

Stone Soup

The Magazine by Young Writers & Artists



"Wu Song Killing the Tiger," by Zhao Jingyu, age 7, China

A GIRL CALLED HELENA

A hurricane, dolphins, a girl who loves the sea . . . what's the connection?

STARFISH

Shannon and Michael are suddenly surrounded by hundreds of starfish

Also: A review of *Thura's Diary: My Life in Wartime Iraq*

MARCH/APRIL 2006

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VOLUME 34, NUMBER 4

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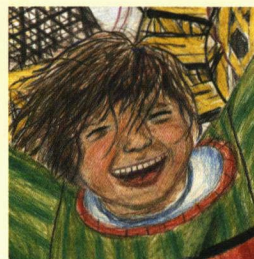
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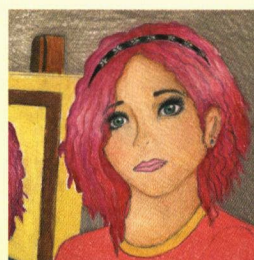
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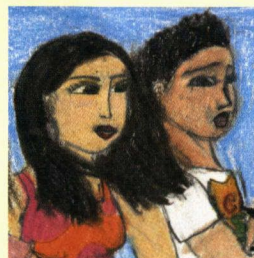
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Stone Soup

The Magazine by Young Writers & Artists

WELCOME TO ALL OUR READERS, old and new! We've had the pleasure of publishing *Stone Soup* for over 30 years. It is our belief that, by presenting rich, heart-felt work by young people the world over, we can stir the imaginations of our readers and inspire young writers and artists to create.



Jessie Moore, 12

Contributors' Guidelines

Stone Soup welcomes submissions from young people through age 13. For our complete guidelines, please visit our Web site at www.stonesoup.com.

Story and poem authors: Please do not enclose a self-addressed envelope with

your submission. Send copies of your work, not originals. If we decide to consider your work for a future issue, you will hear from us in four to six weeks. If you do not hear from us, it means we were not able to use your work. Don't be discouraged! Try again!

Book reviewers: If you are interested in reviewing books for *Stone Soup*, write editor Gerry Mandel. Tell her a little about yourself and the kinds of books you like to read. Enclose an SASE for her reply.

Artists: If you would like to illustrate for *Stone Soup*, send Ms. Mandel three samples of your art work, along with a letter saying what you like to draw most. Enclose an SASE for her reply. We need artists who can draw or paint complete scenes in color. Please send color copies of your work, not originals.

All contributors: Send us writing and art about the things you feel most strongly about! Whether your work is about imaginary situations or real ones, use your own experiences and observations to give your work depth and a sense of reality. Send your work to *Stone Soup*, Submissions Dept., P.O. Box 83, Santa Cruz, CA 95063. Include your name, age, birthdate, home address and phone number.

Cover: "Wu Song Killing the Tiger" was loaned to *Stone Soup* by Paintbrush Diplomacy of Menlo Park, California. For over 25 years, Paintbrush Diplomacy has worked to promote children's artistic expression around the world and to raise awareness of children's causes. Special thanks to Louise Valeur and Char Pribuss.

The Mailbox



LBP, 9

Thank you so much for publishing your wonderful magazine, *Stone Soup*! I absolutely loved being included in your publication, and cannot thank you enough for giving me such an opportunity. I know that I will not be a part of another magazine that is as dedicated to young people's work as yours. It was a very valuable experience for me. I am still creating art on a regular basis, and I will be attending San Francisco University High School in the fall. I can't believe it! I continue to pursue opportunities for my work to be published, and I re-read my *Stone Soups* every night before going to bed. Thanks again!

LEIGH MARIE MARSHALL, 15
San Francisco, California

See Leigh's beautiful illustration for "Parting Is Such Sweet Sorrow" [July/August 2004] at stonesoup.com.

I admire your wonderful technique of writing in "The Last Dragon," Veronica Engler [September/October 2005]. Your way of describing the beautiful dragons, the colors of sunset, and the dark, cold sapphire winds are great. Even though your writing is short, I have never read anything nearly as wonderful. Keep on writing.

CINDY CAI, 10
Madison, Wisconsin

I wanted to compliment the writer Veronica Engler on her story, "The Last Dragon" [September/October 2005]. Your story, Veronica, made both me and my mom cry the first time we read it. Most of the other dragon stories I have read didn't stir any deep emotions as your story did. I especially liked how you kept repeating the word "Dragon" over and over again.

MEGAN BINKLEY, 10
Madison, Wisconsin

I wholeheartedly enjoyed and appreciated "Where Time Forgot" by Sophia Stid [March/April 2005]. Rarely does one come across a story anywhere which so upliftingly transplants its reader into the setting, or presents new perspectives with such fresh, innovative expression. The illustration was also exquisite and captured beautifully the essence of the story. I strongly believe that the world would be a much better place if everyone frequently allowed themselves to escape the fast-paced, urban world, to enter nature as just another dynamic in its timeless, self-sustaining environment. Thank you, Sophia, for insightfully sharing your experiences, and keep your pen alive!

MEGAN M. GANNETT, 16
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Read five of Megan's stories at stonesoup.com. Click on Writing, then Hall of Fame.

This September/October 2005 issue was one of the best I have ever read. With the ultra-descriptive stories, a wonderful poem and two excellent book reviews, I would like to thank Rachel Stanley, Ralphie Kabo, Margaret Bryan, Veronica Engler, Lauren Tompkins, Emma Kilgore Hine, Adara Robbins, Canyon Woodward, Natalia M. Thompson, and Katie Ferman for producing such excellent pieces. I'd also like to thank book reviewers Chloe Miller and Juliet A. Martone, and artists Rachel, Cameron Osteen, and Ashley Burke, and of course the people who make it all happen, Gerry Mandel and William Rubel.

ADANMA RAYMOND, 11
Port of Spain, Trinidad

All the work mentioned in *The Mailbox* can be found on our Web site: www.stonesoup.com.

Note to our readers: Send us your letters! We are especially interested in detailed comments about specific stories, poems, book reviews, and illustrations. We'd also like to receive anecdotes (150 words or less) about interesting experiences you'd like to share with our readers. Send letters to The Mailbox, Stone Soup, P.O. Box 83, Santa Cruz, CA 95063. Include your name, age, address, and phone number.



Freedom, that's what pushed out of me on that day

Me, Myself, and My Personality

By **Simon Gonzalez**

Illustrated by **Sofia deGraff-Ford**

“**C**AN WE PLEASE do it again? Please?”

My mother looked at me, dumbfounded. “No way,” she replied. “When I saw you go upside down, I thought you were going to fall. You know how I feel about roller coasters.”

“Oh, Mom, you are so cautious. Stop being so worried.”

“Oh, all right,” my mother breathed.

Ahhhhhhh. How I loved that steel carriage; the rushing wind that made me feel like a bird, the racketing of the cars along the tracks, and my screams of excitement, all came together at once. Freedom, that’s what pushed out of me on that day. My wild-jungle-like outrageous personality that jumps out of me when I am done with school work. That personality that was fighting, fighting to get out. Finally, it burst through, in a frenzy. This was me when I lurched upside-down. This was me when I run. This was me when I play. Now on that coaster, I was feeling that combination all over again. My heart was beating wildly. This was me. This daring, screaming, and full-of-energy boy. That day in the amusement park was one of my few days to show who I really am.

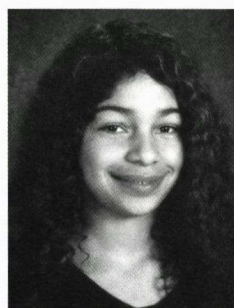
When I walked back into school, a few weeks later, my serious mind fought back. My willingness to learn and my love for school fought back, my smarts and my skills, fought back, they teamed up, locked up my other personality, and threw away the key . . .

That is until next summer!

Ahhhhhhh. How I love . . .



Simon Gonzalez, 11
Brooklyn, New York



Sofia deGraff-Ford, 13
Duncan, British Columbia,
Canada



"Linda, don't you love the ocean?" Helena said suddenly

A Girl Called Helena

By Rachel Cohen

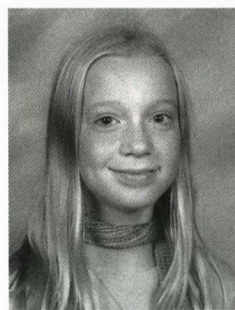
Illustrated by the author

IT HAD TO BE the worst storm the town of Seaport, New Jersey had ever experienced. The rain struck the earth like pins piercing a pincushion, so keen and strong that there was only a foggy sheet of gray encircling the ocean. Flashes of lightning brightened the sky, and thunder sounded all around. Wind swarmed, howling at the ocean and tumbling through the air, sending a chill through our house. Behind it, the mangled ocean tangled with the thunderstorm. Even the stars and moon were shielded by opaque, blackening clouds.

Meanwhile, I, Linda Fortinger, sat trembling by my bedroom window. I was wearing lavender fleece pajamas. Covering my quivering shoulders with the orange sheets on my bed, I peered out into the gloom from my bedroom window. I heard my younger sister, Kaitlyn, snoring from across the room, honey-blond waves scattered on her pillow, and my parents sleeping silently in the next room over. I was alone, too awed to sleep, to tear my eyes from this scene.

In my eleven years of life, I had never seen the ocean like this, a wave of fury fighting, an angry mob rampaging through the streets. The ocean was my only friend here on vacation in New Jersey. I swam by its shores, surfed along its waves, sailed its surface, but never saw it in frenzy.

And then I saw it. My eye caught a blurry silhouette emerging from the ocean. As I squinted to get a better look, I saw the figure slowly bob to the surface and glide toward the sandy beach. I gasped in fright. No, it couldn't be . . . I rubbed my eyes, and



Rachel Cohen, 12
Swarthmore, Pennsylvania

the figure had disappeared.

I lay back on my bed, amazed. I assured myself it was only a wrecked sailboat, or perhaps an unlucky sea creature. Maybe my eyes were fooling me. I couldn't bring myself to believe it, but I was sure I saw, through the darkness, the profile of a girl, with a shadowy stream of black hair tossing in the wind behind it.

"LINDA! Come down to breakfast, dear, it's nearly nine o'clock!" At the sound of my mother's voice, I rose hesitantly from bed, thrust on a lime-green T-shirt and denim shorts, brushed my hair and teeth, and went downstairs to the kitchen.

There, my mother was bustling over by the stove, her brown ponytail skipping along with her, adding brown sugar to my hot cereal. Kaitlyn sat at the table, stirring her own cereal with one hand, and holding her dainty head with the other. My father had apparently already left; an empty bowl lay on his placemat. He was probably down the street fixing the Fervents' old fence or down at the old boardwalk, nailing stray boards into place; he was an engineer and was always volunteering for something or other. I pulled out a stool and sat, glancing at the small television in the middle of the table.

"Here you go, sweetie," my mother smiled heartily, handing me a bowl of hot cereal. "Now girls, today I was planning that we could spend the morning at the beach, then try this new Asian restaurant at the end of town. After that, we're free to do anything, unless your cousins

in Ocean City call us . . . Anyway, I was hoping that—oh no, not another one!" Her head was turned to the television, announcing that a certain Hurricane Helena was likely to travel northwest from its current perch in the Atlantic Ocean and hit New Jersey in about a week.

"These storms . . . just all popping out of nowhere, and on vacation, too! Now we might have to go grocery shopping this afternoon instead . . ." my mother grumbled, clearly annoyed. She began to slice a peach in silence. I simply gulped down my cereal.

