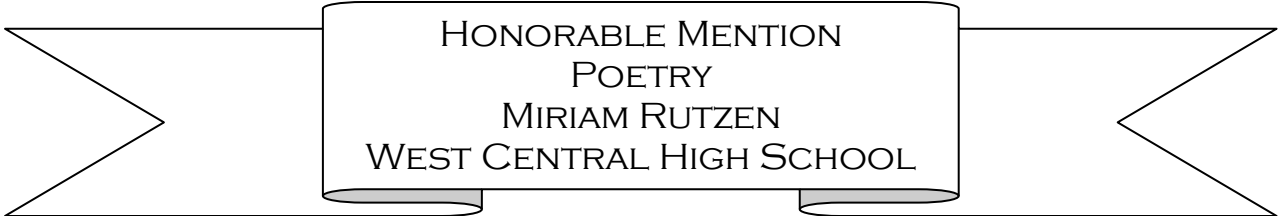
Whispers.

That Teen America sees as a social death sentence,

she sees merely as speech from those lacking wisdom.

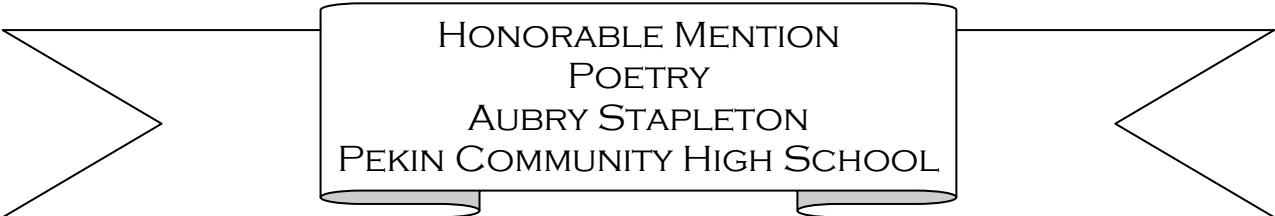
Eyes engaged on what is to come,
something after this earth.

She is alien, not a resident of the world,
the OUTSIDER.



HONORABLE MENTION
POETRY
MIRIAM RUTZEN
WEST CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL

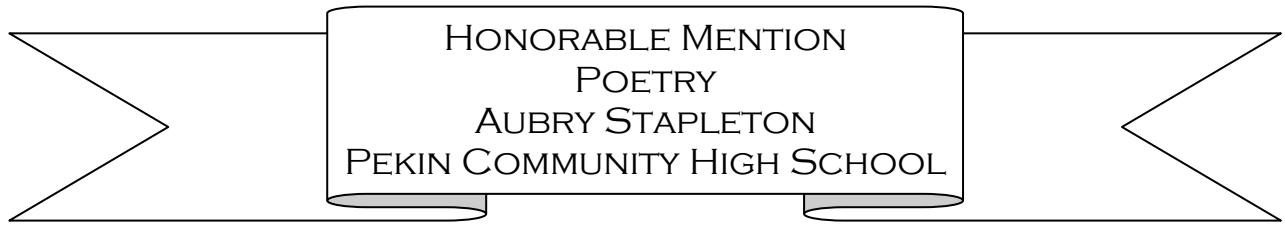
Spring is in the air.
Beautiful sweet sugar,
I taste on my tongue.
I take a deep breath;
Cleansing, relaxing.
Tension runs high.
I gaze at the bar,
Levelly staring back at me.
In defiance, I shift back,
Balancing on my heel.
With the thrust of my arms,
I race toward my enemy.
Closer I approach,
Charging, like a bull.
And with the grace of a gazelle,
I lift off the ground,
Arching, arching, ever so high;
Twisting, spinning, flying;
Down, down; sweet relief.
Triumphant; I have won.



HONORABLE MENTION
POETRY
AUBRY STAPLETON
PEKIN COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

Ice Queen

Her beauty is unrenowned
Her malice
Unforgettable
She sits on a throne of ice
Cold unwavering
Her eyes
Piercing
She covers everything she sees
With a bed of frost
Her chill
Brings lovers together
And tears the world apart
Winter is a double-edged sword
Held by a queen
Of ice



Little Toy Soldier

Barbie sits on the shelf,
trapped in her plastic prison,
bound by twist ties,
and plastic tags,
a smile plastered on her face.
She stares ahead,
eyes never blinking.

One day a young girl
comes and buys Barbie.
She takes her home,
carefully cuts the tags,
untwists the ties,
tenderly removes Barbie
from her cardboard cell,
poofs her rumpled skirt
and brushes her flattened hair.

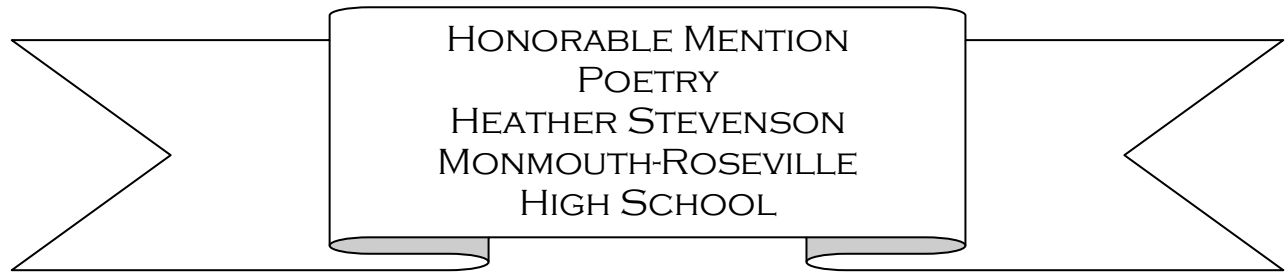
She sets Barbie on her shelf,
setting her precariously
on a plastic stand
next to other Barbies,
all stamped
with the same vacant expressions
and hollow plastic heads.

Every day Barbie watches
as the girl stares up at her
in adoration and says,
“I want to be just like you.”
Barbie never says anything,
never acknowledges the young girl.

As the girl gets older,
Barbie watches
as she pops pills,
smokes cigarettes,
refuses to eat.

Barbie watches as the girl
everyday
tears herself apart
for an image she can't achieve.

Barbie is America's –
a symbol
of values we truly hold
and lives we destroy
to become a vision
of plastic.



Sweet Serenity

Coiled within me lays a serpent of fear
Penetrating fangs with my each bloody tear
He awaits
To strike
To release
His deadly bite
But he holds back and slithers through my veins
Til I'm cutting at my own flesh screaming "This creature must be slain"
He then strikes and his deadly venom courses throughout me
Poison mixed with blood is his sweet serenity



Louis

My big brother Louis told me that the ghosts of a million peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were absorbed into the blacktop of our school after they were eaten, and that was why even the playground smelled like the inside of a lunchbox. When the teacher's aide threw open the doors for lunch recess, the scent wafted in and pulled us outside, each of us hopping in the randomly placed light green tiles of the dark green hallway floor.

That day, even before I saw a couple of the big boys gathering halfway across the playground, kids waiting for a swing were shifting almost imperceptibly into hunched-over, "Someone's-going-to-be-crucified-today-and-it-better-not-be-me" expressions, preparing for a kick they knew was coming. We all felt it descending.

We all went to watch anyway, feet pounding on the blacktop, elbowing our way through a small but growing circle of kids, craning to see the unfortunate one in the center.

Someone jeered, "He got hit in the stomach and he's *crying!*"

I laughed nervously and looked down through the tangle of blaring colored t-shirts.

Louis crouched on the ground, beet-red, clenching his teeth and wiping away tears that kept on dripping.

"Louis is a girl!" somebody else yelled and there was an explosion of derisive laughter. "A girl! He's a girl!"

I looked down again and swallowed, and began to feel oddly disgusted. Why did he always, always have to cry? Why did everything have to hurt him twice as much as it hurt normal people?

It was almost nauseating; his swollen purple face gave no hint of clearing.

They started to chant it, "Louis is a gir-rl! Louis is a gir-rl!"

Their voices faded in and out of my ears, replaced with a churning sound I was just sure was my lunch, ready to propel itself on the ground in front of everybody.

And then my mouth was open. "You mean Louisa!" I yelled. "All he does is play his violin all day! He's a GIRL!"

The circle dissolved in laughter and, shaky and relieved, I laughed with it, my ears clearing, arms aching with the bigger boys' good-natured punches. When I glanced down, Louis was wearing the same stricken expression I'd seen on his face when we found that drowned rabbit in the flowerbed fountain.

I stepped back through the crowd, once, twice, then turned and ran for the safety of the swings, pumping myself upward, losing myself in a perfectly smooth sky.

* * *

At three o'clock, though, I remembered. I dragged my feet down the pavement to the bicycle rack where Louis stood waiting, and looked sideways at him. He stared stonily ahead and then set off toward home, shaking the earth with his steps, clenching his backpack straps so hard they left red welts on his hands.

I trailed behind him, biting the inside of my mouth. "L-Louis?" I said tentatively. He didn't answer, but quickened his pace, gaining a few more sidewalk squares on me. A large block of ice landed in my stomach.

I tried again. "Louis...I'm...you know..."

He kicked a pebble in front of him and didn't answer.

"Are you listening...Louis..."

