

# Stone Soup

*The Magazine by Young Writers & Artists*



*Illustration by Zellie Calavita, age 13, for "Friends," page 13*

## **THE BIGGEST WIN**

It's not about winning, it's about being a team

## **RIA FISH**

In a magical underwater grotto, Maria and her father meet again

MAY/JUNE 2016

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**43rd Anniversary!**



# Stone Soup

*The Magazine by Young Writers & Artists*

VOLUME 44, NUMBER 5  
MAY / JUNE 2016

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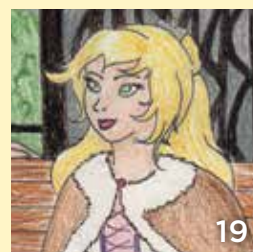
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# Editor's Note

**There's nothing special** about the number 43. Except that it's a big number for a little magazine like *Stone Soup*. Yes, dear readers, this issue marks 43 years of publication! We're happy we can continue to bring you exceptional writing and art by kids. As you may have noticed, we have a soft spot for melancholy stories, and this issue is no exception. Don't worry, it's not a cry fest. All of these stories have positive resolutions. Mai, in "Friends," misses the life she left behind in Vietnam, until a kind classmate takes her under her wing. Celia's lonely life is turned around when she meets the mysterious Z in the park. In "Ria Fish," Maria gets to see her dad one last time, and in "The Blue Jays' Song," a chorus of blue jays provides an *aha* moment for Ciela. Have you ever had to start over at a new school? Lost a loved one? What was the catalyst that turned things around for you? Tell us your story.

— Gerry Mandel

## Subscriptions

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## Submissions

Read our guidelines at [stonesoup.com](http://stonesoup.com). If you have submission questions, write to [editor@stonesoup.com](mailto:editor@stonesoup.com). No email submissions, please.

**ON THE COVER** Zellie Calavita has been drawing since before she can remember. As a preschooler, she would dictate stories to her parent or teacher, then illustrate them. Her favorite thing to draw is people, especially girls, using colored pencils or watercolors. Zellie also enjoys writing, acting, and softball.



# The Mailbox



**I just received** my copy of the March/April issue with my story, “The Way Back Home,” in it! It was so exciting, not only to see it in print but also to see the pictures from my illustrator, Katie

Lew. She did an amazing job! It was very surreal to see the story I had in my head come to life through someone else’s eyes.

**Sawyer McCloskey, 13**

Eagle, Idaho

**Stone Soup is awesome!** Every issue has so many things to enjoy. I particularly loved reading “Iris in the German Garden” in the January/February 2016 issue. It was a lot different from many of the stories I have read in *Stone Soup*. I particularly loved the fact that the author acted out the story before writing it down. I love acting out stories that I have read, written, or am about to write, with my friends, siblings, and cousins.

**Abigail Rose Cargo, 13**

Lexington, South Carolina

**That review** is pretty amazing, isn’t it. My mail arrived just now and I’ve read it three times already. What a great thing your magazine does for writers, old and young! When I was a school librarian, it was very popular with our students.

**Augusta Scattergood, author**

St. Pete Beach, Florida

*Augusta Scattergood is the author of The Way to Stay in Destiny, which was reviewed by Eun Bee (Lena) Park in the March/April 2016 issue of Stone Soup.*

**I love Stone Soup** so, so much and have since my parents gave me a subscription for Christmas about three years ago. *Stone Soup* can let kids express themselves through writing and artwork, and I just think that is great. The drawings and paintings are so well done, and the writing doesn’t seem like it’s written by kids. I am delighted when a new issue arrives, but sadly, I quickly plow through it in only about half an hour. Of course I read it again, though. One of my favorite stories was “Different City, Same Stars,” by Abby Svetlik [July/August 2015], and I loved the illustrations by Audrey Zhang for “Join the Fun” [January/February 2016].

**Zellie Calavita, 13**

El Cerrito, California

*Zellie illustrated “Friends” on page 13 (and on the cover!) of this issue.*

**My whole family** loves *Stone Soup*. When I visit my grandparents I can read my mom’s old magazines that she kept all this time!

**Luna Sophia Bar-Cohen, 9**

Princeton, New Jersey

**I think Stone Soup** is really cool and quite inspiring for young writers and illustrators, just to know that there is a place that appreciates their work and is willing to put a whole magazine out there for all of these creative people who like to write and illustrate.

**Samantha Abrishami, 11**

McLean, Virginia

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*Stone Soup* welcomes your comments. Send them to [editor@stonesoup.com](mailto:editor@stonesoup.com).



*"You're the best best friend ever!"*

# The Biggest Win

By **Caelen McQuilkin**

*Illustrated by* **Ester Luna**

**P**ASS. KICK. GOAL. Those are pretty much the words I live by. It would also be accurate to say that every day after school I put on shin guards and pull tight the waxy, black laces on my shiny coal-colored cleats. I play through weather, bad days, homework overloads, injuries, and anything else you may encounter in daily life. I play until the crickets come out and it gets cold and the sky is slowly steeped with rose, magenta, tangerine, and lemon zest.

On the weekends my best friend Janina and I adventure together. It could be her painting my portrait, going skiing, swimming in icy mountain lakes, etc. One weekend, Janina surprised me by blurting out, “I want to be as good at soccer as you are, Rachel!” That was just about the most shocking statement Janina has ever made, and that’s saying something, considering that she’s crazier than *me*! This was so knock-you-off-your-feet, because Janina’s life is essentially art. My life is essentially soccer. Janina’s an artsy daydreamer. I’m a soccer star. Our friendship is based on the quote “opposites attract.” We are not meant to be on a sports team together.

Luckily, I was stable enough to find my bearings and replied, “Nina, you should sign up for the team!” The moment the words left my lips, I regretted them. My BFF was cut out for art, and maybe even hiking, but definitely not club soccer: a pressurized, play-harder-than-your-hardest sport.

“Really?” Janina asked. “I always thought that you thought I was terrible at soccer, but you’ve proved me wrong! Yessss! I’m



Caelen McQuilkin, 13  
Lee Vining, California



Ester Luna, 12  
Washington, DC

gonna sign up for the team right away!” As I tried to glue on a smile and stop my hands from sweating, Janina added, “You’re the best best friend ever!” It was too much to bear.

“Uh, thanks. Shoot, I just realized that I, uh, need to be home now!” Before Janina could say anything, I whipped out my phone and dialed home. I tried to ignore her puzzled face as I asked Mom for a ride home. “Bye, Janina!” I called as I ran out the door. My face turned beet red as I added, “Can’t wait until you sign up for the team!” Then I turned and sprinted down the street towards home, forgetting about Mom coming to pick me up.

“**R**ACHEL, SWEETIE, all I’m saying is that you aren’t the kind of girl who would do that to a friend!” Mom piled on the guilt by topping everything off with, “Janina called five times this evening!”

“You just don’t get it!” I said in an almost whisper. If I had been brave enough, I would have told my mom that Janina is my best friend in the whole wide world who manages me after losing a game, who I can tell anything and everything and will surely understand, and always knows what to do... and I completely lied to her. With that thought, my brimming wall of tears split and out came a flood. The tears splashed onto my red cheeks and I ran up the stairs desperately to the safety of my room.

**W**HEN I GOT to the park early Saturday morning, it turned out

that my hopes from the morning were ninety-percent desperation. Janina isn’t the kind of girl who says something and doesn’t follow up. I found her in the park, waiting expectantly for the team. The last word I’d use to describe Janina then would be soccer player. She was wearing jean shorts that looked tight and uncomfortable. No cleats or shin guards, just simple sandals. Janina smoothed her silky blouse and tossed some wavy black hair behind her shoulder.

“Uh... are you, ya know, still signed up for the team?” I asked.

“Of course!” fizzed Janina. “It’s just that I don’t have the equipment yet. So today I’ll just meet everyone.”

“Ohhhh... that’s, that’s fine,” I said uncertainly. “I like your outfit.” I felt guilty for adding that comment, but at least it broke the awkward silence that used to never occur between us.

**T**HE NEXT few weeks of my life went terribly. At practice, Janina tripped and fell, kicked with her toe, passed the ball to the other team. She also asked embarrassing, dumb questions like, “What does the defense do again?” It seemed like she was *trying* to embarrass herself! Coach put the pressure on and held practice every day since the championship games were coming up. That was usually a stressful time of the year, but now it was unimaginable. To top it all off, Janina and I grew further and further apart, until I could hardly even call her my best friend.

One evening, after a particularly exas-

perating practice, coach called us all into a circle.

“Now,” she said, “we all know that our game which decides whether we go on to the championship finals or not is tomorrow.” We all nodded with nervous, soccer-loving smiles. “I have some homework for you tonight.” Some of the older girls like Suzie and Bella groaned. “I want you to think about what the word *ohana* means. You can ask parents, siblings, Google it, whatever. I just want you to be able to tell me what it means tomorrow.” With that, coach left our circle of confused girls. After a pause Janina picked up her duffel bag and left with a weak wave. Then, one of the nicest girls on the team, Natalie, left after a cheery goodbye.

“Man!” Suzie said. “Janina stunk like my second uncle’s weird aged cheddar cheese today!”

“I know, right?” Bella joined in. “She missed that one goal that *any* of us could make!” Bella gestured around the circle and the other girls nodded. Soon enough, everybody except for me dished out their share of mean comments about Janina. And when I say everybody, I mean my friends, my team, my *family*. Their expectant looks destroyed my last shard of pity for my used-to-be best friend.

“Rachel, I know that Janina is, like, your best friend and stuff, but you have to admit...”