"Well, it looks as though some new folks are moving into the Melbournes' old shack," Kaitlyn piped up. It was true; moving vans were parked along the road, and many people were unpacking sofas and mattresses and bureaus, heaving them through the open door. This was good news; the Melbournes were an old, quiet couple who lived across the street from our beach house in an unkempt two-story house that wasn't in very good condition for a house right next to the ocean. After Mrs. Melbourne died, her husband left the ocean, and for three years the building stood alone and untouched, until now.

"Let's go watch!" Kaitlyn suggested eagerly. The pair of us trotted across the street, where the family was just getting settled.

A surge of envy filled me as I caught a glimpse of their daughter. She was beauty beyond belief, with shiny black hair that fell to her hips, a long sheet of dark silk. She wore a velvet magenta skirt that



"Here you go, sweetie," my mother smiled heartily, handing me a bowl of hot cereal

dragged behind her and a ruffled, white shirt. Then I saw her eyes flash toward me, blue-gray, with a hint of green and silver, identical to the ocean on a sunny day. My curiosity drew me closer.

"Hi," I muttered shyly, "I'm Linda Fortinger, and this is my little sister, Kaitlyn. We're staying for the summer at our beach house across the street."

"I see," the girl replied, in a tone so soft I could almost feel it. "I am Helena."

"Helena . . . ?"

"Helena Crest. This is my mother, Lela,

and my father, James. Pleased to meet you. I'm sure we'll become good friends." Helena held out a tanned hand, and I took it.

"It's our pleasure." I grinned, my hopes rising. I've never found a true friend in these parts. "Well, I'd better get back home now. I'll see you later!" I dashed off across the street, too excited about my new neighbor to think about anything else.

"THIS IS HELENA. How may I help you?" a soft voice spoke into the tele-

phone.

"Hello, Helena, this is Linda."

"Ah."

"Anyway, my mom is taking Kaitlyn out to buy a new pair of sneakers, so I was wondering if you'd like to take a walk along the beach with me."

"Oh, I'd love that!" the voice filled with excitement. "When will we?"

"How about I meet you there in five minutes?"

"Fantastic! Well, I'll see you in five minutes."

"Sure. Bye!" I hung up the phone and slipped into some flip-flops. When I trotted outside onto the front porch, Helena already stood waiting for me at the corner. Today, a lavender skirt blew along with the ocean breeze, rippling playfully at her ankles, and perched lightly on her shoulders was a white tank top.

"Let's go!" we said simultaneously, giggling as we ran up the creaky, wooden steps, and then onto the damp sand.

Helena and I walked down the coast in the water's fringe, collecting seashells and laughing merrily at the seagulls skimming the water's edge, hoping to catch a good fish for dinner. We even spotted dolphins dancing gracefully on the water, and then diving down again.

"Linda, don't you love the ocean?" Helena said suddenly.

"Well yeah, it's a pretty nice place to be."

"Oh, no." Helena's shiny eyes peered straight into mine, and I felt the meaningfulness in her graceful expression. "Do

you consider the ocean as an equal, as a faithful companion in life? Don't you ever feel that you're somehow tied to it, like a bond of friendship that is forever indestructible? I love the ocean, I always have, and I can almost feel the waves. Don't you agree?"

"Well . . . no," I admitted. "I mean, I never thought about it the way you do. I've liked the ocean, for surfing and swimming, and I've been coming here every summer since I was born, but the ocean is just there to me. I guess I'm not really tied to it like you are."

"Strange." Helena slowly turned to face the horizon, eyes darting toward the endless blue. "I would think that someone this close to the ocean, seeing that you came here since you were born, in one of the closest houses to the water, would feel the same. You grew up with the ocean, and yet you don't understand it." She paused, heaving a sigh. She looked up at the floating clouds, smiling faintly as if in a trance. "I just love it here, more than anywhere in the world. I love the way the waves are always lapping playfully at your toes, the soaked sand sinks into your heels, the way the waves tumble out to shore and seem to hug you with a gentle splash . . . speaking of which . . ." Clutching her skirt in two fists, she aimed a kick at me, and water splashed my new Bermuda shorts. I stood shocked for a moment, and then splashed her right back. Helena may have been plenty attached to the ocean, but she certainly knew how to have fun with it. We leaped and splashed all down the

beach until we were so soaked and exhausted that our only choice was to go home.

IT WAS OFFICIAL. Helena and I were now best friends. We did everything together; rollerblade to the park, eat ice cream, and take walks on the beach. Over the next week, I had so much fun with her I didn't even realize the time flying by, and eventually, it did.

At the end of our first week of friendship, we were rollerblading home from the Dairy Queen. Still licking the strawberry ice cream off the ice cream cone, I was about to open the front door to my house when a voice from behind stopped me. It was Helena, shouting from her porch next door.

"Linda, wait!" she cried.

"What?" I queried.

"Before you go inside, I want to tell you something. I won't be seeing you for a while, but I want to say you've been a very good friend to me. By the way, get ready for the hurricane tonight. I heard it will be a rough one!"

"Oh . . . all right then," I replied. At that, a white, toothy smile glinted at me from Helena's porch. Then, my friend strolled to her front door and drew it closed behind her.

I remembered the hurricane. What had it been called? Hurricane . . . Hurricane . . . Hurricane Helena! I gasped. "Helena!" I cried. The peeling white door remained closed, and no answer came. I assured myself it was only a coincidence. Then, with-

out giving it a second thought, I rushed inside to prepare.

THIS STORM was much worse than the last. The rain began to pour when the sun would have set, if not for the looming clouds growing fiercer as the night wore on. The wind was starting to rage even before midnight, when the hurricane was scheduled to hit us. I shivered at the thought.

Once again, I sat awake at the window. Something had kept me awake, urged me here. All I saw was a dreary scene, and a drab sheet of black approaching once again. But there was something different, something unusual about tonight.

I was growing drowsy when I spotted a figure beyond the translucent curtain of gray. I gasped in horror and surprise. It was Helena.

She stood at the corner, where we usually met for a walk on the beach. She was wearing a bright red raincoat and a matching umbrella hoisted on her shoulder. But she couldn't fool me with a clever disguise. How well did I recognize that calm face, with such soft features, or that graceful gesture? I grew suspicious. Then, she turned, and began to walk away toward the beach.

I didn't care about getting wet, or getting in trouble. I checked the clock; it read eleven o'clock. I had an hour, and I would have to use it wisely. Still in my lavender pajamas, I pulled a blue sweater over my head and a yellow raincoat on my shoulders quickly and quietly. Checking

that Kaitlyn and my parents were all still fast asleep, I crept downstairs, and grabbed an umbrella and a flashlight from the kitchen. I took a deep breath, and bounded through the door.

It was miserable, yes, and for a minute, I was sure I had been driven into insanity. But my determination was greater and more powerful than my fear, and with that in mind, I set out to find Helena.

I approached the beach and held my flashlight up to the sand. Long ago, a tractor had spread the sand smooth, and there was only one pair of footprints. I took my wet boot and set it next to the imprint of a shoe. They were the same size. I followed the footprints, which lead only in a straight line. I suddenly stood still and found I had walked right up to the ocean. I glanced left, then right. There was no sign of Helena anywhere. But then where did Helena go?

As if answering my question, a group of dolphins was swaying in the waves. How could they be enjoying themselves when a vicious storm was about to hit? They leaped into a dive, and threw themselves back under. I rubbed my eyes in panic. I saw it again exactly as it happened before. I could have sworn I had just seen a streak of pale peach among the blue skin of the dolphins, and long locks of black hair billowing out behind it. Comprehension dawned on my face.

Suddenly, an abrupt blast of wind knocked me over, and I jumped back up

in alarm. The hurricane would hit anytime now. I darted back home just before the hurricane swooped down upon us.

"LINDA, HURRY UP! We have to leave in ten minutes. Kaitlyn, dear, don't try and carry that suitcase, your father will . . . Jonathan! Please come down now and pick up this suitcase of yours! I'll grab some crackers for the ride home, and Linda, can you pick that up for me? Thank you, dear, you're a doll . . ."

Today we were leaving Seaport, New Jersey to return home. For once in a lifetime, I would miss it. Last night, the night of the hurricane, was still fresh in my memory, and so was Helena. Speaking of the Crests, no one had heard of them since before last night; Mom said they probably left to avoid the storm; I didn't believe it. I dragged my suitcase to the car and loaded it into the trunk. My mother was in a rush to go, because we had to drive home and then go to our cousin Debbie's wedding in Philadelphia. Pretty soon, the family packed themselves into the car and drove off.

"So kids," my father chuckled, grinning at us through the rearview mirror, "Did you enjoy yourselves this year?"

There was a murmur of "Yes, it was fine," from Kaitlyn in the back seat.

But I whispered, so that only I could hear, "Oh, yes, we had tons of fun this year, Helena and I. I can hardly wait until next summer . . ."



Ghost Park

By Sariel Hana Friedman

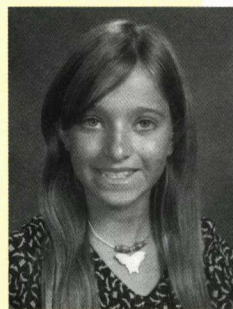
Swaying wooden swings
Whisper to each other

The wind blows dry leaves,
Scattering messages across the park.

The white, lacy blur
Of a girl

Polished black boots drum along stone paths
As the boy calls out her name.

"Come back, Margaret!
I didn't mean it!
Come back!"

