

2009 West Virginia Young Writers Anthology

May 2009

Introduction

We proudly present the anthology of the 2009 West Virginia Young Writers contest. It showcases the stories of 23 students who first won in their counties in their age divisions and then won at the state level. These Young Writers represent 19 counties from around the state. Included are the winners of first, second, and third place in each age/grade category, plus the winner of the Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship. In addition to the scholarship winner, six “Honorable Mention” essays are included here as well.

The West Virginia Young Writers Contest has honored good writing by our state’s students in grades one through twelve for 25 years. The contest is an initiative of the West Virginia Department of Education and West Virginia’s writing project sites: NWP@West Virginia University, Central West Virginia Writing Project at Marshall University (South Charleston campus), and Marshall University Writing Project in Huntington which includes satellite site Coalfield Writers. The 2009 contest was co-directed by Barbara Holmes, director of the Central West Virginia Writing Project, and by Terry Reale, coordinator of English and language arts, WVDE.

2009 Credits

WV Young Writers Steering Committee 2009

Terry Reale, WV Department of Education
Dr. Jo Blackwood, University of Charleston
Dr. Paige Carney, University of Charleston
Karen Dillon, Coalfield Writers
Mary Hawkins, Coalfield Writers

Barbara Holmes, MUGC, CWVWP
Paul Epstein, CWVWP
Doug Walters, Community Representative
Carolyn Whitlock, University of Charleston
Patricia Banning, CWVWP

WV Young Writers Judges 2009

Barbara Holmes: MUGC
Patricia Banning: Putnam
Mary Hawkins: Logan
Lou Chafin: Kanawha
Jessica Chafin: Member at Large
Carol Mathis: Kanawha

Travis Vandal: Kanawha
Jennifer Allen: Kanawha
Kelly Rucker: Kanawha
Barbara Lewis: Kanawha
Karen Dillon: Logan

Young Writers Contest and Celebration Day is sponsored by

*West Virginia Department of Education
Marshall University Graduate College
University of Charleston
The Charleston Daily Mail*

Editor of the 2009 Young Writers Anthology: Travis Vandal

Table of Contents

Going Away ~ Joseph Ta.....	5
A Hippo with Hiccups ~ Rachel Cogar.....	9
The Super Inchworm ~ Nicholas DeFelice.....	11
The Seed ~ Payton Litton.....	12
The Pumpkin Man ~ Taylor Griffith.....	13
A Gecko Story ~ Ethen Hayes.....	15
A Mermaid’s Tail ~ Abby Sindledecker.....	17
A Candle of Life ~ Andrew Bohman.....	19
Night Run ~ Sabrina Kay Squires.....	21
An Alien Stole my Homework ~ Kevin Reynolds.....	23
Soups and Spies ~ Shelby Anderson.....	25
Monongah: My Story ~ Derek Prunty.....	29
Nightingale Feathers ~ Janelle Vickers.....	31
The Decision ~ Connie Callison.....	34
The Thief in the Night ~ Miranda Blankenship.....	37
The Businessman ~ Lila Sharpes.....	40
Learning to Fly ~ Kristen Epling.....	44
A Work of Non-Literary Merit ~ Julia Barry.....	48
Chevelle ~ Alex Strampp.....	52
Untitled ~ Zachary Cunningham.....	55
What Does it Mean to be an American? ~ Meghan Pauley.....	58
Mortality’s Defeath ~ Anna Plummer.....	60
How We Were Good ~ Nina Sabak.....	63

Going Away

By Joseph Ta

Capital High School, Kanawha County

Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship Winner

I woke up in my father's rough arms, untiringly carrying me to places I'd never dreamt of going to. My eyes, still foggy, lazily opened to view fresh, real palm trees and sunlight that appeared broken and scattered through the slowly swaying leaves. The air tasted pungent and was full of such different sounds in this strange land! Without sounds of men shrieking bargains on prawns in the street or the smell of fish sauce on every corner, this new place was soaked with the aroma of salt and a rhythmic, incessant crashing in the distance.

I rubbed my tired eyes in hopes of a better look at this quieter world whose solitude was broken only by my father's labored footsteps and dry breathing, loud in my ears and matching the rhythm of the slowly growing crash like cymbals. A rough crust of little grains sprinkled my hands. I looked down to my father's trudging feet, kicking away at the powdery earth—the same stuff on my hands. My curiosity and fascination rose uncontrollably in my throat.

“Ba,” I whispered, afraid to disturb the delicate balance of sound. “Where are we going?” I was answered by an absent silence. I looked up to my father's face to see that his eyes were fixed on something that was not in this world, something I couldn't see. “Ba,” I said firmly, a hint of worry in my voice. My father blinked and focused for seemingly his first time onto our surroundings, surprised by the increasing noise.

“Can you walk?” his voice raspy from a night and day without use. Not needing a reply, he slid my small frame down his thigh; my feet fell into a kind of ground that held my toes in a cold, firm embrace. For the first time, I saw where my father had carried me. We were inside a tunnel of shadowy trees that would tell some ancient secret about their past lives, but were

drowned out by that beating sound. A chilling wind, dancing around dark trunks and through drooping leaves, urged me forward from behind. No bigger than my fist, a blinding light ahead was the source of the crashing.

“Let’s go,” he said, grasping my whole hand in his and pulling. I didn’t remember his hands being so rough before. Each step I took sent a heavy mist of fine powder into the dank air. We walked until the blinding light slowly focused into a small circular portrait of white, sky blue, and the kind of green you find on paintings of the ocean. The ocean! I had only heard of its shining sand, sparkling green water and blossoming sunshine from stories that my grandma had told me. This was that place in the pictures! This place of wispy earth and ancient trees and mysterious water that teased and enticed me to its shifting edge; this place would be the last I would touch of my father’s country—my country.

We waited for hours. My father led me to a small, cramped enclosure to just sit and wait until something would come by. Whether it would come from the expanse of the water or the shadows of the trees behind us, I couldn’t tell. I looked at my father again. He seemed alert, almost skittish, as if the trees would at any moment lift themselves up from the ground, pick us up, and carry us back to wherever we were going from. For the first time in my life, I saw fear in my father’s eyes. It was the kind of fear that when I saw it, I would remember it each time that I was afraid. I began to think about Mother.

For that matter, I tried to think about what exactly had happened to me. I could recall a hushed exchange my parents had had just when sleep was claiming my consciousness and when I would wake, I wouldn’t recognize anything around me.

“Xin loi,” father whispered apologetically. I’m sorry.

“Never take your hands off of him,” Mother said on the verge of tears. “You must promise me that I will see him again, happy and safe.” I didn’t hear anyone speak.

“Yeu thuong” he said after a while. I love you, I love you.

The sun had fallen now. The shadows of the trees had grown to cover the ocean’s already murky depths, melding water and leaf and dark into night. We remained smothered by the heavy darkness, my father watchful, seemingly able to see through the blinding atmosphere; myself, holding his hand limply with the air thickly filling my lungs.

Suddenly, every muscle in my father’s body tensed in clenched anticipation, gripping my hand so tightly, I had to cry out in pain.

“Shh!” He snapped through his solid jaw. I steeled myself to hold back the tears, trying to be brave, trying to be strong. Soon, I saw what worried my father so.

Glowing, floating, approaching, orange orbs of sickly light swayed across the black land. Father pressed my frail body low to the ground as the ghostly wanderers drifted toward the water. Mine and my father’s eyes followed them silently, intently on the now clustering phantoms. They halted at the water’s edge, looking as though they were readying themselves to float across the waves. Now, the orbs sporadically blinked and flashed, a pattern mimicking firecrackers.

Father exhaled a breath that had been waiting to escape for what seemed an eternity. “It’s safe.”

We walked to meet the ghosts, a dirty, broken militia armed with oil lanterns, scraps of cloth, and some rafts. Some faces sullen, others stone, and not a child in the bunch.

“Now we go,” stated a man with eyes brighter than the lamps. Several of the hanging heads nodded in agreement. The rafts were cast and each boarded one, ready to venture the ocean darker than the sky.

On the turbulent water, my father hummed Vietnam's song.

A Hippo with Hiccups

By Rachel Cogar

Gihon Elementary School, Wood County

1st Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

There was once a hippo that had the hiccups. Hippo decided to go to his friend's house to see what he was doing. He knocked on the door and his friend, Tiger, answered.

"What are you doing?" asked Hippo.

"I'm doing my homework," said Tiger.

Hippo took a pencil and said, "Let me help you. Hiccup! Hiccup!"

"You just messed up my homework! Go away, Hippo," said Tiger.

Hippo felt bad, so he decided to visit another friend. He rang the doorbell and his friend, Monkey, answered the door.

"Hi, Hippo," he said. "I'm making a paper airplane."

"Cool!" said Hippo. "Can I see it?"

"Sure," said Monkey. "Why not? It's over here."

Hippo picked up the plane. "Hiccup! Hiccup!"

"Oh! No! You just crushed my airplane. Go away!" said Monkey.

Next, Hippo went to see his friend, Elephant. When he came to the door Hippo asked, "What are you doing?"

"I am playing a game with my sister," said Elephant.

"Can I join the game?" asked Hippo.

"Sure," said Elephant.

"Hiccup! Hiccup!" went Hippo.

The pieces of the game flew everywhere.

"Oh! No! You just ruined our game. Go away!" said Elephant.

Hippo felt so bad that he decided to just go home. He cried all the way, because he had upset his friends. In fact, he cried so much that when he got home he was very, very thirsty. He went into his kitchen and poured a big glass of water. Hippo drank it down as fast as he could.

