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The editor of **The Writers' Slate** invites original, creative and expository writing by students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The editor also invites submissions of book reviews of children's or young adult literature, written by students. Educators are also encouraged to submit article ideas for consideration.

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Shelly McNerney  
Editor

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## Author Interview: L.D. Harkrader



Ms. Harkrader attended the fourteenth annual Literature Festival in Lawrence, Kansas in October of 2007. Her latest novel, [Airball: My Life in Briefs](#) focuses on a junior high boy's search for his absent, and possibly famous, father. Ms. Harkrader was kind enough to answer some questions for our readers, via email, this spring.

**I really enjoyed reading [Airball](#) and I know this is the first young adult novel that you have published. Is this the first time you have written a novel length piece?**

[Airball](#) is actually my twelfth book. I've written several nonfiction books, on subjects ranging from the Civil War to Cuba to endangered orangutans. I also was a ghostwriter for the [Animorphs](#) series, a middle-grade science fiction/adventure series that was very popular in the 1990s and early 2000s. As a ghostwriter, I didn't get my name on the cover of the books I wrote (numbers 44, 49, and 51 in the series, in case anyone is interested!) but I did have a lot of fun and learned quite a bit about writing novels.

**What other types of writing had you done before this novel?**

When I first started writing seriously in the 1990s, I began with short stories. I've published probably 200 stories for all ages of kids, from the very young though upper middle grade.

**I read on your website that you would sometimes write at the Kansas University student union. How did that particular atmosphere help you get "in the mood" to write [Airball](#)?**

I write in a lot of different places. I get bored with my own company day after day, so I take my laptop somewhere out in public—coffee shops, bookstores, the mall, and yes, even the student union—and work where there are lots of people and I don't have to feel so cut off from civilization. The general buzz and hubbub around me seems to give the writing more energy. And of course, since most of the final scenes of Airball take place at Kansas University, it was helpful to actually go there and absorb all the details of the setting first hand.

**Did you come up with the characters or the general idea for the plot first? Or was it simultaneous?**

For me, character and plot feed off each other so much that it's really hard to separate one from the other. With Airball, I had a general idea for the plot first, sort of an updated version of "The Emperor's New Clothes." Then I began developing the characters, which also helped me develop the plot, and as I kept going, the story became much more about the characters than about my original updated fairy tale idea.

**I think Kirby has a really distinct voice. Was it hard to write from the perspective of a junior high boy?**

You know, not really. I must have a junior high boy hidden deep inside me!

**Did you do anything specific to help yourself develop Kirby's voice?**

I did what I always do to develop a character—I interviewed him. I asked him questions, such as: What do you look like? What do you like to do? What did you ask for on your last birthday? What did you get? And I let him answer in first person. Luckily, Kirby rambled on for page after page after page. This is the best way I know to really develop a character and get into his or her voice. Once I can hear a character speaking in my head, I know I've captured that character and can begin writing his story.

**Can you describe the publishing process?**

Having Airball out in the world has been a wonderful experience. So many terrific things have happened to me because of it. It's kind of like throwing a rock into a pond—you never know where the ripples will end up. I've met a lot of terrific people and have been invited to some great events—book signings, book fairs and festivals, library conferences, and even an awards ball, complete with long dresses, tuxedos and a jazz orchestra—because of Airball.

**How similar was your original vision of the story to the final published product?**

The finished book is much, much different from my original vision, and that's as it should be. If it weren't, it would mean I'd been so rigidly faithful to my initial idea that I hadn't allowed better, fresher ideas to come in and shape the story along the way.

**What is your favorite part about having a published novel?**

My favorite part is when people tell me they've read it and enjoyed Airball. I've loved books since before I was even able to read (my parents read to me from the moment I was born, I think), and I know how wonderful it is to find a book that really captures or touches me. So when a reader—whether a child or an adult—tells me Airball touched them in some way, I feel like I've given back to the world at least part of the joy I've received from books.

**What was your favorite part of the publishing process?**

My first favorite part was finding out that my editor liked the book enough to publish it. My second favorite part was when the box of books finally landed on my doorstep and I could see my story in published form for the first time.

**Was there anything frustrating about the publishing process?**

I think every writer would answer this question the same way: waiting. It takes a very, very long time to turn a manuscript into a book, and at every step along the way, the writer finds herself waiting.

**What is it like to work with an editor?**

It depends on the editor—and on the writer—of course, but for the most part, working with an editor has always been a positive experience for me. I’ve worked with smart editors who have really dug in and found ways for me to make my stories stronger. I just received a revision letter for an upcoming book, and the editor’s comments and suggestions proved how much she understood what I was trying to do with the story and gave me ideas of how to do it. A real feeling of freedom came over me as I read her letter. I suddenly felt free to do whatever I needed to do to make this an even better book. That’s what really good editors do for a writer.

**I have also really enjoyed reading over your blog. I like the fact that you share information about some of the forums where you meet with other authors and share advice with each other. I think a lot of people imagine that being an author is very solitary. Do you ever get feedback on your writing or your ideas from other people?**

You’re right—writing can be a lonely pursuit. The Internet has changed this a bit. I’m online with writer friends from all over the country every day. Still, when it comes time to write, it’s just me and my keyboard.

When I first started writing, I was in a critique group with other children’s writers, and it was a great way to receive feedback on a regular basis. Now that I’m working with an editor on most of my projects, I depend on her (or him) for feedback. I often let my sister read my work first, though. She’s not a writer, but she loves the same kinds of stories I love, so I know that if something isn’t working for her, it isn’t working for the story, either.

**What inspired you to create a blog for your fans?**

I wanted a way to quickly update information about me and my books online, letting readers know when I’d be attending various book events. It sort of grew from there. I only update my blog a few times a month (I’m amazed at writers who post to their blogs every day—I’d never get anything else written if I did that), but I try to include things I think readers and other writers would be interested in, such as upcoming conferences, great books or movies I’ve seen, helpful writing tips, story issues I’m grappling with. I see my blog as a sort of public service announcement with (I hope) a bit of humor thrown in to make it easier to read.

**Do you have any other works that are coming out soon?**

My Young Adult mystery, *Afterlife*, will be published early next year. I’m also working on another middle-grade novel about a boy who loves comic books, but I don’t have a release date for that yet.

More information on Ms. Harkrader’s fiction, her writing process, and events she will be attending is available on her website, [www.ldharkrader.com](http://www.ldharkrader.com)

### Parent-Teen Hatred, Both Sides of the Spectrum

What is the most common topic of conversation that most teenagers have? Is it clothes? Games? Boyfriends or girlfriends? From what I have heard, there is one topic that seems to be popping up more than moles in a whack-a-mole game. Parents. I have heard such comments as, "I hate my parents," and, "My mom is so stupid," and so on and so forth. This is truly a subject that I, even as a teenager, do not understand. I never know what to think whenever I hear complaints such as these. I wish that I could get into the mind of a parent and see what makes them do such horrid things. I also wish I could get into the mind of a teenager who thinks that their parents are such horrible people, and that they are just a burden that they have to deal with. This is what I have discovered through long hours of thinking, asking questions of my friends, and contemplation of my own life.

Teens of today have more freedoms than any other generation in the history of mankind in the entire world. They can become whatever they want to be, do what they love to do, and have access to all types of entertainment, music, movies, and thousands of other things that I cannot think of. But somehow, teens deem it necessary to bash their parents every which way that they can think of just because they can. Even now, as I write this essay, I hear small conversations among my peers about things that have happened to them. I heard one student, not three minutes ago say, and I quote, "My mom stole my Ipod yesterday." So what makes it stealing? What if you just misplaced it? Why blame your mom? Why is it that whenever something goes missing, a parent is to blame? The thought of having a true and passionate hate and loathing of my parents is, once again, something that makes my head spin faster than a tire on a race car.