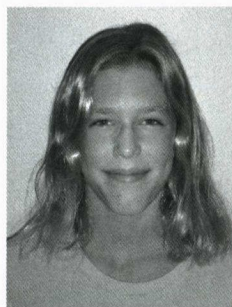


Sariel Hana Friedman, 9
Pacific Palisades, California

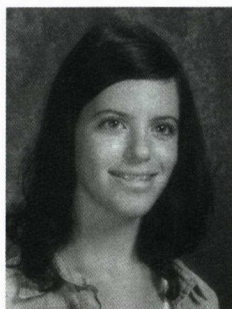
The Fallen Log

By **Bethany Walker**

Illustrated by **Dana Hareli**



Bethany Walker, 13
St. Cloud, Florida

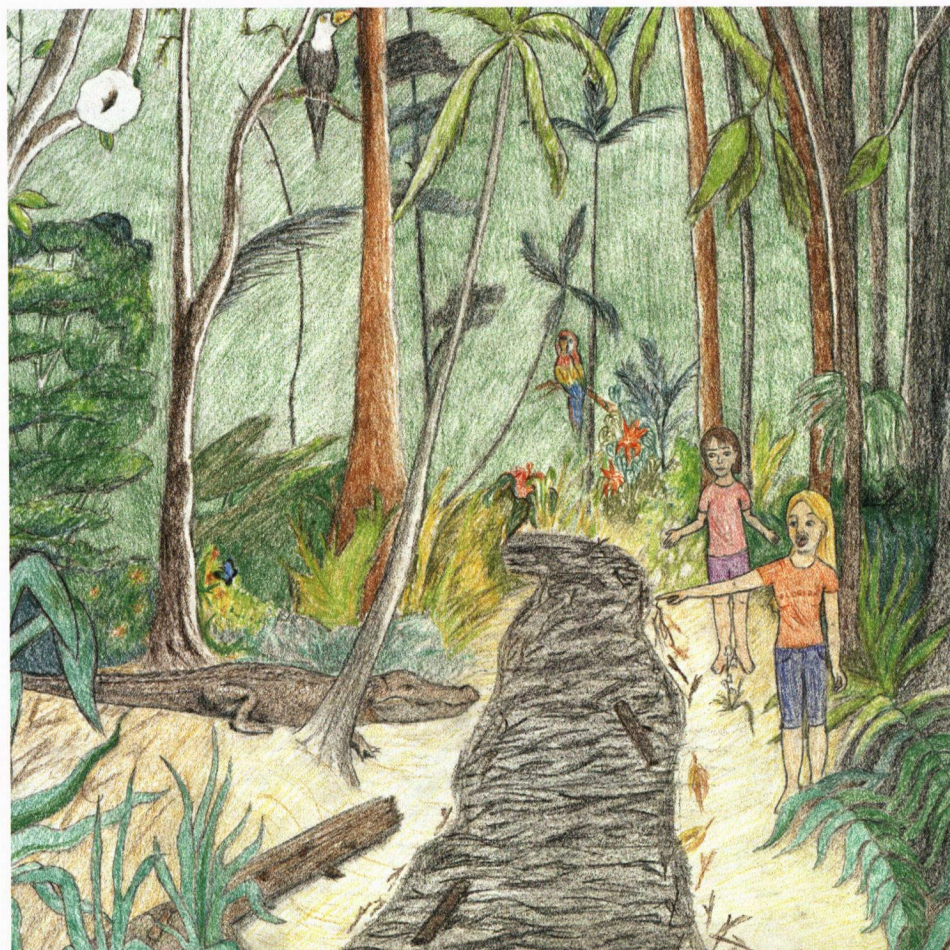


Dana Hareli, 13
Sudbury, Massachusetts

ELIZABETH AND ALEXANDRA stepped across the deep, jungle forest. Palm tree branches tilted slightly in a soft breeze. Palmettos fanned the humid air, and their deep, dark green leaves and sharp stems bent to one side. The lush green vines decorated the branches above. Tangles of weeds cloaked the trees, and every now and then wildflowers scattered the forest floor. Wild citrus trees were here and there, bearing the sweet fruit that sprinkled the trees. The forest was bustling with business up high in the trees, where native Floridian birds cooed, squawked, yakked, and sang above.

It was a perfect day for their little exploration in the jungles of central Florida. They were on the Ranch, where cattle and citrus were the produce. The Ranch was large and vast with long, yellow fields and pastures flecked with thousands of cows, the light brown, tan, charcoal black, and murky gray colored cows. They were raised and sold to make beef. There were several forests. There were woods, lines of citrus trees, and long canals that looped around the Ranch. There were even wild hogs that tore up the pastures and some people hog hunted to control the population.

Elizabeth and Alexandra were cousins. Elizabeth was nine. She had short brown hair and dark brown eyes. She had freckles, was bigger built, and loved to explore the beautiful forests at the Ranch. Alexandra was thirteen. She had soft blond hair down to the center of her back. She had starry blue eyes and was thin and lithe. She also had the desire to explore.



"It's just a log," Elizabeth assured her. "No it's not," Alexandra said. "Look!"

The cousins ducked beneath a long, silver spider web, which was magnificently spun from one tree to another. A banana spider descended a couple inches, leaving a string of delicate thread behind. Alexandra was not a big fan of spiders but even she was in awe over the beautiful web it had designed. As they stepped through the forest they remained silent so the beauty and sounds of the forest could be fully enjoyed.

"Look," Elizabeth breathed as she pointed and indicated to some animal a ways off. Her face shone with excitement as she tugged on Alexandra's shirtsleeve.

"An armadillo!" Alexandra whispered. She slowly inched closer as the armadillo emerged from a thick cluster of bushes. It was small and almost looked like its middle was made of brass. It had four little legs and a short tail. Its nose was brushing the ground as if it was searching the ground

for something to eat. Alexandra slowly advanced. A thrill of excitement shivered down her back. She loved animals.

Snap! Alexandra stepped on a twig and it snapped in half, frightening the armadillo so that it scurried away a distance. For a while, the girls pursued it until it was completely hidden somewhere in the deep green plants that cloaked the forest.

"Man!" Alexandra said.

"Let's walk over to the canal," Elizabeth suggested. "I like to stand on the water's edge."

"As long as we don't run into any alligators," Alexandra said.

They pulled branches out of their way and made their way through the obstacles that blocked their path. The cousins' feet sloshed into marshy ground and their sneakers became muddy and soaked.

"Ick," Elizabeth said as they waded across the squishy ground. They pushed through tangles of vines and branches and finally they came out onto the bank of the skinny canal. The bank was made of white sand. The water was black velvet and branches floated on the surface. Where the water was clearer, there were rings of orange, yellow, and red on the bottom. On the other side there was a large, sloping bank, and the trees on the far bank had lines across them, revealing where the water level had been after the last hurricane. The last hurricane had sure swallowed up the area, for the waterlines were at least five feet above the regular waterline on the shore.

"Look at all the amazing colors in the

water near the shore," Alexandra observed.

"Let's walk along the canal," Elizabeth said, taking off her wet sneakers and setting them on the bank. She waded in the shallow canal and let her toes wriggle in the sand. Then she and Alexandra walked along the bank, taking in the nature. The sun seeped through the shade of the forest's trees. The girls listened to the peaceful rustle of the palm tree leaves. They kicked sand as they strolled down the canal.

Suddenly, Alexandra shrieked.

"What?" Elizabeth asked, as she immediately froze.

"L-l-look!" she stammered. "A-alligat-tor!"

She pointed a shaking finger to a brownish lump on the far bank.

"It's just a log," Elizabeth assured her.

"No it's not," Alexandra said. "Look!"

There was a long nose with flaring nostrils and a grin of sharp teeth. The overbite was obvious and the dark reptile's profile was in the shape of a large head with four legs to its side and a long, powerful tail with scales rippling down its back. Elizabeth and Alexandra had seen tons of alligators on their several canoe trips and airboat rides but they had never been this close. The large alligator was about eight feet long and was only a couple yards away.

The little eyes seemed to stare blankly at the girls. Of course they knew very well that alligators are frightened of humans and crocodiles are the ones to be

aggressive and attack. But Elizabeth and Alexandra took one look at the dinosaur-like creature and ran.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!"

They did not look back. They ran down the bank, scooped up their soggy sneakers, and tore through the forest. They broke through the branches that scraped their faces, arms, ankles and knees. They screamed and ran across the wet, muddy ground and through several patches of moss. They leapt over fallen logs and sprang over palmettos. The soft whoosh of the wind's deep breaths that rustled the palm trees was all they could hear besides their panting and short breaths. They dashed out into the clearing and met the dirt road that led to Alexandra's dad's office. Dust kicked off their heels as they felt the wind smack their faces and they accelerated. As they reached the parking lot of the office their runs faltered and they slowed to a walk. Elizabeth collapsed in the grass behind Uncle Willy's office window and clutched her sides, which were cramped. Alexandra helped her up and they exhaustedly opened the door of the office and got inside. There was no

alligator behind them.

Alexandra began to laugh as she walked down the hall and slumped into one of Dad's spinning office chairs.

"Liz, the whole time the alligator wasn't even chasing us!" she laughed.

Elizabeth sunk into a different office chair that was cushiony and comfortable. She peered at Uncle Willy's flat-screened computers and relaxed her back.

"I don't think it's funny," Elizabeth said. But then she started cracking up.

"We were so silly to run away like that," Alexandra said.

"But I was terrified!" Elizabeth said.


"Me too!" Alexandra agreed.

Alexandra's dad walked in and sat at his accounting desk. He was the Ranch's assistant controller.

"So girls, how was your walk?" he asked, while logging onto the computer.

Elizabeth grinned at Alexandra. Alexandra returned a wide smile.

"We endeavored to explore the forest and we had a remarkable time Dad," Alexandra replied.

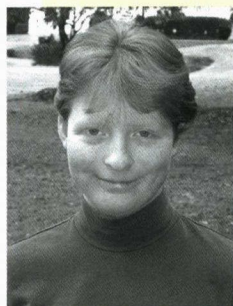
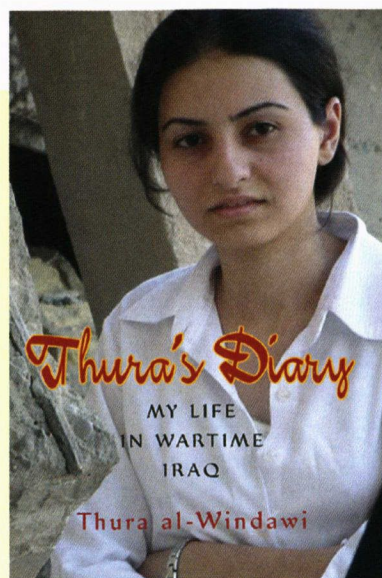
"Yeah," Elizabeth said. "A remarkable time." 



Book Review

By Rose Brazeale

Thura's Diary: My Life in Wartime Iraq, by Thura al-Windawi; Viking Children's Books: New York, 2004; \$15.99



Rose Brazeale, 13
Auburn, Georgia

“IN THE MIDDLE of the night we were thrown out of our beds by some massive explosions,” described Thura in her diary. Thura al-Windawi was nineteen years old when the war in Iraq began. That was also the time when she started a diary, which was later published into a book. In the process it was translated into English by Robin Bray.

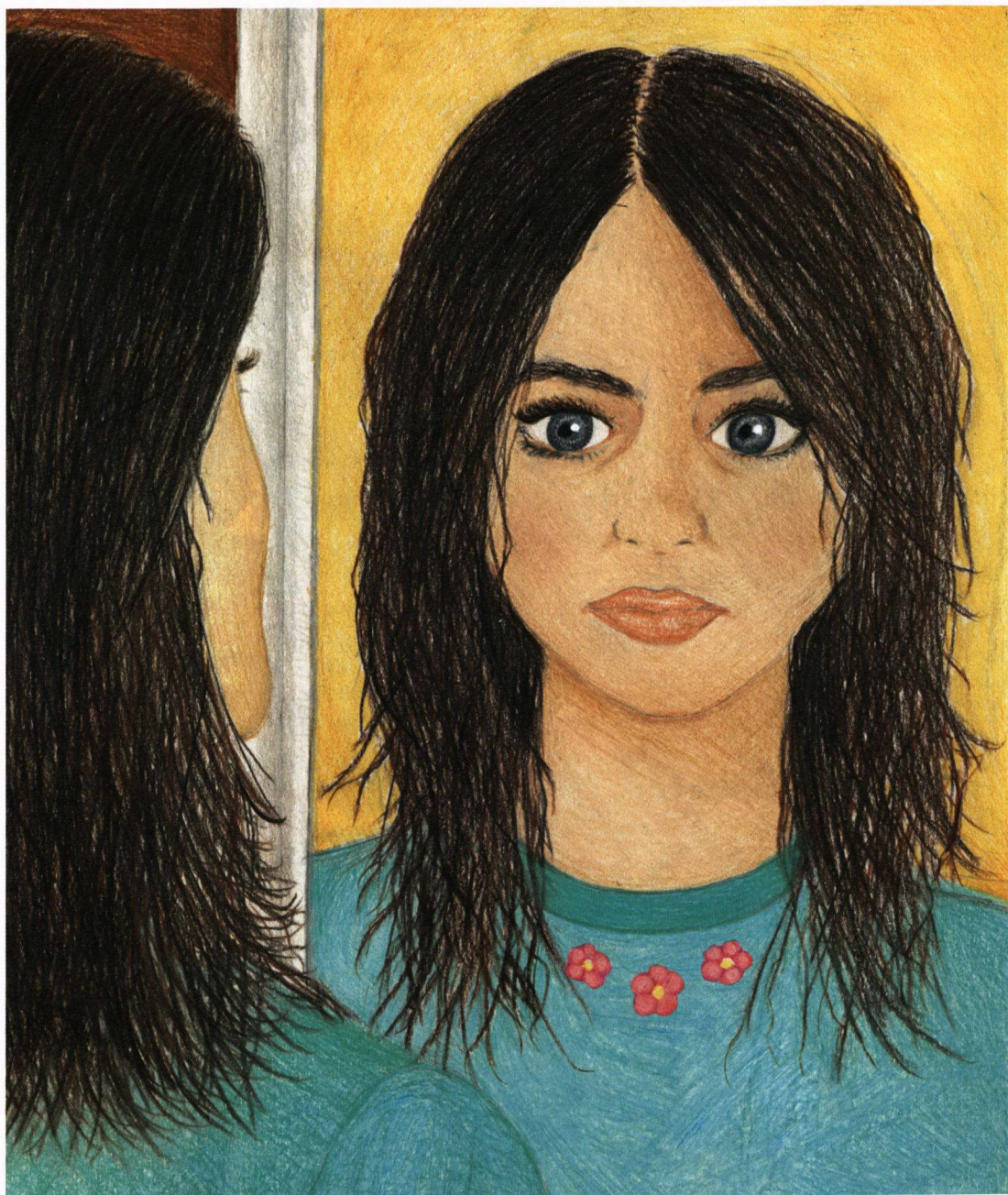
As I read her diary, I was surprised by how similar Thura's life in Iraq is to my life in America. We both watch television and use the computer, we both are in school, and we both have a passion for writing. At nineteen, Thura is the eldest of three girls. Although I only have one sibling, at thirteen I'm also the oldest child in my family. Our parents are similar in many ways too. Like my parents, Thura's mother and father are well educated and value education for their children.

