

Stone Soup

The Magazine by Young Writers & Artists



Illustration by Victoria D'Ascenzo, age 13, for "The Separation," page 31

STANDING ALONE

Alex loves to dance; his classmates love to tease him about it

IN THE WOODS

Can it be? A perfect miniature house in the forest?

Also: A fantastic tale set in Africa

MAY/JUNE 2014

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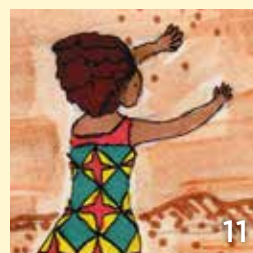
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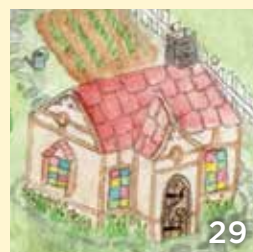
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Editor's Note

As we go through life we have experiences, both good and bad. What can we learn from them? Can we become better people, wiser, stronger, more mature? In a good story, the characters are complex. They're not the same from beginning to end. Several authors in this issue show us characters who are changed by their experiences. "A Monster" is a powerful story about a boy who shoots a squirrel with his BB gun. When he realizes the consequences of his action, he is devastated. We know he will remember this experience forever and act differently in the future. In "The Separation," Isabella looks back on the day her mom moved out and took Bella with her. At the time, she was just scared and confused. How could this be happening? Now, seven years later, she looks back on her painful experience from a stronger place. She understands. Can you think of a life-changing experience you've had? Tell us your story.

— Gerry Mandel

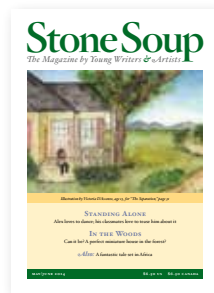
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Submissions

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ON THE COVER Victoria D'Ascenzo, a frequent *Stone Soup* illustrator, likes to draw and paint nature scenes. Her art was awarded "Best in Show" twice from the Solanco Fair in Pennsylvania. She is inspired by her art teacher, Mrs. Ruth, and her Uncle Carlo, a gifted artist. Victoria hopes to be a teacher one day.



The Mailbox



I really wanted to write and thank you for publishing “More or Less,” by Sammy Westfall, in the January/February 2014 issue. Although I’ve been receiving *Stone Soup* since 2011, I’ve never found a story like this one. The story is convincing and touching, Olivia Zhou’s artwork is almost real enough to breathe, and the use of Tagalog words was very cool. Great job, guys! And great job, *Stone Soup*, for publishing it!

Anna Haverly, 13
Mancos, Colorado

Anna’s story, “Curtis Freedom,” appeared in our September/October 2013 issue.

Thank you for publishing *Stone Soup* magazine. I really enjoy the cool submissions by kids my own age.

Tyler Brogan, 12
Houston, Texas

Even though you’ve probably heard this a million times, thanks again for the awesome, inspiring stories you publish. I love getting your issues in the mail; they’re like the packages of eighty percent dark chocolate that I love so much. What all the writers, editors, staff, book reviewers, poets, and illustrators have is a true gift.

Isabella Widrow, 11
Olympia, Washington

Isabella’s story, “My Kitty Mango,” was published in our November/December 2012 issue; her new story is on page 36 of this issue.

All I can say is, I adore your magazine. I picked up a few at my local library a few weeks ago, and now I’m hooked. It is one of the most inspiring magazines for kids I have ever read. The stories that are submitted are very touching and heartfelt. I am in awe of how amazing my fellow authors and illustrators from around the world are. One of my all-time favorites was “Finding Keeper” [January/February 2013]. It was so real and genuine and brought tears to my eyes. I’m so not kidding. As an avid writer with a dream of being an author and an aspiring artist, I love to see what other authors and illustrators are up to. I have been writing daily for years, but after reading your magazine I feel like I need to be writing all the time. Thank you so much for changing my life, *Stone Soup*!