He'd turned the corner, moving too fast for me. I jogged after and found him standing on the curb of the biggest street, the one he's supposed to help me cross, scraping at the grass with his shoe, and watching the cars flash past.

I ran up to him and cried, "Louis, I'm-I'm sorry!"

He just kicked a few clumps of grass into the street.

"I'm sorry...for real!" I pleaded.

He turned away.

I eyed the cars, and then glanced back at Louis.

He was silent, so I took a deep breath and stepped out into the street. The new asphalt baked, smelly in the sun, and cars gleamed just a short way off, rumbling hungrily.

I hadn't made it past the painted white line when Louis seized me from behind and dragged me back to the curb.

"You know what happened to the kid who tried to cross this street ALL BY HIMSELF?" Louis roared into my face.

"No." I whispered, terrified.

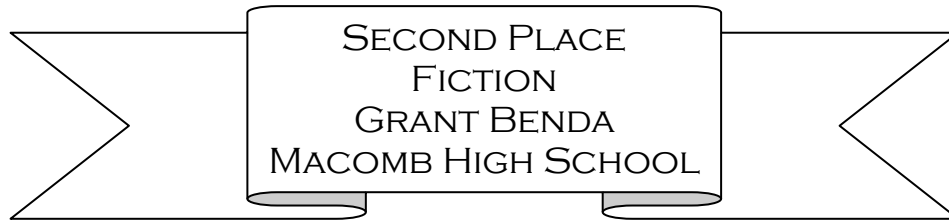
"He got squished!" he said ominously, "as flat as anything. They had to peel him up with a pancake flipper. Now they pin him up on the wall, and none of his pants fit, so his mom has to hang skirts on him."

"Really?" I squeaked out, eyes widening.

"Really," he said, looking down each side of the street, and then again, just to make sure. "You don't want to wear skirts, do you?"

I shook my head vigorously.

“Come on,” he said, and grabbed my hand roughly. We dug our sneakers into the melty asphalt and crossed the street.



The Humanoid

The day had already expired into the earth when he awoke. His joints began to creak and his tired eyes slowly began to see. It was different though. He felt more aware of everything. He noticed the broken mirror sitting on the ground across from him. The viridian paint that colored the walls was starting to chip, and flakes of it could be seen scattered across the cement floor. Through the small window in the top of the wall that was to his left, he saw that daylight no longer lingered outside. He moved his legs. They felt very heavy, and he had to move them around a little before he could walk. After a few minutes of this, he walked slowly over to the light switch to turn it on. He placed his hand on the switch and moved it to the “on” position. The bulb in the fixture above flashed on, sparked lightly, and then went out. It seemed that there would be no light inside either. Looking over at the mirror, he saw his image split into several smaller versions of himself. He walked towards the mirror and touched it gently. With the help of the reflection, he could easily see how time had taken its toll, although he didn’t know exactly how much time had passed. He was rusting and corroding, and the silver colored spray paint was chipping off his body. Now anyone could see that his arms were clearly constructed out of coffee cans, not military grade titanium or anything of that sort. It didn’t matter though, because it wasn’t what was outside of him that was so amazing. It was the inside.

They had assembled him in the kitchen, out of cans, pots, pans...whatever they could find. The fact that they were on a strict budget could easily be discerned by looking at his joints, which were constructed from cheap plastic tubing. They didn’t really have much of an idea of what they were doing, or even what they intended to do. They just worked. They were both seniors at MIT at the time, so they had their share of necessary knowledge, but the task they were undertaking would prove to be far more advanced than anything they had learned there. By working countless hours, aided by coffee and soda, they produced one of the most wonderful and mystifying things a man has ever made. They created a sentient being.

He found the stairs, and slowly began to climb them. His feet were big and clumsy, but then again, walking had not been intended to be his forte. The old staircase ascended directly into the very kitchen where they had built him. Oddly enough, it was only now that he wondered where they were, or why the house was in such shambles. The kitchen, like the basement, was unlit. On the ceiling, there was an old fake chandelier with light bulbs in the shape of flames. He turned the dial that was placed on the wall a short distance away from the stairwell. About three of the eight lights began to glow warmly. This would be enough. Examining the kitchen, he walked around and felt things. Feeling things helped him understand his surroundings more clearly. The room seemed to have died in a way. Perhaps it was the light that was being cast by the few bulbs that made it seem unnatural. This was a very peculiar thought for him since he as unnatural himself. On the cracked wall, there hung a crooked picture of him with his creators. This brought back more memories.

They had hesitated to call him a robot, seeing as he didn't really fit the description very well. Eventually, they granted him the title of "humanoid." They gave him a name too. They wanted something simple, something that they could relate to. Together, they decided that the humanoid would be referred to as "Jed." They took him to conventions, but there was no good way to display the truth...that in fact, this "machine" had ideas of his own, emotions of his own, abstract thought of his own.

Jed stepped away from the picture. The refrigerator still emitted a faint hum. He stepped towards it and wrapped his fingers around the handle. Pulling it open was a difficult task, since it apparently had not been done in quite some time. However, it contained nothing other than the bright light that inhabits every refrigerator. He did not like the synthetic brightness, so he quickly closed the door. Hunger was one of the few human feelings Jed never felt. He was glad about it too, because gluttony has been the downfall of many great men. However, while he did not experience hunger this way, he felt other kinds of hunger. Jed didn't know exactly what he hungered for, but he was starving for whatever it was. Something he did know was that he no longer wanted to be in this room, the room of his birth.

He went promptly into the living room. Now he understood. All the larger pieces of furniture that had formerly occupied this space were now gone. What was left was broken or close to being that way. Before him, a couple of shattered and splintered wooden chairs were lying helplessly on the ground. He picked up a piece of wood, and his grasp closed around it subconsciously. If he were a man, he might have gotten a splinter, but the portion of timber did no more than scratch the metal of which his body was formed. The wood fell to the ground with a light thud as he flipped over his hand and let go of his grip. Then, he stood there for what must have been at least ten minutes.

"So they left," he said at last.

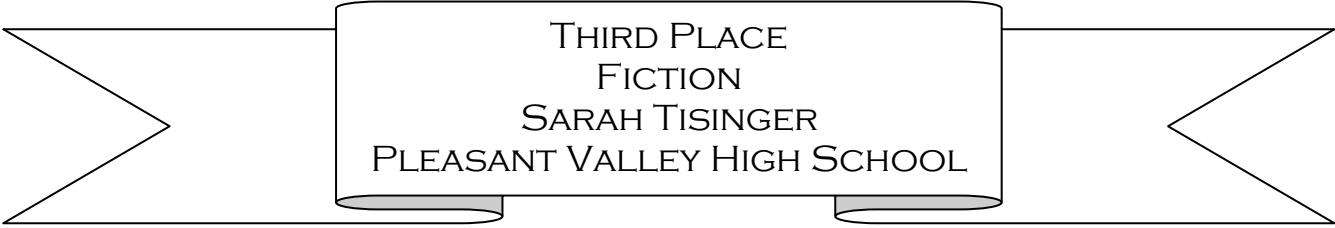
They had always been slightly scared of him he thought. He was a classic example of the unknown that so many people fear. The two did not know how they made him or what made him so

lifelike. They found him much more intimidating than they would have found an actual “robot,” since he had these human feelings. But in fact, he could go either way. In some ways, yes he was more dangerous, because he could experience sadness and anger, which could cause him to be violent just like it could a human being. At the same time, however, he felt all feelings. This meant that he felt happiness, love, and remorse. He had felt a bond to his creators. So strong a bond was it, that he could’ve never brought himself to harm them. They, however, had apparently not felt this same connection, or at least not as strongly, for they had indeed left him in this house, with no sign of returning. They had made sure that they turned him off before they left, lest he try to follow them. Now Jed the humanoid, for the first time, was experiencing anger.

He bent over, picked up a back of one of the broken chairs, and hurled it across the room, shattering it into many splinters that soared back at him, but fell halfway, as if they did not want to meet his fury. If he was able to cry, then his eyes would have been streaming with tears of rage as he proceeded to punch holes in the wall. Only after several minutes of this outburst did the ire finally begin to secede. He did not blame them now. He could now see what he was capable of. Wanting and trying to deny it, he could not. They were right. He was dangerous – much more dangerous than a normal person.

What he now had to do suddenly became clear. He took a few last looks around the room before retreating into the kitchen. When inside, he took the photograph and put it face up on the table gently. He didn’t know why, but he felt like it was right. He turned the knob that controlled the brightness of the bulbs on the spray-painted plastic chandelier until they turned off with a soft click. Glancing over his shoulder every so often, he headed down the creaky steps to the dark basement. When he was nearly at the bottom, he suddenly stopped.

He ran back up the steps, through the now dim kitchen, through the destroyed living room, and up the stairs to the next level. Bypassing all the other rooms, he went directly for the attic. He lowered the steps from the ceiling and traveled upwards. When he got there, he rummaged around for several seconds until he found what he needed. Once he had it, he absconded from the attic, dashed down the stairs into the living room, darted through the kitchen, and eventually down the stairs to the basement. Once there, he took the light bulb he had retrieved from the attic and held it in front of him. He took a stepladder from the corner, stood on it and reached upward to grab the burnt out bulb. Then he replaced it with the new one. That was it. His job for now was done. He looked at the corner where he had woken up just a few minutes ago, and decided that it was time to shut himself off again. It would not be dying. It would just be sleeping until someone found him, and gave him a purpose again.