Although we have commonalities, we have differences, too. When Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq, Thura didn't have access to a large range of media, while I have an abundance to choose from: television, the Internet, books, magazines, and newspapers. As an American, I am allowed more freedom than Thura was allowed in Iraq. Thura states in her diary that “men are in charge of everything,” whereas in the United States women have much

more freedom of choice and movement. A personal difference between Thura and me is that she has experienced war, even though she is not a soldier, whereas I have never stepped on a battlefield, not even as a spectator.

Since the start of the war with Iraq, my life has changed in some ways. My parents' obsession with following wartime events drove, and still drives, me crazy. I could never get away from it, not even during a meal, but since the war, Thura's life has changed so much more drastically that my disruptions pale in comparison. After the war began, she wasn't able to go to college. Her father couldn't work anymore. It was difficult to get food for her and her family and insulin for her diabetic sister, Aula. It even became hard to breathe due to oil fires and smog. The chaos of the war also allowed religious men to force their beliefs on the women of Baghdad, requiring them to wear the headscarf or fear being kidnapped. Under Saddam Hussein's regime, women could choose to wear a headscarf or not. It was unbelievably tough to live in the wartime conditions.

As I read, I wondered how Thura, as an Iraqi teenager, felt about the American invasion. Thura doesn't care for either side of the war. Like me, she dislikes the fact that the Americans and the Iraqis won't talk about their problems peacefully. She hates it that men have to go to war and leave their wives and children. She also expresses her distress about men dying in the war and her concern that the women left behind won't know how to take care of themselves. She does not call Baghdad "liberated," as President Bush has said time after time. Rather, she calls Baghdad an "American colony." What I believed to be ironic is that Thura described the Iraqi people's vision of Saddam as a lion, but in my view Thura has the courage and the heart of a lion for being strong for her family and not hating all Americans for what has happened to her country. ❀



Unfortunately, she thought, nothing had changed

Paintings

By Michelle Grifka

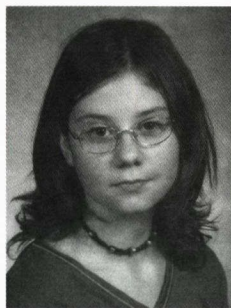
Illustrated by Ashley Burke

LARA FLUNG THE COVERS away with an arm and nearly fell out of bed in her rush to get to the clock, on the other side of the room. The piercing wail of the alarm had always irritated her immensely. She saw it as a shatterer of dreams, a malicious creature that waited until the very moment when you jumped into the sky to ring its sorry heart out. Hand slamming down on the "off" button, she sighed and ran her long, slender fingers through her tangled dark brown hair. Then she regarded them with fastidious interest. She decided they should be included in her list of good features, as number three, owing to the long, unbitten fingernails and delicate, almost visible bones. The other two were her eyes and her hair.

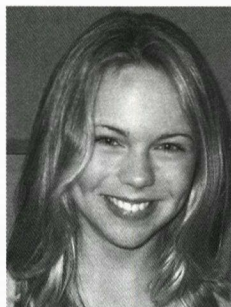
The only delicate thing about me, really, she thought rather sadly, as she tried to walk to the bathroom but tripped over a sheet that was wrapped around her ankles. She hopped on one foot, tugging the miscreant sheet off, and continued on her way.

Once there, she scrutinized herself in a tall mirror on the back of the door. Stocky, five foot five, straight, lanky brown hair, stormy blue eyes, check. Unfortunately, she thought, nothing had changed. She turned to the mirror over the sink and began to search for the easiest place to start brushing. She had long ago decided her hair was like a wild stallion. Sometimes it could be elegant, pretty, even affectionate, but mostly it was willful, impertinent, and unyielding.

Yanking her brush through the first wild snarl, she heard a small, metallic crack. She sighed and reached up to pull a tiny



Michelle Grifka, 12
Ann Arbor, Michigan



Ashley Burke, 12
Cedar Park, Texas

metal tine from the knot, then looked at the corresponding hole in the brush. There were other holes too, mostly around the edge. She felt sorry for the decimated thing, and compared it to the soft grass the stallion viciously chomps.

She brushed her teeth quickly and brusquely, and then went back to her room to grab a book before heading downstairs. *The Hounds of the Morrigan*. A fantasy story, but centered on Irish mythology. She stroked the shiny cover as she walked down the hall. Ireland. She would be going there soon. She smiled at the thought. Maybe, just maybe, she would have a magical adventure. After all, where would one be more likely to happen than in Ireland, the Land of the Fae? She trilled three happy notes, and then found herself in the kitchen.

Lara always had the same thing. She was aware this was very unimaginative, but she told herself she could not be infinitely creative. In things that were not artistic, she always followed a set pattern or order. Even though it made no difference, she liked to think she accomplished more when in a comforting ritual.

Grabbing a bagel from the breadbox and a bottle from the fridge, Lara set them on the table. She was in the act of dipping the knife in to spread on the bagel, when she realized it was ketchup. She hurriedly wiped the knife off, screwed the top on, and put it back in the fridge. Then she pulled the right bottle out, feeling minor irritation.

As she lazily spread creamy yellow mus-

tard on the bagel, Lara thought it was quite possible no one else in the world had the same thing for breakfast. She liked to think that at least one thing was all her own, unshared. She knew it was unusual to eat mustard on a bagel, but she was a firm believer in *Pleasure Before Convention*. Like *Age Before Beauty*, an idea she thought excellent. She both envied and despised exceptionally pretty people. She knew (or told herself she knew) she only had one remarkable feature; her cloudy gray-blue eyes. She would have loved them even more if they had worked properly, instead of making her wear glasses. Well, need them, anyway. She hardly ever wore them.

Carrying her plate to the table, she put her feet on the chair diagonally across from her and began to eat. She also read, using one hand to hold the book and the other to eat. She vaguely heard her mom, Michaela, begin to stir above, and she felt a sort of sinking. She loved her mother, but she liked having the house to herself.

She finished the bagel and licked her fingers, then put down the book and carried her plate to the counter by the sink, and left it there. She climbed the wide staircase, and halfway through the hall, she met her mother.

"Good morning, Lara," she mumbled, then rubbed her eyes. She seemed to come more awake, and smiled. "Only a day and a few hours left until you go to Ireland!"

"Yes, I know, Mom. Thank you. I'm really glad to be going."

Her mother smiled even wider and her

eyes got the melted look Lara recognized as fondness for something inanimate. Whenever she thought of a special place, object, or even idea, her eyes became shiny with moisture, and they seemed to stare right through whatever was in front of them. Lara's mother cried very easily, but not out of sadness. Now she shrugged her shoulders in excitement and then, suddenly, frowned. "You're still in your nightgown!"

"Yes, I'm going to change right now, Mom." Lara slipped into her room and nearly tripped over the giant suitcase. She swore silently and glared at the thing. She had tripped over it nearly daily ever since she finished packing. She imagined it glaring back at her in a stuck-up fashion. "There's only enough room in here for one of us," she told it sternly, then without another word, she booted it into the hall, where it lay in haughty defeat. She lifted her chin and turned to her dresser.

Nothing much was in the maple drawers. It had all been packed, all but her least favorite clothes. That ugly T-shirt with the polka dots, and the pink shorts whose in-seam came halfway down her thighs were examples. She scorned these and put on a bright yellow polo and a pink-and-black-striped skort. The colors clashed, but she didn't care enough to change. She made her bed, and then went downstairs again.

The rest of the day passed very slowly. She felt she was only wasting away entire hours in anticipation of her trip to the airport the following late morning. Each hour had nothing in it to look forward

to but the bit closer to the moment she would leave. She spent a restless night, waking up every hour or so to stare angrily at the red-lighted numbers on her clock. She felt that life was being measured in minutes instead of years or decades.

Finally the hour rolled around. Chewing on a bit of beef jerky, she tugged her suitcase in short jerks towards the trunk of the black Toyota Camry her mom fondly called "that thing." Heaving it in, she was suddenly struck by a wave of nervous doubt. Little what-ifs buzzed around in her head, and she had to stop herself from wringing her hands or cracking her knuckles.

Michaela stepped off the path and came almost skipping towards Lara. She stopped in front of her and grinned.

"You're going to have so much fun, I just know you will. You'll make so many friends you'll come home wishing you were still there," she babbled, sounding almost more excited than Lara herself.

"Mom, I'll be gone for a month. I'll be glad to come home," replied Lara, annoyed by her mom's insane buoyancy.

"Are you saying you don't want to go?" she almost whined.

"No, no! Of course I want to go! I'm just saying I'll miss you," Lara explained.

"Oh, that's sweet of you," her mother said, clearly mollified. They climbed into the car and drove away from the small periwinkle-blue house.

Lara thought about her mother's cousin in Ireland. Lara hadn't even known her mother had a cousin in Ireland until, three

months back, she had received a postcard inviting her to stay with the cousin and her family, or Lara's second cousins. Lara and her mother had agreed eagerly (both loved Irish and Celtic things) and the next months were spent in anticipation.

In a short time they arrived at the airport, checked in, and were in the waiting lobby. Lara stared at the ceiling, bored. Her mother read a novel; in all probability a sappy drugstore romance. Lara could imagine the characters whining platitudes of undying love and passion at each other from a "clandestine bower." She sighed.

At last they were permitted to enter the concertina of a passageway from the lobby to the plane. Her mother kissed her tearfully, made her promise to write lots of letters, then pushed her into the corridor and watched until she disappeared from sight.

Lara found her seat in the economy class and pulled out a book from her backpack. The paranoid voices in her head whispered a myriad of horrible things sure to happen to the plane, but she ignored them.

ALMOST SIX hours later, she was jerked out of a cramped and uncomfortable sleep by the landing. They bumped and skidded to a stop. Lara rubbed her cheek where the seat's armrest had been imprinted. She grabbed her backpack and slowly filed out with the rest of the passengers. Her eyelids fluttered in her effort to keep them open, and she moved stiffly.