Guess what! His hiccups went away. Hippo learned some very important things that day. If you have the hiccups, don't go near your friend's projects, and always drink a big glass of water to get rid of them.

The Super Inchworm

By Nicholas DeFelice
Suncrest Primary School, Monongalia County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

Once upon a time there was an inchworm, not just an inchworm, but a super inchworm that lived in the ocean. This is his story.

One beautiful day a bird swooped down and flew away with Inchworm. While crossing the ocean the bird suddenly fainted. Inchworm fell! Luckily he could hold his breath an incredibly long time.

After swimming through many dangerous sea animals, he came upon a pirate ship. The pirates had this sensing thingy-magiger. The captain himself went down and captured Inchworm. They put him in a dirt case. He dug to the bottom and broke free. Inchworm almost got smashed crawling across the deck during a party. He was going off the ship when the captain grabbed him. Inchworm squirmed, popped out, and got away.

Next he came across an enormous, evil crab sent by the pirates. He was bigger than the biggest whale. When the worm swam, the crab kept up easily. Inchworm went up to breathe and hit the bottom of the ship! The pirates were coming down a rope when it! The water went crazy with pirates. The inchworm jumped and grabbed the rope. He climbed, but was captured again.

This time he was put into a wooden crate. He escaped through a crack. He gathered the pirate's captured animals and broke down the door. Inchworm jumped and swam far, far away. He came upon a little boat and started driving. He was a horrible driver because he never had driving school. Inchworm was out of control dodging icebergs when something amazing happened. A huge whale appeared. He'd been sent by Inchworm's mother to find him. He congratulated Inchworm on becoming so powerful and named him Super Inchworm. From then on Inchworm lived in the ocean helping others.

The Seed

By Payton Litton

Summersville Elementary, Nicholas County

3rd Place Winner (Grades 1-2)

Once upon a time there was a tiny seed. The seed wanted to be a flower but it didn't know how. One afternoon the seed met a bee named Andy. Andy seemed smart, so the seed said, "I want to be a flower, but I don't know how."

Andy said, "Let me go get my sister, Abby, so she can help." So Andy buzzed off and got Abby. When they got back, Abby had a shovel and a watering can. Abby asked, "Are you ready?"

Seed said, "Yep!" As they started to dig, along came Jordan, the magical snail.

She asked, "May I help, Andy?"

Abby said, "Oh, sure." They continued to help seed by digging a hole and covering him up with dirt. They watered seed and the magical snail became sunlight to the earth. She sprinkled the glowing sunlight on the ground. As time passed, they went to check on Seed, but they were shocked when they found a beautiful sunflower. It had yellow petals on the back and snow white clumps on the front. They all thought the sunflower was amazing! It was their favorite place to go. They were so happy for Seed on his special journey of becoming a flower.

The Pumpkin Man

By Taylor Griffith

Madison Elementary School, Boone County

1st Place Winner (Grades3-4)

Autumn brings many changes to my small mountain town. The leaves on the trees begin to turn from shades of emerald green to bright magentas and gold. Our mountains look like they are wrapped up for winter in a warm toasty patchwork quilt. It is also the time when the Pumpkin Man arrives at Mr. Wilson's Pumpkin Patch! He arrives just as secretly as old Jack Frost himself.

The Pumpkin Man is quite a sight to see. He towers ten feet into the air. His torso and head are all made out of different size pumpkins and gourds. His mouth, which always wears a smile, is carved from a red pepper. His cauliflower eyes twinkle and seem to follow you wherever you move. His tousled hair is constructed out of cabbage leaves. Ears made out of potatoes are always ready to listen to any child that visits him. Green beans serve as fingers and feel oh so gentle when they brush against your face.

Children from all over my county excitedly await his visit each year. Their laughter when he finally makes his appearance is a very heartwarming sound. Generation after generation, people return each season to have their picture taken with the Pumpkin Man. Stories are told as the pictures are snapped about happy experiences with the Pumpkin Man. Children share their memories of conversations they have had with him. They tell us he whispers a language that only they can hear. He tells them how he runs and plays in the fields with the baby pumpkins when the farmer is asleep. You can hear the children giggle and carry on lengthy conversations with him, telling him all their recent news. It seems as if they are old friends, happy to see each other once again.

Sadly though, after just a few short weeks that warm patchwork quilt that covers our mountains is gone, taking our friend the Pumpkin Man with it. As the families of our mountain town prepare for a long cold winter, they keep warm memories of the Pumpkin Man in their hearts.

A Gecko's Story

By Ethen Hayes

Waverly Elementary School, Wood County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

My name is Rip. If you're a lizard, you have probably heard this story. I am not your average gecko. Although my cousins think I'm crazy, I live in the city. I was a young gecko, just living my life in an old fire station. I enjoyed sneaking into fridges, getting into cupboards, and surfing on spoons in the sink. But one day, I decided to explore my world a little more.

I had almost made it halfway across the rocky road when out of the shadows a gigantic thing about the size of my ancestors came towards me. It was a human boy. As I began to panic, I started to run. I ran face first into an invisible wall. Ouch! I rubbed my sore, bruised nose. This was very, very strange.

After a while I realized that I was in a glass jar. I could see I was being carried by the human boy. Pretty soon the boy placed me in a terrarium. In the terrarium there were two other amphibians. There was one with an unusually short tail. The other one was lava red with big black and orange spots. They were obviously salamanders.

"My name is Heatwave," said the last salamander. "You can stay at my place, if you would like."

"Thank you," I responded.

He led me through a long piece of pipe. Finally, we came to a door. Heatwave pushed the door open. Behind the door was a toy fish skull. As we approached the skull, I noticed the eye sockets were rubies, which acted like windows. As we entered, I felt very tired. I curled up in a corner and fell fast asleep. I was happy to have found a new friend.

"Rip, wake up!" Heatwave yelled. I let out a loud groan. "Come on, Rip, we have to get out of here, now!"

As I looked out the window I saw why Heatwave was scared, there was a fire! We ran through the door and down the pipe. Quickly, we woke the other salamander. We all climbed on top of the pipe and crawled out the top of the terrarium. As we climbed down, we noticed three miniature skateboards on the table. They were just the right size! We rode them down the table legs to make our quick getaway. Heatwave did a nifty! We went through the dog door and crossed the road to the fire station.

As we reached the fire station, we ran through a rat hole. Once inside we explained to the rats what was happening to our home. They agreed to help by chewing through the red alarm wire. Soon the fire siren came on. Wow, I had to admit the alarm was a lot louder than I remembered.

Then out came the fire engine as it rushed to help put out the fire. Our home was safe! What a great escape!

A Mermaid's Tail

By Abby Sindledecker
Maysville Elementary School, Grant County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 3-4)

Once upon a time a girl named Emma was walking along a beach, looking for a place to sit and rest. When she found the perfect place, she stretched out on her back and looked at the clouds. Then she sat up and realized she had three hours until she had to go home for lunch. She decided to go for a swim. She walked out into the ocean until she was up to her chest in water. She dove under.

At first she saw nothing and wasn't very fascinated. But then she saw something colorful and began swimming toward it. What was it? When she got near to it, she realized it was a reef. It wasn't just a normal reef, it was the biggest reef she ever saw, and it was very, very bright.

She swam closer, trying to get a better look. She suddenly felt a strong current pulling her towards it. She tried to swim away, but the current was too strong. It pulled her so close to the reef that she could touch the coral.

She was afraid she would drown from being under the water for so long. Then she realized the coral was now covering her and sucking her down into a hole. She knew she must breathe! She tried taking a deep breath. She felt water all around her so she knew she was still under water. She tried again, just to be sure. She really could breathe! She was so fascinated about breathing under water that she decided to explore.

It was beautiful! There was colorful coral and beautiful fish all around. Then came the most beautiful thing she ever saw. It was a Mermaid with a rainbow tail fin. She couldn't believe her eyes, but as it came closer she realized it was real. Then the mermaid said to her,

“Welcome to my palace.” She couldn’t believe what she was hearing – or was she hearing it?

All her life she thought mermaids were just fairytales, but her mind was changed.

“Are you real?” asked Emma.

“Of course I am, but you must not tell anyone,” said the mermaid. “Never!” said Emma.

“My name is Alisa,” the mermaid said.

“My name is Emma.” “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.”

For the next few hours, Emma and Alisa went to lots of underwater stores. Emma ate new foods and tried on many mermaid tails in all the stores. When she finished, she was swimming with ten shopping bags. Suddenly she saw the most beautiful seashell she had ever seen. It had all the colors of a rainbow and was very sparkly.

She grabbed for it, but it faded away. So did the store! Everything started to fade away, even her shopping bags. She was most upset about her shopping bags. Everything then changed to white, pure white! Now she saw her bedroom. She was in her bed. Suddenly she realized..... It had all been a beautiful dream!

A Candle of Life

By Andrew Bohman

Buckhannon-Upshur Middle School, Upshur County

1st Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

The air was sharp as snow blew and buffeted the dark, shallow cave in the side of a hill by the winter moon. The hill was rough and coarse, with a dark opening that was like the mouth of an animal waiting to crunch down on its prey. Yet through a small crevice a faint light protruded from the darkness around it. A feeble candle burning almost on its last thread shone from inside. Wax bubbled as it trickled little by little down the sides of the vanishing candle, escaping from the hot flame that rested on the wick. The fire swirled and danced as it burned on with the desire to live and be free. Warmth emanated from it, as a small orange glow shimmered from a coal black wick. This candle is a beacon of hope for the lost, a scrap of food for the hungry, warmth in extreme cold.