Then I hear things that turn my opinions completely. I hear about parents in the real world that abuse, molest, and mentally destroy their children on a regular basis. I see these parents say that "It's for their own good," but why punish them that way? Why go through so much trouble to make your child's life, quite bluntly, a living, breathing hell? What gives these parents pleasure in causing other people, much less their children, pain? I have a friend who tells me that her parents will not let her come and see my family, because they want her home. That's it. Granted, it sounds like a good excuse at first. Parents do need to spend time with their children. But is that a good excuse after the twenty-seventh time? I don't think so. They

make her stay home and have no physical contact with the world. Why would someone do that? Why would a person deprive their child of anything fun? I don't know.

But, after many hours of thinking, I finally figured it out. I think that I know why teens hate their parents so much. They are easy to blame. Think about it. What happens when a parent grounds a child for something miniscule once? They blame them for everything in between. Anything that they get sent to their room for, or get grounded for, will be based on that small little cornerstone of their disdain. Then, after that disdain sits and festers for days, upon weeks, upon years, it turns into hate. After a while, teens become rebellious, and then they don't care even if they are grounded or whatever. They just go out and break the rules, because now they hate their parents, and don't care what they say. They just brush it off and just do whatever they please. That just isn't the way to go. It works the same way for parents too. What does a parent normally do when their child does something wrong or just plain dumb? They make sure that they don't do that again. That is a normal parental reaction. It is an instinct that they rightfully have. But there is an extent to how far that can go. In some cases, the parent then becomes a paranoid person because their child made one mistake. The parent then thinks that they have to limit their child's freedom. Well, once they do, the teen goes off in a huff and doesn't get to do anything fun for the next two to four weeks. They don't like it, and then complain to their friends about how stupid their parents are.

I cannot imagine a world where I don't love my parents unconditionally and to the fullest extent of the word. I am a firm believer in the fact that nobody is perfect, and that if you stay focused on those imperfections too long, then you will just be bitter for the rest of your life. Nobody wants to be bitter for the rest of his or her life (at least I hope so). I'm not gonna come out and say that my family is perfect. I know it's not. I know that I have had my share of beefs with my parents, but there is one key difference to my parents' and my relationship. We talk to each other. We let each other know how we feel, and work out problems by sitting down and talking them out civilly, rather than yelling and screaming at each other at the top of our lungs, all the while having things be thrown around, overturned, and in shambles by the end of it.

So what I am trying to say is this. To the teens that read this, give your folks a chance. You know that they aren't perfect, so cut them some slack. They're only watching out for you. No matter how many times they fight and bicker with you, deep down, they love you. And to the

parents, ease up on your teenagers. They are old enough now to know what is best for themselves. You don't need to lead them by the hand their entire lives. Let them stand on their own two feet, let them make their mistakes, and let them learn for themselves what it is going to take to be a good adult. I hope that this has cleared out the fog from the oceans of thoughts in your minds, and hopefully, now you can see the land off in the distance, which is being able to get along with each other, and maybe one day, to love each other unconditionally.

Ryan Powell

Twelfth Grade

Tuscon, Arizona

## Baby

It was a beauty, especially in the eyes of those who were musical inclined. A baby grand piano with a shiny, sleek coat of freshly painted black. It made you want to reach out and touch it, slide your fingers against its cool skin, and bask in its profound glory.

The first time Shanna saw it through the window of Bailey Burxhaumer's School for the Performing Arts, she knew she was staring at a bit of heaven on earth. It was a Sunday and she had been sitting quietly on the steps of Children's Sanctuary, an orphanage and her only home, watching little Peter and George throwing rocks at passing, and unaware, pedestrians. The pedestrians were of course, merely squirrels.

As a child of eleven, she was clever for her age, and always curious, and her ability to understand what the grown-ups were talking about sometimes landed her into trouble. She was, however, deeply adored by everyone and had an uncanny knack for making friends with both children and adults.

She was also quite extraordinary when considered her ability to pick up concepts at great speed. Once, for instance, when Mrs. Casket, one of the orphanage's caretakers, had been trying, yet failing, to assist a young man with his schoolwork when he was unable to comprehend the material, it was Shanna who had listened intently and finally described it to him in a way he could understand. Her method seemed highly confusing to the older woman, which involved dividing up a piece of raw dough and Mrs. Casket was surprised that she needed Shanna to repeat it to her multiple times for her to comprehend it as well. The intricacy of Shanna's explanation and her aptitude to adjust her teaching techniques showed signs of an early teacher and an eager student.

Shanna had been the first of her age group to learn the alphabet, the first to conquer reading, and her desire for knowledge surprised and delighted her teachers and adult supervisors.

With Shanna's yearnings for knowledge though also came a constant frustration that could not be satisfied until her task was accomplished. She would often sulk around miserably when she came to a barrier in her life that she was having trouble crossing, even when the 'wall' was really not imperative to overcome.

Shanna tried not to dwell on where her birth parents were, and where she came from, but that was exactly what was on her mind that Sunday afternoon.

It was an exceptionally hot day in New York City in the middle of June. Sitting on the steps of Children's Sanctuary, she absentmindedly brushed a loose strand of her dark brown hair out of her face and every few moments when the wind swooshed it onto her left cheek, she would remove it again. Unable to stand doing nothing of interest any longer, she decided to make up a song, a pastime she often practiced.

"The day is new, the sky is clear,  
The birds are singing, oh so near.

Who could have called for more perfect weather ... Oh!"

She then glanced at the ground to her right and saw the most beautiful object she had ever seen.

"Look, what a lovely feather, " she breathed as she bent down to pick it up. The feather was astounding, a perfect teardrop shape, and bright blue as if it belonged to a blue jay, except for the delicate green spots outlined in a thin trail of black. She intended to carry it back with her to her room to keep under her pillow with her small collection of special objects, but just as she was turning to head back inside, the wind picked up again, and lifted the feather from her arms and sent it flying through the air. It spiraled and twisted and flipped and turned while an agitated Shanna circled beneath it, arms stretched towards the sky, waiting for it to land. But land it did not. It rose higher then sank lower, then higher, always just beyond her reach. She watched in restlessness as it crossed the street and after looking both ways, and behind her in case she were to get in trouble, she followed it across the large avenue. It spiraled some more and then quite suddenly came back to the earth on top of a faded brown windowsill.

It was then that Shanna peered through the glass window and saw the baby grand piano in the corner of room B209 of Bailey Burxhaumer's School for the Performing Arts.

The feather seemed to have realized that its duty was done and quietly lifted off and away again, but this time, the distracted Shanna did not even look up. For to her, the baby grand outshone every single stunning object she had ever seen, imagined, or dreamt. She thirstily gazed at it and took in its rounded curves, sharp angles, keys, and pedals.

She saw people in the room. A young girl, probably around the age of 14, and an elderly woman, with her gray hair pulled up in a tight bun, were sitting at the bench, their fingers poised in a playing position. The woman suddenly threw up her hands in what looked like exasperation and strode out of the room.

Shanna heard someone calling her name behind her, and looked up to see her friend, Allison, motioning for her to come inside with the rest of them. Shanna took one last look at the piano, and then raced back across the road knowing in her heart that this would not be their last meeting.