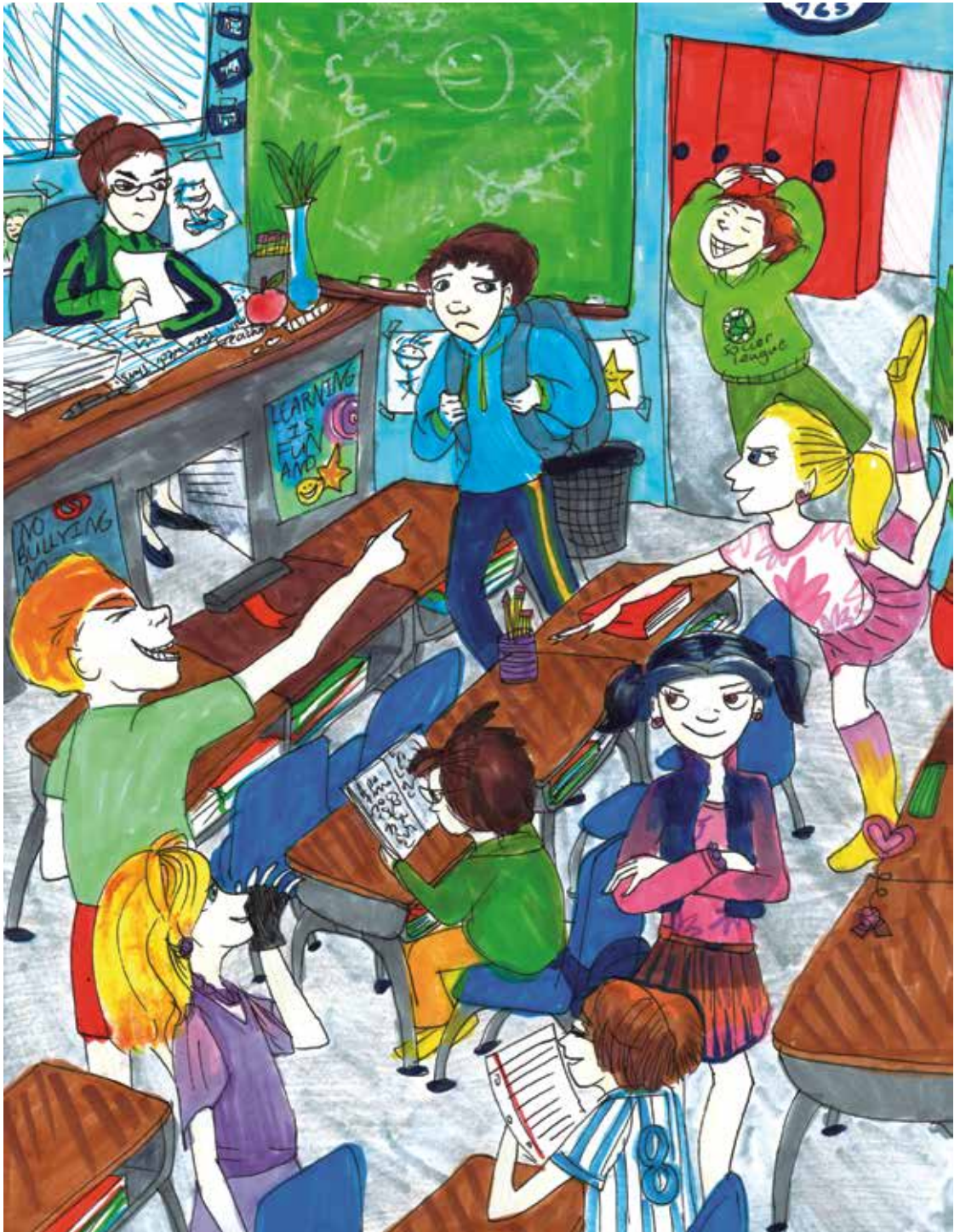
Ruby Voge, 10
Princeton, New Jersey

Ruby’s work is recognized in the Honor Roll on page 48.

I told my students that if they finished a draft of their personal narrative, I would submit their work to your magazine. This was incredibly exciting and motivating to them and I cannot thank you all enough for creating your magazine. Without having that tangible goal to work towards, I am not sure some of my students would have finished their narratives.

Michael Thomson, teacher
Bronx, New York

Stone Soup welcomes your comments. Send them to editor@stonesoup.com.



"Hey, there's the ballerina!"

Standing Alone

By **Erin Trefny**

Illustrated by **Audrey Zhang**

“**Y**OU HAVE SOMETHING in you, Alex. Something not a lot of boys have. You have the ability to speak, to communicate, through dance. I am very proud of you.”

Those words play through my head every second of my life.

I go to Kent Middle School. Ever since I started here, things haven't gone too great. You see, I'm a dancer. Yeah, OK, fine. Tease me. It's not like I can hurt you. The thing is, I love dancing. I take contemporary, tap, and jazz.

For me dancing is a way to express myself. Authors express themselves through their writing. Artists express themselves through their painting or drawing. Singers express themselves through their song. But I express myself through dance.

There is only one problem. Boys don't think it's cool to dance. They think cool is sports, cool is dressing cool, and dancing is definitely not cool. So I'm not cool. Not being cool pretty much means I'm a dead fish.