The candle lit the small, desolate cave, making it completely visible. It was bare and dirty, with ice forming on the damp walls. There were no comfortable amenities. It was completely empty, yet through all this emptiness the candle gave life and filled the chamber with radiance.

Outside, snow beat silently against the ground, cruelly blanketing the pines and browned grass. An unconfirmed howling that would send chills to one's spine pierced the air in the distance: it could be a coyote or the blustery weather.

An old man, who lived his years without regret, shivered in the cold, holding his treasure of life and heat close to his frostbitten body. He was stranded in the harsh wilderness, lost in a frozen world of hatred and frost, astray in a tundra in the northernmost parts of the world. The man had a long, shaggy beard, a weather worn face with deep wrinkles, but a naturally cheery countenance that would make anyone happy. He wore torn clothes, a dirty over-shirt and leather

pants that stretched on his thinning legs. Smiling, he felt the candle by his side. Though the wick burned weak, the fire in his heart raged on. His cold, ice-strewn beard warmed and melted. His chapped and freezing cheeks filled with life again.

The man tried to enjoy his last moments, but the candle's time was limited, and it limited his life. His vision and hearing suddenly enhanced and he felt like he did when the blood of youth flowed strong in his veins. He was strong with a powerful heart, and sounds of laughter rang and echoed through his head. He smiled as memories of his past flashed in his mind. His grandchildren were holding onto his hands while the warmth of the sun beat down upon them. They were laughing and he set his youngest granddaughter upon his shoulders. The green grass shone with the yellow light of the sun beating against it. The breeze was cool and it refreshed his lungs with every rejuvenating breath. These thoughts warmed his heart even more. But then his mind went back to how he stepped into the horse-drawn carriage that would change what little remained of his life, and it sent him back to reality. He was sitting with that candle in his hands in the cold, dark cave again.

Finally, the candle started to flicker its last moments, and silence enveloped the night; even the wind seemed to halt for a moment in time. Tears appeared in the old man's eyes as he realized what was coming. As the light disappeared the old man saw his final breath come from his mouth and vanish before his eyes, and the fiery glow in his heart went out.

NIGHT RUN

By Sabrina Kay Squires
Mussleman Middle School, Berkeley County
2nd Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

The evergreen forest flashed behind her in a green blur as she charged through the pitch black, moonless night, trying to escape the enemy that was now chasing her. She was running, quite literally, for her life. The forest began to thin and widen to reveal a rocky path that led to the mountains. Snowcapped, they reached high into the misty sky as if trying to touch it. Suddenly, the two wolves rushed out of the confines of the forest and into the wide, seemingly endless expanse that was the mountains. Rocks tumbled off the narrow path to the earth below, kicked up by the pounding paws of the wolves.

Black fur created a mask on her features and formed an ebony cloak as if it flowed down her spine and then stopped at the base of her tail, stopped by a pelt of silver. Slender elegant black legs made up for most of her considerably small stature. A small bit of white on the end of her feathery long tail lashed through the air as she ran forward hurriedly. Her body build was lithe, long, and overall, built for speed and agility. Perhaps this was the one advantage over her bulky opponent that rushed at her with snapping jaws, ready to tear flesh open and spill crimson red blood on her coat. She growled and urgently pushed forward, evading him for now.

She did not want to run; it wasn't in her nature to do this, to run like a scared little coward. She wanted to turn around and fight him, hear pained yelps escape his jaws as she raked razor-sharp claws across his side, to make him pay for the troubles he had caused her. However, she knew that she couldn't fight him and win; common sense won the battle over rage and anger. Her chest rose and fell and her breath sent little clouds in the oxygen deprived air of the mountains. The silver wolf struggled for breath and welcomed the frigid cold air that filled her

lungs and turned her throat raw. Gracefully, she sped along the path, taking up long lengths of the ground in single strides.

Her dark blue eyes widened as she saw the earth disappear into the sky, a cliff! She couldn't turn back now, not with him hot on her heels. She had but one choice: to jump. She grimaced as she forced her limbs to move faster, trying to gain the momentum that would allow her to soar safely across to the other side. He too saw the cliff, but he didn't look discouraged, not the least bit, so confident that he could catch up to her before she tried to jump. Panting heavily she took a final elongated stride and leaped. For a moment she was airborne soaring through the air and then colliding with the earth in a cloud of dust. Shaking, she got to her paws and turned to her enemy, forced to come to a screeching halt on the other side. A fearsome snarl ripped from her throat as she shouted to the world, "I've won!"

An Alien Stole My Homework!

By Kevin Reynolds

Sun Valley Elementary, Mercer County

3rd Place Winner (Grades 5-6)

I came into class Friday morning and sat in my chair. Mrs. Albertez called out, “Who has their homework?” Hands went up, but not mine. She came to me and asked, “Where is your homework?” At that moment I answered, “Aliens stole it!” Puzzled she asked, “How did they steal your homework?”

“Well, it all started last night,” I began. “My mom had tucked me in and I was starting to fall asleep. That’s when I heard a CRASH! I jumped out of bed and looked out my window. My mouth dropped open in awe. A spaceship had landed in my front yard.” Mrs. Albertez did not look like she was buying a word of this.

“Next, an alien stepped out and knocked on my front door. My parents were sleeping and my dad was snoring so loudly that they couldn’t hear them knocking. I jumped out of my bed. The alien burst through my front door! I ran to my closet to hide. I heard my door open and the alien came into my room. I saw him through a crack in the door. He was green with small sharp scales and big black eyes. He had stubby little arms and legs. He even had a name tag that said Fred. I wondered what the little green alien was looking for, then he called out, ‘Where is that report?’ I jumped out of the closet yelling, ‘You’ll never get my report!’ I grabbed my backpack and ran out the door with the alien chasing me. He chased me all the way into their spaceship which was sitting right outside our front door! It blasted off with me inside.

Another alien named Marvin was on the ship too, and as hard as I tried to hold onto my backpack, he snatched away my report. ‘Marvin,’ I asked, ‘Why do you want my report?’

Fred replied, 'This is what we do. We are space creatures who enjoy sneaking in at night and stealing little earthlings homework.'

Fred and Marvin turned out to be very nice little green aliens. They took me to Jupiter to see their cloning chambers and even showed me how it worked. You put someone in chamber A, pull the switch and another identify in chamber B appears. They called their cloning station St. Fredricks.

Then they took me back to Mars. We landed and I got to meet their leader, Von Fredricksburger. He welcomed me to their planet and offered me food. Well, at least I think that's what it was supposed to be, but after looking at it I decided I wasn't very hungry.

Before they took me home, Fred and Marvin said they had just one more thing that they wanted to show me. I walked around with them and looked at all the spaceships. All of them were round like a plate or a saucer and had blinking lights all over. Fred and Marvin decided it was time to take me back home. We got back in the spaceship. Finally, we were back on Earth!

Fred and Marvin waved goodbye and I went inside to get some sleep. I woke up at 6:00 a.m. to tell my parents what had happened, but they didn't believe me. My mom mumbled something about too much TV. I shrugged my shoulders and then I left to come to school. Now, here I am in your classroom."

Mrs. Albartz did not buy my excuse. She crossed her arms and asked, "Where's your proof?"

Just then there was a loud crash. Mrs. Albartz's mouth dropped open when she saw that a spaceship had landed on the playground. Fred jumped out of the spaceship and ran up to the window. He said, "We forgot to give this back to you." He handed me my report. "Thanks Fred," I said. I waved goodbye as Fred and Marvin took off for outer space again.

I handed my report to Mrs. Albertz and went back to my seat with a smile. Wonder if she believes in aliens now?

Soup and Spies

By Shelby Anderson

Tucker Valley Middle School, Tucker County

1st Place Winner (Grades 7/8)

Marcy and Kylie rode the fancily decorated elevator downstairs from their small but homely hotel room in Zambia, Africa. The two spies were getting an early start on the “all expense paid” continental breakfast for guests only. The lobby was fairly clear, all except for the lifeless concierge and a burly looking man eating breakfast alone.

The two girls chose an isolated table in the far corner and seated themselves quietly. In a hushed tone, they began discussing the day’s traveling plans. One wrong move and their whole mission, which was to locate and retrieve a stolen ancient Greek scroll, would be set back.

“According to headquarters, we need to head south to Botswana. That’s where the last sightings were,” Kylie said, stabbing a finger at the map in front of them. Marcy, clearly rethinking this idea before deciding, nodded her head slowly. At this, a rather monotonous looking waitress approached the table. She opened her mouth to ask a question, but Marcy cut her short and ordered pancakes and orange juice. As the waitress scribbled something down, Marcy stole a peek at the man across the room.

She noticed that he had extremely crooked, black teeth, an eggplant purple turban, a dirty, scruffy beard, and a few earrings. Overall, his appearance was particularly uninviting. “*We won’t be visiting him any time soon,*” Marcy thought silently. She then noticed something even more peculiar; he was reading a scroll! As this clicked in Marcy’s mind, the man looked up and caught her gaze. Marcy nudged Kylie and motioned for her to look. At first, he appeared shocked, but then, he appeared very anxious. In the blink of an eye, the man was out of his chair and gathering up his belongings, including the scroll. He shoved it in his back pocket and darted out of the room.