A small group of cheerful, redheaded

Irish people caught her eye. She saw an older woman, presumably the mother, holding a sign reading "Lara Accoust Landing Point." She smiled and walked towards them.

"Look, Bridget, there's . . . what's-ername!" cried a tall, thin teenaged boy to the girl next to him, who was obviously his sister.

"Brandon! Read the sign, stupid. It's Lara," she told him in a superior voice, tossing her red hair.

Lara looked at her and became instantly convinced she was a snob. Her expression, her perfect clothes, all screamed "Preppy snob! Stuck-up brat!" Lara wished it wasn't so, but she prided herself on being a good judge of character. It was dislike at first sight, she thought gloomily.

The mother of the family, holding a sleeping baby in one arm, came forward and gave Lara a crushing hug with the other.

"We're just so glad, so ecstatic, we're so glad you're here!" she boomed, stepping away to get a good look at Lara.

"And I'm happy, so, so happy to be here!" Lara almost sang. Brandon and Bridget snickered, but the mother missed the playful mockery. She beamed.

"Please, dear, call me Mary." She held out the baby, who had a bit of blanket in its mouth. "This is Sarah, my baby girl."

Lara smiled. Sarah certainly was adorable, and she said so.

"Why, thank you, dear. That's very kind." Mary smiled back, obviously pleased.

Lara walked closer to the other children. "Hi," she said, unable to think of anything else to say. They were her own age, and therefore dealt with differently.

"Yeah," agreed Brandon. Bridget laughed.

"Well, he really is quite an idiot sometimes. He usually snaps out of it. I'm Bridget, I'm sure we'll be friends, maybe really close, like the secret-sharing kind," she chattered. Lara nodded, but she doubted it. Bridget's bubblegum-pink hair was yet another hint that Lara's personality and Bridget's personality were not going to mix.

"C'mon," Bridget jabbered. "Let's go!"

THEY REACHED the small, comfortable, middle-class house very late at night. All stumbled in, weary, and as Bridget led Lara to the room they would share for the next month, she didn't notice anything but the bed. She fell onto it, still fully clothed, and dropped straight into sleep.

It seemed like only five minutes later when loud, nasal voices penetrated her dreams. She shook herself, ready to yell at whoever was disturbing her rest. Then, when she opened her eyes, she saw Bridget's disgustingly cheerful, pink-framed face.

"Rise and shine!" she sang brightly.

Lara wanted to do something painful to her, but instead she rolled over and pulled the pillow over her head.

"Riiiiise aaaaand shiiiiine!" Bridget sang again, this time in a voice that made Lara

think she might be famous in opera one day. Her only response was to burrow into the covers like a hamster.

Bridget's response was to tackle her. Lara rolled out from the covers onto the floor, stood up, tackled Bridget, and tried to wrap her in blankets. Bridget wailed in pitiful protest. Lara let go, annoyed. Then she sat on her pillow and looked at the room.

The walls were covered with posters of pop and movie stars. Smirking blonds and spiky-haired punks plastered even the ceiling. Lara felt slightly claustrophobic. As Bridget untangled herself and went to her bed, Lara dragged her suitcase across the oak floorboards to her dresser (there were two, one for Bridget, and one for Lara) and began to unpack. After that, she grabbed a loose navy-blue T and her favorite light blue jeans and went looking for the bathroom. She found it to the left, right across from their room.

She stepped in, closed the door, and changed quickly. When she got back to the room, Bridget was wearing a shirt the same color pink as her hair, with yellow letters spelling BRAT printed boldly across the front of her chest. A black mini cheerleader-type skirt accompanied the shirt, and the entire outfit was finished off by a black headband decorated with rhinestone flowers. Lara grimaced, but didn't say anything. Instead, she grabbed her hairbrush and started brushing her hair.

"So, what are you planning to do today?" Bridget asked, swinging her legs

over the edge of the bed.

"Oh, I only just got here. I'm not sure. How about you?"

"Well, I had planned to go shopping with my friends, but I think I'll take you too and show you the stores."

Thanks, thought Lara dryly. I really appreciate being thought of as a burdensome thing. She knew she was being overly defensive and Bridget was just trying to be nice, but she was grumpy. Anyway, she was never good at being polite to people she didn't like.

"Thanks, but I just realized I have some things I need to do."

"What kind of things?"

"You know . . . things. I just got here." It was a lame lie and she knew it.

"Yeah, OK," muttered Bridget. "I get what you're saying."

And without another word, she walked out.

Lara stared after her, then flung herself on her bed and began to read, angry with the preppy girl.

An hour later, Mary came upstairs. "Hello, dear. Why didn't you come down to breakfast?"

"Uh . . . I . . . I forgot," Lara murmured, feeling red creep up her face.

"Oh, that's fine! I'll just make you something quick if you come downstairs," Mary told her.

"OK." Lara was going to tell her about the bagel thing, but changed her mind.

They went downstairs to the kitchen. Warm lights filled the room with yellow cheer. Lara sat down at a circular glass

table while Mary bustled around, mostly getting things from the fridge and pantry. When she stopped for a moment she looked straight at Lara.

"When Bridget came downstairs she seemed a little upset. I hope you two weren't fighting," she said seriously.

"Oh no. Not at all," Lara answered hastily. Then, to reassure Mary, she asked, "Where is Bridget now?" Probably at the mall, she thought.

"I think she's in her studio."

"Her . . . her studio?"

"Yes! My Bridget has quite a talent for art, you know. She did that recently," she said, pointing to an oil painting above the small glass cabinet with china in it that was opposite Lara. The picture showed a red-haired man in a dark suit, with thin rectangular silver glasses. His soft brown eyes were serious, but compassionate. The painting was all in muted tones. Even the man's red hair was softer and less vibrant.

"Really?"

Mary's face saddened. "Yes, yes she did. It's her dad. He . . . left four months ago."

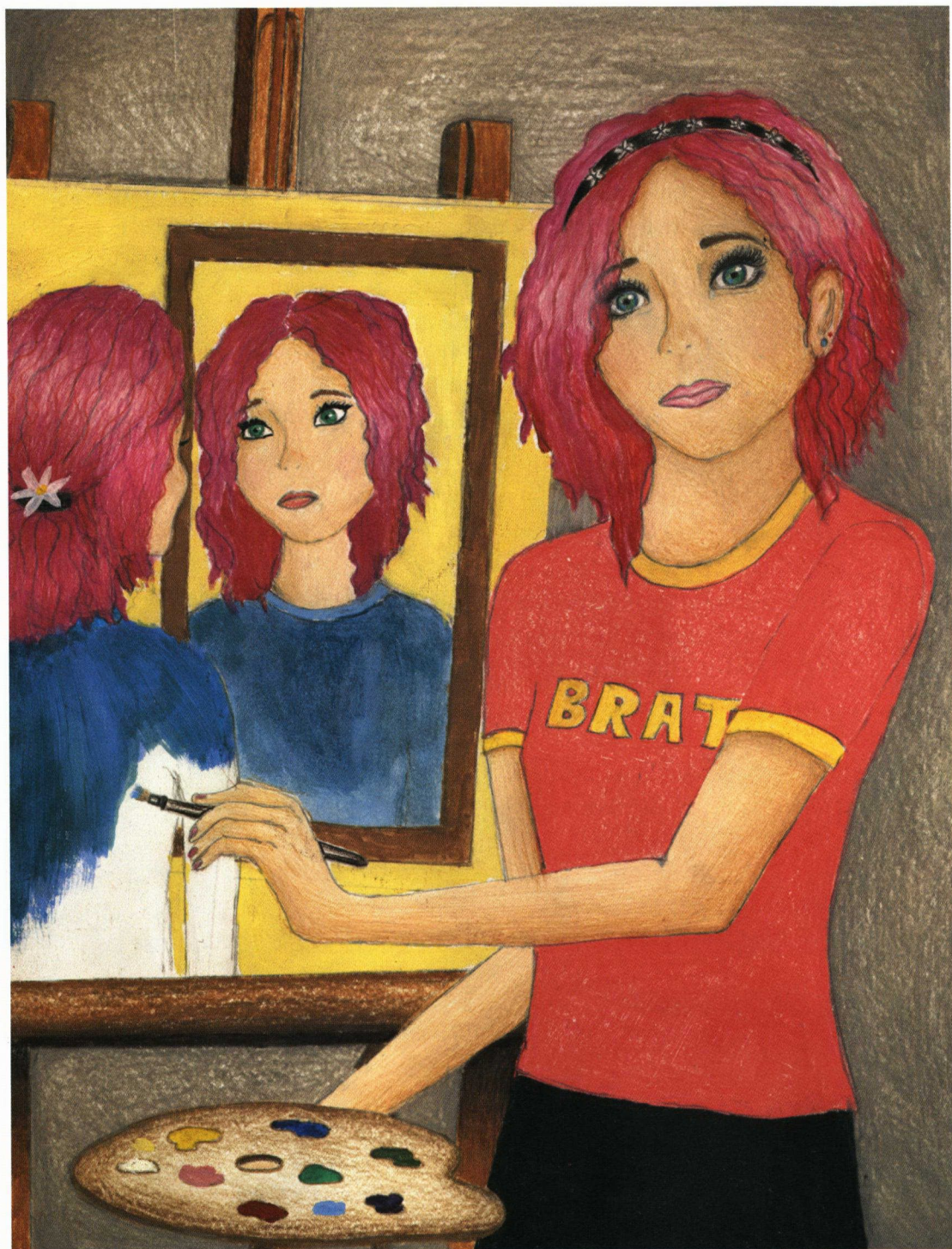
Lara's breath caught in her throat. She hadn't even noticed. "Is that why you asked me to visit?"

"Well, yes. Not that I wouldn't have anyway," replied Mary.

"Where's the studio?"

"In the garage. The door is the first on the right, down that hall," replied Mary with a very small smile. Lara walked down the hall and opened the door.

Bridget was there, and painting. Unnoticed, Lara stood watching as a pic-



"Bridget . . . Bridget, I'm really sorry I was mean. I would like to be friends"

ture began to form on the canvas, shaped by Bridget's careful strokes. In the painting, she herself was standing in front of a vanity. But in the mirror, instead of her reflection, a sad Bridget gazed back, shoulders slumped, eyes pleading, and mouth turned down at the corners.

Lara took a step towards Bridget, which startled her. She jumped, but no harm came to the painting.

"Bridget . . . Bridget, I'm really sorry I was mean. I would like to be friends, I really would, it's just that when I saw you I made a mistake. I looked at your clothes and your hair and I thought you were a snob. But then I saw that picture of . . . of your dad, and while looking at it I realized we could still be friends. You could still be a really nice person. I'm really sorry, and, uh, I . . ." She didn't have anything else to say, so she left it at that.

Bridget nodded, face tight. Something glistened on her cheek, and Lara realized,

just like in the old song, they were the tracks of her tears. She shifted uncomfortably.

"So, uh, do you want to go to the mall?"

AMAZINGLY enough, they became friends that moment. That night, Lara wrote a postcard to her mother.

Dear Mom,

I got to Ireland safely. You were right, jet lag is horrible.

My second cousin (the girl, anyway) is named Bridget (I guess you already knew that) and she's really nice. She's also a mega-talented artist! You were right about another thing, we're good friends now. I would write more, but it's time for bed and the jet lag is calling my name. One thing though; I think I'm going to learn a lot here!