Right as I enter the classroom people look at me and say something like, “Hey, there's the ballerina!” Then they start twirling around the room. Of course, the teacher notices, and she *has* talked to them. They just won't listen.

So here I am, on the bus to dance class, thinking the same thing I always think about: those encouraging words my teacher told me the very first dance class I ever took.

Unfortunately, some of the other kids take this bus too. Today, three kids from my class are on for the ride. I try to duck so they won't notice me, but nope, it's not working.



Erin Trefny, 11
San Francisco, California



Audrey Zhang, 11
Levittown, New York

"Hey, ballerina, where are you heading?" one of the girls asks me, shoving in front of the others. "Dance class?"

"Yeah, actually, you're correct," I say, "I am heading to dance class."

"Did you remember to practice?" she asks, giggling. I just decide not to answer. Eventually, she walks back to her seat.

I get off on Twenty-Second Street, walk to the building where my dance class is, and open the door. As soon as I enter the building, I know I'm supposed to be here. I walk to the back studio. When I walk in, my contemporary dance teacher is practicing. He is so graceful, turning and leaping in the air; I wish someday I could dance like him.

"Hey, Alex," he says, finishing his dance, "how are you?"

I don't really want to spill the beans about how I'm getting bullied, but I think my teacher might understand. I mean, he was a boy dancer in middle school too, right?

"Hey, um," I say, "I have a problem you might be able to help me with. In my class people don't think it's cool to dance. They're bullying me just because I'm a dancer."

"Alex, why didn't you tell me before?" he replies, surprised. "I had the exact same problem when I was in middle school. A lot of boys do. The best thing you can do is to stand up and show them what you can achieve. Show them how amazing you really are."

"How?" I ask.

"Dance for them, Alex. I know you can

do it."

"When would I dance for them?"

"Do you have a talent show at your school?"

"Yeah, next week."

"Perfect, sign up, and give them all you got."

I WALK DOWN the hallway of my middle school, heading towards the sign-up sheet. I hear people whispering behind my back. And I'm pretty sure the topic is me. I pretend not to notice as I reach the sheet. One word printed on the sheet in big red letters sends my dreams crashing towards the floor: FULL.

Impossible. It can't be full. I came all this way and practiced extra hard. Just to be rejected?

Wait, what am I saying? I'm not giving up now. I'm going to walk to the principal's office and tell Mr. Lawrence what I think about this.

"I'm sorry, Alex," he says, "full is full."

"Please," I say, "I want to show people what dancing really means to me."

The principal closes his eyes in thought. I hold my breath. He opens his eyes and smiles at me.

"All right," he says, "I'll try to open up a spot for you."

"Thank you."

I walk out of the principal's office, my heart jumping with joy.

I leap across the stage, gliding and twirling. The audience is watching me do what I do best; and I am free.

A sound over the loudspeaker awak-

ens me from my daydream: "Alex Miller. Please report to the principal's office right away. Thank you." I hear snickers from my classmates, but I try to ignore them. I quickly get out of my seat and head down the hallway. When I reach Mr. Lawrence's office I open the door and sit down. He clears his throat.

"Congratulations, Alex!" he says. "You will be performing in the talent show."

I'm overjoyed. "Oh, thank you so much!"

"You're very welcome, Alex."

I walk back to the classroom with high spirits. I'm in a good mood for the next few days, too. There's a feeling in me that I've done something right: stood up to people who have teased me; loved myself just the way I am.

"I KNOW YOU can do this, Alex."
I'm in the boys' room with my

teacher, putting on the finishing touches. Makeup, hair. I know it's weird. Welcome to the theater life.

A head pokes in through the door. It's Mr. Lawrence.

"You'll be on in five," he says.

I'm ready for the show. For the next five minutes I sit backstage, waiting for my cue.

A staff member looks at me. "You're on."

I am ready for this. I know I can do it. Those encouraging words my teacher told me the first dance class I ever took play through my head.

"You have something in you, Alex. Something not a lot of boys have. You have the ability to speak, to communicate, through dance. I am very proud of you."

Now it's time to make my daydream reality.



The Writing Tree

By **Brooke Gillman**



Brooke Gillman, 13
Rolla, Missouri

I grab for a knob,
hoisting myself
onto the first branch.
Rough bark crumbles
under my sneakers
as I search for a hold.