“He can’t be up to any good. Let’s follow him,” said Marcy in haste. The two girls rocketed out of their seats and began their pursuit after the mysterious man. The chase led them to a door marked in strange letters, but had a translation under them: ‘Employees Only’. Apparently, the man had disregarded this caveat and had continued up the vast amount of stairs. There was no trace of the man’s presence on the stairs, so they continued cautiously. As they reached the very top, they encountered another door with markings on it. The English translation stated: “Roof.” With great force, the spies pushed the door open. Surprisingly, the man was standing right in front of the open door. He raised a fist, and the girls knew that he had ambushed them. Nobody would hear the screams of the girls on top of a hotel roof.

Kylie acted quickly and ducked. Marcy was not so lucky. She fell to the ground, but she wasn’t out cold. She recovered the blow quickly. With great might, she surprised the man with a sucker punch to the nose. Kylie added onto this attack by elbowing him hard in the throat. He gagged and gasped for air, but the girls were relentless. Marcy jumped onto his back and began choking him further! The man attempted to heave her off, but Marcy’s hair got caught in one of his earrings. Kylie grabbed the strands of hair and freed them with a hard tug. Her force was so great that his earlobe was ripped right off! A howl of pain filled the air.

Marcy took this chance to give him one last blow and grab the scroll out of his back pocket. This last and final whack knocked him out. He was defeated.

“Open it! What’s it say?” Kylie asked anxiously. Marcy obeyed this request and unraveled the parchment. She held it out with both hands and scanned the page. Her expression turned from excitement, to deep disappointment, then to guilt.

“What’s the matter?” Kylie asked, wondering what the reason was for her friend’s dismay. Marcy looked up at her and took a slow, deep breath. She began to read the title aloud,

“Mother Tina’s Recipe for the Perfect Chicken Noodle Soup.” She stopped and slapped her forehead in frustration.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Monongah: My Story”

By Derek Prunty

Monongah Middle School, Marion County

2nd Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

December 6, 1907 came as any day in the tiny, snow covered town of Monongah, West Virginia. Many men and children, most of them foreign from far away countries, awoke that morning to go work in the coal mine. As miners finished breakfast, and wished good-bye to their loved ones, they set out for the coal mine just across the river. This was the day after the Feast of Saint Nicholas, and many miners did not go to the mine that morning; these would be the lucky ones.

As I put my boots on, and packed my lunch pail, my son came running from his room. He told me of a terrible incident that would occur at the mine, and begged me not to go. I assured him that this was only a bad dream, patted him on the shoulder, and left the house at a brisk walk.

I reached the crest of the hill and saw the massive smoke stacks roaring with a thick, dark cloud of smoke. The air had a piercing feeling as it came across my face. Then, a thought jumped into my mind making me stare awed on the top of the hill. A voice behind me said, “Are yaw coming, or you just going to stand here all day?” It was my best friend, Tom. I came out of my trance, and followed him to the entrance of the mine where we retrieved our caps, shovels and pick axes, and headed for the lift.

At the bottom of the shaft, the lift came to an unsteady halt, having plunged us into total darkness. Tom, I, and probably twelve other people turned our head lamps on, and stepped out of the lift. We started our journey into the labyrinth of twisting tunnels, listening to the sound of the lift creak back to the surface to retrieve more miners.

Tom and I met our friend Ricardo, walking back to the lift with an overwhelmed expression on his face. “What’s got into him?” asked Tom. “I dunno,” I said. Just then, my lamp went out. “I’ll be back,” I said annoyed. I went to the supply building to get a new light, but there were none there. So I walked across the bridge to the main building, but just as I had traveled half way, an explosion erupted from behind, throwing me to the ground.

I spun around to see the hillside above the mine collapse. From a far distance, I could hear cries of distress, coming from the town. I ran back to the place where the opening should have been, throwing all my gear to the ground, and began to dig to the helpless miners. As I dug, sweat pouring of my forehead, another explosion occurred just down the river. It felt as though the world was spinning around me, vision spinning in my head.

Tom, my best friend, was trapped inside the mine, along with hundreds more innocent souls. The thought of Tom lying inside the mine gasping for air made me a little sick. Then, about ten feet from where I stood, a man began climbing out of a fox hole, crying and screaming in denial. I held my breath, thinking it might be Tom, but it was only Peter Urban.

That day, over three hundred miners, including Tom, lost their lives in what later would be known as the worst mining disaster in the history of the United States. I retired from mining and began working for a bureau that was formed in 1910, to help create safety laws for mines so that nothing that disastrous would ever happen again. I still go back every year to pay my respects to Tom. The memory of what happened that cold December morning will probably haunt me for the rest of my life.

Nightingale Feathers

By Janelle Vickers

Moundsville Middle School, Marshall County

3rd Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

I could feel the blood pumping through my body as I practiced my solo for the final time in the silent dressing room. The only sound I heard was the slight clank of my Pointe shoes on the hardwood floor, accompanied by my own breathing.

Ever since my mother died when I was three years old, I had been preparing for this night at the Beauchamp Academie de Danse in Paris. My mother, a famous French ballerina, met my American father when she was on tour in the states. He must have been special to her, I guess, because Mother sacrificed her career for marriage. A thousand times, I couldn't help but wonder if she would be pleased with my choice of solo.

Every spring, the older students all chose a ballet to showcase their talent in the Écouter Pretemps, where proud parents and talent scouts alike would congregate to watch poetry in motion. Careers were often made from this one night alone.

Each year, someone always preformed Giselle or Sleeping Beauty, and an unladylike fistfight would erupt over who would dance to Swan Lake. I, on the other hand, chose something completely different, "The Nightingale", a little-known Belarusian tale that I had adored since childhood. The story tells of a poor, ordinary girl with an awe-invoking singing voice, who was offered everything - jewels, property, even marriage – by the king of her land to become his personal singer, to be at his beck and call. She refused, knowing that her freedom was worth more than anything the king could provide her. Furious, the sovereign transformed the girl into a nightingale and locked her in his tower. However, the bars could not hold her; her voice charmed

the ivy that grew around the masonry, and it released her. I admired the spirit of the girl who chose life as a songbird, just so she could be free.

My peers and dance mistresses were shocked at my choice. My mother was a Swan Lake girl, and everyone expected me to be her carbon copy. Even though I never really knew her, I had concluded from stories and pictures of her that we were nothing alike. She was porcelain-skinned and blonde; I, on the other hand, inherited my father's dark skin and curls. My mother was a conventionalist, I, a nonconformist. I continued with my ballet education in the hopes that I would somehow feel closer to and understand more fully the woman I had never know.

As I mused, the time flew. I was making my way backstage through the swarm of conductors, soloists, and corps de ballet, the younger girls with minor parts in some selections, when I suddenly felt a strange calm cleanse me like a soft wash of rain. While other girls were showing clear signs of nausea induced by the seemingly impossible task before them, I felt collected and focused.

I found myself at the center of the darkened stage in an unbelievably short time. As the lights came up and I slid into my first cabriole, I felt something stir within me; I wasn't conscious of the two thousand spectators. All I knew was the sound of the orchestra in the pit below me and the feel of my body as I moved through the dance. No, I did more than move - I floated. I flew on imperceptible wings. From the glissade to the arabesque to my final tour en l'air, I was aware that I had unlocked some part of me that I had never known existed. At the end of my recital, there was a full heartbeat of stunned silence. Then, the theater erupted in thunderous applause. I glanced at the audience for the first time to see them giving me a standing ovation.

I received so many gifts that night that it took me nearly an hour to sort through them. When I got to the card my father sent, I felt a lump in my throat. It read: “Your mother lent you her wings tonight.”

That one evening, that one concert, I finally recognized that I was my mother’s daughter, and that her spirit was always within me. My mother would be a part of me forever, but I was also my own person, free to choose who I wanted to be. That night I had flown on angel wings of nightingale feathers.

The Decision

By Connie Callison

Meadow Bridge High School, Fayette County

1st Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

Snow crunched beneath her fur-lined boots as she walked quickly down the unusually empty city streets. Maura's honey-brown eyes surveyed her surroundings and her warm breath hung in the cold, wintry air. Her speed picked up quickly as more and more of the white flakes fell into her black hair. She was only two blocks from the warmth of her apartment that she was determined to get to before the storm fully attacked. The rhythm of her boots hitting the snow-covered sidewalk was all that kept Maura going now.

She was experiencing a rough couple of weeks, thousands of thoughts were now buzzing in her head. Dozens of situations played out in her head, but none of them seemed to have the result that she was so desperately searching for. What path were you supposed to take when the rules were so unclear? The decision would have been so easy if the two choices were as clear as black and white, but they weren't. In fact, Maura couldn't even narrow down her thoughts to two choices, and the black and white areas in her mind had merged to form one gray confused mess. What could be expected of someone who had been exposed to so much in so little time?

Only three weeks ago, a time that seemed like an eternity now, Maura had begun a job that she had been working towards since she graduated from college. He was such an important man, one of the pillars the struggling city leaned heavily on. To be working for such an essential political figure should have been an honor, and at first, it had seemed like one. Having this experience on her résumé would have given Maura a shot at almost any job she could ever want. She just wasn't aware of how big a sacrifice she would have to make for that experience.

Maura walked faster, and tears started to flood down her face as she approached her apartment. The wind threatened to tear her coat away from her tiny frame as she reached the

steps at the front of her building. She struggled with her key for a minute before the door swung open and the warm air greeted her. If she could make it up to the second floor, she would be home and safe. Then maybe she would be able to make the decisions that were haunting her.

The first few days at work seemed to fly by for Maura. She felt so far behind everyone who seemed to have a perfect place to fit in there. They were all doing exactly what was expected of them to help the man who had saved this city. She wasn't even sure where to begin. Looking back, she had decided that her obsession with fitting in was probably what had caused that first week to seem alright.