Love, Lara

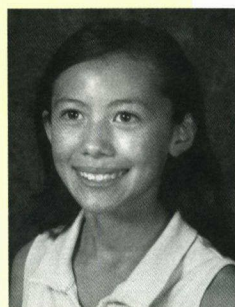
P. S. You seem to be right about a lot of things!



Moonbeams

By Lauren MacGuidwin

Big and bright
It stood and watched me.
Shattering as I
Skipped stones
Across the surface
Of the
Solid lake,
The ripples spread its
Perfect whiteness.
Silent but bold.
It moved the ocean waters.
It was howled at by the
Wolf,
Enraged by loneliness.
It lit the path of the
Dead night.
I cup the cool, crisp
Water in my hands and
Splash them on my face.
The drops
Capture its rays
And I am splashed
With moonbeams.



Lauren MacGuidwin, 12
McLean, Virginia



Elsabeth swore a silent oath that blue would, until her death, be her favorite color

Blue

By Margaret Bryan

Illustrated by Haluk Akay

“POMEGRANATE, APPLE, or bunch of grapes?” Mom asked, just asking out of sheer politeness, as she knew what the answer would be.

“Pomegranate, please,” her three daughters said in unison. Mrs. Loft sliced the brilliant red fruit in quarters, passed each girl a quarter and took the remainder of the sphere for herself.

The two younger girls picked the seeds from the white, inedible and bitter “meat” of the fruit, but Elisabeth, the eldest of Mrs. Loft’s three children at thirteen, looked down at her slice with distaste and surprised her mother on a sudden whim.

“Mom, do you have any leftovers of last night’s blueberry pie, or did Lucille and I finish it this morning?”

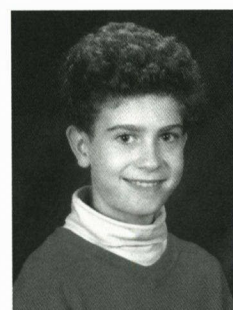
Mrs. Loft blinked, surprised by her daughter’s sudden inquiry. Shaking her head and regaining her usual calm senses she looked intently about the interior of the hamper. “No,” she said to Elisabeth, “I’m afraid there is none left.”

It was then that Mr. Loft turned his head slightly from his driving. “I’ll have Elsa’s quarter of pomegranate if she does not care to eat it,” Pa spoke in a bittersweet, chocolaty voice, which made Mom turn her head the opposite way to hide the scowl that had shattered her usually composed features. She detested her husband’s voice, because in her opinion, it was too fictional. No voice was like that in real life. But she had made up for her disapproval by being known to say that, other than his voice, Mr. Loft had no other visible faults.

Road signs protruded from the cold snow every few feet on



Margaret Bryan, 11
Holden, Maine



Haluk Akay, 11
Sewickley, Pennsylvania

either side of the vehicle. The wintry white scenery was like a giant blanket spread over a vast expanse of flat terrain, or an electric blue tarp keeping the plants safe from a harsh frost, the heavy wrinkles forming what makes the continental crust of our Earth land: hills and valleys, mountains and even minute anthills.

The Confederation Bridge loomed into sight as Dad plucked a scarlet pomegranate seed shiny in luster and held it up to the light before popping it into his mouth. Elsabeth, slightly paranoid for her thirteen years, looked up in alarm.

"Pa, I would watch closer at where I was going, if I were you," she said irritably, before adding hastily, "I don't know much about driving of course, as I have only just reached my teens." Mr. Loft was very particular about what others had to say about his maneuvering abilities. However, he heeded his daughter's warning, and placed the remaining pomegranate into the cup holder next to him. He grasped the steering wheel tightly, and screwed up his eyes in mock concentration. Eve laughed at her father's false expression of serious deliberation.

A claret red car passed the Lofts' vehicle, its bright hue reflecting off the colorless, almost transparent shade of mystic silver of the automobile's exterior. Its speed was impregnable, and the crimson car wobbled back and forth on the smoky gray road, every now and then passing a boundary of brilliant yellow, the line that separated the two obscure lanes.

"Well I'll be!" Mr. Loft said after the

clumsy-looking sports car had passed, throwing his hands up momentarily in surprise and causing his knuckles, which were deathly white from clutching the steering wheel, to resume their normal color of rouge. He continued his speech, winking at Elsabeth. "If I hadn't been watching the roads, I assume that there would have been a horrible accident on this Confederation Bridge." Something about the tone in her father's words made Elsabeth think about what would have happened if *she hadn't* told her father to watch the roads. Would her corpse be lying upon the frozen icy pavement right now, beside a demolished car lacking in hue, marks of red scattered upon the glistening metal of the vehicle's surface?

Elsabeth shook herself as if to relieve her head of such a burdensome thought. Such a troublesome predicament was almost impossible to fathom, not to mention quite unpleasant.

At that moment a car the color of the azure sky slowly lumbered past. *Blue*, it seemed to whisper to the young Miss Loft. *Blue*. Elsabeth had always liked that color; there were so many names for its numerous shades. For green there was just lush, viridian, and kelly. With red there was claret, scarlet, and crimson. As far as black was concerned there was only the elegant phrasing of the adjective, ebony. Brown was perhaps of a wider range of choices, with burnt sienna, chestnut, sepia, etc. Yellow had hardly any names of much consequence. Orange possessed the sole vermilion, unless you intended on



"Pomegranate, apple, or bunch of grapes?" Mom asked

pairing it with the crayon color name of marigold. Pink could be known as salmon, rouge, and mauve. But with blue—Ah! There was cerulean, phthalo, and indigo. Azure, cornflower, and periwinkle. There was midnight and sky. Oh, there were so many different shades of blue, and at that very moment Elisabeth swore a silent oath that blue would, until her death, be her favorite color.

ELSABETH LIVED in Sacramento, California, with her parents,

Richard and Cladissa Loft, and her two sisters, ten-year-old Lucille and four-year-old Eve. Elisabeth was no straight-A student when it came to academics, but she was somewhat of a genius when it came to computers and could even outsmart her high school technology professor. This remarkable gift had been accompanied by a strong desire in her early years to save the rainforests, and to become an environmental lawyer.

Elisabeth swept her bushy, rather tangled locks of short auburn hair out of her

placid face. Prince Edward Island in the winter seasons looked like a jewel-encrusted pendant, all covered in quartz crystal and zircon. Elisabeth was no favorer of diamonds. Their abrupt transparency made them seem like they were not in existence at all. They seemed like sheets of glass scrubbed clean; so clean that one could not make out a single speck of dust or dirt to decipher the glass from the things seen through it. No, in Elisabeth's opinion, diamonds seemed to have an emptiness about them, and no matter how much bright hue and artificial (or natural) coloring was added, they would always possess that aura.

Now zircon and quartz crystal were another story. Their beauty was one of impenetrable value, and the glistening, snowflake-like structure of quartz was nearly identical to the small speck of whirling blizzard on a bitter winter's night. Zircon, though imitation diamond, seemed to contain an invisible tint of beauty and distinction, and reflected the slightest bit of aquatic atmosphere in its depths.

They had reached a series of uneven terrain on the bridge, though the slow elevation was so subtle that Elisabeth barely noticed that they were ascending about thirty feet.

Then, there! A perfect view of Prince Edward Island; the zircon and crystal was scattered about the stunning red soil, like a long bolt of crimson cloth garbed with sequins. Where the island had supposedly blushed under the glance of God, what gave the appearance of potter's clay re-

mained. Though it was winter, the island still gave the impression of residing in the cadet-blue sea. Mrs. Loft looked back at her daughters' astounded faces. Her dark, flowing brunette tresses were in perfect contrast with PEI's elegance. Though nearly in her forties, Cladissa Loft gave the distinct impression of still being in high school. Her startlingly blue eyes, like teardrops of aquamarine, hid nothing. The mother of three believed not in secrets, but in sharing her vast knowledge with the world.

"Well, here it is," Richard's voice sliced the air like a knife on butter, and at the sound of his bittersweet voice Elisabeth had a sudden craving for a box of chocolates. "Prince Edward Island." The words were said in unison by both mother and father. One more change of pavement from dusty, worn, slate gray and blackened tar, and they were actually on the island! Days of ceaseless traveling, stopping only to fill the car with gas, run inside the nearest McDonald's for a bite to eat, or to pull up to a dingy old motel with chipped yellow paint and peeling green lettering.

"Aunt Prudence lives in Kensington," Mr. Loft said, "about thirty kilometers from Cavendish, the setting of L. M. Montgomery's acclaimed novel, *Anne of Green Gables*. Really, Elisabeth, as long as we're here, you should really take the time to read it. There are about seven or eight books in the series, I reckon." He started ticking off names. Lucille was hanging on to her father's every word, already taking out her notebook and flipping to a page

that said, "To Read," already with five or six pages following the title. Lucille read everything that she could get her hands on, and whenever she heard of another book, whether it sounded interesting or not, the ten-year-old would scribble out what ranged from one to ten words, usually.

"Then there's *Anne of Ingleside*, *Rainbow Valley*, and *Rilla of Ingleside*." Father finished the last three names and ended by thrusting a handful of pomegranate seeds into his gaping mouth. "All right, you three," he said in a businesslike manner, "we've got a long drive ahead of us still to come before we reach Kensington. I'm assigning some work for you all to do to ensure that there will be no boredom on the remainder of this trip. Elsa, you write the entire alphabet in the finest cursive you can muster, both capital and lowercase, each letter written three times. When you're finished, I want you to write a list of places that we want to go on this week-long vacation. For our fastest reader on the planet, pray do read *The Little Prince*. Shouldn't take you that long. When you're done, help Elsa. And you," Mr. Loft winked at Eve, "me, you, and Mommy are gonna play the color-car game." Mr. Richard Loft assigned a job to everyone on a long car ride. It made the waiting easier. And since no one in the family ever got carsick, there was no fear of reading or writing. Lucille was already rummag-

ing around her book box, groping for the novel that Father had suggested. Elisabeth bent her head down to write.

"I'm blue!" The eldest of the three daughters felt a little squirm of a mixture of gratitude and resentment as her parents and younger sister decided on the colors that they were going to be in the color-car game; a game played on the road where each player counted up how many cars they found of a certain color and the person with the largest sum won. Quite simple, really. Eve was the well-worshipped blue, Father, the pernicious black, and Mother, the mysterious white—color of the snow and the snowman, if you could call it a color, that is. Mrs. Loft was sporting a white wool hat upon her chestnut head, making her chosen car color appropriate in both hue and contrast.

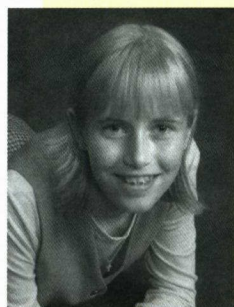
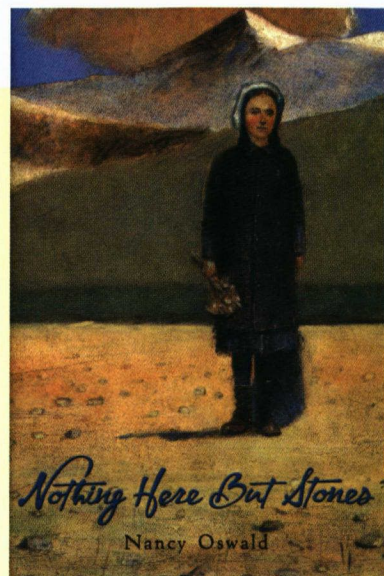
At that moment Elisabeth realized that she had been working so slowly that she was only on the letter B, whilst Lucille was already on page 20 of *The Little Prince*. The young Miss Loft, filled with satisfaction, bent down over her paper once more, and when the next blue car passed by, Elisabeth smiled at it in recognition, for once again, she had the distinct impression that the aura of blue was around her, and that she was forever in its debt. ❁

This story is an excerpt from Margaret's novel, The Pomegranate.