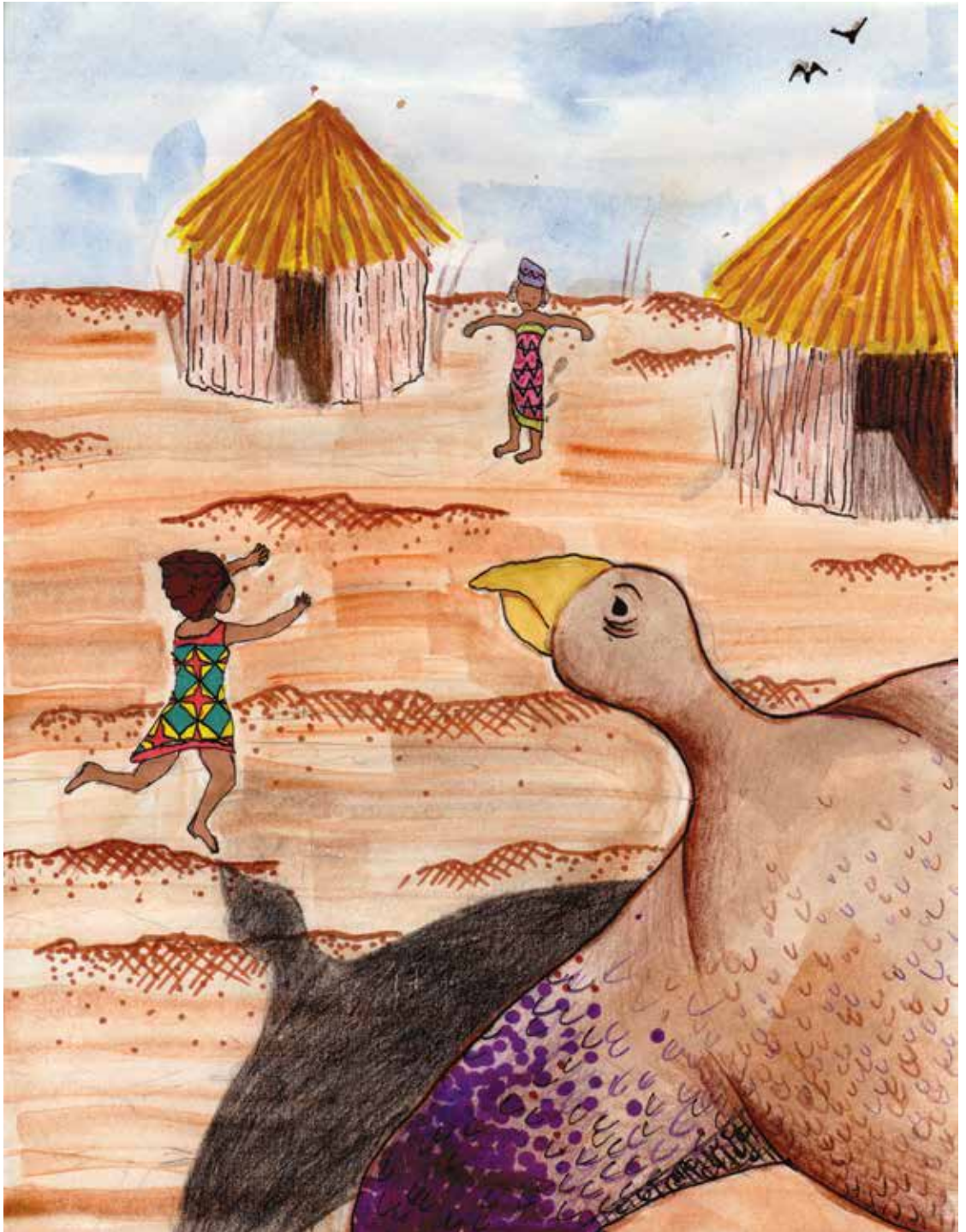
Odd-shaped leaves rustle
as branches shift
under my weight.
I pick pieces of wood
off my hands,
leaving indentations
in my skin to fade away.

Nestling into a worn crevice
I look out over the dark,
still water,
light from the evening sun
playing across its
ever-changing surface.

I lean up against
the massive oak,
one leg dangling
out over the lush, tall grass.
Silhouetted in the sky
birds burst from the trees.

Silence surrounds me.
I am alone
with my thoughts
as a friend.

I free my hand
and begin to write.



There in the sky are the unmistakable brown and purple feathers of the Jago bird

The Jago Bird

By Emma Caroline Duncan

Illustrated by Miranda Adelman

“S ’BONGO!” I hear my mother’s voice ring clear and loud across our homestead. I look up. There in the sky are the unmistakable brown and purple feathers of the Jago bird. Its massive wingspan blots out the sun and its black shadow twin chases me as I start running toward my mother. She motions for me to get inside—not that inside our mud-and-stick home is much safer than outside—yet it’s all we have. We huddle together underneath our window and wait, still and quiet.