Five days in, she had her first "real" conversation with him. Until that point she had been escorted in and out of his office and closely monitored like any guest to such a prominent figure. Finally, she had gained enough respect and trust to talk to him alone. At the time, that had seemed like a good thing. He hadn't been excessively obnoxious the first time he had her alone, just a little awkward and unexpected. She had pushed any doubts out of her mind, convincing herself that she just wasn't used to very affectionate men in the professional world, but in time things got so bad that they couldn't be ignored. He began to call her into his office regularly, always shutting the door behind her. Maura had never even imagined a co-worker flirting with her, much less her boss doing this. Just the thought of him began to make her sick to her stomach, but seeing him out of his office was much worse. She could feel herself tense up and become nervous in his presence, while he acted incredibly nonchalant.

Maura began to dread going to work. The days no longer flew by, but rather the hours seemed to drag on. She didn't want to give up on something she had worked so hard for, but sometimes resigning seemed to be the only logical option she had left. Finally, a plan began to

form in her mind. She would record one of her meetings with him. If anyone heard one of those tapes, there would be no doubt left in their minds that she was being violated as a professional.

Her plan had seemed flawless, but sitting in her apartment now with the tape in her hand, Maura wasn't so sure. Was this really what she wanted to do? A tape like this would most certainly take away any power he had. After talking to everyone else who had worked with him, it seemed like she was the only one that anything had ever happened to. What was so special about her? It would have been so easy for her to have him exposed if it had been anyone else. He had built this city up from next to nothing, and even more than that, he had always been one of her personal political heroes. She couldn't decide if he was a danger to anyone else or if she was the only person he hadn't helped. Could she really take down someone who was the life of this city?

Tears rolling down her face, Maura made the toughest decision of her life. She slowly walked toward her desk and sat down in the hard wooden chair. Her shaking hands reached for her laptop and cracked it open. In one slow movement, she found the mouse and clicked on the icon for a blank document. After reaching for a tissue and wiping her eyes, Maura's quivering fingers settled onto the keys. As her tears started to dry, Maura slowly typed her letter of resignation.

The Thief in the Night

By Miranda Blankenship

Williamson High School, Mingo County

2nd Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

Even though he is in motion, his life will forever remain on pause. He will remain as if a record, stuck on a break in a ridge. He will repeatedly play the very notes which captivated his soul, or in turn devastated his very being beyond repair. His memories have been stolen by a thief in the night, left with half but not the whole record, bits and pieces scattered about.

That thief was sneaky for it still crept through my grandfather's window every now and then just to steal a few more of his records. The thief had claimed many records; he had also claimed so many victims that it was ridiculous. This crook had not only mastered his craft but perfected it, and found pride by instilling fear into the minds of his victims. He was a prime example of thievery at its finest. He was sly and after he claimed a victim, he moved onto the next without delay. The record which told the stories of the long walks that my grandfather and I would take with me high on his shoulders, or the record that held the memory of the up-to-the-waist mud that my grandfather waded through in Normandy of World War II, were no longer a part of his collection. The records he felt proudest of were no longer within his grasp. For these reasons, I hated that thief.

With everything in me, I resented that thief. From the balls of my feet to the crown atop my head, I found hatred in the deepest depths of my soul for the crook. It was because of that thief that my grandfather laid his head on his pillow every night with guilt on his conscious for not remembering his grandchildren. It was because of that pathetic thief that my grandfather went to bed with a sense of emptiness about him that could never be refilled. It was because of that thief that my grandfather no longer reminisced with me about my childhood, let alone

recalled his own. Towards that thief, I found emotions I thought would come later in life. I felt hatred and I felt depression; but also, I found maturity. I found through this life experience that pain will knock on your door, but it's whether or not you embrace it to which it visits again unexpectedly. Without a doubt, pain will return, but by embracing it, you're ready the next time it knocks.

My grandfather and I were quite the pair when his mind was strong and my heart didn't have to deal with the pain of his mind's absence. I would wake him on a Saturday morning with bread in hand and shoes on foot, ready to feed the ducks by the river. We would walk hand in hand to the riverbank, and without delay, he would put me on his shoulders so I could lead him to the ducks. At that instant, I can remember finding myself on top of the world. We would distribute the bread evenly among the ducks, but I would always run out first. He would always say, "Pumpkins, keep in mind that these ducks find themselves more appreciative when they can enjoy their meal. They become "scatter brained" and tense when they have to fight for their bread. Just relax by reflecting on these moments and you won't find yourself in such a rush." Then he would give me half of his bread while also leaving me in amazement.

After every Sunday school, we would often find ourselves lying beneath the clouds, making up stories to go along with their shapes. We would put our arms out to our sides, and look up to the sky for amusement. I would spin alongside my grandfather, and to the cool green earth we would fall. After all of our spinning, we would land with a dizzy new train of thought. I would daydream of a ballerina with her arms stretched, just twirling and dancing as if to recite a story to an audience of one. Often he would tell a story, focusing on the life among the circus of acrobats, clowns, and animals that gathered underneath the big top to perform. Looking back at those moments, I believe he was reunited with his youth; I just wish he could have it back.

My grandfather is still to this day, my best friend. He is my hero, my protector, the very one who never let go of the seat of my bike. He's the one person I can relate to and I find comfort in knowing that. He may not remember me from time to time, and though it may hurt my feelings, I know that no matter what, I'm his "Pumpkin." I know that he will always love me. Even though he is in motion, his life will forever remain on pause. His memory was stolen by a thief, known as Alzheimer, left with half but not the whole record, bits and pieces scattered about.

The Businessman

By Lila Sharpes

Doddridge County High School, Doddridge County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 9-10)

The cabin where the Bakers spent their last year was small, but suitable for their needs. It had one bedroom, a small kitchen and a bathroom that was barely large enough for the cast iron tub that Morgan Baker loved so much. It had no living room so the Bakers spent most of their time in the kitchen where Morgan cooked a wide variety of food including several different casseroles.

The cabin was placed in a large meadow surrounded by tall hills to the north and west. A small winding road passed by the cabin on the eastern side, and in the south was a long rolling pasture that stretched on for miles. The Baker's porch was perfectly positioned for a view of the field, and in the spring, when the snow melted, giving way to green grass and first buds of flowers, the sun illuminated the land in such a way that no words could describe its beauty.

But the cabin wasn't always such a serene place. In the autumn of the year when the trees were shedding their leaves, leaving the branches barren, the ambiance was rather gloomy. In the morning of these days the sun would rise slowly, and by noon there was only enough light to enclose the cabin, leaving the surrounding hills dark and mysterious.

It was during this time that Morgan Baker would go on long hikes in the woods, leaving her husband in the cabin cleaning the dishes from breakfast. And so it went that one day while Morgan was out, Alex Baker heard a loud knock at the door.

"Anyone home?" came a familiar voice from the other side.

He sat down the plate he was drying and proceeded to answer it.

"Yeah, yeah I'm coming." Alex replied.

He opened the door to see the smiling face of Jack Lychen.

“Thought you’d never answer the door. Then again it wouldn’t surprise me for you to just leave a friend standing on the porch.” Jack said with a grin, “Where’d you learn your manners?”

Alex laughed, “My manners? Where’d you learn your patience?”

Jack Lychen was the funeral director of Buffalo County. He and the Bakers had become friends immediately.

“Well, you might as well sit down.” Alex said, motioning to the chairs on the porch.

“It’s a nice day.” Jack commented, taking a cigarette out and lighting it. He blew out the match. Alex nodded in agreement.

“Morgan here?” Jack asked puzzled.

“No.” Alex replied, “She’s up at the waterfall.” He looked away to hide the tear forming in his left eye.

“That’s a dangerous place. What’s she doing up there?”

Alex blinked, “She goes up there to think.”

“Bout what?” Jack asked.

“Different things. She’s going through a lot right now. Autumn is always a hard time for her.” There was a pause between them.

“I worry about her,” Alex said solemnly. “I just hope she doesn’t do something she’ll regret.”

Jack didn’t reply. He looked away into the sun, his eyes shining with a hungry look not unlike that of a famished hyena. They sat talking for a while until finally, looking at his watch, Jack said, “Well I’ve gotta be heading out.” He waved goodbye to Alex as he pulled out of the

driveway, but he wasn't planning to go home. He drove down the road a few miles, just out of sight of the cabin. There he parked his car on the side of the road and got out.

There was a path near the road that he knew well. He followed the path up the side of the hill until he reached the apex. As he approached the waterfall at the summit he saw the familiar figure of Morgan Baker silhouetted against the trees. He approached her slowly, but when his foot snapped a stick Morgan turned towards him. Her tears sparkled in the sun.

"Jack?" She said confused.

"Morgan?" he tried to act surprised to see her.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, walking towards her.

"I'm just thinking."

"What about?" he asked. "Are you alright Morgan?"

"No...Jack I'm not." She wiped a tear from her eye. He waited for her to continue.

"This is where my daughter died, you know." She proceeded, "We were out for a walk and she wanted to see the falls. I looked away for a second and she fell over the edge. She was too close to the edge, and she fell over."

She started to sob uncontrollably.

"I'm so sorry Morgan. I had no idea," Jack said, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"Thanks Jack," she said trying to compose herself. "Why are you here anyway?"

He removed his hand.

"I...just..." he stammered, "I don't know. Business has been so slow. Non-existent actually. I've just been throwing around the idea of..."

"Idea of what?" Morgan asked. Jack looked down.

“Suicide,” he mumbled. “I know it’s cowardly, but business is so slow that I’m practically broke.”