“Yeah, totally,” I said. Then, surprising

myself, I added, “I bet we’ll lose tomorrow with her!” While I expected to feel satisfied about agreeing with my team, I felt an inky black monster slither to my heart and settle there. And though it was hard to admit, I forced myself to. I knew what that monster was... guilt.

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The moment the  
words left my lips,  
I regretted them.

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I WOKE UP that morning with those special game-day butterflies that only dedicated soccer players feel. That day was our almost final game—the one that decides

whether we get to go to the final championships. Coach looked nervous as she called us into a huddle.

“Girls?” she said. “Did any of you think about *ohana* last night?”

Well, I hadn’t thought about it last night, obviously. *I have way too much on my mind and it’s just some word that nobody else will understand*, I thought.

Coach continued on. “To be honest, I’m pretty disappointed in you girls today.” My heart fell to an impossibly deep spot somewhere below my cleats. “Well, I’ll tell you what *ohana* means. *Ohana* means family. *Ohana* means that everyone is responsible for everyone.” Coach took a breath. Every girl on the team was frozen. The pause didn’t even get the team rowdy and giggly again. We all held our breath, waiting. Coach started again. “We are all tightly bonded. We are friends, teammates, *family*. We are only as strong as our weakest link.” With that,

Janina's eyes widened and I could see the other girls wrinkle their eyebrows and sneak peeks at Janina. If coach noticed, she was unfazed by it. Now on a roll, she began again. "As the coach, I am proud when we win. I am proud when we score, and I am proud when we save a goal heroically. But I am most proud when I see teammates helping one another. And I have to say, girls, I haven't been seeing a lot of that lately. I haven't been seeing a lot of ohana, and I haven't been very proud." The words sank in.

I desperately tried to wrap my brain around coach's concept, but the ref angrily gestured to our team to hurry up. We fanned out into our positions. As soon as the whistle blew, I received an expert pass from Bella, but I lost the ball. Luckily, Suzie got it and scored a leftie. For some reason, I didn't feel that happy. Whenever I blinked, the word *ohana* flashed before my eyes. This distraction led me to let two opponents by me. Both of them scored, and I didn't even notice. At half-time, the score was one to three. I ignored everything: my teammates congratulating Suzie on her leftie goal, a mean comment about Janina from Bella, and even coach giving me some gentle advice.

Things began to look up for the team as Bella scored two goals, both assisted by Suzie. Since I was the other forward, this was a bad sign. I had had no part in our team's success today. I could tell people

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**My friendship  
with Janina flashed  
before my eyes.**

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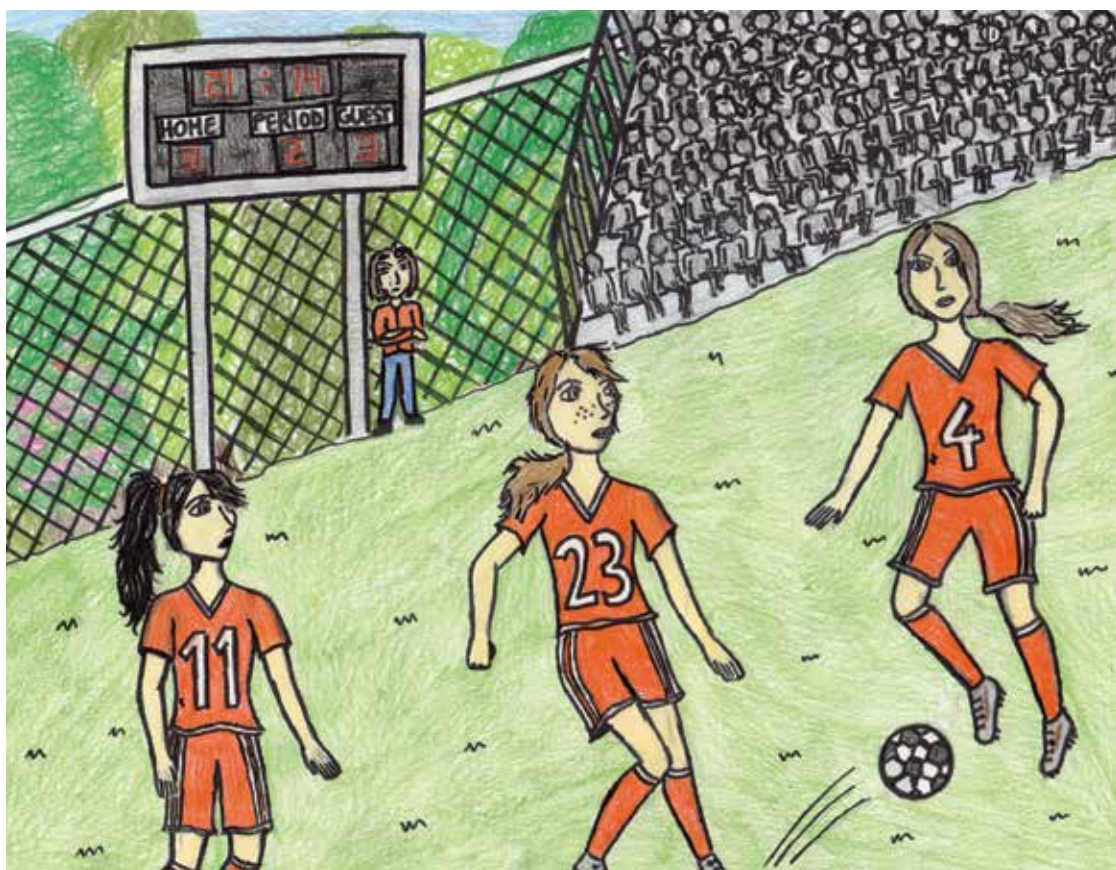
in the crowd started to lose their admiration of me. Usually, huge signs and banners screaming *Rachel* encouraged me on, but I didn't notice any today. By the last quarter, things had gone back and forth but the score remained three to three. An opponent kicked the ball out and it was

our throw in. I knew this was the moment. Usually the phrases "a throw in," "from us," "close to our goal," "the game is tied," "in the last quarter," etc., make me get all jumpy and ecstatic with butterflies,

but now I just felt a heavy weight in my stomach.

It was now that I noticed Coach had made a weird decision and played Janina in right wing, Suzie's usual spot. I tricked a defender, making it past, and had a choice—Janina was wide open, with a good shot at the goal. Bella, on my left, was getting covered, but there was still a good chance she'd make it. In slow motion, a defender approached me. I lifted my leg and passed the ball to my left. The moment the ball left my foot, I heard Janina let out some kind of quiet but loud animal sound from deep inside her. Bella scored and the whistle blew with a sickening finality that suggested the end of my friendship with Janina.

**I**F YOU'RE A good soccer player, a soccer star, a good friend, a good teammate, would you go to the pizza party after your victory? If I was, I would. I



*I lifted my leg and passed the ball to my left*

would go to the party, drink tons of soda, eat lots of pizza, play games, and eat too much candy. I would be glad that there had been a scout watching the game, and that I played well. But no. I am not a soccer player, a soccer star, a good friend, a good teammate. And that's why I am not going to play in the championship game.

**W**HEN I GOT HOME, I escaped to my room. I cried and cried and cried and tried to ignore the constant flow of Snapchats coming from the pizza party.

Eventually, my mom came into the room and talked to me for a while. She finally convinced me that soccer is what I live for. Yes, school comes first. Yes, family comes even before that. But next is soccer. I need to honor that. Feeling a little bit better, I decided to play the championship game.

**T**HE CHAMPIONSHIP game for Orchid County is a huge deal. Practically the whole school comes out to watch. Banners and signs float in the huge crowd. People scream and laugh and

shout and cheer and sometimes even cry. Coach usually gives us a huge pep talk before we head out onto the field, and we do a team cheer, and it's one of the best days of my life. But that day, before even getting to the stadium, I could already see how different things would be. Before walking out onto the field, Coach didn't say or do anything. She just gave us a pained, desperate look.

I had never felt so helpless in my life.

But then all of it flashed through my mind. Janina's kindness despite me being better at soccer, my watching her paint for hours on end, the team being rude and her running away, me quitting... the realization was golden, whole and pure. Never is it one person's fault, it is the whole *team's* fault. It isn't the "bad player." It is the "bad team." And it's not about winning, it is about being a *team*. A team... no, a family. And *nobody*, not even toe-kicker Janina, is left behind. Nobody gets left behind. Nobody gets left behind. Nobody gets left behind. I knew that in order to win, we had to once again become a team, a family. I knew what Janina had felt. I understood what coach had felt. I knew what ohana meant.

In the third quarter, the score finally changed from zero to zero. They scored. My heart sank, and so did the team. We were just too down on ourselves.

Finally, Bella had a breakthrough and the ball came to the side we were trying to score on. An opponent stole the ball from

us, but it somehow got kicked out.

"Janina can throw!" Coach announced. Bella, our usual throw-inner, gave her a funny look and picked up the ball.


"Let me!" she hissed.

I was silent for a moment and then whispered to Bella, "Just give her a chance." Coach heard, because she gave Bella a strict nod.

Using one of my best soccer talents—losing a defender, I became open for Janina to throw. For a second, my tiny spark of a hope that Janina could throw the ball accurately was gone. But then I decided I had nothing to lose. Janina threw the ball.

For one millisecond, I was caught by surprise. It was a perfect throw-in! Then my soccer instinct kicked in and I dribbled the ball once, twice, and shot. I pulled my foot back to kick. Each second stretched itself into a year. My friendship with Janina flashed before my eyes. My soccer career flashed before my eyes. The two flashbacks merged, and the ball soared towards the goal's top left corner. The crowd *oohed* and *ahhed*.

The ball bounced off the post and the whistle blew.