THIRD PLACE
FICTION
SARAH TISINGER
PLEASANT VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL

Silent Angels

“Sunni! Wake up, everyone’s outside waiting.” Her Aunt Jen gently shook Sunni’s shoulder. Sunni’s dreams vanished—gone were her parents laughing and joking, her mother turning the radio stations and her father singing with the old tunes from their college days. Gone were their smiles in the rear view mirror, and gone were the pair of bright lights searing through the darkness.

“Sunni,” her aunt paused, “you could stay here if you don’t want to go. No one expects you to.” Jen headed slowly toward the door; books and magazines about horses lay scattered on the floor and clothes next to that. *This is no place for this poor girl*, Jen thought, *how can I be a mother to her...*

“No, I’m fine. I’ll get ready and meet you down there.” Sunni sat up and pushed the calico cat that had been licking her face.

As Jen left the room, Sunni pushed the covers off and scrambled for her clothes—a light blue t-shirt displaying a horse head and *Angel Stables* on the back, coupled with her faded blue jeans and dusty brown boots.

“Well hello, sunshine. Ready to go?” Bryce, the stable man, jangled the keys to his truck. Auction day brought hopes of finding a few prospective horses. Garret, the elusive teenager who trains the horses at Angel Stables, finished hooking the trailer to the truck.

Through everything, her parents’ death, leaving her home, school, and friends, moving in with an aunt she’d met only a handful of times, Sunni had the need to feel useful. So Sunni climbed into Bryce’s truck with Garret on the other side and headed toward the vast unknown—a horse auction.

For the first hour, people traveled aimlessly past pens of horses, ponies, and half-horses. Most of the horses seemed drugged and listless, eyes sunken, heads hanging low, and eyes covered in flies with their ears half-heartedly flapping in a failed attempt to discourage the pesky bugs. When Sunni stepped close to the pens, she was dismayed to see that most hooves looked overgrown, and other horses had scars upon their legs.

Something triggered in Sunni that had probably been there her entire life. She had never before known the state of total helplessness, being without hope and cooped inside a pen with no escape. And now here she stood, face to face with her demons, now she witnessed a creature that looked on the outside how she felt inside.

For the next hour, high strung ex-racehorses pranced into an arena surrounded by people looking for a good deal. She stood in line for the concessions trailer that looked as ancient as some of the horses. She understood it was used for shows and then boarded up, shut away, and rolled to a new place, with

new faces and new horses. She might feel useful in this life where everything was always new and different. But then again, she never wanted anything to change.

Sunni came to the last row in the barn, and leaned against the board of the pen. She heard a rustling, quiet at first, but then it grew louder with little snorts. She turned to see an agitated gray mare with a thick, matted mane weaving in her pen. Sunni could see the whites of her rolling eyes.

“It’s okay girl, do you really think I’d hurt you?”

On an impulse, Sunni slid back the bolt to the pen, and slowly slid the door open until she could enter and escape just as easily. Instead of stepping in, like she could do with Jen’s old horse, Angel, she stood there, horse and girl waiting to see which would move first. The mare snorted, and flung her head up and down a few times. Sunni stood undaunted. The mare froze, repeated its act, then froze, and repeated again.

After the fourth or fifth time, Sunni noticed the horse’s sides heaved less and its nose stopped flaring. The horse, curious now, let out a low whimper. Sunni took this as an invitation to step forward, her hand outstretched towards the mare’s nose. The mare quickly tensed. Sunni silently cursed herself and put down her hand. The horse flung her head about again. Sunni reacted as placidly as she had before, and the horse took a small, nervous step forward.

Stretching out her hand more slowly this time, the horse relaxed, and Sunni took a tiny step forward. The mare met her hand and allowed Sunni to slip her hand over her nose and face, and eventually, down her long smooth neck, protected by the thick matted mane. Lost in their own world, neither horse nor girl noticed a couple staring at them incredulously from behind the bars of the pen.

Jen and Bryce had come up behind the two of them, and Sunni, noticing the mare becoming agitated again, quickly exited the stall and the owner bolted it shut.

“I guess my girl wants your horse, and remember, you still owe me a favor.” Jen smiled nicely at the young swindler. Everyone in this business owed Jen a favor.

“She can have the horse, it don’t matter to me.” He signed a few papers and handed them to Jen. An hour later they were back at the ranch with a new horse.

“I think she’s been abused. It would definitely explain her nervousness. She’s testing you to see if you’ll react to her misbehavior. If you ignore it and then praise her for the good things she does, she’ll learn that it’s easier to do good things and to be rewarded for them. We just need her to trust us first.” Garret was explaining how they would get her gray horse, who she now called Storm, to stop acting so jittery.

During the conversation Sunni’s mind kept wavering back to her parents. She refused to deal with her jitters. Instead, she had thrown herself into the stable work with a need to make herself useful.

After dinner, the ranch hands had gone home, except for Garret. Sunni sat at the window. Garret stood at the door looking at her, wondering how he could treat someone he adored as cruelly as he had in the past month. After all, he knew how it felt to lose your parents.

“Why do you hate me so much?” Sunni faced Garret now, with a pained expression. He felt torn up inside.

“I don’t. I never did. I’m sorry if anything I have said brought you to think that, but it’s just so hard. You coming here wasn’t only hard on you. It’s horrible what happened to your parents. I remember when you first moved here you didn’t seem open to new friends and I was the same way. It was inevitable that we wouldn’t get along at first.” He tried to explain, but he figured he was confusing himself as well as her.

“I couldn’t talk to anyone. I never hated you either. You put your heart and soul in the ranch, but I couldn’t stand it. My parents were killed by a drunk driver and I…”

Garret put his arm around her as best he could, as the tears slipped down her face.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It shouldn’t have happened. I know the other driver is behind bars, but my parents are in the ground.”

“I know how you feel.”

“How could you possibly know?” She pushed him away. She instantly felt regret when she saw his stricken face. He looked like he’d been slapped.

“About two years ago, my mother left me and my dad, but he was always so drunk he barely noticed. I was only sixteen. I was independent enough to get a job here, but I had to quit school to work full time. Jen loved my patience for these horses, even the ones like Storm.

“Just before you came, my mom sent me a postcard from Arizona. It hurt so badly knowing that she abandoned me.”

Sunni had known him for a month now and he had given no clues. He hadn’t wanted to admit his weakness or gain her sympathy.

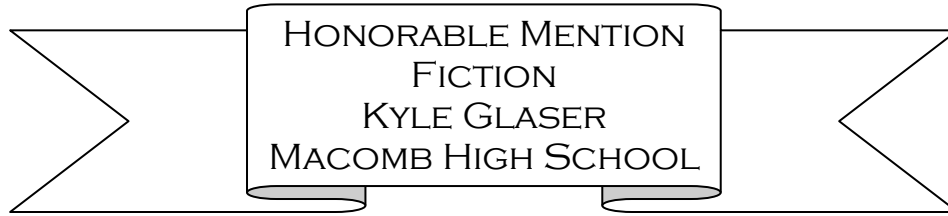
“I am so sorry, if I’d known I’d never had made that comment,” she whispered.

“I guess when you showed up it felt as if Jen wouldn’t have time for me anymore, like I was losing my mother all over again. I’m sorry I’ve been so horrible.”

“You’ve been horrible, not unbearable.” Sunni laughed and they both looked out the window that overlooked the paddocks. They could see in the dim, dying summer light a gray beauty streaking across the field. Storm seemed to see them and she stopped and whinnied, ears perked.

“That horse is an angel. She reminds me of someone but I’m not sure who.”

Garret held Sunni’s hand and grasped a little tighter.



Twilight

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”
-F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

It was just past sundown. I felt great. My favorite place in the world. When you come into my town from the north, that’s where it was. It’s hilly there, and when you come over the final slope, just before you enter the city limits, you can see the university campus in all its summer evening glory. I looked at Sommerset Hall sitting up on a hill in the distance, a single spire lit up against the stars like Jupiter or Venus. The high-rise dorms to its right shone like fat Christmas trees against a black canvas. I drove past the golf course where my dad had urged me to “be patient” on the putting green and past the baseball field where I would go to watch my brother play ball in the evenings and, more importantly, to see girls. Beyond it was the swimming pool; as a kid I had spent so many summer days racing across the hot pavement, listening to pop music hum out of the boom box by the pretty lifeguard. To my right was the Cineplex next to the old-fashioned Pizza Place that some friends and I had been tossed out of after a junior high dance. It was all beautiful.

My hometown was nothing special. You can be sure of that. We did have a university, which I suppose added to our feelings of superiority over anyone from the surrounding “hick” towns, but it was still a small town. A dot on a highway map, although a large one. Still, I was born in that town. I’d lived there my entire life. I was going to miss it terribly. A lot of the kids I’d seen pass through high school before me seemed to feel differently, though, or at least they acted that way. They couldn’t wait to leave. They hated the place. I didn’t get it. Still don’t.

James started talking.

“The rest of the guys meeting us there?”

“Yeah, up by the video store.”

“Well, we shouldn’t have any trouble finding a parking spot.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Of course.”