“It’s not cowardly. I’ve been having similar thoughts. That’s actually why I’m here.”

Jack Lychen turned away from Morgan. He smiled a selfish, hungry smile.

“Maybe,” he said, “Maybe we should jump...together.”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Well I do Morgan,” Jack argued. “Isn’t it obvious that this is why we’re both here at the same time? Doesn’t it seem strange to you that two people debating suicide would end up at the same place?”

“You really think so?” Morgan asked.

“I really do.”

“Alright then,” Morgan said. “On three.”

“On three,” Jack agreed.

They counted together, “One...two...three.”

And there, on a breezy autumn day in Buffalo County, Morgan Baker jumped to her death.

Jack Lychen stood there laughing quietly to himself.

“Well,” he said, “Looks like I’m back in business.”

Learning to Fly
By Kristen Epling
Matewan High School, Mingo County
1st Place (Grades 11-12)
Honorable Mention Recipient
2009 Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship

It's raining. Not a downpour—just a light drizzle, a foggy rain that makes the whole world a bit sad. On days like this, I still think of her, remembering the minute details of her face, her aroma, the way I felt when she held me. Wet, cloudy days are when I feel she's with me the most. I think about how she, my mother, my best friend, changed me, in some ways for the better; in some ways for the worse. Every nuance I picked up from years of closely observing her every move seems to stick with me, her mannerisms becoming my own. I'm not sure whether it was her actions that impacted the core of my being or if it were the questions she left unanswered. However, the mere fact that she was in my life has made me a better person for many reasons. Some, I cannot explain. Others, I do not know yet, but as I grow older, I am fully becoming aware of the impact of her presence.

I clearly remember riding in her old, beat up white Honda, surrounded by the hazy smell of Marlboro Lights, hairspray, and vanilla, a mixture so etched into my sense, I can smell it now. Sound of the early 1990's blast from the radio as my fun-loving mother drums on the steering wheel as though it were her instrument and sings to the road as if it were her audience. Her thick deep red, curly hair sat perched in an untamed ball atop her small head as her large, mischievous brown eyes smiled down at me from under a veil of thick eyelashes. I wanted to be just like her.

However, I was young and naïve, firmly believing that Mom was exactly as I saw her: a princess stuck in a chaotic world to which she never belonged. You see, my mother never quite grew up. The role of adult, with its jobs and payments, responsibilities and aggravations was

something she never understood; I'm not sure she ever really tried. She was never emotionally capable of being a mother and really did not want to be one. Looking back, I realize that she was capable only of being my friend, sharing her mistakes while encouraging me not to repeat them. We had many mature conversations in the Honda. It was here at an early age I learned the secrets of the world.

As I grew older, the childlike veil through which I saw my mother began to disappear. I resented being left at random houses for days without clothes or food, not knowing where my mother was. Why it was so hard for her to take care of us as other mothers took care of their children?

Once, I vividly remember being dragged up Peterfork Hollow. Having no one to keep me, my mother was forced to take me to the center of her addictions. Too young to understand at the time, I nonetheless could sense the urgency, the need in her actions. "Stay in the car," she demanded.

"But, Mom, it's cold, it's dark. I'm really scared!" I pleaded.

"Get out and come on then," she muttered indifferently. Stepping from the car, I looked up at the beautiful array of diamonds sparkling rhythmically in black velvet draped across the heavens. We trudged up a set of old wooden steps into a crowded, dingy trailer smelling strongly of cigarettes and something I could not identify. I plopped on an old flowered couch while she disappeared into a back bedroom. Hours later, I was awakened by a woman who resembled my mother but could not have been her, one who pulled me up by the arm and forced me out the broken door. Something was different, something was cold about her. She yelled at me to get in the car, though my gut instinct told me to stay exactly where I was. I did as I was told, however, and soon realized my mistake. She drove erratically as if she could not see at all,

swerving, hitting ditches, and crossing yellow lines. Terrified and confused, I did not understand her sudden change and rash behavior. Then we simply crashed. Gone were my child's eyes, replaced by those of an adult who decided never to follow my mother's rules or those of any other authority figure ever again. I had to trust my gut instincts.

Although succumbing to her addictions, my mother was a beautiful, caring woman with a heart of gold. She loved her children; even today, I do not doubt that fact, but something bigger controlled her life. I'm not sure she had the strength to stand up and stop it completely, though she tried.

My happiest memories are at Dewey Lake. Mom loved the lake, with its deep blue skies mirrored in the waters below. Here, she was happy, playing games, laughing, splashing, and enjoying being together. Dewey Lake is the place I can remember really feeling like a child, skimming across the water as warm air patted my face and pushed tears out the sides of my eyes. Mom would sit crossed-legged at the very front of the boat, hair up, eyes closed, arms spread, as if she were flying. With her glistening brown skin, auburn curls flying, I always thought she looked like an angel, the definition of freedom; however, I knew then that I never wanted anything to control my life the way substances controlled hers. I wanted to live as I saw her before me. I vowed that my children would always be taken care of first and foremost and that they would love me the way I loved her right then. Looking back, I think I had an epiphany that my mother would not spend many days upon this Earth because no one, other than me, could understand her.

One warm spring day, a few years ago, my mother disappeared. She simply ceased to exist. Her loved ones searched for three long, excruciating months before finding her remains buried carelessly in a shallow grave up one of the many hollows that wind through West

Virginia's mountains. I am puzzled how someone could effortlessly, selfishly take the only person I ever remember loving. Later, I learned that at the time of her death, she had tried to ask forgiveness for things she regretted, one final attempt at heroism that tragically led to her senseless, brutal death.

In the twisted irony of it all, I know my mother was never content being simply human. She wanted to spread her wings and fly into the wind. Somewhere deep in my spirit, I know that's exactly what she's doing. Never perfect, my mother spent years trying to correct her mistakes, to right the wrongs she had selfishly committed. At her best and at her worst, my mother single-handedly made me the person I am today. Her short life was not lived in vain. I have discovered that holding on to secrets about who I am and where I come from is toxic. I know that keeping secrets could kill me, just as keeping secrets killed her. Only by admitting my wrongs and trying to make amends do I gain the strength to survive.

A Work of Non-Literary Merit

By Julia Barry

Hampshire High School, Hampshire County

2nd Place (Grades 11-12)

Honorable Mention Recipient

2009 Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship

Through the insistent efforts of my English teachers, it has come to my attention that some writings possess “literary merit.” I am not sure of the exact definition of “literary merit,” but by reading—against my will—so called examples of this mysterious quality, I have formulated a hypothesis as to what it actually is. My grand theory is that “literary merit” is a feature of certain pieces of “great” literature that make reading them an endurance test of mental pain thresholds.

Prior to discussing the content of books of literary merit, I must say that they offend me before I even consider their substance with how they look, the way they sound when opened, and their incomprehensible syntax. First, most prints of these books have strangely unattractive covers. Be it the squash and pumpkin color blend surrounding bristly, ugly little pig heads on *Animal Farm*, or the violent red providing a backdrop for an unsettling German Expressionist painting on *The Metamorphosis*, these covers are like glossy poison dart frogs warning you away from imminent pain and death. When these books are opened, their rigid spines crackle restlessly, as if reluctant to expose their pages’ contents to criticism. The pages themselves shuffle stiffly, their edges brownish yellow and rippled. Whether this is caused by age and disuse, or toilet water from unsuccessful attempts to flush them, I don’t hazard a guess. After the complete sensory displeasure that these books cause, you’d think that English teachers wouldn’t go so far as to make us read them, but they do. Here is where the suffering truly begins. The reader must fight through pages of paragraph-long sentences written in the dialect of centuries

past. Occasionally, pages fused together by the drool of a previous victim, or possibly toilet water, must be forced apart. By the end of this maddening effort to find the end of a sentence and separate stubbornly stuck pages, the reader is traumatized. In fact I feel that studying works of literary merit in English classes may be responsible for the “emo” movement of the twenty-first century.

For those of you not familiar with the term “emo,” it is used to define a sector of today’s youth. Emo kids favor black clothing, facial piercings, and strangely colored hair. They often sit in the dark corners of the cafeteria listening to loud music involving a lot of screaming. I used to think that emo individuals were just sensitive types trying to express their feelings. Now I suspect they’re reacting to being forced to read works of literary merit and have found that painful piercings of their body parts help distract them from the more painful act of reading a work like *Macbeth*. I do believe that these people have the right idea for dealing with post-literary merit distress. I have resolved to join them in their corners and stick a safety pin through my eyebrow. There’s really no other recourse after reading this literature.

The frightening thing is that it’s not just high schoolers being traumatized to the point of needing Prozac. Small children are also exposed to literary merit. Who doesn’t remember the tale of *Black Beauty*? This book tries to teach lessons in kindness through multiple painful deaths and horrendous animal cruelty. After being forced to read this I couldn’t look at a black horse for several years without crying. In middle school, youngsters are treated to the tortured orphans of *Oliver Twist*. The children in the story are bullied and abused and one character ends up strangled. “Please sir,” I’d like some more psychotherapy and antidepressants.

As we students age, the death toll in books of literary merit increases. Witness *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s much admired work which is taught in many high school classes. In five acts,

employing a horrific mix of swords and poison, Shakespeare adroitly kills off the entire royal family of Denmark. In yet another of Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet*, the separated and desperate lovers must watch their feuding families try to kill each other. Not surprisingly, numerous characters in this tragedy, including young Romeo and Juliet, are murdered or commit suicide. *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* it isn't!