The Jago bird is one of the most ruthless, destructive creatures in our region of southern Africa. Its wingspan is the biggest any in our village have seen. Bigger than the tallest of the men. Its cry has the ability to send a surge of cold through our bodies, even in the heat of summer. It has attacked our livestock, eaten our crops, and even attacked adults and children. We have reason to be frightened. Whenever the bird comes around we hide. It has become our first instinct. Some of the old people say the bird is a curse on our people. That we have upset the gods, that when the bird is seen a time of trials and suffering will begin.

When we are sure it is safe, we slowly walk out of our hut. It is a simple home, one round room with a thatched roof and no door. We are very poor but it is home to me, my little sister, Nkugle, and my mother, Boniswa, whom everyone calls Bon. I don’t remember my father. He died when I was three.

Days later, I collect my water jug and head off into the dense



Emma Caroline Duncan, 11
Birmingham, Alabama



Miranda Adelman, 13
Arlington Heights, Illinois

forest surrounding our village. My shoeless, calloused feet have traveled this dirt path many times. I have to go collect water for my family before dark. If I stay out later I risk getting bitten by a snake or losing my way home. Getting to the river takes about forty minutes. The return takes much longer. I'm still slower than my mother, but she can't collect water as she looks for work in town.

As I walk I hear a screech. I know that screech. My body immediately reacts, sweat is replaced by chills like a winter gust. I realize I need to hide. Dropping the jug, I scamper up a nearby broom tree and hunch down. At the top of the tree I look down. The bird is pecking at my water jug. I wish I could scream at him—tell him to leave. But I can't, I have never been able to speak—speak a word, sing a note, or even laugh.

Not being able to speak can be very frustrating. Not many understand me. My mother has always understood me though. Since I was little, I was able to draw with sticks in the dirt. When drawing in the dirt was no longer sufficient, she bought me a set of pencils, a small notebook, and one rubber eraser. I don't know where the money came from. That notebook and pencils are my greatest treasures.

The tree is rocking violently now. Looking down, the bird is gone. Looking up, there he is. My grip on the limb loosens and I don't remember anything until I wake with a sharp pain from a scrape on my knee. My head rests on a pile of leaves

near the tree. I can't see the sun anymore. As fast as I can, I gather my empty jug and limp home.

When I arrive, my mother takes one look at my knee and rushes inside to get moss to soak up any remaining blood. Once my wound is clean, I draw her a picture. It's of an ant and an angry Jago bird. "Oh, S'bongo!" Mother shakes her head and pulls me next to her. We both soon drift to sleep.

The next morning when I wake my mother has already left to collect water. When she returns she is clearly weakened by the effort. She lies down on her mat and falls asleep immediately. It's a bad sign, as she hardly ever takes breaks from work. I hope tomorrow I have the strength to collect the water.

The next morning, however, it is clear no one is collecting water today. My knee is puffy and sore, and the cut oozes. My leg cannot support me. My mother is ill and it is painful for her to breathe. When I try to give her hot pap that morning, she winces. The trip to the healer takes three days time, and she will want some form of payment. We cannot afford that. I hold my mother's hand and rub her face, comforting her with my eyes.

The next day I go to the next homestead and motion for my best friend's mother to please watch over my mother and sister as I go to collect water. This trip is less eventful. I return as children are coming home from school. The children stop laughing and joking as I pass. I hear them murmur "curse" under their

breath, and they move away from me. My best friend smiles at me, but it is a timid smile—even she thinks I may be cursed.

Then the screaming erupts. Everyone runs toward their homestead. My mother lies there, unable to move toward me and my sister under the window. We keep a watchful eye on her. My mother's eyes look frightened. This time the bird's visit is short.

Soon I walk back outside. As I emerge I notice green herbs scattered around the front of our homestead. Did the healer come as I so wished she would?

I bring the herbs back into our homestead and show them to my mother for approval. They pass the test. I grind them in a small wooden bowl with a spoon. They give off a small amount of juice. I mix the juice with a small amount of water and pour it into a cup. My mother drinks and we all hope for the best.

Over the next few days my mother recovers. One morning I awake to find fingers quickly twining through my hair, making a small tight braid that only an expert could make. This is a good omen.

When my mother is fully recovered it is time to celebrate. I sneak out to a small clean water spring up high on a mountain in a small cave hidden by ivy. I only go to this spring when it is time for a celebration. The trip is long and tiring. When I reach the top I quickly fill my jug. Turning to return home I notice something out of the ordinary. It's purple and brown,

long and slender. It is lying almost over the edge of the steep cliff. A slight breeze would make it fall. I don't know why I feel like I should take the risk of falling but I must get the feather.