I loved my small place on the map, but the one thing about it that I truly despised was the Heritage Festival. Every year in June the city would hold this three-day festival in the town square, complete with every variation of stuffed animal, carnival ride, and lemon shake-up imaginable, all on sale for ludicrous prices. We would go every single year, if only to see people from school whom we

considered our friends, but who didn't like us enough to call us during the summer or be seen alone with one of us in a public place. Then we would leave remarking how we hated the festival so very much.

I pulled my red 1990 Cadillac Deville up to the curb about a block down from the town square. We hopped out and started heading downtown. As we walked down the street and past the video store, I observed the carnival rides at the square. From far away they looked fairly impressive. It was when you got close and saw the loose bolts and rusted metal that you became aware of the true nature of the festival beast. There was the "giant" Ferris wheel, and a horrible machine called the "Salt and Pepper Shaker," where victims would be buckled into cramped seats and spun upside down to right side up at Mach three speeds until the carnie running the thing got tired or someone puked. I could see the tents set up about a hundred yards from the square in Chandalier park where you could buy any number of heart-attack inducing treats including, but not limited to, deep-fried Snickers bars. James and I walked around the swarming anarchy at the carnival rides, heading for the park. I felt confident in my new, yet worn-looking jeans and white Nike kicks. Somehow that feeling melted away though when we turned the corner.

Coming straight at us was Sally Ross. I felt my chest cavity collapse into my gut.

"Hey, guys!" she exclaimed as a smile shot onto her face.

It was strange. I hadn't even become infatuated with her until earlier that year. The first day of school I'd wandered into my Early British Literature class and taken a seat. I said hello to a few people around me and was just settling in when she entered the room. I'd never really looked at her before. Of course I'd seen her around and, my town being small and my school smaller still, I'd known who she was. But I'd never really *looked* before. She had those soft eyes; they looked so green against her dark hair, but with a spark, something vibrant that I can't really explain. She dressed casually, but there was an air of grace, like she could look just as good in cutoff jeans as in an evening gown. She struck me as pure and uncomplicated, such a contrast to the world around me, one that was filling up with things that I couldn't empathize with. I felt like I was in a social limbo, stuck between immaturity and a world that seemed more than a little scary to me. For some reason, she made me feel safe. I remember what she said when she saw me sitting in the classroom that day. She smiled at me, and I smiled back. "Hello, Mr. Fitzgerald," she'd said to me, and I was hooked.

But back to that evening in June.

"Hey, Sally," James and I said in unison.

"So...what're you doing here?" I said, ready to smack myself the second the words left my mouth. Most girls would have been polite and ignored the stupidity of the question. Sally was not "most girls."

"Oh, well, I'm doing a walk for the Salvation Army. Wanna make a pledge?"

For a second I was terrified. What was she talking about? What do I say? That was when James burst out laughing. My face burned like I'd been smacked by a hot frying pan.

"I'm sorry, John. That was mean," she said, with a sympathetic smile still lingering on her face. "I'm here for the Heritage Festival, for reasons I can't explain."

"Yeah, us too," James replied.

"I come every year, drop my life's savings on rides and crap prizes that I'll never use, and swear never to return, yet here I am," she sighed.

"I know the feeling. Oh, John, there are the rest of the guys. I'll go get 'em, you two stay put," James said, looking over to a park bench, where I recognized Freddy and Sammy and the others, eating something, likely an onion blossom.

James turned to go, but not before sending an obvious wink in my direction. How helpful.

"So how's your summer going?" she inquired.

I knew where this was headed.

"Oh...fine. Yours?"

"The same. A little boring I guess."

"Yeah...yeah."

Oh, god, think of something! I bellowed to myself. How was everyone else so smooth?

"So I really enjoyed getting to know you this past year, John," she said, breaking the silence that must have lasted for about three seconds, but felt closer to three minutes.

"Really, cause I was so happy to spend time with you. I mean, we never really talked before...you know."

"Yeah, it's too bad we didn't spend more time together in high school."

I nodded slowly, my eyes intently examining the stitching on the tops of my shoes.

"So, did you have a good time at prom?" she asked.

"Ummm...it was okay."

I had so badly wanted to ask her. But we had different friends, different lives. I went to parties and sat on the couch and wondered what she was doing at that exact moment. I played football, and during half time, she performed on the field with the marching band. From what other people told me, she must have been some trumpet player. It can be so difficult to tell what another person is thinking sometimes, and guessing wasn't a game I had the courage to play.

I was getting ready to ask Sally how much she had enjoyed prom when I looked up and saw him. He put his arm around her. Mike. He went to college in Michigan. Mike was Sally's boyfriend.

"Who's this, Sal?"

"Mike, this is John. John, this is my, um, boyfriend, Mike."

"Hey Mike. Nice to meet you." I offered, pretty weakly.

“Same here.”

There was that deafening silence again.

“Well, I’m gonna go,” I said.

“It was really nice to see you, John,” she replied, smiling softly.

I raised my hand to wave goodbye and walked away from the park, away from everyone. I walked all the way around the square and found a metal barrier to lean on. I glanced up at the ride in front of me. It was called the “Heart Flip.” I watched the people spin around clockwise, hanging on tightly.

In less than two months I would leave this place and start a new life at a university three hundred miles away. Sally would do the same, only she’d be leaving on a plane, traveling all the way across the country. No doubt down the road I’d feel the same way about another girl, and this night would be a distant memory, if I remembered it at all. Still, right then, in that moment, it hurt. It hurt a lot. Maybe things weren’t meant to be different with her and me. Maybe I just was too stupid or too afraid to make something good happen for myself. I couldn’t be sure what lay ahead for me, but soon my home, which was both everything I’d ever loved and everything I’d ever hated, would be gone. All I could think of were the words I regretted most. The ones I never said.

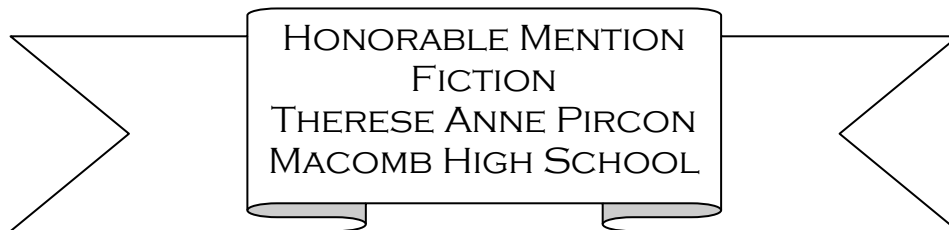


Table Talk

The spring storms were more severe here than anywhere else Emily had ever been. As she walked home from her first day of high school, Emily was already soaked to the bone. Her chocolate-colored curls were scattered all across her face from the harsh winds. It was the fourth time Emily had moved this year, so she was indifferent to the idea of making new friends in Starling, Maine.

When she stepped onto the porch, Emily’s mother came bursting out of the dark blue house.

“Oh my goodness!” cried Mrs. Grey, “Darling, you are soaked! Come on in and dry yourself off.” Mrs. Grey was not elderly, but she was no spring chicken, either. She had been married many times and had, regrettably, been divorced many times as well. Traveling to a new home always seemed to be the perfect solution to Mrs. Grey whenever her marriages failed. Emily, unfortunately, had to suffer for Mrs. Grey’s reckless decisions. It had been years since she had had a real friend. The divorce trips were constantly shuffling Emily in and out of schools, so she never had time to bond with anyone, except for

Space, Emily's dog. Though Space wasn't human, the dog found ways to ease the adolescent's pain. He was the only company she had had in years.

"Well, Curly Q, I was just about to make some soup," said Mrs. Grey as she walked to the kitchen. The earth splattered teenager followed to help her mother prepare the meal.

"What kind are we having?" questioned Emily.

"Umm, chicken noodle. Yes, I'm in the mood for some chicken noodle soup tonight, aren't you?" Emily didn't respond. She calmly walked over to the cabinet to retrieve the proper ingredients for their supper. At that moment, Space came trotting in. He circled around the table once and then settled into his favorite bean cushion.

"Hmm, I remember when Space first entered our lives," said Mrs. Grey. "Mark was the one who got him for you, right? Or was that Paul? No, no, I'm sure it was Mark."

"It was Dad. Right before he died." She hated it when her mother forgot her biological father like that. It was as if he never existed to her mother. Like he didn't matter. However, Emily made no gesture of her hurt feelings and started to prepare the soup.

"Oh, yes. Bill. Oh, and don't forget the bacon bits for the broccoli and cheese soup." Emily looked up in bewilderment from her pot of liquid gold. "But you said you were in the mood for chicken noodle soup."

"Yeah, but now I have a craving for some broccoli and cheese soup. Doesn't that sound delicious, Darling?" Earlier in the day, Emily had noticed their kitchen sink had a slight leak. While she was silently pouring out their aborted batch of chicken soup, Emily saw that the drip was now moving a little faster and the droplets were becoming bigger.

"Mmm, I haven't had broccoli and cheese soup in a long time," chirped Mrs. Grey.

"Mom," said Emily in a soft voice.

"Yes, Baby?" replied Mrs. Grey as she plunked some chopped up broccoli bits into the pot. Emily shuffled her feet before looking up into her mother's face.

"Why don't you ever ask me what I think about your relationships? Why don't you ever care about how I feel in these situations?" The droplets were now beating as loud and fast as a machine gun.

"What are you talking about? I've always asked you how you've felt about all of my...I don't want to talk about this, Emily."