Now let's consider Orwell's cheery little novella *Animal Farm*. The pigs found in these pages are unlike the sweet Wilbur of *Charlotte's Web*. No, these are power-hungry, murdering porkers. They enslave their fellow animals, and just when I had gotten over *Black Beauty*, they send the poor old workhorse, Boxer, to the glue factory to be made into some quality Elmer's.

Literary merit must also be acknowledged in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. While I could tell you that lots of people die gruesomely, and the entire reading experience is akin to simultaneously getting a root canal and passing a kidney stone, I feel that enough conclusions about content can be drawn from its title.

A lesser known work of literary merit is Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." This tale examines the wretched life of Gregor Samsa. One morning after years of slaving to support his ungrateful family, Gregor awakens to find that he has transformed into a giant, roach-like insect. That's rock bottom, right? No, that comes at the end of the story when Gregor dies from the combined effects of starvation and an infected wound inflicted by Gregor's own father.

Why do English teachers make us read these dark, depressing works of literary merit? I've just had an epiphany: perhaps English teachers don't make students read works of literary merit to torture them. Maybe they make us read them to help us realize how much bloody worse our lives could be. No matter how bad my life gets, my and my boyfriend's families aren't engaged in a fatal feud (yet), the only pigs in my home will be the bacon on my breakfast plate,

and—on any given morning—I won't wake up as a colossal cockroach. Hold the Prozac and the safety pin—I'm feeling better already!

Chevelle

By Alex Strampp

Bridgeport High School, Marion County
3rd Place Winner (Grades 11-12)

The engine snarled as I cruised up to the stop light. The low thumping of the idle 454 pulsed through my entire body. The clean pure smell of sheet metal mixed with that of gasoline and incinerated rubber. The sweet combination of smells permeated the driving compartment. I couldn't help but smile. I was sitting in a dream, literally my dream.

The clean sinuous lines of the car evoked images of a wild animal poised for the kill. This sculpted sheet metal was bathed, no kissed with a black so deep it rivaled the oceans. The chrome trim felt like the sun had somehow made into long pieces of metal and attached with a jewelers precision to the sides of the car. The car was so perfect in every way that it couldn't have been made by mortal hands and yet, by some miracle, I had made it.

The light turned green. I gingerly touched the gas. The car surged forward with the strength and sound of 900 horses straining at the reins. I blinked and almost missed the next stop light. I hit the brakes. Immediately the four six piston brake calipers bit down on the polished slotted brake rotors. The once slack race harness immediately grew tight against my chest and shoulders as I flew forward from the force of the sudden and abrupt stop. I laughed uncontrollably, nothing this much fun could possibly be legal. The light changed and I set off once more with equal parts deafening roar and molten rubber. I had to get out of the city, to escape the short, regulated streets that had become choked with an endless sea of drones. I had to escape the people floating through life never aspiring, never challenging anything, never asking why. They just did what they were told from the day they could understand the language to the day they died. These people are so afraid of failure that they never did anything at all. Not me.

When I get behind the wheel of this vintage piece of iron that is what I'm saying, not me. I won't give up on a dream because it's hard or because it might not work, no I charge full speed ahead into it and hope for the best. People ask me why. Why did you put such a large engine in it, you don't get the mileage that you get from something smaller? Why did you waste so much time fixing something so old and out of date when you can buy a new car and save the trouble? Why did you make the tires so big, why did you do this, why did you do that, why, why, why, why! Why not! People forget that just because it's not the norm doesn't mean it won't work or shouldn't be done. The point of restoring a car is not simply to drive an old car, it is to express yourself with a two ton, 800 horsepower statement. A statement that says, "Hello world, wanna race?"

As I thought about all these lofty ideals I noticed that the brick and concrete jungle had given way to a lush green blur of trees and foliage. I was free, for a short time however, from the rest of the world. I mashed the pedal to the floor and let the supercharged engine breath deep. The entire car torqued to the right as the power was sent to the ten inch wide Mickey Thompson racing slicks. The world seemed to disintegrate around me as I sped ever faster toward my unknowable destination. I could not possibly know where I would end up but I knew two things for sure. It would be far away from the city, and I would get there fast.

Day turned into night as the sun set into a bloody sky. The distortion of the heat coming off the hood warped the very sky I looked into. The yellow lines of the road extended forever into the surrendering sun. Night fell swiftly; I assumed it fell silently for the roar of the engine drowned out anything else. There was nothing, nothing around to disturb the brilliance of the stars ahead of me. It was as though a great black veil had been draped over the world then pierced with the most brilliant light. The weight of what I was seeing was so overwhelming it

compelled me to pull over. I sat on the hood, staring, simply staring. I slept under these lances of light. I slept a deep contented sleep, free of any dreams or distractions. The reason for the absence of any visions of faraway places or exotic settings was simple, I was living it.

I awoke to the damp cool air of a lazy morning. The perfect serenity was enough to evoke the slightest pity when I fired the engine and shattered it forever. I drove on, eventually the road led unstoppably to a place. In this particular case, a town. I almost felt bad as the idle of the engine reverberated off of the ancient brick and mortar of the ancient town. When I shut the Chevelle down I looked around and I was immersed once again into the quiet stillness of the morning. I fueled the engine, checked the oil, and picked up some sandwiches for later. When the convenience store clerk asked where I was headed I shrugged indifferently and left, the little bell marked my exit with a little chime.

Back on the road, the sound of metal vibrating inside the cabin was music to my ears as I continued to chase the sun. The road continued for infinity as I raced the clouds and leaves and sky itself to oblivion. Then the scenery once again changed. The dark greens and browns of the woods evaporated into the soft yellow of vast fields of grass. I wanted to continue forever, sailing unendingly forward on the asphalt waves. Alas the limitations of time forbade this.

Eventually earth would once again claim my body, rust would claim the car and the roads would return to the land it was built upon. But not today, today I would live more in a quarter mile stretch than most lived in a life time. Today I would do my best to find the end of the never ending roads. Today I would drive.

Untitled

By Zachary Cunningham

Barbour County

Honorable Mention Recipient

2009 Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship

Straining to reach the last piece of firewood, I finally gave up and jumped into the back of the truck to get it. My two friends, Jordan and Zac, and I were unloading our camping gear in the middle of the mountain field. We had finally convinced our mothers that we were mature enough to handle a fishing trip without adult supervision. Jordan and Zac were struggling to put up the tent. Of course, we didn't need to look at the directions. Directions were for women. I was unpacking the food and firewood and arranging our fishing gear.

"Dude, I am so pumped. I can't wait to get out on the river tomorrow and show you guys who's the best," I shouted across the field. Of course, each of us argued that we would catch the biggest trout, so we made a little wager. I was definitely the best fisherman of the group. I could tie lures around Jordan and Zac, and they knew it.

After several hours, a few minor mishaps with the tent, and one closely avoided punch in the face, we had camp set up and were ready to "catch" a few hours of sleep. Five a.m. comes early, and even though I love to fish, I would have liked a few more hours of sleep. But I, like every good fisherman, know that you have to get up early if you want to catch "the big one."

Being the master chef that I am, I cooked breakfast over the fire. I couldn't help but get that excited feeling in my stomach - you know the one reserved for that giant fish, or that trophy buck, or maybe even that special girl, although I was yet to find that last one. After breakfast, we put on our waders, grabbed our poles, and began our hike to Five Mile Island. Five Mile Island is my favorite fishing hole. It's about an hour long hike through the woods to reach it, but the

twenty inch trout I caught there last summer convinced Jordan, Zac, and myself that the hike was worth our time and effort.

Finally, we reached the river and crossed over to Five Mile Island. We walked around the little island for a while before settling on a rock ledge about fifteen feet out into the river. We spread out and cast our lines. Each of us kept quiet, focusing on the morning, the river and the fish. We stayed on the ledge for about two hours, but we weren't having much luck. I'd caught a couple of red eyes, and Jordan and Zac each had nabbed a small trout. We decided to move around to the other side of the island where the current was a little stronger. We figured if we could cast down below the rapids that we might be able to catch some native brook trout, which prefer the cold water rushing down off the mountains.

We slowly made our way to our new spot. We were trying to move quietly and slowly so that if there were fish down there we wouldn't scare them away. I was leading the way, and there appeared to be a rock ledge that ran about ten feet out from where we were walking. I slowly made my way out when I suddenly felt myself slipping. I dropped my pole and tried to regain balance, but I felt myself slip under the icy water.

Instantly, I was filled with panic. I knew that I had to get my waders off, and if I didn't the water that rushed into them when I fell would weigh me down and hold me under. I tried to keep calm and find something I could cling to in order to pull myself above water, but my lungs started burning. I felt myself losing strength. My head was hurting, and I didn't want to fight the water anymore.

Just when I had unbuckled my straps and had given up hope, I felt something grab me. My mind was fuzzy, but it felt like someone was grabbing for my shoulders. Suddenly, I was

above the water, and I could faintly see the chest waders I had been wearing floating down the river. I felt myself being pulled toward the shore.

I gasped for air as I crawled onto dry land. I looked around, and there stood Jordan and Zac, soaking wet. I could see fishing gear and waders thrown all over the shore. They told me that as soon as they saw me go under, they headed after me, but the current was traveling pretty fast. In the final seconds, when I was ready to give into the blackness, they had pulled me out of the water and dragged me onto the shore.

We made our way back to camp. Our long, hoped for fishing trip suddenly didn't seem as fun. We were cold, wet and tired, and when someone just barely evades death, it kind of ruins the fun. We headed home.