From that moment on, our team was one. One team that understood ohana. One team that understood we were only as strong as our weakest link. One team that understood and still understands that to win, we have to be one. And in the end... winning isn't what really matters. What really matters is ohana. 

# Thunderstorms

By Lulu Priede

Thunderstorms,  
My favorite things.  
I sit on the porch with a cold treat.  
Wrapped in a fuzzy blanket, warm  
And watching the sky light up.  
Thunder echoes through the air, a grin creeping  
Across my face.  
Darkness all around,  
The stars are hidden behind the dark clouds.  
If I look fast enough, I will see the bright streaks  
Race across the sky.  
Raindrops dance as they hit the ground,  
Drops tickle my toes.  
As the night sneaks up on me,  
I only close my eyes and smell in the wonderful smell.  
The smell of fresh liquid pouring from the sky.



Lulu Priede, 11  
Minneapolis, Minnesota



*I am happier than I have been in a long time*

# Friends

By **Jem Burch**

*Illustrated by Zellie Calavita*

**O**UR NEW HOUSE is small and nondescript. It has two bedrooms and one bathroom, and a tiny backyard with sparse grass. Along the perimeter is an ugly, pink cinder-block wall lined with thorny, bristling rose bushes. Inside there is the table and the rug on the floor and three chairs. There is a small couch and a bamboo plant in a large round glass jar. My room has only my bed and the small desk with a lamp that casts a greenish glow across the hardwood floors. There is one window by the desk, and when I look out of it, I can see the grass and the sky and the large maple tree fingering the breeze in the yard next to ours. In the late afternoon the tree casts looming shadows on the grass.

I miss our home in Vietnam. It was cozy and comfortable, and outside I could see the papaya tree with the large green fruits hidden under its broad leaves. We never got to harvest the fruit this year. We stayed as long as we could. But the end of the war chased us away, and we fled to America. The journey on the ship was long and arduous. We were crowded together with many other families, waiting... And now, here we were, in a whole new country, with no knowledge of this place.

**I** SHRINK IN MY SEAT, trying to make myself seem as small as possible. This is school, where I am the odd one out, where I am alone. I know nothing. I want to fade into the background, or drift out the door back home. But where is home? Home is not here. Home is Vietnam. I don't care about the war.



Jem Burch, 12  
Van Nuys, California



Zellie Calavita, 13  
El Cerrito, California

I want to be home.

"We have a new student today," my teacher says, beckoning me forward. Shyly, I stand up and walk to the front of the room in awkward silence. "Everyone, please say hello to Mai." Ms. Nelson smiles encouragingly. I look up at her, pleading with my eyes to let me leave this room. She seems to understand and nods faintly. I rush back to my seat, my cheeks red, trying to ignore the stares of other students.

"Class," Ms. Nelson says, "please open your silent-reading books."

I look across the room. Students are opening their books and reading in silence. I stare down at my desk. I have no book. I don't know English. The whole world is shattering around me, and I am watching—helpless—from afar.

Ms. Nelson notices me. She quietly walks over and squats beside me. "Do you have a book?" she whispers, her voice kind.

I look at her mutely. Tears well up in my eyes. Ms. Nelson sympathetically pats my shoulder and looks around the classroom. "Hmm..." she says. "Ah—Laura? Do you mind helping Mai?"

The girl sitting at the desk next to me turns her head. She smiles when she sees me, and Ms. Nelson helps scoot her desk closer to mine. Satisfied with the arrangement, our teacher walks away.

"Hi," Laura whispers with a kindly smile. "I'm Laura." She says each word slowly and clearly.

I grin and point to my chest. "Mai." I

like this girl. She understands me.

She smiles back, her eyes shining happily. "Welcome to school."

Laura shows me her book. I look down at the letters dancing across the page. I frown and shake my head and point to the words.

"Hmm." Laura appears thoughtful. She raises her hand, and Ms. Nelson walks over to her. They whisper for several minutes, and finally Ms. Nelson nods. With a smile, she walks back to her desk, pulls out a green slip of paper, and gives it to Laura. Laura stands up and beckons for me to follow. I walk out of the door behind her, and in silence we move down the hall.

Laura halts at a door and opens it. I stop and shake my head, but she beckons to me with a smile. Curiosity draws me forward, and I let the door close as I step over the threshold. I am awed by what I see. Shelves and shelves of books—tons and tons of them, all lined up neatly in rows. Each one is like an opening into a different world; I long to sit down in one of the comfortable cushy beanbag chairs and stay there forever, poring over the stories. In Vietnam, I used to sit in the chair by the bookshelf with a story and read until darkness obscured the pages.

"Come over here," Laura whispers, and I follow her as if in a trance. She sits down at a desk, and I sit down beside her. She picks up a small pencil and a clean sheet of paper and begins to draw the alphabet. I watch her, awed by the fluidity of her motions, how quickly and easily she

moves. I trace each letter with my finger as she writes them, and she tells me about the sounds they make.


I learn fast. By the time the allotted amount of time is up, I can understand seven simple words and can say the entire alphabet. I am happier than I have been in a long time.

**T**HE WEEK progresses. Every morning, instead of reading, Laura and I head to the library where she teaches me more and more words. I marvel at Laura's patience and kindness. I drink up the new words like a small plant. I love them all. Earth. Moon. Flower. Bat. Car. Jump. Violet. When every lesson is done, I want to jump and scream and shout. But I don't. I don't want to shatter the lovely whispering quiet of the library.

One day moves into another, and finally it is Friday. I skip to the bus stop,

and wait. It pulls up, letting out a stream of noxious exhaust, and I hop on, choosing my customary seat in the back. The bus turns away from the curb. Three stops later, Laura hops on and sits down beside me. We exchange smiles.

School begins, and Laura and I head to the library for the lesson. We sit down at the usual desk, and she immediately shows me a sentence. "Can you read this?" she asks.

I look at the letters. They float in my mind like birds circling above my head. I try to catch each one by the tail as it flies past; I trace the letters with my fingertip. And then my heart skips a beat. I can see the words. I understand their meaning. I smile happily and look up into Laura's hazel eyes. "Yes." I answer her question. Then I look down at the paper again and with the pencil I circle the six words: Do you want to be friends? "Yes." 



# Book Review

By Vera Sablak

*Fish in a Tree*, by Lynda Mullaly Hunt;  
Nancy Paulsen Books: New York, 2015; \$16.99




Vera Sablak, 12  
Concord, Massachusetts

IN LYNDA MULLALY HUNT's new novel, *Fish in a Tree*, sixth-grader Ally Nickerson has a big secret that she's afraid to share: she has always struggled with reading and writing. It's been the same thing in every one of the seven different schools she's been to (her father is in the military): her best work isn't good enough. On top of that, Ally is bullied by two mean girls, queen bee Shay and her sidekick, Jessica, who insult her and call her many awful names, one of the worst being "dumb." Ally fears that she is dumb, but she isn't. When Ally's teacher goes on maternity leave, a substitute named Mr. Daniels replaces her, and something special happens. Mr. Daniels cares so much about every student in his class. Ally eventually learns from Mr. Daniels that "everyone is smart in different ways" and that she has a learning difference that makes it harder for her to read but not impossible.

Mr. Daniels reminds me of one of my teachers. Like Mr. Daniels, Mr. Lemaire is kindhearted, generous with his time, and did his best to help each and every student in my class. I can remember many times when I stayed after school or came in before school to work on a range of things, from spelling to

writing to practicing lines for our annual school plays, which all of us loved and he directed. In fact, he was the one who introduced me to *Stone Soup* and suggested good books. Mr. Daniels gave each student in his class a writing notebook and so did Mr. Lemaire. We would write about our thoughts on the books we read, and he wrote back to us every time. I will always remember how he helped me in fourth and fifth grades, and if I ever become a teacher, that's how I would like to teach.

Mr. Daniels wasn't the only person who helped Ally; her friends did, too. In the beginning of *Fish in a Tree*, Ally didn't have any friends. I give her credit for trying to make them, and I was happy for Ally when she met Keisha and Albert. Ally admires Albert for his thick skin. Albert also gets teased, but he doesn't let it get to him. Almost every middle-school kid wants to fit in, including Ally, but Keisha reminded her that sometimes it's not good to fit in with the wrong people, like Shay's mean crowd, and instead, Keisha stands up to them. I think this is good advice, and I believe that it is better to be who you are and not pretend to be like somebody else. My friends are the kind of people that I want to be around. I would rather have my few understanding, true friends than a flock of followers like Shay's "friends."

If you are looking for a good read that will make you think, laugh, and cheer, *Fish in a Tree* is waiting for you. Also, reading Ally's story could be comforting if some parts of school are scary or seem stressful, or you're getting teased or feeling lonely. A poster in Ally's school reminded students: "Sometimes the bravest thing you can do is ask for help," and don't keep your struggles a secret. It is important to remember that you should never give up. You never know when impossible can turn into possible. 



*They were from two different worlds, but as they talked they found that they fit*

# Z

By **Ayla Schultz**

*Illustrated by* **Anna Dreher**

**T**HE SUN GENTLY WARMED the earth. The squirrels were hopeful waking up. Peeking out, softly, just enough to see snow, always snow. The cold cracked their dry noses harder than a bad nut.

Slowly, reluctantly, shades went up in houses. Pulled up by invisible hands. People, chained to their beds by the relentless cold. Ice-lined windows stared out defiantly, still believing that spring would come. Then their inhabitants would, once again, take pleasure in looking out of them at the beautiful vista of the park beyond. A girl scurried out from her bed, not in one of the surrounding houses, but in a building within the park itself. She wore a thick brown coat, a barrier against the frost. Her dark hair was all but lost under a densely knitted hat the color of roasting chestnuts. Turning, she looked with dark amber eyes at the park, her conquered territory.