Most of the rest of the week for Shanna turned out to be particularly busy and she unconsciously put the baby grand out of her mind. However, on Thursday morning, she found herself outside again and her mind once more drifted towards what lay behind that brown windowsill...

Her eyes rose to the area across the street and before she knew it, Shanna was standing on tiptoes and staring at the piano which she decided from now on to refer to as 'Baby'.

When Shanna was four years old, at story time, a book was read to her by one of the older children. It was a fable about a meek, little armadillo that was suddenly given the power to name all the other animals of the world. Lions, tigers, chimps, and horses all were uttered from his mouth. After a while, however, he got so accustomed to the wonders of power that he forced all the animals to name him their king since he gave them their names, and he was soon banished forever. The moral of the story, though, held little of Shanna's interest. What she was fascinated by was the prospect of being able to give things names. For weeks after the book was read to her, she would go around pointing at random objects and dubbing them whatever name suited her best. The three front chair of the cafeteria were suddenly referred to as Flipsy, Flopsy, and Flapsy. A rock at the entrance of the building, Tiffany. Even Mrs. Casket was abruptly named Shirley Sue, for some reason that nobody could quite comprehend. Eventually the habit wore off, but since then, Shanna had always secretly enjoyed naming things that were special to her, for giving it a name made it seem more of her own.

At the window of Bailey Burxhaumer's School for the Performing Arts, Shanna noted that the elderly woman was there again, but this time with a different child, a boy who looked somewhere around her age, probably a little older. Once again, the woman

looked frustrated and the look of defeat in her eyes was obvious.

Shanna took a step backwards and for once gazed at the actual building itself. Bailey's was an old, brick building, but that was one of the few things she really knew about it. It was quite true that most of the children never really paid attention to the crumbling, old building across the street, even when melodic music quietly drifted over and reached their ears.

Bailey's only took the best of the best pupils. Classes were for audition only and they accepted just forty new children each year. They had a reputation that one could not compete with; once you stepped in Bailey's School, any performing arts college across the country would immediately consider you. They had four prime divisions: drama, band and orchestral ensemble, choral, and piano.

Over the next few weeks, Shanna made it a habit to return to the window whenever she could. Some days, when she was unable to revisit it, usually because of rain, she would strain her ears, trying to get a drift of the beautiful music that came from Baby. When she stood close to the window, the melodies were both loud and clear, but from all the way across the street, they disappointed her by being broken and diluted.

Sometimes, the students inside the classroom would see her, but usually they were too occupied to care that a little girl was hanging onto every tune just outside the wall. Occasionally, the teacher would spot her, once in a while giving her a curious glance, but more often ignored her completely. Shanna did not mind though; she did not come to make new friends. She came only to hear and see Baby, for that was all she expected. And that was all that mattered.

One day, however, almost four weeks after she had first found that intriguing feather that had led her to Baby, something different happened. Standing on tiptoes as usual, Shanna did not realize that someone was approaching her until it was too late. With a crash, Shanna found herself on the hard cement, a youthful boy besides her, and loose papers flailing everywhere.

"Uh... oh, s-s-sorry, in-my fault, my fault," he stuttered. He bent down to pick up the papers and Shanna helped him.

When he regained his posture, he said, "My name is Carl, do you go to Bailey's too?" Shanna shook her head.

"Oh, well I'm part of the chorale here, I just got accepted and my parents were so pleased and it really is a great school don't you think so..." Shanna noted that once he was on his feet, he had no trouble getting started in conversation.

"I was just on my way inside. You see, my teacher, Mr. Borgg, had me run home to get my copy of Music of the Night. I can't believe it, but for some reason I suppose my mind wasn't with me today since I forgot it. It was under my bed, my music not my mind, and I had some trouble getting it back out if you know what I mean. I found things under there that I didn't even know existed. It's a rather pretty song by the way, don't you think?"

Shanna found herself following him inside, wobbly papers still clutched in her arms. Before she knew it, she was standing inside of the most beautiful front halls she had ever seen. The floor wood consisted of dark cherry and light oak, spiraled towards the center of the large room. The ceiling was cherry also, lined with a mahogany trim; she assumed this was meant to make the room lighter. A beautiful lighting fixture beamed down, sparkling and shining. At the back of the room was a little desk in which a secretary sat, quietly reading *Pride and Prejudice* to herself. Shanna could not believe that such an old and unwanted building exterior could contain a room fit for a palace inside.

Carl thanked her again for her help, his voice echoing in the large room, and bustled off down a corridor on the left. Shanna was in awe at being in the presence of such beauty. She walked backwards slowly, wondering again how such a magnificent room could dwell in such an old and dirty building.

"Can I help you," the lady at the desk asked, looking up from her book for the first time. Shanna shook her head, silently wondering if she would ever return here again. The school would certainly not tolerate strange girls wondering around in their facility. Just as she was exiting through the front door, on an impulse, she suddenly turned around and strode up to the small desk with an air of confidence about her. The woman peered at her behind her reading glasses kindly, but curiously.

"Is there, um, anything I can do to help out around here today. I really don't have anything planned and..."

"I'm sorry, but we don't offer job positions here, honey," she interrupted, truly looking sorry.

"Oh, I wasn't looking for money, just any small thing I can do to help out." The woman seemed to consider this for a moment.

"Well, I do have to run these new reeds down to the A wing ..."

"I'll do it!" Shanna practically shouted. After she got directions from the secretary, who was named Ms. Brooks and received a small brown box, Shanna started off. She could not just let an opportunity to explore the building slip away, besides maybe she would even get to glimpse at Baby on the way back.

After she finished, she eagerly went back to Ms. Brooks's little desk and received her next job from the slightly startled secretary. And that was how it went for the rest of the afternoon.

She was disappointed however, when it was finally time for her to head home and she still had not been into the piano room. She left, thanking a still surprised Ms. Brooks who thought that she should be thanking Shanna instead for her help, on her way out.

The next morning, Shanna woke up very early, rushed through breakfast and practically flew outside. Ms. Brooks was taken aback to see that she returned, but quickly gave her a new list of tasks to accomplish. The next day, when Shanna returned yet again, Ms. Brooks, who was not quite so surprised this time, decided that it was high time she got to know a little more about this strange girl.

On Shanna's fourth day of doing errands at Bailey Burxhaumer's School for the Performing Arts, Ms. Brooks took her aside.

"Shanna, it's not that I mind your help, but don't you think young girls like you should be playing outside instead of being cooped up in a building doing chores?"

Shanna looked up at Ms. Brooks and studied her face for the first time. She was a fairly young woman with bright eyes and pale skin, though at first glance, she looked quite older than she really was, because of the tired look that seemed permanently implanted on her face. Her medium length brown hair was tied back in a messy bun and her reading glasses were askew. Shanna had known that she had liked this kind woman from the very start and wanted to be truthful with her.

"I don't mind at all. This is something that I enjoy to do, please Ms. Brooks, please let me stay." Pure emotion was in her voice.

Ms. Brooks was not an unintelligent woman. She knew that Shanna came from the small orphanage. She had seen her visiting the piano for weeks, always peering silently through the glass window. She sighed.

"Of course you can stay. I haven't had company this good in ages you know. But before you run off around the school today, how about we sit and chat for a few minutes longer."

From then on, everyday, Shanna would make time to visit Bailey's School and help Ms. Brooks while exploring the school, which she had come to know as well as Children's Sanctuary. And afterwards, she would stop by Ms. Brooks's desk and sip peach tea and eat peppermints with her while discussing anything that Shanna felt like talking about. Sometimes they would talk about their past life, sometimes about the weather, but more often just whatever was on either of their minds.