I may have held the title of best fisherman, but you have to give them credit for saving me. Maybe they are better fishermen than I give them credit for, because they fished me out of the water, risking their own lives to do so. Maybe I take back what I said about tying lures around them.

What Does it Mean to be an American?

By Meghan Pauley

Boone County

Honorable Mention Recipient

2009 Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship

Every morning, I wake up to the sound of my alarm, which I set myself for whatever time I choose. After hitting snooze a few times, I step out of bed and walk into my bathroom to brush my teeth and shower, using as much clean water as I desire. I then proceed to my room to continue getting ready, where I dress myself in the garments that I feel best express my opinions, style, and personality. Once my preparation is complete, I am ready to get into my car and drive.

Every aspect of my life revolves around being an American. In my life, being an American means having choices. God intended humans to have free will and the United States honors that wish. I am granted the freedom to choose what time I wake each morning. We have immediate, abundant, clean water in America, and there is no regulating how much I can use. I am not required to cover my face before I step outside; in fact, I can dress however I like. All these choices, all these freedoms, are something found only in America. No other country allows its citizens to live as independently as the United States.

Every day, I drive ten minutes from my house to my school. For students who cannot drive, the government provides free transportation. I receive a government-funded education that is costless to my family. School begins at approximately eight o'clock in the morning and dismisses at exactly two forty-five in the afternoon, every Monday through Friday. Before classes start, the school offers breakfast for its students. At midday, students are offered lunch. If any student is unable to afford the costs of breakfast and lunch, our government covers the costs, insuring each student two free meals each day. I am educated on core subjects such as reading,

English, and math, but I also attend classes of a more complex nature, such as psychology, sociology, chemistry, and foreign language. Excluding the required core classes, I choose which classes I attend each year.

After high school, my mother attended college only for a brief amount of time, where she earned no certificate or degree. Conversely, my father attended a university and earned two Master's degrees. Yet, unlike in other countries, my parents' successes do not determine my future. I decide if I attend college. I decide which institution, I decide what classes I take and I decide my major. In other countries, citizens' futures are determined for them by the government. In this country, we choose.

I do not live in fear of the American government, but in appreciation and awe. This nation is experiencing a transition of executive power. The transition occurs not because of a government overthrow or the death of a dynasty, but simply because of national policy and regulation. The current President's time in office has expired, and for the first time in United States history, the people of this country chose a minority to replace him. We will be witness to possibly the most controversial executive transition in history, and yet this transition is always completely peacefully.

As Jimmy Carter once said, "America did not invent human rights. In a very real sense, human rights invented America." I awake each morning and lay my head to rest each night with the satisfaction of knowing my life is what I choose to make of it. Who I am is solely up to me. Knowing that my future is truly in my own hands, I feel an immeasurable amount of love for this country. Appreciating and acting on our right to choose: that is the defining quality of an American.

Mortality's Defeat

By Anna Plummer

Oak Glen High School, Hancock County

Honorable Mention Recipient

2009 Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship

When my mother called early in the morning to say that she'd be working a little later than usual, I knew right away that she was lying. I don't know how I knew for sure, but I did. Instead of confronting her then, however, I let her think that she had fooled me and passed the lie on to my brother as if I believed it without a single doubt.

The night before this particular morning, I had visited my grandfather, who had been sick for the past two years. Looking into his eyes as he lay helplessly in the nursing home bed, I knew instinctively that this would be the last time I saw him. It was obvious that mortality had claimed another victory. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I comforted him and told him that everything was going to be alright. Although, theoretically, he couldn't comprehend what I was saying, I knew that deep down, he understood every word of solace that I murmured to him. He knew, down in his very core, that this was the end of his life on earth, that he'd be starting a new journey that we, his family, couldn't accompany him on just yet.

When I returned from school that afternoon, my mother still wasn't home. The empty garage further proved that I had been right this morning. My father informed my brothers and me that my grandfather had died early that morning. The news didn't surprise me in the least, but it still weighed on my heart.

Over the next few days, the phone rang more than usual, and dear friends visited us to offer us comforting words and help with anything we may have needed. For the next two evenings, I greeted relatives and family friends that I didn't know very well as they came to pay

respects to the great man that I had affectionately called my pap over the years. Seeing him lying in the blue casket, I knew he was finally at peace, but this knowledge did little to ease the pain in my heart as I digested the fact that I would never hear him speak again, never be lovingly teased by him or listen to him tell stories of his youth.

Though my cousin sobbed beside me, I was able to keep my composure during the funeral as the song “I Can Only Imagine” was played, along with “Over the Rainbow.” I smiled when my great uncle spoke at the podium about how he and my grandfather used to go on fishing trips, how if anyone needed anything, he only had to call Bill, and my pap would be there.

When the day ended, we all were exhausted. After visiting the cemetery for a second time, we went home and reflected on the day’s events and my grandfather’s long successful life.

Later the next day, while I was reading the list of names of those who had come to the funeral home to express their condolences, many of whom I didn’t know, a sudden realization hit me. Many people measure the successfulness of a person’s life by financial and social status. However, this is not how a deceased person is remembered. A person’s mark on the world is made eternal by how much he loved and was loved in return.

My grandfather was certainly not rich. Nor was his name well-known for his position in society. The people who came to the funeral home didn’t come because he had much power in life. They came because they loved him dearly, and he loved them in return. Every one of the mass of callers had fond memories of my grandfather to share with the family.

It was during this epiphany that I learned an important lesson in life. The true value of a man is not determined by how much he has in his pocket, nor by how high he is on the social totem pole. Rather, his worth is measured by the love he unselfishly gives away and by the love

that is willingly reciprocated. In this respect, my grandfather was genuinely rich. In this respect, the inheritance split among his children and grandchildren is worth more than a chest of pure gold. And in this respect, he will live forever in our minds and hearts. Truly, in this case, he conquered mortality.

How We Were Good

By Nina Sabak

Fairmont Senior High School, Marion County

Honorable Mention Recipient

2009 Barbara W. Walters Memorial College Scholarship

We sing songs about the suburbs. We tell stories about our childhoods, back when our childhoods were full of stories. We do not falter, do not make mistakes, do not pause between *Once upon* and *ever after*.

We believe in happy endings.

When we were small, our parents bathed us in soapy water and sent toy boats free to float around the tub's perimeter. *Alice fell down the drain*, our mothers whispered and we made glugging noises, noses wrinkled in laughter. No drain or grate or chasm would ever claim us because we were small and loved and so much bigger than the universe. The world needed us just like it needed Lassie and Spider-Man, Captain America swooping in from off-screen to save the day like always. These things were true. Other things we held to be true:

1. It is important to talk to God every night, sometimes in the afternoon if you feel lonely.
2. Everybody secretly lives forever, but they pretend to get old anyway.
3. If you run fast enough, nothing can ever catch you.

We dreamed about running. Maybe someday we could run around the entire world, heels splashing in the Atlantic Ocean and slapping against the mountains of Peru, which was a place where they didn't have nice things the way we did. If you went as fast as anybody ever could, you'd leave a trail of fire behind you, just like in the Roadrunner cartoons, and everybody would know you'd been there.

We wanted everybody to know we'd been there, but this seemed another given. So we expanded our list.

4. You will be famous one day if you want to be, and everyone will remember you forever.

Sometimes our mothers cried and we pretended not to see. When we were sad, we bawled, mouths opened ugly and wide to the sky above and shoulders heaving, and then we were better. Adults cried behind spread palms and hunched shoulders, pretending that their eyes were just leaking or that they were invisible. We didn't understand this. If you were sad, wouldn't you want to be comforted?

Other days, our fathers came home late and kicked off their shiny shoes so the leather went flying toe-first towards the closet wall. I'm home, they bellowed, waiting for us to come running out of somewhere, diving for a hug. "Well, hey there champ," they said, grinning on one side of their mouths, "Didn't know you missed me so much." And then they would lumber into the dining room where our mothers sat reading the newspaper, or maybe a textbook, a glossy magazine, and kiss them quick and loud on the side of the cheek. Until we were much older, we didn't realize there was another way to kiss.

Hi, our fathers said, and our mothers said hi back quietly, flipping a page. In the kitchen, a roast congealed and vegetables went cold and limp. "You're late," they said, "half an hour late, and we've been sitting here starving all that time."

"Don't exaggerate," our fathers said, and we stepped on the floorboards gently on our way out, the way we'd learned long ago, not a single creak to be heard under our feet.

Most days, we had dinner past seven-thirty, our red-eyed mothers passing us rice in a pale pink bowl. Our fathers sat at the head of the table, our mothers at the foot, and we lorded over the long stretch bequeathed to us.

“You know I love you,” our mothers said when they tucked us in under flannel sheets. “More than anybody.”

“More than Dad?”

“You know that’s different,” they said, which meant they didn’t want think about it.

We kept secrets inside our dressers, boxes of army men and farm animals that we brought out as our piece de resistance during neighborhood games. Other people kept secrets inside their skin. We sang songs about going home and being young before we understood the words, and then after because we thought they were funny. Our parents liked us to perform for them on the nights when everyone was smiling, and so we did, our hands thrown up to the sky at the end of every number like the kings and queens of showbiz. “Oh, isn’t that funny,” our mothers said, hugging our fathers’ arms close. “Where on Earth did you pick that up, you smart thing?”

We sang songs about the suburbs, made up different childhoods, and we always closed with love songs to make our mothers smile. We heard our own voices in the quiet evening air like flutes or knives, high and clear, and we watched for the moment our fathers would nod. It’s Friday, I’m in love, we sang, not knowing yet just what a liability love could be.

<http://www.nwp.org>