The carriages started to wake up, eagerly awaiting their morning meal of people and elbow grease. The clacking rose from the streets, a pleasant sound that would go on all day, lulling people to sleep at sundown. The girl in the brown coat flew across the road into a small bakery across the street. Disappearing inside, she appeared a few minutes later with a hot cup of tea and something in a happy-looking brown bag. Silently, she slipped back into the park through the forgotten back gate. Lowering herself lightly onto a bench, she promptly started to eat. The mist from her tea obscured her face for a moment.



Ayla Schultz, 12  
Brooklyn, New York



Anna Dreher, 13  
Portland, Oregon

The main gates of the park open at eight, she thought to herself, I have some time.

Church bells rang across the city. Calling proudly to everyone that it was eight o'clock. Now everything was awake. She dove behind a bush as the absent-minded constable walked by to open up the park. He always forgot to close the back entrance, which was her way in and out. He unlocked the heavy iron bolt with a large tarnished key, which turned with a protesting moan. The floodgate opened and people started to flow in. Ladies

in big dresses full of lace, still ignorant of the fact that you do not wear white in midwinter when the snow has lost its sheen.

Looking out from behind her nook in the bush, she saw a seated girl about her own age, staring at an old oak tree, absently turning something in her hands. The girl's pale blond hair was luminous but her face was still, missing its light. Unfurling herself from her hiding place, brushing the snow off her knitted hat, she walked over to the girl on the bench and perched next to her. "What is your name?" she asked the sad girl curiously.

"Celia, and yours?" the girl said, still not blinking, her pale hair wafting in the breeze, almost blending with the weather.

Amber eyes shining, the girl whose home was the park responded, "Just call me Z."

Celia was a child of privilege but neglected. Her parents only seemed to care about money and lush parties. She was lonely, trapped in an endless expanse of riches, dances, and emptiness. Z was as mysterious as her name—a single letter that gave nothing away. But she had a warm heart and a quick mind. Everything she knew she had found out for herself.

They were from two different worlds, but as they talked they found that they fit. Like two sides to the same person.

The next day Celia came back. A pattern arose. Celia would come

and bring Z food in return for knowledge about the park. Z taught Celia about the birds that lived in the crackling bushes and the ones that lived in the snow-heavy trees. Z showed her the ancient stone toolshed that she lived in at night, and Celia started to feel that she had a place in this world. One day, when the few brave flowers were beginning to crack through the slowly defrosting ground, Celia asked Z if she ever got lonely in the park without a family. Z mysteriously invited her to come and see for herself that night, saying that the park was far more beautiful then.

The park was just beginning to change from day into night. The animals and people were changing shifts. Birds were settling down in their nests for a cold sleep where they would dream of what it would be like when spring finally came.

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**Everything she knew  
she had found out  
for herself.**

---

The bats were taking to the air, their wings making the sound of a late river. Fast and unsteady. The robbers of the daytime, squirrels, were being replaced by the thieves of the night, raccoons. Their masks slipped permanently over their faces, their satchels on their backs, they stalked out of their houses to find anything unlucky enough to be dropped in their way. The constable took up his shift as the night watchman. Immediately after the other guard had left he fell into a deep sleep.

Celia and Z slipped in the back entrance, unseen.

They walked along the main path, devoid of all other human life, deep into the park. The only sounds were those of the chirping crickets and soft rustling of raccoons furtively stealing somebody else's dinner. Finally they arrived at a big clearing with the old oak tree in the center. Z made a long, low whistle and people started appearing out of the trees. They gathered around and Z introduced Celia. They made a fire and started to tell stories, stories about finding beauty in the relentless cold and frost. Tales of finding truth in the very flowers that grew on the ground. Stories about themselves and how they had found that the most beautiful thing was propping each other up in times of trouble. This is why they gathered in the park at night when it had emptied, a large

family, a new family. Celia fell in love with the park that night and with these people.

The next night Celia went back, and then the next. Soon she couldn't remember the time before she had met these people. She was now at peace, she had found friends who cared for her, who loved her not for how much money she had, or who she had met. She was filled with a joy that she had never felt before. Z had stripped away the sad colors of Celia's world and revealed a rich and beautiful surface below. Shifting it to bring in light into what had been a dark life.

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**Celia started to feel  
that she had a place  
in this world.**

---

One morning Celia sat down on the bench in front of the old tree as usual. She waited, as the sun softly stalked the clouds across the horizon, scaring them into non-existence. She waited as it started to seep into the earth and melt the last shards of tired ice from the ground. Finally, her hands rattling, she walked to the old stone building that Z lived in. The path had never felt so long. She knocked on the door, not her old insecure knock, but a new, rippling knock of the girl she had become. She carefully opened the door. It desperately moaned, longing for some company. Celia stepped in, boots clicking on the worn stone floor. Calling out a name that bounced around the room, a fly caught in a jar. And it hit her, a ball kicked in her face, Z was gone. ❀

# Little Miracles

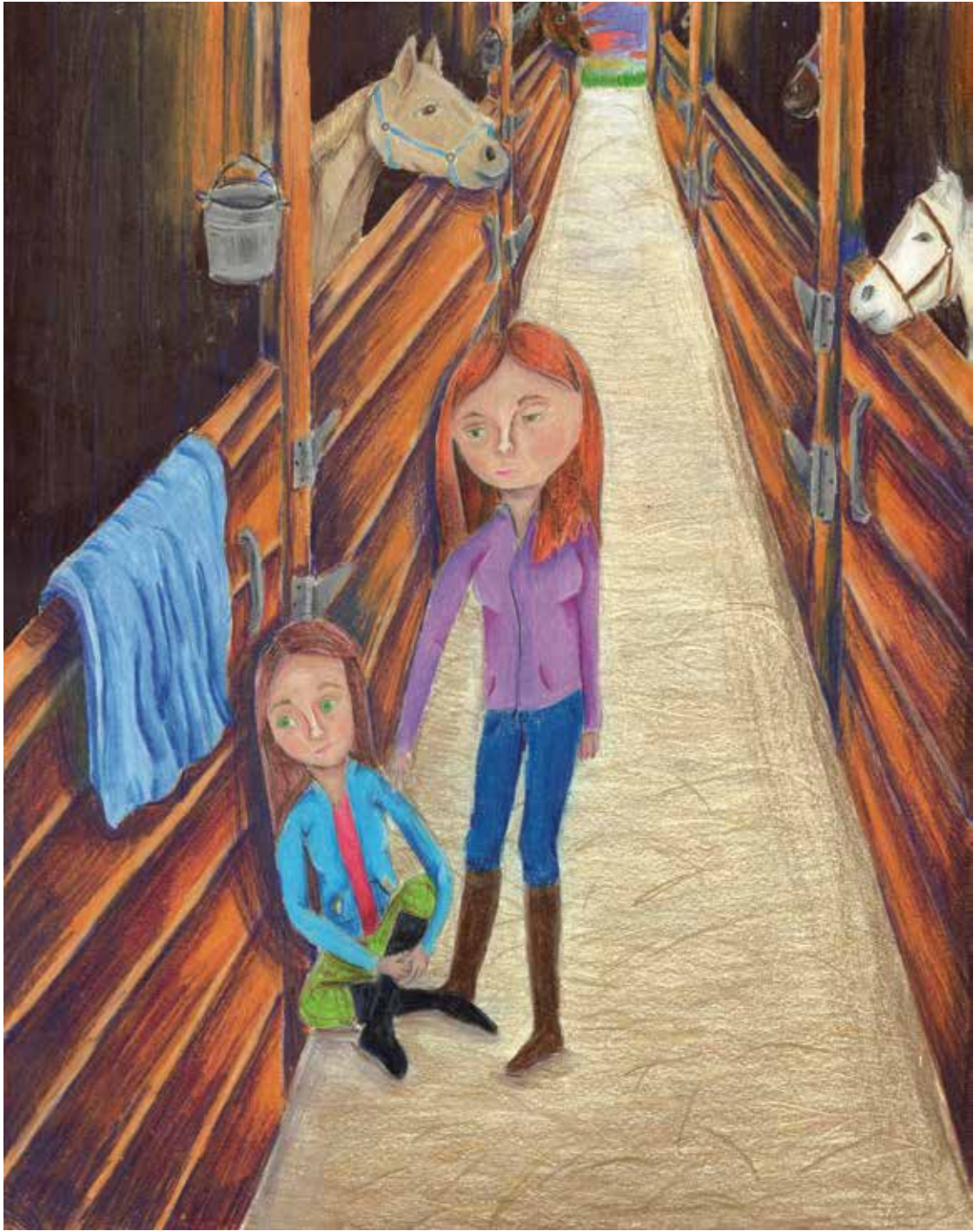
By Sylvia Gibson



Sylvia Gibson, 13  
Mill Valley, California

We all think we are important.  
But if we weren't here  
the world would still turn  
the sun would still rise  
most people's lives wouldn't change.  
The world doesn't need us.  
Some people  
many people  
sit and think about it.  
They only see that the whole wide world doesn't need them  
and don't see that they need the world  
for them to feel better  
for them to get better.  
I am one of those people.  
I try to conjure up a lifeline that I can hang onto.  
But sometimes,  
the school bell just rang  
and I'm alone  
standing  
waiting for the light to change so I can cross.  
And a car passes by me,  
so close that I can almost touch it.