Shanna learned of Ms. Brooks's love of music and how although she had never gone to a music school to refine her skills and qualify herself as a teacher, she had taken private piano lessons for many years as a child.

Ms. Brooks rarely had any people come inside, since they took so few students a year. The beautiful hallway was usually silent, or at least it had been until Shanna came. Sometimes, Shanna would get to walk past the piano room. She had come to learn that although there were multiple band, orchestra, and chorus rooms, the main piano lesson room only counted one. The piano section also had only a single teacher, who was in fact the elderly woman Shanna saw, and whom she now knew was named Mrs. Pertrusian.

From her daily strolls around the school, Shanna knew that there was also a large auditorium where they practiced giving concerts, a small cafeteria, and various extra classrooms that on most occasions lay empty and unused.

Shanna did not quite understand what drew her to this place. Perhaps she had been bored with her usual surroundings for far too long, or maybe she was intrigued by the eye-catching entrance hall that gave her shivers of pleasure whenever she stepped into it. Perchance, however, she felt that this was where she was meant to be.

One afternoon, after greeting Ms. Brooks as usual, Shanna decided to tell her about Baby, hoping that her love for the piano as well might give her some hint as to why it fascinated her so. Shanna explained her desire play it and how the beautiful melodies that

came out of it touched her soul, and made her wonder why anyone would want listen to the radio instead.

Ms. Brooks smiled sincerely. She took Shanna's hand, led, her to the auditorium, and drew back the large curtains to reveal a magnificent stage, with a shiny floor and in the center, a small but sturdy upright piano. As they walked up the steps, Shanna saw the piano in closer detail. Its brown exterior was peeling in places; its yellowing keys chipping from age. The pedals had long ago lost their shine and the whole instrument portrayed loneliness and abandonment. Compared to Baby, the piano was most depressing.

Shanna didn't care.

Just the fact that a real piano was in front of her, a piano that was in arms reach gave her almost too much joy to bear.

"You know how I told you that I used to take lessons as a child. Well, I may be a bit rusty, but I still remember a few things..."

An amazed Shanna sat down besides Ms. Brooks on the old piano bench that creaked when they leaned forward.

"Now, the first things you need to learn are the basic scales. Sing with me, Do, Re..."

From that day on, whenever Shanna came over she spent time with Ms. Brooks learning to play the piano. She was not taught anything complicated, just the basics, but to Shanna, it was a beginning of a whole new world she never new existed. Ms. Brooks also let Shanna do some work in room 13209. Her main job was to organize the old piano theory books, quietly of course, for while she sorted them out, lessons were always being held just a few feet away.

As she arranged them alphabetically, she would occasionally listen to what Mrs. Pertrusian taught the children in their lessons. The elderly woman always seemed to have a frustrated gleam in her eyes and a scowl on her face, though she never seemed to be truly unkind. Shanna always wondered if she was unwanted there, but Ms. Brooks's reassurances that she was not a bother kept her from ceasing to come. Despite the fact that Mrs. Pertrusian seemed harmless enough, Shanna would admit that she was slightly afraid of her, but fascinated in what she taught as well. She would also page through the books and, little by little, learn of the information that it held. She absorbed the beginnings of scales, chords,

simple pieces advancing to more difficult ones, and so on. Throughout all of this organizing and reading and listening, Shanna found out that she could multi-task fairly well.

As the days went by, she learned that the schedule of the children's piano lessons consisted of the following: Billy Trenton had lessons from 9:00 to 4:30 on Mondays, Shari Kleane then followed at the same time on Tuesday, Anthony Rodrick on Wednesday, Tim Midel on Thursday, Katherine Murphy on Friday, and they took turns returning for weekend lessons. This was, of course, the summer agenda and during the school year students were more intensely taught their musical education and their academic studies. Shanna assumed then that these children were the most dedicated since they decided that they wished to return during their summer break.

So, with the help of Ms. Brooks's short daily teachings, the old theory books, and listening in on the lessons of advanced students, Shanna began her own musical education.

One day, Shanna arrived later than usual to Bailey's, after playing a few games of hopscotch to satisfy Allison's pleas for attention. She found that Ms. Brooks was not at her usual place at her desk, so Shanna wondered around for a few moments and ended up just outside the main office. She stopped short when she heard voices.

"Yes, Yes I know Ms. Brooks, but the rules apply to all. There is nothing I can do." Shanna heard Mrs. Pertrusian's voice, sounding tired, but softer and more patient than usual.

"But she is such a good student, you have heard her in the auditorium, I know you have! She picks things up so quickly, and she has the true passion and dedication that so many of our other students lack. I know that that is what frustrates you so. Don't even try to deny it! This place is where she is meant to be. I can feel it! Please, please, give her a chance," Ms. Brooks's voice begged.

"You know I want to, you know I would if it were possible, but we do not take on students for free and we do not supply scholarships. Bailey's has very few students, and word goes around quickly! If it was to get out that we were giving free lessons or even just accepting any ordinary child off the street, our reputation would go down the drain. Suddenly, performing arts colleges would no longer want our students. We cannot let our current students suffer that!"

"But surely you know Shanna is not ordinary," Ms. Brooks replied quickly.

"Yes, you know that and I have come to know it as well, but others will not understand. They do not view music as we do, Lily," Mrs. Petrusian murmured sadly.

"What if, well, what if she were to properly audition, formally, in front of a crowd if we have to. Then others would see her talent and everyone would assume she was merely another musical prodigy who came to us from private tutors...just like the rest of them. The Fairwell-Summer Recital! It's perfect, anyone musically interested within miles and even farther comes to see our annual summer performance."

Peeking through the door, Shanna saw Mrs. Petrusian seem to consider.

"I'll talk to her, let me talk to her," Ms. Brooks said exuberantly.

"No, no," Mrs. Petrusian replied sternly, "you cannot put that type of pressure on a small girl, the consequences! Think of the consequences! She has probably never participated in any sort of recital before, and this one is known all over New York! She will be performing in front of those who expect professionals, the best of the very best! We both know one must be very careful when dealing with the minds of young children..."

Shanna ran off back to the orphanage.

That night, she lay in bed, thinking over what she had heard for a very long time, and by the time the sun peeked through her window, she had no doubts.

Rushing over to the crumbling building, through the doors, and to the bulletin on the side wall, Shanna yanked off a poster labeled:

"Fairwell Summer Recital: August 30"

She sprinted over to Ms. Brooks's desk and said, "This is who I want to be." Then she fled into Ms. Brooks's open arms, who understood exactly what she meant.

For the next few weeks, Shanna worked with Ms. Brooks constantly, preparing a variety of pieces by Bach, Mozart, Kabelevsky, and other renowned composers. Shanna worked harder than she ever had in her life, and though the level of her playing would still be way behind the others, she perfected each piece in such a way, that the difference in levels would be insignificant to the untrained ear. She learned of dynamics, ties and slurs, key signatures, and more. She worked until her brain hurt, her fingers were sore, and her eyes were strained, but still she worked on.

On the night of the performance, Ms. Brooks brought her over to her small apartment and gave her one of her old dresses, a prized possession from her childhood, to borrow for the concert. It was a gorgeous blue satin dress with a long, flowing bottom, and pearly white lacing along the edges. Ms. Brooks found that there were tears in her eyes when she saw the happiness in Shanna's expression as she tried it on. Ms. Brooks helped her do her hair and make-up, and reminded her to relax, play each piece with emotion, and continue on if she messed up. Shanna knew that she was not only performing by playing the piano, but also by acting. She was playing the part of a professional.