As I reach for the feather, a breeze whisks it away. It dances on the wind and lands on the next cliff just below me. I take a deep breath and reach down my hand. I almost have it when it happens. I lose my balance and tumble head first down the hill. I bump my head and the world begins to spin and eventually goes black.

I awake at the bottom of the hill, amazed at still being alive. I still have a firm grasp on the feather. A new one lies beside me. I head back to my small village and my mother.

When I get home she wants to know where I got the two feathers. I begin drawing a small picture of me falling down the mountain. I continue my small sequence of pictures by adding a shadow that I saw before I fell. I am not sure who or what the shadow belonged to but a thought I cannot ignore floats around in my mind.

Screaming erupts again and I scramble out quickly. I climb nimbly up to the roof of our hut. My stomach churns as I prepare for what I am about to do. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and *leap!* I feel scared and giddy at the same time. I hear a rush of wind and brace myself for the

I have never been able
to speak a word, sing
a note, or even laugh.



All of Africa spread out, like a giant patchwork quilt

impact on the ground. I feel an impact but it is not a hard earthy one. It is soft and feathery. We soar!

I open my eyes and see underneath me brown and purple feathers. I open my mouth in surprise and a feather shoots toward the back of my mouth. I pull it out gagging, coughing. I know I am sick or so I think. I groan and it startles me. I don't groan. That is not possible for me to groan. I try to speak and for the first time in my life a noise that is as close to speaking as I have ever been able to make comes out.

With powerful, rhythmic beating wings the bird and I make quick time to the mountain. We land on a ledge outside

a cavern not visible from below. Inside there is a huge Jago bird with fierce eyes. I am terrified and cannot move. My eyes scan the cave for an escape or at least a place to hide. Before I can move, the bird stands, revealing a nest and five small birds. They rise up, opening their beaks, pleading silently for food. Why aren't they making any noise? I look at the bird that carried me here, our eyes meet, and I understand.

The giant bird moves to the ledge, opens its enormous wings, and looks back at me, expectantly. I move toward him, grasp his neck, and we take off—all of Africa spread out, like a giant patchwork quilt, below.