"You never want to talk about this!" cried Emily as she slammed a spoon on the table.

"You're not old enough to understand!" Mrs. Grey snapped. "Ugh! Great! Now I've lost my appetite for that broccoli cheese soup because of you," said Mrs. Grey as she poured the second attempt of the night's dinner down the drain.

"You probably didn't know that I don't have any friends! Oh, wait. I forgot you're too busy trying to find the next model of a husband!" The faucet was now gushing with water.

“What did you say to me?” screamed Mrs. Grey. “Don’t you ever talk to me like that, young lady! I am your mother and the head of this household!”

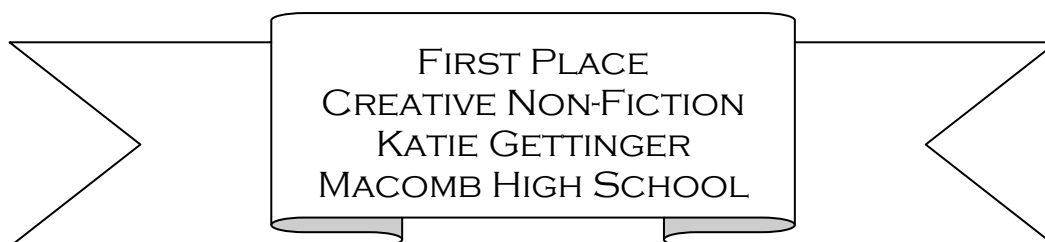
“So why don’t you grow up and take responsibility for your actions! God, Mother. If only you could see how incapable you are of commitment. Picking a soup to dine upon is almost as hard as staying in a relationship for you!” Water spewed from the sink’s faucet as the two women glared at each other. The amount of tension between the two could have set off a rocket to the moon and back again. Mrs. Grey’s eyes soon took their gaze off of Emily’s and began to swell with tears. Great snuffles and hiccups soon followed as Mrs. Grey collapsed into one of the kitchen chairs. Emily could hardly comprehend what her mother said next with all the hiccupping and sobs that emanated from her weary body.

“I (hiccup!) ’ave ’een a (hiccup!) a ’errible (hiccup!) terrible mother.” There was some more blubbering and a few more hiccups before she was able to speak again.

“You hate me, don’t you?” Emily’s mother whispered. Mrs. Grey’s daughter looked with heartache at the poor disheveled mess she’d made her mother become. She remembered how much she hated her mother’s ex-husbands for putting her only parent in the exact state that she was in now. Silent tears trickled down Mrs. Grey’s face and Emily felt awful that she had stooped to their level. Emily embraced her mother’s body and gently stroked her back.

“I don’t hate you. I hold more love for you than you will ever be able to imagine.” Mrs. Grey lifted up her head to look into her daughter’s sparkling green eyes. The same lively green eyes she had had a long time ago.

“You just need to think about what’s good for me sometimes. We don’t need men to fulfill our lives. All we need is each other.” There was a moment of peace as the mother and daughter smiled into each other’s faces. During the malevolent storm that had ensued both inside and outside of the house, Space had retreated to more tranquil quarters. However, as the tension abated, the loyal canine padded calmly into the kitchen and lay purposefully between mother and daughter. Their feet rubbed his warm coat as he bridged their caress. As they dialed the number to Big Joe’s Pizza Place, they fixed their eyes on one another and smiled. This was the beginning.



Camille’s Hinge

I glanced across the countertop in her direction, catching her innocent doe eyes focused unenthusiastically upon the pages of a book. She had been living in my house for two weeks now,

sleeping in my bedroom while I slept wherever I could find a space, and yet I still had heard no more than a few basic words from her. When she did speak she was always hesitant, reserved, as if her lips were the dam trying to hold back a river of information. Of course, it could be said that I, too, had not made any outstanding effort to connect to the girl. Whenever I spoke I found myself facing the same dryness of speech. “Camille,” I would begin, catching her attention when I stumbled over the delicate pronunciation of her name. Following that I would offer a few carefully, though perhaps foolishly, chosen words, accompanied by a flurry of hand gestures and facial expressions. I felt like some sort of ill-trained mime, desperate to mold the swarming myriad of thoughts in my head into one simple, broken down, easy-to-display gesture. Language stood between us, an invisible wall hovering over the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. This barrier had yielded only slightly when she stepped off the plane and into Chicago’s O’Hare Airport. Her English was timid and questionable, and my French was even worse. As I now watched her flipping through the pages of a Molière play, I wondered if there was any way for me to tell her that I had read the same work two months earlier, in an English translation. However, the words felt limp in my mouth like a kite without wind, and I turned to my cooking.

The truffle filling had been sitting in the refrigerator for over six hours, well beyond the one hour the recipe recommended. I took out the bowl and used a spoon to carve out shards of the firm chocolate mixture. The doe eyes were watching me but I continued on without seeming to notice. I carefully gathered the thick shavings and then rolled them into a sphere. After completing several of the balls and leaving them to set on a cookie sheet, I glanced up from my work. Camille still sat at the table, now idly playing with a cheap yo-yo. I went back to my cooking.

Three truffle spheres later, she carefully cleared her throat. Her voice, thick with accent but light in tone, permeated the silence. “You make what?”

I continued to work but looked up at her and smiled. “Truffles,” I said cautiously. I wasn’t sure if she understood, so I riffled through a recipe book until I found a picture of what the finished product would be. “Bon-bon,” I cast out, fishing desperately for a response.

Her jaw dropped weakly, and suddenly, I could see her whites as her eyes grew wide. “You make?” she asked incredulously.

I smiled, confident she now understood, and uttered, “Oui, bien sûr!”

To my surprise Camille walked to the sink, rinsed her hands, and then returned to the opposite side of the counter, facing me. “May I help?” she asked and leaned over the bowl of chocolate filling, her hands still dripping with water and her eyes gleaming at me like a praise-hungry puppy. I smiled, nodding, and then began to show her, wordlessly, how to shape the spheres to the correct size.

It is true she lacked the finesse. The truffle centers she created were of various sizes, ranging from marbles to golf balls. “For Colin,” she laughed, pointing to the largest of the truffles and referring to a friend I had introduced to her several days prior. He was a voracious eater, and Camille’s clearest

image of Colin was that of a boy constantly gnawing away at several different plates of food at once. He came to represent the greedy, overeating, stereotypical American she had heard about in France. I laughed with her.

As we both rolled the chocolate filling and set the truffles upon the cookie sheet, our talk became more frequent and it even evolved. It was no longer the formal, reserved speech of all our previous conversations, sounding like a second-rate lecture out of an elementary language book. Our confidence grew as we both discovered that in the past weeks we had observed enough to be able now to understand each other's basic motives and ideas. The words acted as the confirmation, the clarification of the picture that we had been painting. I had seen her reading books for her literature classes, but only now was I able to ask her how she felt about the classes, what she learned. We both abandoned the consciousness of our imperfections in the language, shedding our insecurities in order to become light enough to scale the great mid-Atlantic barrier.

Camille laughed at something I said, releasing a spastic giggle that climaxed into a snort, which only served to launch us both into another eruption of laughter. It was the first time I had heard her truly laugh, and it made me see her fully as a human being close to me. She was no longer "Camille, a French girl," as I had introduced her previously to my friends. She became "Camilla, my French sister."

While standing in my kitchen, with Camille explaining to me some of the finer points of crêpe making, that I still have yet to master, a thought started to play within my head. The words had always been there. Whether they were in her muddled English or my miserable French, or whether simply unsaid altogether, perhaps nothing we said at that moment had failed to be summed up in feelings and actions. Just in a subtle twitch at the corner of her mouth or the gleam in her eyes, I was able to tell as much as when she confirmed it with words.

I believe our relationship was able to grow so strongly in the two weeks because its heart was at the unifying level of emotions and experience. Rather than talking about how we felt, we lived it, felt it, knew it before any words could even begin to form. The framework of our friendship was built upon these shared feelings, and the language merely created the defining contours to the walls.

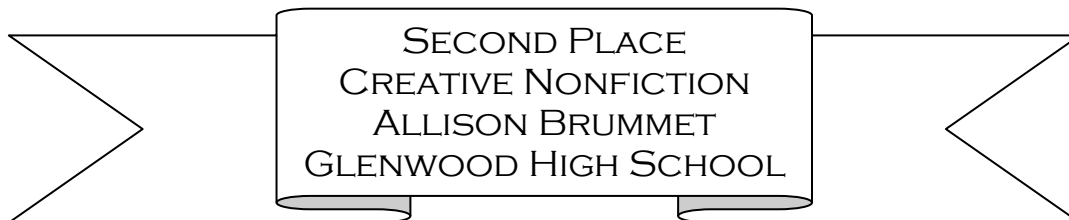
Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if Camilla and I had missed meeting as we did while making truffles. I assume that we would have either broken down to each other at some later point, or we would have just continued living parallel, unrelated lives in the same house.

When I now look back upon our sculpting the chocolate truffles, I see it as the door that led me into a whole new line of thinking. Before I met Camille, I was relatively secure in my established lifestyle. Then when I drove up to meet her at the airport, I began to realize that my routines would be placed upside down for the next four weeks. At first, the experience was like a foreign place to me, since I never had had any sisters or a foreign guest stay so long at my house. While Camille was struggling to figure out how to function in an American home, I was lost as to how to live with her. Without even

trying, she taught me how to loosen up and open myself to a whole new culture through her actions and the friendship that took shape while we finished the truffles. With perhaps the same effortless, I hope I was able to let her experience America in a full way.