And I think of how easy it would be  
to step forward  
to fall.  
I have to focus on creating a lifeline,  
something that stops me from falling.  
I am afraid  
that one day  
that lifeline will snap  
I will fall  
I won't stop myself.  
But I hold on.  
I find the small things  
that give me a lifeline.  
The little miracles in life that make it worth living.  
Have you ever seen a bird take off,  
bursting into the air?  
Or felt the joy  
when a child takes his first step?  
Living things are miracles.  
We all have something to give to the world.  
Something that the world needs.  
These words,  
they are my gift to you.  
They are my gift to the world.



*"Honey, you really shouldn't be out here"*

# The Foal

By **Brooke Hemingway**

*Illustrated by* **Gabby Heller**

**H**IDDEN IN THE early morning Virginia gloom, I crept into the stable a few minutes before dawn, opening the door quickly to stop the sound of creaking hinges. My riding boots made a crunching sound with all of the hay underfoot, and I slowly walked past the five horses in the stable. Two horses, the ones we were currently training to sell, shied back a little, but the three horses my family owned leaned over the oaken half-doors. They nuzzled my warm cotton jacket like they expected me to hand out sugar lumps as I normally did. But today wasn't a normal day. This whole week hadn't been a normal week.

When I reached the last stall, across from my brother's white Welsh pony, it was empty. Nothing remained in there except for a bucket and a blanket draped over the door. Sinking to my knees in hay, I shut my eyes and slumped my head against the door. My hands clenched and unclenched uncontrollably as I thought, *I failed you, Dory. I am so, so sorry.*

Six days ago, around this time, the horse who had virtually been my second mother had breathed her last breath. I breathed in, trying to stop the tears that were already burning at my eyes, but I couldn't. The first salty tear hit my knees, making them feel cold in the morning air. I wept silently at first, then gave in to the huge gulps that stole the air from me. My nose started to run, so I wiped it on my warm, woolen nightshirt.

I glanced at the haystack behind me. It still bore the impression I had made, sleeping there six days ago. I had woken up to



Brooke Hemingway, 12  
Chicago, Illinois



Gabby Heller, 13  
Vienna, Virginia

the anguished moans of Dory and had instantly rolled off of the haystack, screaming to anybody awake in the house.

"Call Doctor Jennings!"

But when the doctor had finally arrived, he announced it was too late for Dory. I had turned my green eyes into her deep black irises the whole time, petting her white-and-black head until the life drained out of her. Those eyes still haunted me, calm and full of love one moment, then like lifeless marbles the next. I could still see them when I closed my eyes. Dr. Jennings and my whole family told me it wasn't my fault Dory had died. They said it was the tumor's fault. But no matter how many reassurances they gave me, I knew it was my fault. I had been riding her since I was two, and she had helped me do so much, so many things. And when it really mattered, I couldn't give back.

And now we were going to Chincoteague Island in two hours, to get me a new pony, to replace her. A giant knot formed in my throat, a sensation that was all too familiar to me now. The pain would lessen, everyone said, but I didn't believe them. Although sometimes I forgot about Dory the pain would always return, as fresh and sharp as mint tea.

I heard the door of the stable creak open, but I didn't look up. I couldn't be distracted by anything. Not now, when I was grieving for Dory, grieving when nobody else had tried. Soft footsteps arrived by me. I heard an intake of breath, and then my mother's voice.

"Honey, you really shouldn't be out here," she said. "You could get sick in this weather."

I glanced at her. "I don't care about getting sick. I'm mourning Dory right now. Mourning how I couldn't save her, and how we're going to replace her in two hours."

Sure, I was sounding like a stubborn, spoiled teenager, but I really didn't care about that. And anyway, at least I was acting my age.

Mom sighed again. "Abby," she told me firmly. "Dory wouldn't want you to be like this. Sure, she would like you to remember her and mourn her, but you're dedicating your whole life to depression."

She was sort of right, but I wasn't going to tell her so. My fingers automatically went to the tuft of hair and picture in my pocket.

"But everything reminds me of her," I said softly. "Life reminds me of her. And the way everyone is acting, it's like they didn't even love her!"

I knew they were the wrong words to say. I knew my family loved Dory. I paused, waiting to be reprimanded. Mom went quiet for a moment.

"You know I loved her," she said. "You're just experiencing her death differently from the rest of us, since you two had a special bond."

"I loved her so much!" I cried, the lump in my throat tightening. "And I can't touch her anymore. I can't ride her anymore."

Mom sank down to her knees and

hugged me to her chest, letting me sob into her shoulder and long red hair.

"You can see her," Mom said, "in the sky, in the stars hiding behind the clouds."

"What does that mean?" I asked, gulps stealing my breath away.

"You know how many stars there are in the sky?"

"Nobody does. It's impossible to count."

"Then who's saying that some of them can't be ponies watching over their friends?" Mom stroked my russet hair. "Getting a new pony isn't replacing her, Abby. No one can replace her, you know that."

I swallowed and looked up at her.

"Mom," I said, gathering all of my courage. "Thanks. I think I'm ready to go to Chincoteague Island. I'm ready to get a new pony."

"That's the spirit!" Mom said, smiling. "Dory would like this too, I think."

I saw my white-and-black horse inside my head, butting me with her head, eyes smiling.

"I think she would like it too," I said.

AS THE CAR stopped in the parking lot of Chincoteague Island, I immediately got out and thudded into a person walking towards our car.

"Oomph!" I said, driven backwards by the blow.

Giant hands lifted me up and threw me into the air. I screamed, not knowing who

it was. The hands put me back down again and a familiar, red-bearded face came into view.

"Hey, Abby," Uncle Jeff said, ruffling my wind-blown hair. "Haven't heard you scream like that since you were two, not wanting to eat asparagus."

"You would have screamed if a giant mystery man lifted you up in the air," I retorted.

Uncle Jeff laughed, his great pot belly jiggling underneath his white shirt like a bowl of jello.

"Right-o, Abby!" he boomed, then looked at our blue truck, with the horse trailer hooked up

to the back. "Nancy! Joseph!" he said to Mom and Dad as they climbed out of the car.

Mom grinned. She and Uncle Jeff always got along, mostly because they were two extremely likable people. "Jeff! It's good to see you. How's the restaurant going?"

Uncle Jeff is the chef in a restaurant near West Virginia. It started out a little rough in the beginning, but now people have to call a few months in advance to get a reservation.

"Same as always, Nancy," he told her. "I took two days off just to watch the pony bidding. What's your family here for?"

"We're looking for one pony and a foal," Dad told Uncle Jeff. "A client of ours wants a famous Chincoteague pony, and we're looking for a foal for Abby."

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No matter how many  
reassurances they  
gave me, I knew  
it was my fault.

---

"Abby's getting a pony?" said Uncle Jeff, swinging his head around to look at me. "Why? Did something happen to Dory?"

I felt the tears burning at my eyes. That's why I don't like tears. They're like mystery assassins that slip in between the cracks and betray you feelings.

"Dory died six days ago," I said, trying not to cry.

Uncle Jeff smothered me in one of his famous hugs, warm and squishy.

"I'm sorry," he told me. "I know how much she meant to you."

Grateful for the comfort, I squeezed him tighter. The moment was warm and homey feeling, like I was hugging Dory once again.

AFTER A NICE lunch of plump hot dogs, Uncle Jeff and my family all lined up by the pens with the horses. Peering in, I saw many foals, but none looked like something I would want. I smiled, remembering when I picked Dory out of a pen like this, eleven years ago. I was two then.

I searched harder, thinking there would be nothing that grabbed my attention as easily as Dory did. Until I saw a golden-colored foal standing by herself at the edge of the pen. She was nuzzling everyone's hands and when she turned to me, I saw her eyes. Full of life, and intelligence, they were too familiar. The foal had Dory's eyes. I tugged on Dad's arm ecstatically until he looked down.

"That's the one I want," I told him, pointing to the foal. "Can we bid for her?"

Dad smiled. "Of course. But maybe you should first pick a few more out, in case you don't get her."

Although privately I doubted this, I picked out two more foals from the bunch. One was a frisky brown-and-black male, and the other was a brown female full of energy. Even though these were good candidates for me, I kept looking over at the golden foal. She was so beautiful, with Dory's eyes. I watched her until the cowboys took her out to be auctioned off.

Uncle Jeff and Dad all accompanied me to the bidding area. It was a huge lawn well away from the main pen, with grass everywhere. An auctioneer sat on a stage-like platform, with certificates of ownership in his hand, and a small pen sat in front of him. Feeling nervous, I twisted my hands around each other, wishing Mom was there. She had to go and buy a dark brown mare for their new client but promised to be quick.

The golden foal stood alone inside the pen, nickering and kicking her legs. I smiled, loving how excited she was. It would be a challenge to train her, but I loved challenges. If she were mine, that is.

Dad leaned down and whispered into my ear. "I'm not going to bid any more than nine thousand for her," he told me.

I nodded. "Surely it won't come to that," I said, trying to be confident. I looked around and hoped most of the people bidding for the golden foal didn't have a budget as big as ours. I shoved the



*"That's the one I want," I told him, pointing to the foal*

worries away and focused my attention on the auctioneer. The bidding was now on!

Dad immediately raised his hand, settling three hundred dollars as the first bid. So many hands went up after that, it was hard to keep track of the price being flung around the yard like a frisbee. Soon, it was only Dad and a businessman in a pinstriped suit with a daughter around my age. The hands were raising more slowly now, and I had to fight hard not to start hyperventilating. The tension grew, and my stomach dipped as I realized Dad had

just said the number five thousand.

The man said back in a very clipped voice, "Six thousand dollars."

"Seven."

"Eight thousand dollars."

"Nine," Dad said, his voice rising higher and higher. My eyes widened. The budget was met. If the businessman continued bidding now, I would lose the foal with Dory's eyes.

The businessman paused and whispered in his daughter's ear. I saw how her face turned red, then purple as she held

her breath.