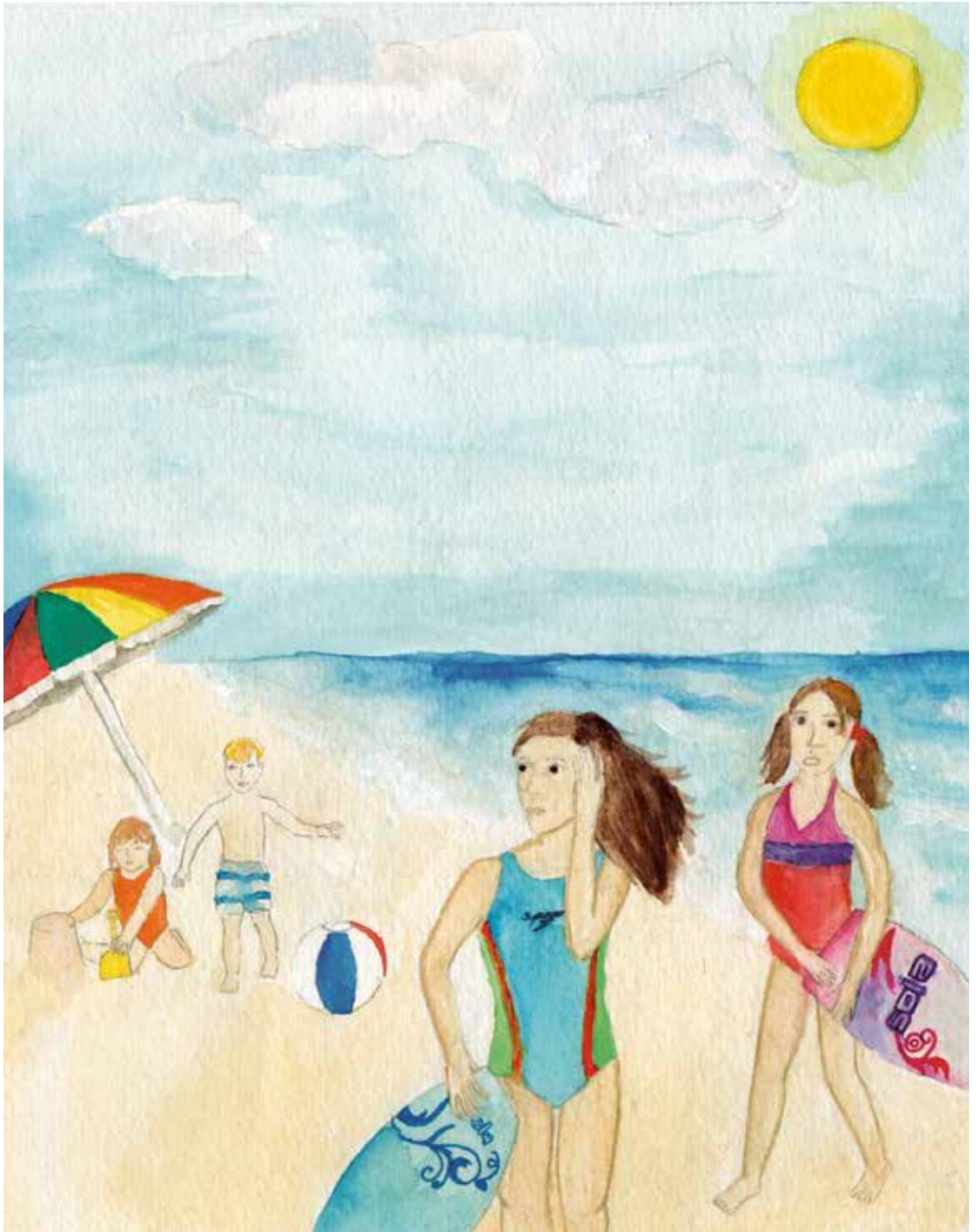
The Pond

By Tess Nealon Raskin

The sun glitters on this damp surface, lighting it up
Silver fish flick their tails and in a flash—they are gone
It is heaven
The warm gray water feels soft, as I touch a ripple
 with my finger
Eyes open, I dive
Rainbow trout circle me as I push water back
One bites my toe and I laugh
Bubbles float out of my mouth,
Like transparent balloons
I feel far away from Earth



Tess Nealon Raskin, 9
Brooklyn, New York



Bella ran up the beach after me. "What's wrong?"

A Lesson at the Beach

By **Chloe Montague**

Illustrated by **Samira Glaeser-Khan**

UNDERNEATH THE FLUFFY white clouds that rested peacefully in the cheery blue sky, the waves pushed me and my boogie board in to shore. Riding the white water was better than anything I dreamed of doing this vacation. Since the moment I first splashed into the waves hours earlier, I hadn't come out; there is nothing better than riding your boogie board on the waves with your cousins!

Mom, Dad, and I always jump on any opportunity to escape from the seasonal sloppy-slop of Oregon. This time, we'd taken a trip to California to visit my cousins, Bella and Joey, and their parents, my uncle and aunt. On this late June afternoon, our gang had landed at the beach. When we arrived here, no worries were lurking about. It was just a gorgeous California day, and I was happy. Very happy.

I would wait for the wave, rush toward the shore, come back out to the waves, and do it again. Bella, my nine-year-old cousin, wasn't too far from me. Sometimes we would shout, "Ready... GO!" and we'd be riding the waves next to each other. I was having the best time ever.

On my ten-millionth wave, I jumped on my boogie board at the perfect time, just in time for the perfect wave of this perfect day. White and bubbly, this was sure to be the wave of the week. I rose, higher and higher, and my smile was as big as the sun. Then, just as I was about to shout, "*Whee!*" I plummeted down. Uh oh.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but even so I could feel the dark



Chloe Montague, 11
Portland, Oregon



Samira Glaeser-Khan, 12
Chicago, Illinois

blueness around me, like a thunderstorm, like the nighttime rain that always wakes me up at midnight. But this time I wasn't in my bed. The waves were rolling over me with a huge force, pulling me down into the rock-hard sand. Ow. And then, in addition to all that, I felt something slip off my wrist.

Once the waves calmed down, I got up and opened my salty eyes. I looked at my right wrist, and a horrible feeling swept over me.

Tears streaked down my face as I dragged my boogie board up the beach. I passed kids building sand castles and laughing. I passed people relaxing on beach chairs. How could anyone be so carefree? How could I have ever thought that the clouds looked fluffy? How could anything, even the sky, look cheery? The sand wriggled in between my toes, like it was trying to reassure me that it was OK. The afternoon heat warmed the back of my neck, and rays of sun wrapped around my body, trying to comfort me. But I didn't feel any comfort.

Bella ran up the beach after me. "What's wrong?" I didn't answer. I shook my head and plopped down on the hot sand. I had to admit that it felt so good compared to the cold, biting water. "Are you OK, Chloe?" Bella asked, sitting by me. I shook my head again. "Tell me, what is wrong?" I ignored my younger cousin and stared out at that awful ocean. I couldn't believe what had happened. My face was hot with tears, and thinking about my bracelet made even more tears

streak down my face. "Tell me, what is wrong," Bella repeated, this time more of a command than a question.