Yet, out of all the significant moments during her stay, I still find myself drawn to that time standing in my kitchen, with melted chocolate coating our palms and both of us laughing freely. It was the trap door that I was firmly centered over without even knowing it, and when the stage lights flared up and I went tumbling through the door, I hardly even noticed I had crossed the gap.

When I now receive letters from Camilla, she speaks fondly of America and begs me to visit her in France so she can show me her country and her customs. I don't feel any worry at all about that prospect. I know that our relationship is a steely one that proved enduring even without words to link us, and if I did go to France we would have no trouble at all with communication. Just the other day I received an E-mail from Camilla asking for the recipes for the truffles we had made. She wanted to show her mother what the best American food she had experienced tasted like. With a smile I sent her the recipe. The truffles we had made together were the best I had ever tasted, and yet I'm not sure their quality could ever be matched again. I think the secret to their success lies somewhere outside the words of the recipe.



Hero

A Feature Article

She reaches for the snooze button on her ringing alarm clock. At 6:40 a.m. she needs more sleep, but she must rise. She begins her daily routine slowly and deliberately to conserve her energy. She gets dressed, eats breakfast, and takes her medicine. She brushes her teeth, puts on her make up and puts on her wig. She is ready for another day of school.

In many ways, Lauter Owens is like most fourteen-year-old girls. She likes to watch her school's basketball and football games and shop at the mall. Her favorite store is World Market, but she likes to buy her clothes at American Eagle. However, one aspect of Lauter's life makes her very unique: she has Ewing's Sarcoma. Ewing's Sarcoma is a bone cancer that affects about one hundred and fifty children and adolescents in the United States each year. This cancer accounts for only 1.8 percent of childhood cancers, and the number of males affected is slightly higher than the number of females. Almost half of all people with Ewing's Sarcoma are under fifteen years of age at diagnosis.

Fewer than three out of every ten patients whose cancer has spread to other organs or tissue remain alive five years after their diagnosis.

Lauter's life started to change Christmas of 2004, a very busy time for her family. Lauter's grandmother had been taken ill and passed away, so all of her family was busy praying for her grandmother and settling her estate. During this time Lauter noticed a lump on her right thigh. Her family did not think much of the lump because no one in the family had a history of cancer or any genetic disorders. Soon after her grandmother's funeral, Lauter's nephew was born and no one really paid attention to her growing bump. In February of the next year she visited a doctor. Everyone thought that the lump was from an accident in seventh grade when a car had hit Lauter. But then the pain in her leg became unbearable. Lauter again went to a doctor and within a week and a half she had three biopsies.

Her mother didn't tell her at first.

"She didn't know how," Lauter says. "After she told me, I was in shock. I cried."

Lauter slowly realized she had cancer. She began receiving all of her treatments at St. John's Carol Jo Vecchie Center: chemotherapy, physical therapy, and radiation. Every Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday she takes Bactrim in the morning to prevent infection. She does her normal routine of getting up, eating breakfast, dressing and going to school. After school she does her homework and goes to bed around 10:00 p.m. after taking Diflucan, a medicine to prevent the growth of fungus caused by chemotherapy, and more Bactrim. Usually she stays up until around 11:00 p.m. talking to her older sister Paris. She now has to sleep more because of her low white blood cell count.

"I have to spread things out," Lauter says. "I have to save my energy. I used to be hyper and have so much energy at the end of the day. Not anymore."

The rest of the week's schedule is about the same, except that she doesn't take her Bactrim. Whenever she feels nauseated she takes Zofran.

"It doesn't work," she says. "I've thrown up so many times that I can predict within two minutes when I'm going to get sick. You get used to it."

Lauter's mother is very protective of her. However, her family didn't seek a second opinion after Lauter was diagnosed. They were free to do so but they decided against it.

"Dr. Brandt is one of the best oncologists," Lauter says. "We didn't need to."

She isn't allowed to spend the night at friends' houses, even on the weekend. Other things are different as well. She doesn't know how anyone can say things like "my life sucks" or "I hate my parents." Teenage angst seem so trivial when compared to what she is going through. She also can't stand it when people make fun of others with disease. She realizes how good she had it—how good everyone without disease has it.

“One day during German [class] a boy was making fun of people with cancer. I walked right up to him and told him how I have cancer. He stopped what he was doing and said he was sorry. I told him he should be. Sometimes I want to say ‘I have cancer so I win,’” she says, “but I can’t.”

On the especially hard days she talks to her sister Paris or her friends Deanna and Maddalena. She doesn’t like talking to her mom about her cancer because she is afraid to make her sad or make her worry.

“Most days I keep things to myself,” Lauter says.

People started acting differently around Lauter after her diagnosis. They watched what they said and how they said it. Some people want to be friends more now than before. Some people don’t know what to say, so they don’t say anything at all. Even her friends started acting weird, but Lauter doesn’t mind. She’s used to it.

“My real friends stayed close,” she says. “Dee and Maddalena cried, but at least they stayed in touch. My pretty close friends acted overly sympathetic.”

Lauter’s family has been incredibly supportive of her.

“My family definitely understands me the best,” she explains.

Lauter has changed too. Ninety percent of Lauter’s nerve was removed from her leg during her five surgeries. She can’t run. Before her cancer she did not participate in most sports in school but was still very active.

“I kicked ass in gym,” she says.

Even through all of the changes in her life, Lauter is still active in her community. She is in Key Club (a volunteering club that benefits the community) and was in Beta Club (another community service group) during eighth grade. Although she has missed a large number of school days for treatment and surgeries, she has managed to keep her A average. Her deep interest in world history has Lauter considering the job of an archaeologist or helping people by joining the Peace Corps. She won’t let her cancer make her angry or stop her from accomplishing her dreams.

“I can’t be angry,” she explains. “I don’t know what to be angry at. I used to ask ‘why did God let me have cancer?’ I still don’t know the answer. But it doesn’t seem to matter. I’m usually too tired to think about it.”

Lauter has learned so much from this experience, not just about cancer, but also about life itself.

“This experience has made my family stronger,” she says, “and it has given me a new outlook on life. I now know about life’s possibilities and all it has to offer.”

Lauter’s cancer has made her understand how wonderful everyone without disease has it—how good she had it. But she keeps on fighting. Recently Lauter finished her treatments and will visit her doctor for check ups every three months for the first year, every four months for the second year, and every six months for the third year.

“My doctor told me that it is a safe bet after the second year of being cancer free that it will not come back,” she explains.

Just after Lauter finished her treatments she went to a relative’s graduation ceremony. This occasion was a doubly festive event for Lauter’s family. Everyone was so proud of her. She cried when her aunt told her that Lauter redefines the word “hero.”

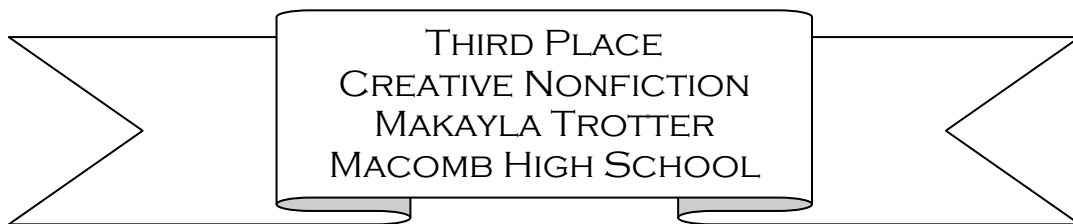
On the surface, Lauter Owens seems to be a regular fourteen-year-old girl. But underneath she is so much more. She is an example of strength and courage to everyone, no matter their age, sex, race, or disease. She has shown the world that even though life may bring despair and disease, hope, love and faith can and will triumph over anything.

Lauter Owens is not like everyone else.

She is unique.

She is strong.

She is a hero.



What Luck

I have always lived on a farm; I have grown up with calves and apple trees as my playmate companions. Together with my younger brother and dogs, I have explored the hills, alfalfa pastures, feedlots, woods, and creeks of my home. I understand the excitement of seeing new phenomena in nature, the complete rapture of watching a baby animal be born, the hollowness of seeing an animal die naturally, or the stoicism of watching an animal be killed. There is a certain adventure in searching for that next glimpse of something breathtakingly simple, like the noise of a woodpecker, a swimming snake, or the awe of a bird’s nest and wanting so badly to reach out and touch those three perfect turquoise orbs but knowing I cannot for fear the mother might abandon her unhatched chicks. There are so many times that I have been left wide-eyed with my mouth open in awed reverence at something spectacular I had just been a part of. There is a holy mystery about all things in nature. It seems as if every time I am surprised by a natural occurrence, it is because I feel my place in the world is so perfect at that moment to be able to witness something so unique.