The auction man was saying, "Going once..."

The businessman didn't move. My face was going red, holding my breath. *So close*, I thought. I almost owned the foal, almost.

"Going twice..."

Dad gripped my arm. I dug my nails into his skin accidentally. He didn't notice. The tension and fear in the air was so sharp you could cut yourself with it. The daughter of the businessman looked at her father with so much disgust and loathing it was a miracle he didn't drop down, pleading for his life. There was a scream inside my mouth, threatening to claw its way out if the businessman continued bidding. Then, like a rainbow after a terrible storm, the auctioneer shouted, "...and *SOLD*, to the man in the front row."

I felt like fainting but didn't. Tears stung in my eyes, but for the first time in two days, it wasn't from sadness. I blindly followed Dad up to the podium and grinned even wider, thinking my face would split when they presented us with the certificate of ownership. Standing there on the podium, looking down at Uncle Jeff, with Mom hurrying up behind him, I was completely and wonderfully happy.

While my parents coaxed the foal into our horse trailer, I sat dreamily on the ground, not noticing the turmoil and people around me. The beautiful golden foal

was mine. It would be up to me to train her, and I would have to teach her how to have a rider on her back. I couldn't wait.

I looked up at the sky again, searching for invisible stars. Although I didn't see any, I decided to name the golden foal Stella, in honor of the place Dory was now. In the stars. Smiling broadly, I stood up and walked back to our truck. There was still one more thing left to do when the sky went dark tonight.


"STAR LIGHT, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight."

I was lying on the green grass outside of the stables, looking at the stars. My voice paused the poem. What should I wish for? Then I knew.

"I wish to see Dory again, just one last time."

As the last echo of my voice fell silent, I stared hard at the sky, watching for something, anything. The whole world seemed to be holding its breath. After five minutes, I dropped my gaze. *Oh well*, I thought to myself, *it is just an old nursery rhyme*.

And then I saw. Thousands, millions of stars swam in the sky. They darkened, moved, and then flared brightly, turning themselves into a galloping horse, the brightest star of them all forming the eye. I smiled and blinked, feeling the tears again.

"Thank you, Dory," I said, because I knew it was from her. 

# A Swing??

By **Gracie Shapiro**

Illustrated by **Kayla Bjorn**

“**C**REAK!” THE OLD HOUSE’S DOOR swings open as I push it. The air smells of freshly cut grass, and, sure enough, the growl of a lawn mower can be heard, coming from the house next door. I leap out the door, over the steps, and land with my pink, flip-flopped feet in the sandy gravel. The sun is smiling down from up in the clear blue sky.

I bound through the stubby grass, heading for one of my favorite places in all of Port Austin—the backyard. I turn the corner, pass the shed, and get a rock stuck in my shoe. Panting, I look around. Disappointment wells up inside of me. *Nope, not here.* Then an idea comes, and I dart back around the shed, past the corner, and into the garage.

The first thing I notice as my eyes adjust to the darkness is the buzz of a saw. Then I feel sawdust spraying my bare legs, and then I see him. Clad in a protective face mask and thick gloves, my grandpa appears somewhat like the Terminator. When he sees me, he stops the saw and flips the face mask up. “Hello, sweetie!” he exclaims.

“Hi, Grandpa!” I respond and start to step forward, only to be stopped by a box of stuff. I scooch around the box and ask, “What are we going to do today?” He ponders this for a moment.

“Aha!” Grandpa exclaims, surprising me. “Today,” he says very matter-of-factly, “we are going to make... a swing!” Before I can say something, he snatches his silver, wire-rimmed glasses out and fumbles to put them on. He shuffles around boxes and



Gracie Shapiro, 12  
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan



Kayla Bjorn, 11  
Orem, Utah



*Flying through the sky, with the wind whistling through my hair, I feel like a bird*

beach toys and then opens a cabinet. He pulls a long, red-and-white, tightly coiled rope out, muttering to himself. "And this,

and this, and this, and then we'll take that board I just cut, and then..." He shuffles around some more, gathering boxes and

ropes in his arms. He strolls outside the garage and plops his armload onto the glass patio table.

"So..." I start to say but am interrupted.

"Aha!" Grandpa interjects. He dashes into the garage and soon arrives with a bow and arrows and a spool of wire. I clear my throat and start talking.

"So, what on earth are we doing?"

Grandpa continues tying the red-and-white rope to the wire.

"Grandpa!!" I clear my throat again. He glances up.

"Oh... sorry. Um, well, this arrow," my grandpa reaches over and grabs one of the arrows, "is going to soar over that tree limb." He points toward an old tree limb growing off of an old tree that towers above us.

"Then?" I ask.

"Uh-huh," he continues, "and the arrow will have that wire attached to it. Then, we'll pull all the ropes over the limb and tie it to the seat."

"The seat?" I question.

"The wooden board," Grandpa tells me. By the time he's done saying that, the rope/wire is tightly tied to the end of the arrow. I leap up in anticipation.


He smiles as he tucks the arrow tightly into its nock and raises the bow. Tufty and gray, my grandpa's hair is a mess, as usual. Grandpa closes one eye, squints, and bites his tongue as he carefully takes aim. He pulls back, lets go, and... *whoosh!* The arrow soars through the air and I run underneath with my arms extended, like a football player ready to catch a pass.

There is a crinkle and a ripping noise of leaves, but the arrow is too low and strikes the ground with a dull thud. We nock the second arrow. Pull back, let go. It soars, straight and true, but again is too low. *Crack!* The arrow lodges itself in the tree. Holding our breath, Grandpa and I stare intently at the arrow, and, sure enough, after a few seconds, it falls to the ground.

The tree limb towers above us, intimidating as ever. Third arrow. Nock it, pull back, let go. It soars higher than the rest, over the branch, a blur of silvery wire. Red and white, the rope follows closely behind. "Yippee!" I cheer, jumping up and down.

"Don't get too excited," Grandpa warns me, "we're not done yet."

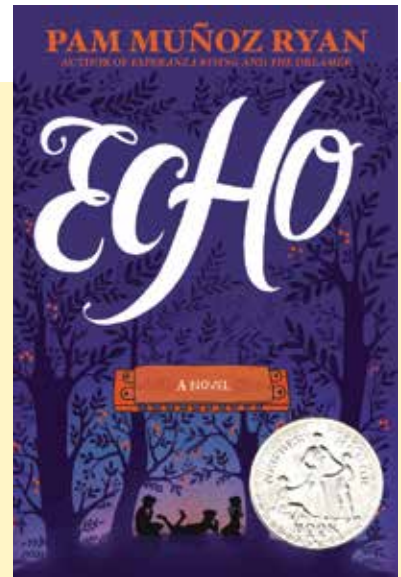
Yanking as hard as we can, we pull the rope over the tree limb. I dash to the patio table and grab the wooden board. Two holes have already been drilled in it, so we thread the rope through them and use metal fasteners to secure the rope. Finally, the swing is done.

I hop on the swing and push off as hard as I can. Within minutes, I am up high. Flying through the sky, with the wind whistling through my hair, I feel like a bird. I can see the sun smiling down at me and hear the lawn mower from next door. I can see my grandpa standing there, gazing up at me as he gathers up the spool of wire and the fasteners. He has a twinkle in his blue-gray eyes, and it isn't hard to realize that he was once an engineer and is proud that I take after him. He grins at me and I smile back, lovingly. 

# Book Review

By Sonja Benjamins-Carey

*Echo*, by Pam Muñoz Ryan; Scholastic Press:  
New York, 2015; \$19.99



Sonja Benjamins-Carey, 13  
Ann Arbor, Michigan


PAM MUÑOZ RYAN's book, *Echo*, weaves together three compelling stories, all centering on a single harmonica and its owners around the time of World War II. The book is long, almost 600 pages, but I enjoyed every second of it.