When Shanna walked through the auditorium doors and saw the many people that filled up each and every seat, she faltered for a moment. What am I doing here? She thought. But when she glanced up on stage, she suddenly knew exactly what the answer was. Everything became clear and fell into place like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle.

She must have walked up the aisle and sat in the chairs behind the curtain, but for some reason, Shanna had no recollection of this whatsoever. Nor would she later remember the passing time until her name was announced to the audience. What she would recall though, was walking on stage and seeing the smiling face of Ms. Brooks and her look of encouragement. She would remember spotting Mrs. Pertrusian in the corner, behind the stage, nodding slightly, and staring at her straight in the eyes, beaming confidence into them. She would remember glancing out at the hundreds of people and not being afraid, but most of all, she would remember Baby. She would never forget the way she slowly slid her small hands gently over its smooth, black coat and fought the urge to cry.

Shanna sat down, breathing deeply, fingers poised on the keys, and knew she was finally at home.

Katie Sheinberg

Allentown, Pennsylvania

You Lately  
Stealing moments,  
just to be with you,  
though it's wrong,  
it's hard to tell the truth,  
Through my disguise,  
You recognized,  
When we were so,  
close.  
It seems so long,  
Ago,  
Since you were so,  
Near,  
When you were with,  
Me,  
Once the love was so strong,  
Now it's long,  
Long gone,  
I remained holding on,  
Because I been thinking about,  
Been thinking about,  
Been thinking about,  
You lately.

Jamale Edwards  
Twelfth Grade  
Rockledge, Florida

## Spirit of the Necklace

My eyes flutter. A ray of sunlight paints my face, its warmth spreading through my body. Slowly, I sit up and look around the dimly lit room. I shift my body and step onto the cold, marble floor. Maids rush to my side. Niffala, my most trusted servant, walks in with a loaf of bread on the platter. She wears a very composed mien: head up, eyes focused on me, taking long, complete strides. Her deep eyes revealing a profound confidence within. Unlike the others, her head has not been shaved. She had said her hair was too precious to be taken from her. Her straight, black hair is not perfumed nor beaded, but its natural sway has the same effect as if it has been. She is black among flock white of sheep, the camel among the elephants. The other maids are jealous of her beauty and mind. They are all appalled by the manner in which she speaks to me.

When she talks, to anyone, she keeps her head up and looks straight into their eyes. She never allows herself to murmur, she speaks only the clearest of words. I love her. She is unique and elegant, beautiful and poised, clever and sharp. I know of no other maid like Niffala. The rest of them mumble when they talk, look down when they speak, and shuffle rather than step. Sometimes, in my daydreams, I imagine Niffala as a runaway princess. This dream would explain her manner.

Niffala sits on the edge of my bed, platter in hand, and says softly, "Good morning Princess."

"Good morning Niffala," I answer. She looks down and smiles at what she is holding. Every morning she tries to bring a different dish so that we can examine all the marvelous details. Today we stare down on a beautifully crafted platter. Its edge trimmed in gold, the animals outlined with a thin turquoise liquid. This story is of a beautiful maid in a clearing of flowers amidst a dark forest. Little creatures surround her. Rabbits, birds, deer, and mice have all gathered around the young girl.

"You were probably the lady the artist was thinking of when they made this," she teases.

After I have been decorated, I am led down the hall to welcome my father. As usual, he greets me with, "Good morning my darling, you look well." I reply with a smile. Today, I had

been dressed in a pale green gown, straight hair wig, a silver necklace, four silver bracelets, dark sky blue earrings, and a cone of lotus-perfumed fat placed on my wig. I had also been massaged earlier with lotus-scented oils.

I walk out of my father's bedchamber and down the hall to a smaller room. In this room is nothing but a desk, two straw chairs, a single painting of my father, King Senwosret II, and a large window to let in the power of the sun and the morning breeze. Sitting on one of the chairs was my tutor. I was never told her name and so I never asked. She is as cold as the stone beneath my foot, and serious. I have been with her for two years and never do I see her smile. I had once told Niffala this and she had said the reluctance to smile was a great weakness in the mind.

"Hello, princess." My tutor's voice rings, rough and grainy like the hot sands shifting in the deserts. I sit and say nothing. She begins. The hours go by very slowly. At times, I regret asking for a tutor. I had begged and begged, for I knew that women with tutors accomplished more and I wanted to be one of those few women.

After three hours, I am free. Rushing politely out of the room, I run to one across the hall. There lies my most prized possession, my wooden charm. I sit on yet another straw chair, place my fingers, and play magic. I have often been told that my fingers do not always obey my heart but once I enter this room my whole body is put under the spell of my mind. The moment my fingers touch the string I can do nothing but float away of a beautiful cloud of sound.

My harp is one of the only things that makes me feel free and light. When my dear mother died I did nothing but play mournfully for two days. I would play for Niffala, my father, guests, or even just myself.

Today, I decide to play my father's favourite melody knowing he would enter the room. He does, of course, but is holding something unexpected. A plain wooden box is in his hands. He also carries a wide smile. He comes to stand by my side and hands me the box.

"Open it," he prompts. I carefully take the lid off the box and place it neatly beside me. I peek inside and gasp!

"I hope you enjoy it!" My father's eyes twinkle at the corners. In the box is a beautiful, handcrafted, gold necklace! I put it gently besides me, in order to embrace him.

"I love it!" I exclaim. His eyes brighten. He sits and explains the design. He begins by saying it has 372 carefully laid semiprecious stones. He then explains every detail; zigzag lines under the base bar represent the early waters. Each of the falcons, symbols of the sun god, clasps a circular hieroglyph meaning encircled. Beside his name are two ankh hieroglyphs, meaning life, suspended from cobras whose tails are wound around the sun disk on the falcons' heads. These snakes represent Nekhbet and Udjo, the traditional protector goddesses of the king. Supporting the royal cartouche is the kneeling god Heh clutching two palm ribs symbolizing millions of years. Even though I know of all this, I dare not speak in fear of crushing his high spirit. Finally, he says that the design reads, "The god of the rising sun grants life and dominion over all that the sun encircles for one million one hundred thousand years to King Senwosret II."

He tells me later that it is a gift in honour of my magical fingers.

"I shall wear it every day, thank you, father!" I say as I leave the room. I hurry to show Niffala the gift. I explain every detail that my father has just said to me.

"How magnificent!" She joins my joy.

I wear the beautiful necklace everyday, as I promised, but after about six months I begin to feel strange. All of a sudden the pure gold is far heavier and becomes nothing but a burden. The bright coloured jewels give me tormenting headaches. The design is beautiful but when it touches my skin I burn.

I tell no one. Niffala discovers by watching me suffer. I will not tell my father for fear of worrying him. Niffala occasionally swipes a cool towel and washes my face. After a few days, I realize what is happening. I have been cursed. A cruel disease has been cast upon me and I am to die. I secretly believe the Bast, the goddess and protector of women, is jealous of the beautiful necklace of pure gold. I do not tell Niffala. After a month of torture I understand that I do not have any time left. I send for my father and tell him what has happened and that I love him. He cries and removes the necklace from my red neck. He lays it next to my bed. I tell Niffala only that I am sick.

On my last day I feel it. My heart is pounding furiously and my head is burning. I call Niffala. She rushes to my side, fear spreading through her body like dye spreads through water.