Book Review

By Hannah Ritter

Nothing Here But Stones, by Nancy Oswald;
Henry Holt and Company: New York, 2004;
\$16.95



By Hannah Ritter, 11
La Crosse, Wisconsin

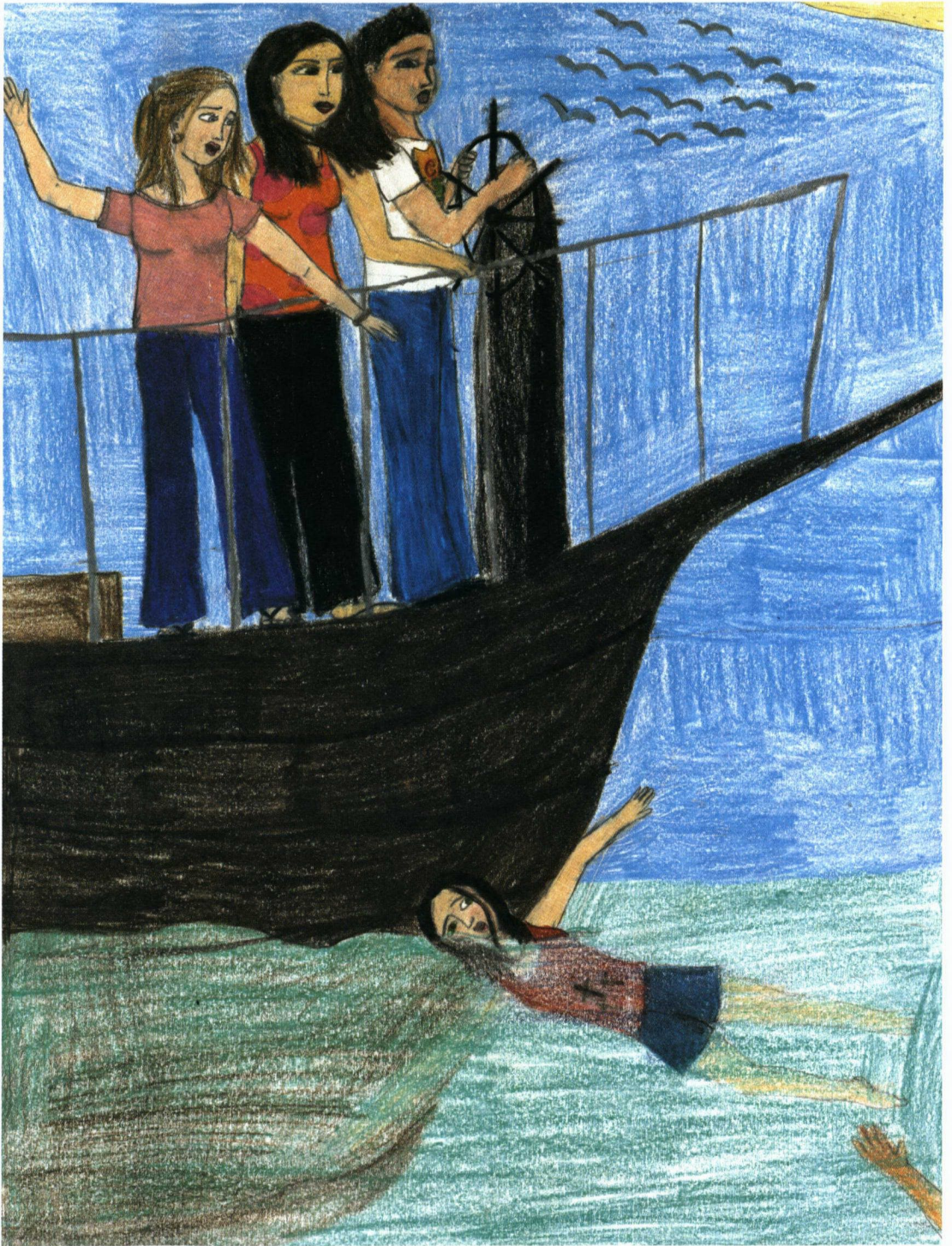
“BOOKWORM” may be one of the best words you could use to describe me. Ever since I was little I could be found curled up in the oddest places, deep in a story, obviously oblivious to the real world. Reading is one of my favorite things to do, but lately I have been disappointed to find that not many of the newer books have the same quality of writing as the classics. That is why I was thrilled when I read *Nothing Here But Stones*. When I read the jacket cover I knew right away that this was going to be a great book with writing that I’d love. When I read the first sentence I was immediately pulled into Emma’s body where I watched through the eyes of a Jewish immigrant girl as she started her life over in a new land. It would be hard on any eleven-year-old girl to leave the country she had been born in to live in a country where she didn’t even speak the language, but to make it worse Emma’s mother had died not long before they moved. This left Emma in a new country with no friends, almost no belongings, and a big hole of emptiness in her heart. Through the whole book I could feel the heavy sadness Emma had and could understand it. I had felt the same kind of loneliness once when I lost many good friends. I went from having a big group of best friends (about eight) and over-

night they wouldn't speak to me and would turn their back to me when they saw me. They were dead to me in a sense and left me lonely and friendless for a while. Emma was worse off than I was though. I had a loving family who supported me and Emma really didn't have anyone to go to. I was glad in the end, when she finally felt loved. I felt happy all over and felt like it was me who finally felt accepted.

I loved this book because not only was the story line great, but the author had a way of writing that made me feel like I was Emma. This and the beautiful descriptions she used made the story seem real, like it was happening the moment I read it. Even though all the characters in this story and the story itself were fiction I could visualize everything the author described.

I also enjoyed reading this book because the author, Nancy Oswald, accomplished something while writing it, which I have always wanted to do. The mountain she described in the story (where Emma lived) is actually a real mountain in Colorado. From 1882 to 1884 (around the same time the story took place), Jewish immigrants like Emma and her family really did settle there. Today the author and her family own the land the mountain stands on. I have always wanted to write about something in my family's history or something old, but I have not been able to come up with anything—yet.

I enjoyed this book very much and am glad I was able to read it. It has even made it to My Top Ten Favorite Books (a poster I make every year). Nancy Oswald definitely has created a must-read book which I will strongly encourage my friends to read. 🍀



"Swim, Amelia, swim faster," Star screamed

Forgiveness

By Niyousha Bastani

Illustrated by Joanna Stanley

“SWIM, AMELIA, SWIM faster,” Star screamed. My hands and feet moved faster and faster towards the ship but the pressure of water was pulling me deeper into the sea. I looked at the ship as it moved farther.

“Stop the ship, Jack, please,” I heard Star’s voice.

“I can’t, the waves are moving it,” Jack yelled.

“You can do this, Amelia; just a little faster.” I knew that it was my mother’s voice. I felt a hand grabbing on my ankle. I swam faster but the hand holding onto my ankle was very strong. I sank deeper and deeper in the salty water. I opened my eyes with horror. I looked around to see who had pulled me in the water. My eyes felt weak but I managed to see the person whose fingers were still around my ankle. I saw a faded image of my father. I screamed, I asked him why, but only bubbles came out of my mouth.

“Because you shouldn’t be in that ship,” he said. Although only bubbles came out of his mouth I understood what he was saying.

I closed my eyes and screamed once more. I opened my eyes; I was sitting on my bed. I was on the bed in the ship moving across the sea. Star, my sister, was sitting by my bed. “Are you all right?” she asked.

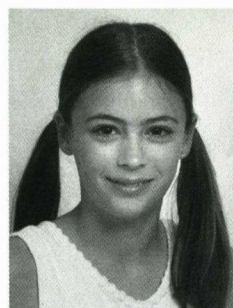
“I think so,” I said.

“You had a bad dream. You were screaming and you woke everyone on the ship,” she said.

“Is Dad still angry?” I asked.



Niyousha Bastani, 10
North Vancouver,
British Columbia, Canada



Joanna Stanley, 12
Seal Beach, California

"About what?" Star asked.

"About me coming with you, coming on the sea voyage," I said.

"I'm not sure. Is that what your dream was about?" Star asked.

"Yes, he pulled me deep in the water and . . ." I sighed.

"And what? It's not that important, Amelia. It was just a dream, Dad isn't that angry. You should go back to sleep." She left the cabin.

I lay on my bed. I tried to forget about the dream. I remembered how Dad had said that I shouldn't go on the sea voyage; how he had said that it was too dangerous. I had told him that I wasn't afraid and I wouldn't change my mind. He had said that he wouldn't forgive me if I did go on the sea voyage but I had only ignored him. Now I felt the ship's movement. I wasn't scared of the sea or the roaring waves. I didn't feel lonely on the ship. I enjoyed walking on the deck of the ship and staring at the blue water. I only felt miserable when I closed my eyes and heard my father's voice inside my head.

I STEPPED OFF of my bed, came out of the cabin and went to the deck. My cousin Jack was on watch that night. He saw me and walked towards me.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"I couldn't go to sleep. I can be on watch for you if you're tired," I said.

"Nah, I'm OK. I like the sky tonight," Jack said.

"What's so special about it tonight?" I asked.

"Look at it," was all he said.

I stared at the sky. It looked so beautiful, the stars were so clear. The moon's reflection was visible in the water. I had never seen such a beautiful sky in the city which we lived in. I sat on the deck. I didn't take my eyes off the clear sky. Then I started to feel sleepy. I rested my head on my lap and closed my eyes. I heard my father's voice once more inside my head; he was saying that he wouldn't forgive me. I was afraid and I felt guilty but I didn't open my eyes. I just sat there with my eyes closed and repeated his words in my head.

"Jack?" I opened my eyes now, fearing that I might have the dream again.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Did you ever have big disagreements with your dad?" I soon bit my lips after saying these words.

Jack's dad, my uncle, had died five years ago when Jack was ten years old and I was only eight years old. Since his mother had died two years before that, he lived with me and my family. Asking the question I had asked made me feel terrible. I wanted to start a new conversation and make him forget about the question but it was too late.

"Yes, I did. A lot of arguments." He blinked and quickly looked away to hide his tears.

"Oh . . ." I said this and stared at the sky, acting like I hadn't seen the tears. I was giving him time to wipe his tears away.

"But they were never worth it, the arguments I mean. I wish we had only



"Forgiveness is everything Amelia, believe me, I know," Jack said

talked about it. When I was angry at him I would talk to your father and he would tell me that the right way to deal with it was to talk about it with my dad. I never did talk about the arguments with him though, and he never talked about them with me. We would just forget about the arguments after a while and would put it aside, without knowing what the other person had been angry or upset about or why they had been upset." Jack sighed and looked away from me once more.

I stared at the sea this time; I didn't

want to start talking with him until I was sure he was ready. In the meantime I thought about my argument with my father. I thought about talking to him, telling him why I had come on this voyage. But then I thought that maybe the way Jack and his father had just put the argument aside was the right way. Just then I noticed that it had been silent for a long time. I quickly glanced at Jack to see if he was ready. When I saw that he was staring at the sea as well I broke the silence.

"Do you think I should talk to my dad?"

I asked.

"About what?" Jack said.

"About the argument we had. He said that I shouldn't come on this voyage and that just seems so selfish," I said.

"But you know that he wasn't just being selfish, right? You know that he was only worried that it'll be too dangerous for you," he said.