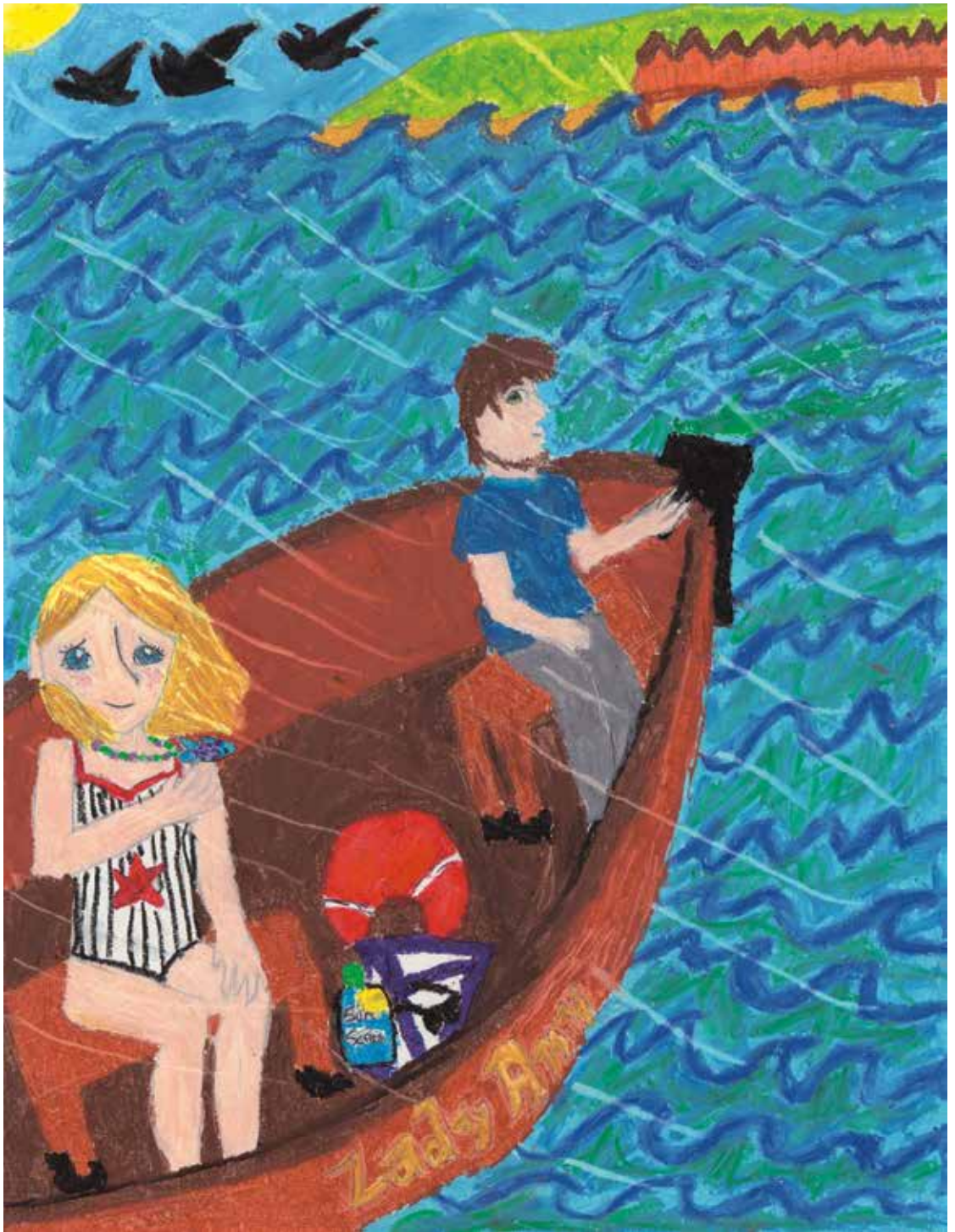
The book presents, in chronological order, three main characters: Friedrich Schmidt, Mike Flannery, and Ivy Maria Lopez. Each story is told with extreme finesse, leaving the ending of each story until the book's conclusion. A total of three brilliant cliffhangers left me wanting desperately to know more, until the new story swept me up, leaving the old one almost forgotten.

Friedrich lives in Germany, where he and his father work in a harmonica factory. When Friedrich's family opposes the Nazis, they have to escape the country to save their lives. Mike and his brother, Frankie, are orphans, and their worst fear is being separated. When the brothers are adopted, it seems like a miracle, until they find out that their new parent doesn't even want them there. Ivy and her family are constantly searching California for a real home and a permanent job for Papa. When an opportunity on a farm finally comes, Ivy hopes their new house will help keep their family together.

Mike and Frankie's story was my personal favorite. The brothers were realistic, lovable characters, with flaws as well as virtues. As an older sibling, I can say that their relationship was also realistic. Mike and Frankie had arguments and fights, but there was never any doubt that they cared for each other. I identify with Ivy the most, but not only because she is a girl. She values friendship, has to overcome stereotypes, and loves music. Friedrich was also an interesting character, although his story was the least original. Personally, I think the subject of Nazi Germany is overdone in children's books, but I was able to forgive the plot because of Friedrich himself. Friedrich was born with a giant birthmark on one side of his face and has always been pitied and teased because of it. He dreams of being a conductor, and his love of music is supported by his father, who plays cello. Friedrich's narrative was honest and refreshing, and I enjoyed it as much as the rest of the book.

All of the characters in this book are drawn together by a single instrument. Friedrich finds the harmonica in the factory where he works, it is a present to Mike, and Ivy receives it from her teacher. However, the harmonica was not the only thing these characters had in common. Each of them lost a home, and each of them struggles to find their new place in the world. And, while their journeys were not easy, each of them finds a place where they belong.

I believe that music has the power to bring people together, cutting through age, race, and culture. I play flute, and I have always thought that many instruments working together to create music with different layers is a beautiful thing. In fact, this book reminds me of a piece of music; many stories interweaving, coming together in one wonderful, musical book. 



*But the real power is that Dad is always with me*

# Ria Fish

By **Saira Licht**

*Illustrated by* **Aleydis Barnes**

**T**HE SUNBEAMS SOFTLY settled on my stretched-out body. These days in Georgia were the best, and with it being the first week of vacation and all, everything was just about perfect. My life was a heaven. With a cool drink in hand, I felt like anything was possible.

I had no idea how true that was.

“Maria! Come! Uncle Jacob wants to take you for a ride on the boat!” My mother was also enjoying the vacation, as evidenced by the bounce in her voice. I rolled off the lounging chair and headed down to the strip of private beach where the water shimmered and the sand was as warm as a bed. Uncle Jacob stood there, his towering figure looming above me. “Come on, Maria!” My heart developed a dull sort of ache at that name. I missed the nickname Ria. It was my father’s nickname for me. Was. Ever since that terrible storm on these very waters, where the boat, like a bucking bronco, had thrown my father off, the word *was* had been my enemy. These shores should petrify me. I should be unable to wade in these waters. But, though these waves hold terrible memories, they also hold all that I have left of Dad. Pushing away the feeling that made me want to crumple and cry, I grinned. Shielding my eyes from the blinding rays of sun, I skipped down to the water, my golden hair swinging around my freckled face. The motorboat stood there, majestic and waiting. “Lady Amy.” My grandmother. Lovely woman, Gran Amy was. At least her death was natural.

The spray of the surf bounded across my face. I was a bird. I



Saira Licht, 10  
Belmont, Massachusetts



Aleydis Barnes, 12  
Bethesda, Maryland

was soaring.

“Maria! You liking it?”

I nodded, showing on my face all the words that wouldn’t come out of my mouth. The sky above me was liquid sapphire. The waters were a shade of blue-green, like someone had mixed that liquid sapphire with a sparkling emerald. The houses on the shore jutted out and were the size of marbles. Dentil Island was right ahead. Plunging my head into the soothing ripples, I caught glimpses of colorful schools of fish. Suddenly, my heart gave a leap. There was *that* fish! My father and I always saw it. More like *used* to always see it. We didn’t know its name, so my father dubbed it the Ria fish. The Ria fish bounced on the water, in the way that used to make us laugh. I reached out, wanting to feel its glimmering scales. Experience had taught me that the Ria fish actually liked to be touched by humans, if you were gentle. Dad and I were. A gust of wind tugged at me. I thought that the breeze would ease me closer to the Ria fish.

But it didn’t.

“Uncle Jaco... augh!” I spluttered. The pitiless wind swooped me off the deck. The boat underneath my fumbling fingers was pulling away. Uncle Jacob had just noticed me fall, but it was too late. The waves were crashing upon me, denying me the right to speak. The surf consumed my body, shoving it down the waves. The spray darted around the boat and dove into my eyes. Salty water settled itself on my tongue, filling my mouth with the horrid taste of seawater. The ripples were

now mini tsunamis. As soon as I came above the raging water, a new wave lapped over me, and I disappeared beneath the sea again. Fighting to come up, I realized it was no use. I was losing oxygen. The disoriented figure of Uncle Jacob was too far. I couldn’t reach. I gasped, water burning me down. I closed my eyes and let it overwhelm me.

When I was sure I was dead, I opened my eyes but was completely astonished. I was in an underwater grotto, and everything was now calm and still. I took a breath. Nothing. The fire wasn’t there. Seaweed hung in beautiful draperies, and I thought to myself, Well, being dead doesn’t seem to be that bad. As I glanced around, out of the sea mist came a figure. Instead of running away, I squinted. I knew this man... I leapt into his arms. Dad.

“Dad! How... what... Dad, aren’t you...” The word didn’t come. I hadn’t uttered it since the day of Dad on the boat. If someone said it in my presence, the tears would quickly emerge.

“Dad, if you... if you’re here... am I...” Dad grinned cheekily, as only he could grin.

“No, Ria. I only have a short time with you, anyway, sweetie.” I nodded, burying my face in his seaweed-smelling shirt. Hearing the name Ria lit a spark in me on a candle I thought had gone out forever.

“Dad, I saw a Ria fish!” I needed to tell him the news. It was the only way to start the conversation. Dad nodded.

“I know. I was the Ria fish.” My heart

practically stopped.

"What?"

Dad chuckled. "Hon, it's magic. Just a little, though." My face lit up.

"Can you do some now?" My dad's face suddenly showed lines of unfamiliar weariness.

"It takes a lot out of me, Ria. But..." I held up my hand.

"Don't hurt yourself any more than you need to." I wasn't about to let my already gone father hurt himself. Dad's weary face morphed into a bright one.

"You know, you haven't changed a bit, Ria." I beamed. Then I remembered.

"Dad, why do you want me here anyway? I mean, besides actually seeing me." Dad nodded, his face growing serious now. He held up a purple-and-green beaded necklace, a figurine of a Ria fish hanging from it.

"I told myself I would give this to you when you grew up. It belonged to my mother's mother. But I added the Ria fish. Anyway, after the whole boat thing, I realized you would always be a little girl in my eyes, and I had missed my chance. So, here, little Ria." He placed the necklace around my neck, and the sensation swept over me. Cooling and heating. I didn't say anything. I didn't even smile. I knew my eyes showed it all.

"Oh Ria. I love you so much." Dad gave me a gigantic hug. His arms were strong.

"But it's time for me to go, Ria hon." I panicked a bit there.

"No, no, Dad, stay!" My heart beat fast and furious. He couldn't just leave me broken!

"How will I get back anyway?" Dad didn't say anything. He just gave me a mournful yet cheerful grin.

And then he was gone.