"You are amazing Niffala. Your life has a long way left. Mine stops here. I do not want you to worry or cry for I shall be taken care of. But before I leave I want you to have something. Take this jewelled necklace. I love you more than I could ever love a sister, my princess. Now go." I whisper. She turns to go and I can hear her crying. I give myself up a few moments later, the image of Niffala's beautiful crying face floating in and out of my head.

Gabrielle Paulhac

Seventh Grade

Waccabuc, New York

## Rafting in the River

I was dreaming about being on The Price is Right and winning a million dollars. Bob Barker was just about to say good job when I wake up to see me in Quality Inn, West Virginia bed. My brother was already awake, and watching Sponge Squarepants. My dad told me to get ready so I put on my swim stuff, and my crocs. We met up with my sister my mom and her two friends Brittany and Ashley. So we were in the car and I just had to blurt out “I hope nobody falls off the raft today!” We immediately got to the rafting place. We all got our equipment: helmets and life jackets. We then walked down to where the rafts and kayaks were. We met our guide, his name was Jeff. After he taught us all the different strokes and that they base rapids like they base hurricanes. We got in ours and so our adventure began.

We first went through some dead water, which is water that doesn't have any rapids and is slow moving. Our guide told us that we were at the point of where we needed to start paddling faster because we were at are first rapid called Shiloh. It consisted of a lot of twist and turns but no drop offs, it was a category one rapid. Shortly after, we were at our next rapid called Rock. He said this is a category three. We started paddling faster and faster if were to not plunge into the enormous boulder. As we went on we kept getting closer. So we paddled like our lives depended on it. But it was too late we slammed right into it. Then we went down the drop off and hit the water. I fell into the raft as so everybody else did except the guide. My mom fell out of the raft and was carried along with the rest of the rapid. We kept throwing the safety cable but it kept getting detached over and over again because she was being pulled under the water and out. Jeff stared out into the distance and then yelled this is the rapid called No Mans Land! It was category five rapid! We then began rushing to try to get my mom to safety but it was too late she still was twisting and turning just like our raft. This is it our guide shouted. We were in it felt like mid air then bashed into the water. The rapid was finally over. Once we were close to her our guide pulled her in himself rather than using the safety cable. Even though it only lasted ten minutes it seemed like an hour. When my mom got aboard she was shaking all over. I said how did it feel? She said it was all a blur. We began to see the rafting center. Well my mom was fine. I learned a lot from that trip. One was always prepare for the worst but hope for the best, and never ever jinx your mom about a life-threatening situation!

Jack Werner  
Kentucky

Sixth Grade

Louisville,

## My Mother's Daughter

"Virginia" was the last straw. I was used to having people mispronounce or misspell my name- Cristina can often become "Kristin" or "Christian" in an untutored mouth- but Virginia? Really, how does Cristina metamorphose into that? What mysterious auditory process had converted the c to a v and placed a g where none belonged? I was tired of hearing my name mangled and mispronounced on everyone's lips, fed up with correcting its spelling so many times.

"Is Virginia here?" the feckless summer camp counselor repeated, searching worriedly through the crowd of twelve-year-olds for the mysterious girl. He was utterly unprepared for my slit-eyed glare and the growl of "Cristina. My name is Cristina!" As I stomped away from the bemused group of preteens, he asked plaintively, "What did I say?"

Although I am no longer a testy twelve-year-old who erupts at the slightest annoyance, the problem of my name can still provoke an emotional volcano. Cristina, with its eight letters and three compact syllables, is easy to spell in Spanish. But in the U.S., some linguistic idiosyncrasy declared that the c absolutely had to have an h alongside (for moral support I presume, since the h serves no other discernible function).

No one here gets my name right on the first try, or even the hundredth. I have attended the same school for ten years, but my back-to-school ritual has not changed since first grade. Every year I fix my inevitably mislabeled locker and painstakingly inform each and every teacher that my name does not have an h or an e, thank you very much. At one debate team tournament, where every single judge seemed incapable of simple spelling, I was replaced with various alter egos like "Kristin," "Christine," and "Chris." After suffering through an entire day of mistaken identity, I announced to my mother that she should have called me something else.... anything else.

"Why wasn't my name Anna, or Sarah, or even Jane?!" I whined. "Everyone always spells it wrong!"

Unmoved by the storm of emotion (a veritable flood of tears was dripping down my nose at that point) my mother patted my back and remained calm.

"Don't drown yourself in a glass of water. If other people spell it wrong, that is their mistake and not yours," she soothed. Although I had heard her oft-quoted adages too many times for them to make much of an affect, the gentle reassurance calmed my fit of frustration. I sniffed and nodded a bit more hopefully.

"Besides, you should remember that it's my name, too," she added.

It was true - amidst all the worry over my own name, I had almost forgotten that it was hers as well! My grandmother called my mother Cristina, and she liked the name so much that she passed it on to me. But she grew up in Venezuela, where Cristina is a familiar name that does not cause any trouble. Any grade-school graduate in Venezuela can spell it properly, but when my family moved to the United States, everyone spelled it wrong, whether they had a high school diploma or a PhD.

I had always thought that growing up in America (and having to correct people almost as soon as I introduced myself) had been hardest for me. But at least I can correct people -- we moved when I was five, so I speak perfect English. But my mother learned to speak English at a school in Caracas, and her pronunciation is far from flawless. When she left Venezuela, she struggled with English's disparate tenses, the unpredictable "soft" or "hard" sounds, and all those awful idioms that can be impossible for a foreigner to understand. I had never thought about how terribly difficult it must have been for her to uproot her life and move to America. She left behind her friends, her family, her language, and her way of life.

Over a decade later, she still struggles with what I like to call "the culture clash." I have lost count of the number of times that I explained words that she did not understand (the concept of "awkward" took almost a week) or corrected her pronunciation (the ths at the end of "months" is an official impossibility). I went through weeks of temper tantrums in middle school when she would not let me sleep over at friends' houses ("Why do you want to go sleep at someone else's house? Your bed is your bed!") until I finally wore her down in sixth grade.

But after I turned thirteen, the constant insistence that I "act like a lady" and try to "look nice" made me want to tear every so-called pretty article of clothing in my closet into shreds. Didn't she understand that in America, girls could wear jeans and still be

feminine? The right to choose my own clothes took almost a year of high-level negotiations, complete with ceasefires, third-party arbitration, and a temporary severing of diplomatic relations. Sometimes I hated all of her handy proverbs and outmoded advice. I wished that I had a mother who understood the small pieces of cultural etiquette that I had to explain so often, one who let me choose my clothes without a thirty-minute argument, someone who had given me a nice, easy name like "Mary" instead of Cristina.

But then I remember everything that she has done for my family, and I remind myself to be proud of my name. Because of my mother's efforts, I am fluent in both Spanish and English. Her determination gave me more opportunities than she ever had in Venezuela, and her courage enabled my family to create a life in the United States. Because of her, I do not hesitate to correct people when they mispronounce my name or mangle the spelling. Cristina is who I am, and I will not change myself to satisfy the world. And it is my mother's name too, and I would not change her for anything.

Cristina Ceballos

Eleventh Grade

Greenwich, Connecticut

## Nowhere To Go

There once was a family that lived in a tenement. The tenement looked new from the outside, but it's like a pig sty in the inside. The two kids who lived there were Maddy and Tom. They're cousins, but very closed like brother and sister. Maddy was 11 and Tom was 14. Maddy was the shy and cautious one, whereas, Tom was the smart and adventurous one. There is a good reason for Maddy to behave that way. She became withdrawn due to constant teasing from her classmates. However, when Tom was around, she felt secured, and even, became a lean, mean talking machine. One time Maddy was chased by a mean dog, and since then, she became very cautious about everything. Tom was smart and not just smart, but very smart. He always knew where to find things without much effort. He liked to be daring which made him so adventurous. Sometimes, his daring got him into risky situation that he regretted.