There was a time when I was standing upon the hot concrete of a small bridge that ran over a creek near my house; I was facing west. It was late summer, and the sun was setting far off behind the

trees. Everything glowed with the dull light fading into the horizon; there were no shadows and yet everything was cloaked in matted light. The huge steel beams which made up the framework and railing of the bridge were just beginning to cool, and I leaned against them, angling my body towards the water, my bare feet pushing dusty pebbles into the creek (my reward was the gratifying, hollow “*pluank!*” sound they made). Suddenly, in a single second or less there was a great *whoosh* of wings and a great gust of air on my face as some creature came from seemingly beneath me and soared above; the shock of the moment sent me backwards and I barely caught myself from falling smack on my behind. What had just happened? My first thought was that a pterodactyl had just flown from its roost. A bit too creative, but close. I looked up from my stupor just in time to see a large gray crane rising above me, chasing the sun, flying west. Oh the wonder, oh the magic! Had it touched me? Suddenly the feeling of soft feathers on my arms seemed a likely occurrence; I walked home reliving the experience partly from memory and partly from imagination. Later, when I told my father, he said that once when he was a young boy, something very similar had happened to him. My father assured me that no, I was not foolish for immediately picturing a pterodactyl, for he confided that in his young innocence, he had imagined the same thing.

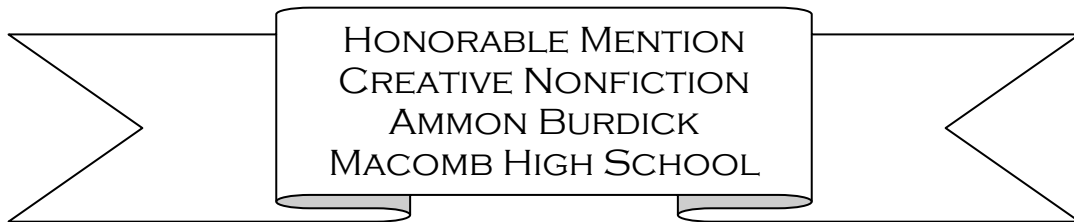
Animals frequently amaze me. I am fascinated by imagining their thoughts, trying to decipher why they behave the way they do. I was never more intrigued, however, than the day I found a different sort of creation.

It was a couple of years ago but I have not yet forgotten my joy in finding that a plate of summer watermelon scraps had taken root, and the seeds had metamorphed into a vine in one of our flower beds. What luck, for even I, a novice gardener, knew that growing a watermelon took patience and careful nurturing, things that I could not bear to bestow upon a simple plant. Suddenly I was filled with that odd feeling that expectant mothers experience. I felt the need to “set up house.”

I weeded and watered that flowerbed every day. I would ever so gently move the creeping melon vines so that they could better reach the sun. I shooed away any intruding cats, dogs, chickens—anything that might harm my precious melon vine. And then, a miracle. One day there was the tiniest formation of a melon, barely the size of a grape. And then there were two, then four, then six. They were pale green and oval, and they had developed vague green stripes. They grew from the size of grapes to the size of my palm, then to the size of a small cat. I would lift them up, rotating them so that they would be able to soak up the sunshine on all sides. I marveled at their weight and the elliptic impressions they left on the ground. There was one melon on that vine that grew faster and bigger than all the others. I knew I couldn’t enter it at the 4-H fair that summer, then I would be kidding myself. To any other observer, it was one ugly melon, but I thought it was beautiful. It grew and grew, and turned a deeper and deeper shade of green, but eventually I began to notice that it had stopped growing. The day had come. It was time to begin the cutting ceremony.

It tasted like a mix between cat food, cucumbers, and a green tomato. It wasn't even pink on the inside...rather orange, really. I couldn't figure out what I had done wrong. In frustration, I cut open all the miniature melons. They were all the same. Sure, I was disappointed, but the satisfaction of watching something grow slowly day by day, and the pride I had felt in watching that melon vine grow was greater than any satisfaction I could have ever had in tasting it.

I haven't really grown anything since that summer of the melon vine, but the inspiration those deformed little watermelons gave me is not vague to me. I still marvel at the tiniest natural occurrences. If it's warm enough, I will sit down at the creek or stream near our house, feeling completely at home in an alien world. I feel blessed to have my home where it is, and sometimes wonder if my peers have ever been so lucky as I to have witnessed all this beauty around me. Annie Dillard writes that it is not particularly hard to witness such sights, "...beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is to be there." Perhaps. Or maybe, just maybe, it is no coincidence we are able to witness the things we do...perhaps someone or something is letting us in on a secret. Perhaps, we are unwrapping a gift.



The Road

I've walked down this road many times before, but something is very different this time. There seems to be a different mood about it. It's much more solemn and quiet. As if everything around me, the old trees and fields, are thinking. They're concentrating hard on something and this had made me think also. I'd always only stared at my feet before, not really experiencing anything on the long walk home, just creating a mental list of everything that needed to be done. But today something compelled me to look up, something made me want to study the earth, the trees, the sky, and most importantly this old road, this old decrepit road.

The sky is a beautiful blue with clouds that seemed to have exploded from a single point in the sky and are still drifting slowly from that point. They look so peaceful but so full of energy. They seem to be spreading out in an attempt to cover this whole landscape, like a mother holding her children. Children who have spent the whole day running around and playing and now are tired and only want to be held by their mother.

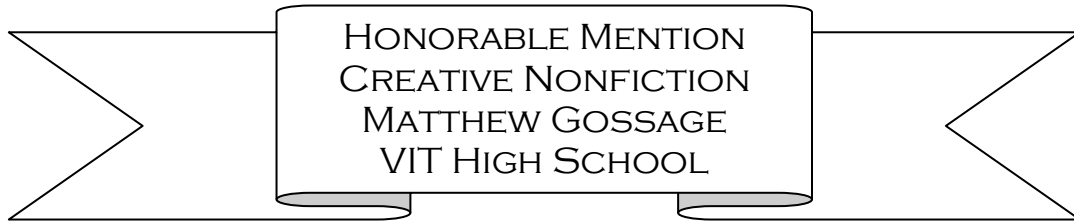
The trees and earth look bitter and lifeless, as they often do just after summer and right before it becomes too cold to walk outside for such a long time. Everything comes across as tired, the road especially. It is worn and stained. It seems to want to give up. As if it's been traveled too many times before. But there is something there that makes it look so firm and resilient at the same time. As if it knows something better is coming and it will hold out against anything for it.

I've recalled how this place looked in the spring. Though I never really studied it, from what I can remember, the scenery made even the road look newer, less like a wise old woman and more like a vivacious twelve-year-old. That's what she is, a wonderfully happy young girl, full of life and always smiling. Being only in elementary school she has already experienced countless surgeries and Emergency Room visits, because of her Cerebral Palsy. But much too often she appears like this road does now, broke and bruised too many times. She seems wise beyond her years, having been shoved out of adolescence much too soon by sickness and words that most twelve-year-olds don't hear. Words like g-tube, SAT-monitor, and central-line. It seems as if she is that wise old woman. But then again, just like this scene, she always bounces back and returns to that amazingly beautiful canvas.

Many times it seems as though neither of them, the road nor Abby, will pull through again. We'll be saying, "This is it. This is the one." And you would think that such a small girl would give in and just let go. That she would finally be so tired that she'd just say, "Well forget it," but obviously she likes it here because she never *does* give up. She always sticks around. Just like this road, and as far as I can see this road doesn't end. Of course it does at some point, just as all roads do, but I'm staring straight down it now and I can see for miles and there is no end in sight. It's rough and anyone could tell that it wouldn't be a smooth ride, but that doesn't mean that there won't be any fun or that it's not worth it, because it's definitely more than just worth it. This road is long and hopefully it is the same for her. I think it is. I'm sure it is.

I'm sitting now, on the shoulder of the road, this point in time, this life. On either side of me it stretches on forever. This road is long and worn and ever-changing. But there is always that sky to hold her. The sky changes too, and looks just as ready to give in at times, but just the same it's always there. She always stands by her little girl. Some pass by this road hardly thinking of it or even noticing it. And then for some, it becomes a part of them. It becomes so important to them and practically a necessity in life.

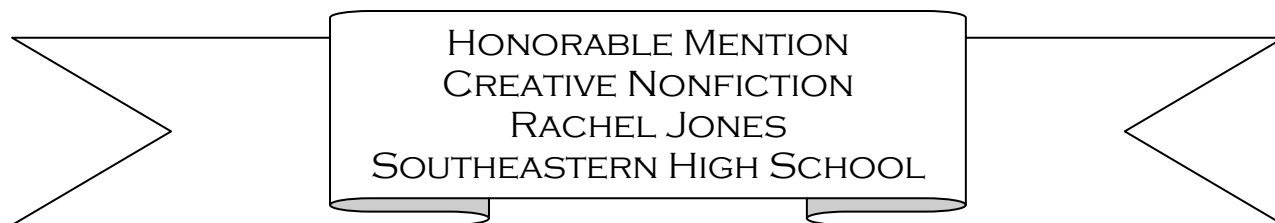
If she gave up, I believe that I would forfeit too. But as I said, this road stretches on forever and every day I will continue to walk home with it. And I won't quit as long as she doesn't, and I think she's say the same if you asked. What a very big road for such a very small girl.



Just the three of us. We grabbed whatever object we could find that could be used to hold the little purple ounces of money. Sometimes we would have a bowl or even a strainer. Anything would work and most of the time we tried to fill whatever we took. It was somewhat of a boast to take something of great size, as if you were telling the others that you were better. After each of us had found a sufficient holding device, we would stroll out the front door. The air, warm on our flesh, would blow through our usually unkempt hair as we crossed our yard towards the gravel road, which led to our destination.