I closed my eyes and started sobbing. Dad was gone now, gone for real. I fingered the necklace. Immediately, I felt swoopy and excited. In another second, I was right by the boat again. Paddling up to it, I swung my slight frame over it. Uncle Jacob was in the water on the other side of the boat.

"Maria... Maria... Come, Maria... Maria, please..." I was dazed, only able to conjure up a few words.

"Uncle Jacob..." Uncle Jacob flung around in the water. For a moment, he only stared, the next second he was right on top of me.

"Oh, Maria, that was *great* swimming, how'd you, oh, so glad, oh, Maria I'm so glad..." All I could do was smile a wan smile, then I collapsed inside the boat.

#### AFTER

DAD'S NECKLACE—well, I don't think it has powers. Maybe it does, and I just haven't discovered them yet. But the real power is that Dad is always with me. Around my neck. He will guide me in anything I attempt. I don't know how I know that, but I do. Dad is my everything. And whenever I see a Ria fish, my necklace feels lighter. Most of the time, the Ria fish is green and purple. And my hand automatically goes to my necklace. Because Dad is always with me.

In the form of a Ria fish.



# Nature's Canvas

## *(Bayard Cutting Arboretum)*

By **Rainer Pasca**



Rainer Pasca, 9  
Bay Shore, New York

Peaceful river waves  
whisper nature all around  
me. My pen reaches into  
calm breeze. Sunshine on

water makes the blue  
look like someone broke  
pieces of gold and threw  
them in. Every wave pops

up, meets soft green leaves.  
My feet drag against rocks.  
I am just trying to make my way  
through nature's galaxy.

A boat in the distance starts  
moving toward us. Then—a dead  
stop. When it moves again, it is  
a seagull flying. The boat

passes rows of homes, its motor  
interrupting the blue water's turn  
to speak. *Very rude of you,*  
*speedboat.* A man on the other

bench meditates. He should be  
able to enjoy silence. *Yeah,*  
*speedboat*, he should. I move  
away from shade and my brother

shows me a great egret catching  
a fish. Two egrets and a swan  
converse. We watch a slow  
tortoise rise from the water and

kayak toward us and the poor  
gargantuan tree tortured with  
graffiti. But the tree offers  
shade and shade and walking

are the prerequisites of parks,  
as is trying to remember  
your brain's best  
poetic errands. Like I

just did. It's not  
hard if you jump in  
the waves and swim  
in the land of thoughts.



*She could still picture it exactly the way it used to be*

# The Blue Jays' Song

By Ermeen Choudhury

*Illustrated by* LiLi Xu

**C**IELA FROWNED.

She tossed the last of her shirts into the faded lavender suitcase, then collapsed on the dusty floor, sighing. She gazed around the room for the last time. It had been stripped bare of every single object Ciela possessed and now seemed strange and unfamiliar, as though it belonged in a different house.

She could still picture it exactly the way it used to be. Nestled comfortably under the alcove was a narrow bed, the plush covers askew. Curtains that Ciela had designed herself caressed the window, incandescent with the light of a summer morning. The peridot carpet was frequently peppered with random objects—a stray hair elastic or a purple fluorescent pen. A towering cupboard leaned against the corner, an army of haphazardly arranged items perched on top. She didn't like using a bookcase—it was a jail cell for all those wonderful stories—so all of her books were categorized into ever-changing piles against the wall. But best of all was the ceiling, a complex yet beautiful replica of the inky nighttime sky, stars scattered across its expanse. Ciela had memorized every single constellation by heart.

But that bedroom now seemed miles away, and Ciela forced it to the back of her mind. That was from her old life. A life she would never be able to get back.

Faintly, she heard a tap at the door.

After a few seconds of silence, there was a deep sigh and the unoiled door creaked open.



Ermeen Choudhury, 12  
Scarsdale, New York



LiLi Xu, 13  
Round Rock, Texas

"Hi, sweetie." Ciela's dad's voice was deep and resonant, and always calmed her. But now she could hear traces of sadness buried somewhere inside it. His face looked different from the one Ciela knew; his mouth was a thin, white line stretched across his face; his eyes were somber and humorless; the lines on his forehead seemed to have deepened.

He said the words as though they caused him pain. "It's time to go."

Ciela sat up. She reached out and touched the walls that held so many memories. *Goodbye*, her mind whispered to her bedroom. Then she came to her feet and, without a second glance, stalked out the open door.

Ciela didn't say anything, but her father saw it all in his daughter's eyes, and it stung.

*How could you do this to me?*

THE WEATHERED SUV veered into a narrow driveway, gravel crunching below its chunky wheels.

The house was small and rectangular, its cream paint job chipped and curling in places. It sat squatly, its foundation succumbing to grass that sprouted as far as the eye could see. Gangly trees clustered in the front yard, their slender arms spread wide, marking their territory. Some branches stretched so far out that their leaves brushed the house, green against pale cream. *Don't come in*, they seemed to say. Behind the house was a wood so densely packed with trees that it looked like a sea of dusky green. There

was something unwelcoming about the house that Ciela couldn't quite place. Maybe it was the fact that the windows weren't glowing. Maybe it was the absence of the battered basketball hoop in the driveway, or the bicycles that weren't propped against the garage door.

It wasn't home.

Ciela's intense gray eyes scanned the place where she was going to live. Suddenly, she felt a wave of nausea wash over her. The tight interior of the car brought out her claustrophobia, and staring at the house didn't help.

With a shaky hand, she opened the heavy door and stepped outside.

Her dad rolled down the misted window. "Ciela, you OK?" He looked concerned, his face more lined than usual.

"I'm fine," she muttered. She heard her dad beginning to lift some suitcases and bags from the car.

A cool breeze ruffled her black hair and tickled her scrawny arms. It rippled through the grass, each blade bending in turn. The knot in Ciela's stomach loosened a little as she stood in the knee-deep grass, her fingers gently skimming the emerald expanse.

But then Ciela's gaze drifted back to the house, and her stomach clenched again. She took one step towards it, another, then halted in her tracks. She could feel a sudden silence, her dad's eyes boring into the back of her head. Ciela's nose was an inch away from the peeling paint of the door and her knees were quaking slightly. She stared through the grimy door win-



*Those memories would stay with her forever, no matter where she lived*

dow, but all she saw was a narrow hallway smothered in darkness. *Could this really be the place where she was going to live?* Her bones felt hollow.

Before she even had time to think, she ran.

She only just heard her father's shout before the wind began to roar through her ears.

Ciela's head was spinning as green shapes streaked by. She didn't know exactly where she was going, just *away*. The air was damp, with the scent of plants

lingering in it, and she felt its humid hands wrap around her skin. She had plunged into foliage; dappled shadows played on the earth around her. Ciela's sandals slapped against the moss-blanketed ground, her hair whipping behind her in a tangled river. She gasped, black spots dancing in front of her eyes. Her heart raced and thundered with every step, her mind swirled in a hurricane of confusion, but Ciela did not stop. She ran until her throat was clenched into a fist, until a sharp stitch had formed at

her side, until all the energy was drained from her body.

Finally, exhausted and out of breath, Ciela's legs buckled beneath her. She scooted up against a choppy brown mass that must have been a tree trunk, rested her head against it, and allowed herself a moment of peace.

**C**IELA'S EYES snapped open. She was in the heart of a glade, lustrous light pouring from the fragments of robin's-egg sky that were fringed in broad, diamond-shaped leaves. Between ribbons of grass, tiny flowers bloomed, their vibrant pink dripping with sunlight. Gangly, narrow trees bordered the clearing, their legs embedded in the rich soil. She could hear the scrabble of squirrels and woodpeckers, the rustle of rabbits bounding through the greenery. There were green stains on Ciela's white leggings, but she ignored them. She lay down in the dewy grass, drinking in the atmosphere.

Suddenly, a blue haze darted before her eyes, then another and another. Ciela looked at the network of leaves above her, but the blue shapes continued to interfere.

Then the most beautiful sound she had ever heard echoed in the trees.

It reverberated throughout the clearing, and all the movements in the forest came to a halt.

The harmony sent shivers up Ciela's

spine, building up a sensation she had never experienced before. The tune couldn't really be described in words; it evoked a never-ending mix of emotions, both blissful and melancholy.

Ciela's eyes swiveled upwards, where she saw flocks of sapphire-feathered birds settling in trees, circling overhead, their speckled wings spread regally. Their arched beaks were raised to the sky, tiny voices blending harmoniously and creating a magical symphony. Blue jays.

Their jet-black eyes seemed to contain a deep knowledge, almost human.

And while they sang, words formed in place of the notes. Words that Ciela found familiar.

Into the woods with grasses of green,  
There—on a rock, a gazelle preens,  
Yes, detached from her homeland  
Of brooks ever so clean,  
Yet her infant skips in the rocks  
by her side,  
Young mind animated and eyes oh-so-wide,  
So, although this may be trying,  
To understand,  
Home is mem'ries and love between.

Then she realized. Memories were what she had. Of happiness. Of love. Those memories would stay with her forever, no matter where she lived.

The corners of her mouth twitched hesitantly as she listened to the blue jays' song.

Ciela smiled.



# Poetry Bird

*By* **Guthrie Harris**

Mourning dove  
High in the swing tree  
Sings poetry  
Just like mine  
Reminding me  
Of the singing bird  
Inside me  
And melting my heart



Guthrie Harris, 10  
Kalamazoo, Michigan



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**Welcome to the *Stone Soup* Honor Roll!** We receive hundreds of submissions every month by kids from around the world. Unfortunately, we don't have space to publish all the great work we receive. We want to commend some of these talented writers and artists and encourage them to keep creating.

— *The Editors*

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