Maddy's mom was a very nice and kind woman. She worked hard to feed her family. Tom's father was her only brother. She took Tom and his father in to live with them and treated both of them like family. Tom's father was jobless at that time when they moved in. Tom's father just could not hold on to a job long due to being unskilled, and worst of all, being an alcoholic. The whole family was supported only by Maddy's mom one income. Money was tight, but the family could still make ends meet. They always had hope that Tom's father would find a steady job, and kick his bad alcoholic habit. Maddy's mom would repeatedly say to Tom's father, "You better cut down on that nonsense. You know that stuff is no good to anyone, especially for you. Your mind is always clouded and you set bad examples for the kids, especially for Tom." Instead of getting better, things turn worse.

One day, when Maddy's mom went to work as usual, the boss, Mr. Bucks, gave her the shocking news. Mr. Bucks told her that she had to be let go because the company did not have enough business to continue to keep all the staff. Maddy's mom almost passed out. All the way home, she couldn't believe that things could go so bad and life was just not fair. She felt very depressed and kept thinking, "What am I going to do now? How am I going to feed the family?" She almost got into an accident when her mind was not in full attention to her

driving. When she got home, she did not see the kids in the house. Tom's father was there, grumbling as usual. Maddy's mom broke the bad news to him. Instead of being helpful and kind to Maddy's mom who just lost her job, all Tom's father could say was, "There is barely enough food to pass around. We can't afford anything now. The only way not to lose more money is to get rid of the kids, and that's final!!" With tears in her eyes, Maddy's mom cried, "I have worked so hard to raise

Maddy, and now Tom, like my own child. I don't want to abandon them. I am sure, we can work something out. I shall look for another job, meanwhile, let's do the best with the situation." That made Tom's father more outraged. "Fine, then I'll take care of them myself." Shouted Tom's father. Fearing that Tom's father might do something dreadful to the kids, Maddy's mom had no choice but agreed to his demand and told him that she would take care of them herself. While the conversation was going between Maddy's mom and Tom's father, Maddy was back and overheard the plan. Heartbroken by what she heard, Maddy walked silently to her room in tears. When Tom returned and saw Maddy's crying face, they both knew they needed to prepare for this. Both Maddy and Tom quickly searched through their belongings and packed some warm clothing and other small things in a Salvation Army box. They put a few dollars they saved from doing odds and ends jobs some time ago in one small bag. Tom found a camera which he planned to use someday, and he took that along too.

In such a short time, Maddy's mom did not have a plan. She did not want to send them to some social workers, afraid that too many questions might be asked of her. In distress, the next day, Maddy's mom took them to a mall quite a distant from home. The next thing the kids knew was they were alone and left in the mall. No sign of Maddy's mom, anywhere they looked. They now realized that they were dumped out here for good. Maddy started to get very panic and repeatedly told Tom that they needed to find some way to report this to the police. Tom, the intelligent one, hesitated and said, "What's the sense of going back. They will try another way to get rid of us, maybe put us into a worse situation than this." They did not want the police to arrest their parents, even though the parents did this to them. Tom knew he had to think fast and find a way to temporarily survive until he could think of a better plan. They scouted out the mall to plan where to sleep at night. Night would be the toughest for them since the weather was already very cold. Tom said, "At least, in the mall, we have shelter. As long as

the security guard does not find us and kick us out when the mall closes at night, we'll be fine." Maddy said in a shaking voice, "Where do we hide so that the security guard will not find us? I am thirsty and hungry now." Maddy always craved for food when she was nervous, especially in the current circumstances. Maddy always said to herself, "Why me? Why? What a life!" whenever things went the wrong way. And, she mumbled that again, and again. After walking for hours, sitting when tired, they picked up some left over food in the mall food court and put them in the container. Tom comforted Maddy, "See, it's a good thing I remember to stuff a couple of empty containers in our backpacks. It come to good use now." "Come, come, Maddy, we'll find a quiet place to satisfy our tummies first." Maddy smiled awkwardly, "Tom, you are always my big brother. Something will work out, right? Right?"

A week later, Tom and Maddy were still in the same mall. Luckily, the security guard did not find them in their little hideaway shelter. Not every night was quiet and without some disturbances while they were there. They found out that there were also other people spending nights in some dark corners in the mall too. This mall was huge but pretty old and run down in some parts, and sometimes the security guard hardly noticed people who stayed in after closing. The second night was pretty scary for Tom and Maddy. Living in a cardboard shelter, Maddy and Tom witnessed a fight between two rough and rowdy men. "Man, you think you're better??" growled one man. "I think so, blah, blah, blah..." replied the other one. "I'm so scared, Tom. What should we do?" whispered Maddy trembling a little. Before, she could say another word, BAM! ! BAM! ! "AAHH" and up went the cardboard box. "Huh? Who the heck are you scum?" "Run!" yelled Tom. Maddy followed, "OOPS! I forget the food containers." "What? Grab the backpacks quick," said Tom. They ran as quickly as they could to the other dark part of the mall. Luckily, the men did not bother to follow them. The fourth night, Tom and Maddy were dodging from the authorities who stayed around a little late after closing to see if there were people still hanging around. The authorities had received complaints from the shop owners that the mall was a mess in the morning when they came to open the shops. That night, Tom and Maddy were almost locked out of the mall. The sixth night was the worst. Tom and Maddy were resting in a corner, when suddenly, "What's this, a little girl with a money bag? Get her!" "AHHH! Take it." and next thing, Maddy's little bag was snatched. "ARGH! !

Why did you do that, Maddy?" shouted Tom. "Do what? I lost the money." Tom was so annoyed, "Great, now look what you got us into." blaming Maddy for overreacting.

"What are we going to do? Oh, my gosh! I can imagine us wandering in the mall until we get old and..." but Maddy was cut off when a hand gripped her shoulders. "AHHH! !" she screamed. Standing there was an old man with a silver topped cane. "If you want to see your family again, I can help you." Tom got amazed and said "Let's go sis, he can really help." "I don't know." "Aww, you worry too much," said Tom to Maddy. The old man told them, "Now, now... I need a favor from you too. Its just a little job I need help, and you two are the right helpers." It turned out that the old man who really was a middle-aged man, wanted them to be burglars and to steal for him. Maddy, kind of smelled the rat, "I told you big brother, but noo... I don't trust him." "Don't listen to him." "Be quiet okay! I'm thinking." Just as Tom was trying to escape, the old man grabbed his arm and forced him to change into burglar clothes, with a ski mask over his face. Pushing Tom forward, the man said, "Go rob the jewelry store now!" As Tom headed for the jewelry store, Maddy had to get the car ready to take-off after the robbery. The man told her to check the trunk of the car. Maddy knew that he would kick her into the trunk. "What's a trunk and how do you open it?" "You haven't seen a trunk? Then, here's the trunk and here's how you open it." When the man bent down to open the trunk, Maddy used all her might and kicked him into the trunk and slammed it shut. Maddy ran inside just in time to save her brother, or saved himself if some say, from being arrested. Tom had taken off the clothes and mask the man forced him into, stuffed them in the bag of stolen goods. Tom opened the trunk carefully and found the man knocked out from the slamming of the trunk on him. He then used the camera he brought along and took pictures of the man who tricked them. "I know this would come into good use."