"Of course I know that. He even said that himself!"

"Well then you should talk to him. You'll always feel guilty if you don't talk to him soon. It might seem like you'll forget the argument after a week but it's not like that. It's just a small argument but you'll always wonder why you didn't talk to him," he said.

"But why do I feel so guilty?" I asked.

"Because he hasn't forgiven you yet. Forgiveness is everything Amelia, believe me, I know," Jack said.

"How do you . . ." But I didn't dare to finish my sentence, I was afraid that it will be about his father. I was afraid that talking about it will make him upset.

"How do I know?" He finished my sentence. "Well I know because when we were at the hospital and he was breathing for the last time, I stood there feeling so guilty because of an argument we had the night before he had a heart attack. I sat beside his bed wordlessly until he said these words: 'I forgive you.' I gave him a hug as he lay there on the hospital bed and I'm so glad that I did."

"I guess I do have to talk to him soon," I said.

"Yeah you do. Maybe you should go and get some sleep before it is morning," he said.

"OK. Thanks, Jack," I said.

I walked to the cabin and tried to get to sleep but I had too many thoughts in my head. I looked at the watch on my wrist; it was midnight but I wasn't tired. I lay on my bed and stared at the cabin's wooden ceiling. After a while my eyes closed and I started to feel exhausted. I wanted to sleep but I promised myself that I wouldn't sleep until I had heard my father say that he's forgiving me.

After what seemed like a year I heard sounds in the ship. I knew that it was morning and someone was awake. I came out of my bed and walked out of the cabin. I went on deck to see if Jack was still awake. The sky was blue and there were no clouds to be seen. The sea was sparkling under the sunlight. Jack was standing in a corner glancing at the sea.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi, Amelia," Jack said.

"Are you exhausted?" I asked.

"I'm a little tired. Did you have breakfast yet?" he asked.

"Nah, I think we're having pancakes today," I said.

"Yum, I love the pancakes that your mom makes," he said.

"Want to go to the kitchen and see if she's awake yet?" I asked.

"Sure," he smiled.

We went to the kitchen and saw my dad standing beside the table. On the table was a plate full of pancakes. My dad was

smiling; I hadn't seen him smile since the beginning of the voyage.

"Hi, Jack. Hi, Amelia," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"Yum, are those Aunt Karen's pancakes?" Jack asked.

"No, Karen's still asleep. I made pancakes myself." Dad seemed satisfied with his work as he nibbled one of the pancakes.

"This tastes great," Jack said after eating a small piece of a pancake.

"Dad, I wanted to talk to you about something," I said.

"Um . . . I have to go and . . . um . . . check something on the deck." Jack rushed out of the kitchen, leaving me alone with my dad.

"What did you want to talk about?" He sat down on a chair and gestured me to sit down as well.

"About the argument we had before we came on this voyage," I said, while sitting on a small wooden chair in front of my dad.

"What about the argument?" he asked.

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry. Maybe you're right, maybe I should've stayed home with Aunt Katie."

"I just don't want you to get hurt. I want you to always be with me. I'm sorry if I made a big deal of all this."

"I guess that it was partly mine and partly your fault, is that what you think?"

I said.

"Yes, that's what I think." He was smiling once more.

"Although it wasn't entirely my fault, I still need you to forgive me," I said.


"I forgive you. And I hope that you forgive me as well."

"Thanks." I went towards him and gave him a big hug.

I felt a heavy weight being lifted from my heart. The guilty feeling that had made me feel so terrible had now disappeared. I wanted to sit on my dad's lap and hold his hands and never let go.

"By the way, do you want any pancakes?" he asked.

"No thanks. I think I just need some sleep," I said.

I walked towards the cabin and lay on my bed. I closed my eyes and quickly fell asleep. I didn't dream of being drowned in the sea like I had dreamed the night before. I dreamed of a wonderful place, with birds singing and flying in the sky, the land was filled with lavenders and purple violets. In my dream a silver bird sat on my hands. I asked the bird why this place was so beautiful and the bird said that because this land is the land of forgiveness. I was confused so I asked the bird, what makes forgiveness so special? The bird said, no longer feeling a pain of guilt is what makes it special. 



The starfish were suddenly there, all around us: dozens of them. Hundreds

Starfish

By **Shannon Keating**

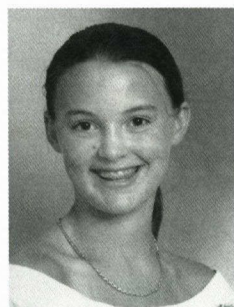
Illustrated by **Bryan Merte**

MICHAEL'S EYES, the biggest, bluest eyes imaginable, glazed over with absolute ecstasy as he beheld the sand-crusted sea treasure sprawling in his hand. The creature squirming on the toddler's pink palm writhed and stretched, its legs curling as they reached towards the weak, cloud-strewn blue sky—slowly, painfully—until its motions became too much, and it lay still, defeated.

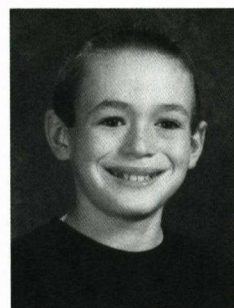
Michael plopped himself down in the grainy white sand as I looked on. He prodded his find with a chubby little finger and at its twitching response positively squealed in delight. His giggles drew the gazes of other beachgoers, and they beamed at the child while some restrained their own teary-eyed kids. The parents with particularly difficult charges gave the twisting, screaming young people of whom they were in charge looks that clearly said, "Why don't you stop whining and behave like that darling angel over there?"

Indeed, Michael looked angelic, his white-blond hair falling in those stunning eyes of his, as he sat placidly on the beach with his discovery, while behind him green-blue, foam-crested waves gurgled and frothed blithely. But the water was deceiving, I knew; it masqueraded as a little bit of relief from a scorching afternoon, when really it was a claimer of lives, shoving innocent beings into the rays of a haze-blurred sun, then receding with a mirthless chuckle.

I took a step towards my brother, my footing uneven, and began to plan my argument. Michael knew me well enough to



Shannon Keating, 13
Ridgefield, Connecticut



Bryan Merte, 12
Wappingers Falls, New York

guess my intentions, and he scrambled to his feet with a cry of, "No! He's mine."

"But Michael," I reasoned in the voice I reserved especially for him, "Michael, if the starfish doesn't go back in the water, he'll die."

Michael's glistening, round eyes narrowed in suspicion, as if he was unsure about trusting me. Michael understood the concept of death—to him, dead meant the caterpillars he collected back home when they stopped crawling up his arm and simply quit moving. Michael knew enough to figure out that if his little ocean dweller were to die, it would cease to be of any amusement.

His mind made up, Michael flung the five-legged invertebrate back to the sea. It landed with a soft flump in the wet brown sand close to the water, and the next wave gobbled it back up to where it belonged.

Michael shrieked in glee, possibly because this was one of the few times I was actually permitting him to throw something. He reached up and clutched my palm, his tiny pale hand appearing even paler in the grasp of my slender, browned fingers.

"Come on, dister," Michael urged me, once again failing to produce an adequate "s" sound at the beginning of his spoken word. He tugged at my arm and began to bound over the sand, spewing white clouds that wafted into nonexistence behind him.

We ran the length of the Block Island beach until Michael's short legs couldn't support him anymore, after which I hoist-

ed him onto my shoulders. He bounced around from his perch, crying, "Wook, wook!" whenever he saw something of interest—a seagull feeding its babies on the top of a scraggly, grass-topped dune, a lone sailboat dipping and diving on the horizon. Our destination was still obscured in the distance by the heat rising from the sand: a clump of black rocks cluttering the beach like dozing giants.

Soon the ceaseless grumble of the ocean lulled both my brother and me into a sense of quiet tranquility, and we absorbed our surroundings silently, like insignificant sponges with pores to our minds and our hearts.

Before we came to the rocks, it started to happen. The starfish were suddenly there, all around us, tumbling from the white-topped waves into our midst: dozens of them. Hundreds.

Michael got down from my shoulders and took it all in, while his eyes—black ink blots in samplings of sky—saw in a way no adult had ever been able to see.

What we saw was life, so much life that the beach pulsed and throbbed with it.

But there was death, too.

I scooped up a starfish at my feet; it was large, with lean, pimpled arms that had lost the will to move. Turning it over, I observed its underside, with the myriad, miniscule tentacles, oozing out to stick straight up in the air. They were waving and elongating, frantic.

And I realized: the starfish was pleading, simply imploring for its release, and for me to let it live.

I could almost see it, then—the faint line etched ever so carefully between being alive and . . . not *being* at all. I was suddenly and staggeringly filled with an overwhelming sense of power.

Life was in my hand, and it was my choice whether I wanted to sustain it or toss it away. I had a choice, and it may not have been one that affected things on a global scale, but it would affect me, who I was as an individual, and it would affect the little bit of living matter squirming in my hand. I had the choice, the *freedom*, to do what I wanted with something alive and real.

So I took the starfish to a tide pool, where it glided in the misty water to plaster itself on the bottom of a rock festooned with algae. I got no thank-you, no acknowledgement at all; but I felt better inside, somehow more . . . *alive* . . . as if preserving a life had increased the intensity of my own. But maybe I was just overthinking things.

So, who really cared about the existence, or lack thereof, of a purple starfish among millions? That's easy.

The starfish cared.

Michael bustled about the crowded beach, flinging creatures in the general direction of the water; I assisted him at a distance. Some were visibly gone, baked by the afternoon sun. And when I would come near as he was dealing with the still ones, Michael would read my thoughts

like always and hiss, "He's not dead! He's *sweeping*! Shhhhhh!" And he'd put a stubby finger to cracked lips, his face wrinkling in annoyance.

Michael knew that I knew that *he* knew some of the starfish were beyond saving. But it was more fun to play the ignorant toddler, as there was less pain that way.

Michael would have to grow up eventually. But for now he could be the baby boy. Though he didn't yet have the authority to eat what he wanted or wear what he wanted or do a lot of the things he wanted to do, Michael still had that freedom of choice when it came to those things no one really considered important. But the truth of it was, those things could be life-changing to someone else. It was just necessary to look with the proper eyes.

Michael and I headed back when the sun began to hang low over the water, bleeding magnificent colors into the oncoming dusk. We were getting hungry, and knew that freshly grilled hamburgers awaited us on our return, to eat with the people we loved under a sickle moon and sprouting stars.

"Come on, dister," Michael said to me, tugging me along, after tossing back one last starfish. He began to head for the comforting familiarity of the twinkling harbor lights, with one last glance at the heaving sea. Then he set his sights towards home, and started walking. Gently, I squeezed his hand, and I followed. ❀

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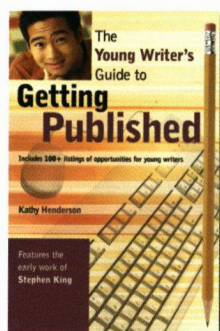
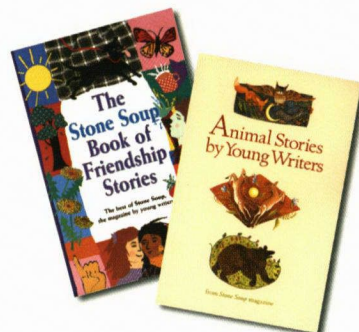
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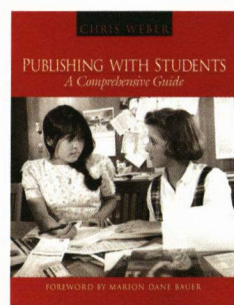
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