Past Mom's flower garden, which was adorned with many flowers that to this day remained unnamed. The flowers were vivid colors—bright yellows, oranges, and purples. The garden, circumscribed from the rest of the yard by a makeshift border of stones, would house these beauties until they would wilt away in the year. We would scramble down the hill on the path between twin trees onto the gravel road, goofing as children do all the way to the dirt turnoff toward the blackberry patch. Up the old overgrown road into what could've once been a field where we would begin to work our fingers around the thorny branches of the blackberry bushes.

We would collect the ripe berries in our pots until they were filled to the brim, even though we would eat just as many of them as we picked. The berries seemed to be endless. Even when we would clear the entire upper expanse of them, the adventurous could delve into the wooded hills where bigger berries could be found. Rarely would we make it into the deep green of the forest, however. With our collections complete we would head homeward, back the same way in which we came. Back out along the old dirt path, down the gravel road, up the hill, across the yard where the dogs would yip and yammer in welcoming, to the house where we would sum up our treasure. We would put the berries into a large pan and estimate about how many quarts we had picked. Once finished we would wash our sore, poked fingers impeccably to remove the dark purple stains from our day's work. The stains would remain. As if we cared.



My 9/11

Everyone has a time in their life when they have to deal with a great loss. Whether a family member, friend, or even a pet, losing someone or something close to you is never easy. It causes stress and usually makes a person realize what they take for granted. Friday, March 3, 2006. This day will forever stick in my mind as the day I experienced one of the biggest losses I have ever had to endure.

Upon awakening that morning, everything seemed to be normal. I got up with the same monotony that I do every morning, and then took my two little sisters to school. I didn't really want to go to school that day, because it was a Friday and the weather was pretty nice. When I got to school, I went straight to the band room and began practicing for Solo and Ensemble, a musical competition that I was to be attending the next morning. The only class I was really looking forward to was Chemistry. Mr. Kerr had told us that we would be making silver and gold pennies that day. After the Chemistry experiment, everyone headed downstairs for lunch. I stood in line for half of the lunch period, just like always, and after getting my food, headed to the small classroom where my group of friends gathered. It was then that the tragedy began.

I began to eat my food as soon as I sat down because I didn't have much time left. Fish sticks. Gross, but I would have to do the best with what I could get. Abbey, Fallan, and I were all laughing and talking just like we always did. The only thing different about that day was that Mr. Kerr was supervising us instead of Mrs. Holst. I was thinking about my last class period, and the unfinished homework that was sitting in my book, when the alarm suddenly sounded. At first, we all looked at each other. Had Mr. Fox told us that there would be a drill today? Mr. Kerr got up to go see what was happening. I watched him walk into the hallway, thinking that someone had accidentally hit the fire alarm with a ball or something. But when Mr. Kerr turned around with a look of panic on his face, I knew all was not well.

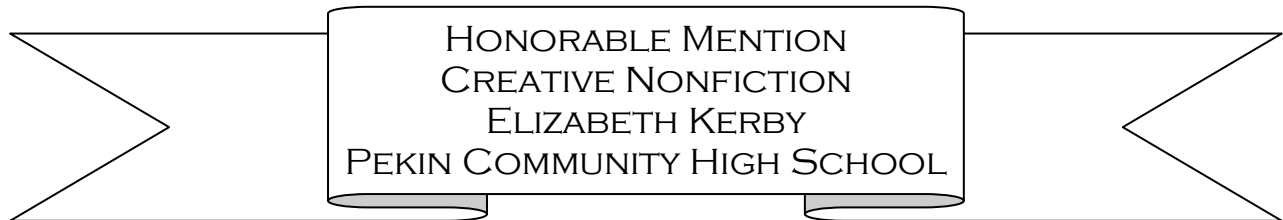
The teachers herded us outside, and then everyone headed to the grassy knoll. As we gathered by class, we began complaining because we hadn't had a chance to finish our lunch. I was still trying to figure out whether or not we were having a drill, and then I saw the smoke. We hadn't noticed it at first, but it became more apparent as the minutes ticked on. We could see smoke coming from the top of the building, and some was even seeping between the bricks. It still didn't look too bad though. When I realized that the smoke was coming from Mr. Kerr's room, my heart sank to my stomach. I was sure that it was my fault that the room was on fire. I began to second guess whether I had shut all of the gas off and put everything away correctly after doing our experiment. I stood talking to Tera, both of us on the

verge of tears. When we looked back to the school, the smoke was pouring out. At that point, I thought it best to call my mother. I knew that if she happened to be watching television, she would probably hear about it and want to make sure we were okay. I tried to call her, but she wouldn't answer. About that time, we were shepherded to the baseball field. It was then that we got our first glimpse at how bad the fire really was.

When I saw the flames bursting from the top of the building, I began to get dizzy. When I got to the field, I met up with my group of friends again. It was then that the tears came. Here was my life, my future, and it was being taken away from me before my eyes. I began to cry, and Tera started to cry with me. We stood there, our heads down, tears in our eyes, only periodically looking up at the monster that was demolishing our home. My heart broke in two. I felt like I was losing a member of my own family, and there wasn't anything I could do besides stand helplessly and watch.

The next couple of hours were a blur for me. I tried to call my mom a couple more times before I finally got her. We were bussed over to the Community Building, where the Red Cross met us. They brought food for the younger kids that had been deprived of lunch. My mom came to pick us up a little while later. I was smiling, but it wasn't a happy smile. Everything felt so surreal to me, and still does. I was still in a huge amount of shock. It was one of those events in life that I thought could never happen to me. We finally got word of what we were going to do and by Wednesday of the next week, we were back to school and hard at work.

When my high school burned down, I realized how lucky we really are. The amounts of help we received and the support we gave to each other made me realize that we live in a great community. For some of us, the school was our life, our home away from home. And it was gone. It was like my own individual 9/11. But now that we have all gone through it, we have bonded. We survived, and as individuals and as a community, we will forever be stronger.



The Hazel Gaze

His eyes would always glitter. Happy, Angry, Disappointed. They would always glitter. Hazel eyes that sometimes changed to brown but unlike mine they would never turn blue. He gave me his eyes. He showed me all of his tricks. How to make them sparkle when he was happy or how to make them

become so dark they were almost black when he was raging mad. I have nothing else from him, but I did inherit these. They are my prize possession and one of the few things that can't be changed.

When he would look at me sometimes my pulse would quicken because I knew that in just a few minutes I would be in very big trouble. Or maybe he had a treat for me. He could never really hide those things but when he wanted to he could veil his eyes with a fine mist that no one could penetrate. That way he kept the many secrets he had safe from harm and questioning, and he kept the light from shining. When he did that I knew to shut up and do it quick because the look he had would scare me.

Unfortunately I never got to learn this trick from him and I'm sometimes afraid that no matter what I do I'll never really be as good at it as he turned out to be. I can hide small things from him and I can even hide big things from so many other people, but no matter how hard I try to keep things away from him all he has to do is look. His stare is one that no one, and I mean no one, can hide from; all he has to do is look at you.

When I was young I was afraid of his eyes, and yet I knew that those eyes could scare away the monsters that I had hiding under my bed. As I grew older I found comfort in that unfaltering gaze and I knew that he would always be there. Now that I am almost grown I see those eyes in a different light. They give me hope.

I may not see them too much anymore but I do know that when I need them all I have to do is remember. He used to tell me, "Princess, make sure you see my eyes when you live your life. Think of what you're doing before you do it and remember that no matter what, I'm always watching you. Don't be afraid but do make sure you're careful." Unfortunately I'm no longer his princess. He doesn't make me laugh or cry; he doesn't look at me with one of his ever-changing stares. His light still shines, I'll not deny that, but it doesn't shine on me.

I remember this the most: his hair would always be in his eyes. It was dark brown and he kept it long so it was difficult to see him clearly but if or when he would brush his hair out of his eyes you knew that something special was about to happen. You might have been terrified by it because you knew that you had done something wrong and he looked as if he was the last person on earth you wanted to cross but you were also in complete awe of him because at that moment you knew that you were the only person in his sight. Whether you were good or bad, small or big, plain or ostentatious you always knew that he would make you feel what you deserved to feel. You didn't dare cross him for fear of him but you would try to please him as hard as you could just to get one of his rare hazel-eyed gazes.

I speak of this man as if he no longer exists in this world, but that is the farthest thing from the truth. He is alive and well, and he still has those glittering eyes that can make you feel ten feet tall and invincible or at the same time make you feel like you're only inches off the ground and you should be so ashamed of yourself that you want to bury yourself into a deep dark hole. I write this way because for years I have not received one of his glances, of contempt, appreciation, or otherwise. His eyes have not

glanced my way to give me one of his lessons or show me that he has a secret to keep in so long a time that sometimes I think that I have made up these memories of mine.

Who is this strange and special man? Why do I speak of him so? He is my father. A wonderful man yes, but sometimes he forgets. I would be lying if I told you that I don't miss the glitter or if I said that I had forgotten the changes in his eye color. But at least I know that once I had the glitter—the sparkle and shine that made him so unique, and yet I also know that no matter what may happen I have them too. They don't glitter in the same way or have the same secrets, but I have his eyes. I share the same hazel gaze and I learned from him well.