They hurriedly contacted the police. The police thanked them, because the same man had robbed several stores in the mall using disguises to trick the police. The police gave the kids their reward. Tom and Maddy headed for home. They wandered along the highway for a long while until they saw a familiar tenement. It was their home. When they went in, Maddy and Tom found Maddy's mom alone in the house. Maddy's mom embraced them and apologized for her not having enough courage to keep them. They got more great news that

Tom's father had left the house and checked into a rehab center. With the reward, they bought a new home. Maddy's mom got a new job. They lived happily there, or did they?

Jessica Chen

Eighth Grade

Silver Spring, Maryland

### With Salt in my Strands

With salt in my strands  
And sea in my shoes  
I am summer,  
I am free.

With movies on my mind  
And maple syrup in my mouth  
I am messy,  
I am joy.

With rocks at my roots  
And root beer in my realm  
I am reaching,  
I am sound.

With lemonade on my lips  
And laughter in my layers,  
I am limitless,  
I am young.

With barbeque on my breath  
And bike rides in my bones  
I am beautiful,  
I am happy.

With carousels round the corner  
And castles of my creation  
I am Cape Cod,  
I am live.

Becki Steinberg  
Eleventh Grade  
Avon, Connecticut

Every Normal Day  
Chapter 1

The music was pounding in my ears. The acoustic "boom boom boom" from the iPod was mesmerizing. "What the heck do you think you're doing?! Finish your hot chocolate! We're going to be late for school!"

My dad's words alarmed me, and it felt as if a forty gun salute had gone off in my ears. Immediately the thrum of the music was paused and the beverage guzzled down. Once again the routine: to school, at school, and from school began. The same routine that happened every day of my life. My life. My life was so ordinary now. Always the same routine. Wake up, go to school, eat, and sleep. Always the same thing, never changing. Only the previous parts of my life that were different from everyone else's.

It's hard to look back upon things you don't want to remember, or things that are just too far back to remember. The average person can usually only remember material from the start age of three. I guess I fall into the average person range, because my first memory is from when I was three. Our dog, Mr. Green, was a puppy at the time, and I was still in diapers. One day, I decided to shuffle out of our house in Riverside, California. Mr. Green came out too, followed by my sister Adena, who is two years older than me. I started playing with a toy lawn mower that had assorted colored balls inside the front that made different sounds when you played with it. Just then, Mr. Green picked me up by the diaper and started running around in circles. I was screaming, but my sister was laughing. She called for Mr. Green, and I was deliberately plopped onto the cold and most definitely hard cement. Please, if you don't mind, form a mental picture of the scene which is my first memory of my life. I hope you find this funny, because while writing this, I still have a hard time to keep from giggling. It's weird how something so dumb could be the first memory in one's life, a life that you're going to live for a very long time.

St. Patrick's Day  
Chapter 2

St. Patrick's Day is fun and exciting for all kids, I hope. In my family, our St. Patrick's Day tradition was that there would be glitter laid out on the floor, and we would follow different paths for the fun of it. My sister, at the time, would eat dog biscuits, which to me was disgusting. She even could detect what ingredients were in the biscuit. If you think you know

anything about dog biscuits, I'd be surprised. On one particular St. Patrick's Day, my sister Adena followed a path which led to the jar of treats for Mr. Green.

"Oh my!" Adena exclaimed, "dog biscuits! Thank you Mr. Leprechaun!"

"Do you really think a leprechaun would leave dog biscuits for you?!"

"Of course, why shouldn't he?" she said as she helped herself to a peanut butter dog treat. As she devoured the cookie, my abilities to go along with her idiocy nearly collapsed. I marched off, only to find myself going in circles around the living room. Tolerance for a dumb person is hard, and to tolerate an obvious idiot is even harder.

### The Men in Black and the Old Man

#### Chapter 3

When I was about four years old, my family moved to San Francisco. San Francisco, California seems HUGE to a four year old. There's lots of malls and restaurants; anything you desired was in San Francisco. Not only was there anything you wanted, but there were lots of things you didn't, such as criminals. I have only had two encounters with what I would call crooks and both occurred in California, but the two were totally different. My family and I were returning from a shopping trip at a mall in San Francisco. The parking lot was crowded, and there were a lot of shadows. We were walking towards our car when two, fast walking men started to following us. Dad turned around, and they tried slipping away from the presence of his eyes gazing, into the murky illuminated concrete building with the reeking smell of garbage. We kept a brisk walking, but they kept coming. The brisk walk turned into a frantic run, and Dad turned around to face the human toms. "Keep going, but don't stop at the car. Try going to the ticket stand." We did, but then Mom left to go with Dad. From what I could see, the strangers were talking to a bunch of giddy "let's go to the mall" shoppers.

They pointed at Dad, but to stop them, he ran over and disrupted their conversation. That was it: my first encounter with a supposed criminal, maybe a kidnapper, a robber.

The second time I've been faced with possible criminal was in San Diego. Our house had mold in it, so were remodeling everything. We were staying at the local Red Lion Hotel. During the time we were there, we probably stayed for over a year in one hotel room. Adena had her friend Bailly over for a visit. During her visit, we were going to go to the movies, and Dad told us to go the lobby. Following his instructions, we were almost on the elevator when an old man

told us to go and fetch his wife for him in his room just outside the hallway. Like most kids, my sister and I were told not to talk to strangers. I went running down the red carpet hallway to get my dad. I don't know quite what happened, but I think Adena and Bailly got cornered inside the elevator. Dad came, and the old man waddled off. Who knows what was on the other side of the hall where he said his wife was? When you're a little kid of three or four, seeing someone that has a bad energy about them is scary. Probably everyone has had some kind of experience, but if it happens when you're young, why does it stick with you? I think this is because children are scared more when they're smaller, because in the adult life, you've probably seen many suspicious things. Being so close to something so frightening shapes you into a totally different person.

That's It

#### Chapter 4

Memoirs, to me, are supposed to be longer than a couple pages. My life hasn't been very long, and it will probably never be as interesting as others'. Our lives as humans will be separated from others' by the paths we take and choose. I've chosen to live my childhood by trying to be "normal," which we all know that there isn't such a thing and hopefully never will be. If all of us were normal, than we'd all be the same, do the same things, and just about live the same lives. It is because we can't be normal that we start the day differently and spend the day differently. Since I am a human, I have the ability to determine the way I start my day and spend it. I might always have a cup of hot chocolate and an iPod to start off my day.

Arel Peckler

Seventh Grade

Boulder, Colorado

# 2008 Heartland Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature Finalists

Twisted by Laurie Halse Anderson □

The Real Question by Adrian Fogelin □

Endgame by Nancy Garden □

Just for You to Know by Cheryl Harness □

Crossing the Wire by Will Hobbs □

13 Little Blue Envelopes by Maureen Johnson □

Alabama Moon by Watt Key □

Twilight by Stephanie Meyer □

Poison by Chris Wooding □

The Book Thief by Marcus Zusak

**Purpose:** □ The Heartland Award, created and directed by The Writing Conference, Inc., was established in 1996 to encourage the participation of young adults in the reading of young adult literature, to encourage the teaching of this literature in middle and secondary schools as supplemental and in-class reading, and to aid in the goal that all young adults become life-long readers. □ □

**Eligibility for Voting:** □ Students who vote must be in grades 6-12 and have read at least three (3) of the books on the list. Students may vote only once.

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