So I told her about my special bracelet that I was sure I had lost, the purple one that Nannie, our grandma, had given me. It was made of brightly colored hairbands that were braided together. I had been wearing it for months, and I wore it everywhere. To school. To dance practice. To bed. I never took the bracelet off. It was very special.

"Hmmm." Bella stared into the ocean, then hopped up onto her feet. "I'll go look for it. Wanna help me?"

I got up and followed her down toward that mean ocean, forgetting to be happy or thankful that she was helping me. I wanted my bracelet.

We looked for the bracelet for a long time, walking up and down the beach. It was nowhere to be found. Bella and I were both sure that the bracelet had disappeared into the ocean, but I didn't tell her because I didn't want it to look like I was giving up, and Bella didn't want to tell me because it might make me really sad. Bella's younger brother, Joey, even came down to help us look, but the ocean had no doubt swallowed it. Eventually, I shook my head. Bella and Joey walked with me back to our campout, away from the dark, mean water. The waves chased after us and nipped at our heels like a playful puppy, but I didn't want anything to do with the ocean ever again. In fact, I would never go in it again!

Joey went back to playing, and Bella

and I sat down on the sand. It was warm, warmer than the seawater. I began to scoop it up and bury my legs with it. It calmed me down a little bit. Bella said, "Will you be ready to boogie board soon?"

"No," I replied, halfway done with my right leg. "You can, but I don't want to go in the ocean."

"Why not?" asked Bella.

It would be silly to tell my cousin that I was afraid of the water because it was mean to me, so I just said, "Just a bit longer on the sand. Please?" I was done with my right leg, and onto my left.

"Look, it is getting to be afternoon. More people are arriving, and the water is going to get too crowded to boogie board. Can we go out?" Bella asked me, with a pleading look on her face.

"Not yet. The water is cold. The sand is warm." I was done burying both my legs in sand. I felt like I was under a fuzzy blanket by a crackling fire. Aaah. How could I ever get out of this?

"C'mon, Chloe. The water isn't cold! It'll be fun."

"Well," I looked around for another excuse, but found none. I didn't want to go, but Bella definitely did. I stared out at the ocean. As far as I could see in both directions, people were laughing and having fun in the water. By staying on this warm sand, I was robbing both me and Bella of that fun. I really didn't care whether I stayed or went. "Fine," I said, "let's go."

Bella hopped to her feet like a jumping bean and grabbed her boogie board.

I trudged after her, breaking my warm blanket of sand, and we headed down to the water. My cousin ran right out into the waves, but I lingered on the edge of the sand. Did I see a fish swimming around with a circular purple thing? A purple thing! Could it be...?


I waded ankle deep into the water and reached down to grab my special bracelet, then pulled my hand back. The fish. How could I get it away from the fish?

I smiled. I didn't need it. The fish must need it for something, and I should not get so attached to a bracelet. Other things were so much more important. Like Bella's feelings.

I splashed into the water. Bella rushed in toward me on her boogie board. "What took you so long?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, smiling. "But I *did* take long, didn't I?" I really *had* taken a long time to realize that Bella was more important than a bracelet.

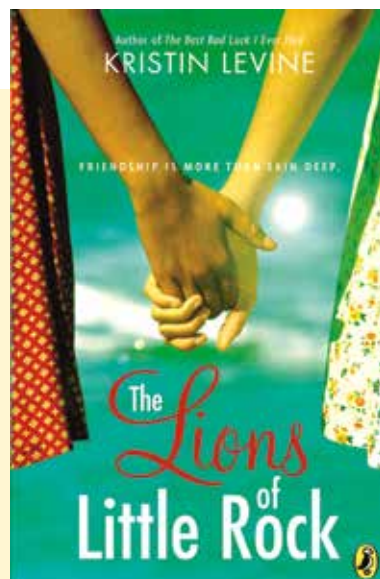
The clouds were fluffy again. And the sky was more cheery than I had ever seen in my life. I knew nothing had really changed, but in my heart, something had.

The rest of the day, I played with Bella in the water underneath those fluffy white clouds. Now, when I think of California and that interesting day, I don't think of losing my bracelet, or that awful dark moment when I got pulled under. I think of the beautiful water and the fish that will love my bracelet. I think of the lesson I learned. But most of all, I think of Bella, because she mattered most that day at the beach. 

Book Review

By Pamela Picerno

The Lions of Little Rock, by Kristin Levine;
Penguin Young Readers Group: New York,
2013; \$7.99



Pamela Picerno, 13
Metuchen, New Jersey

HAVE YOU EVER read a book where you're able to relate so much to the main character that it's creepy? *The Lions of Little Rock* made me feel exactly that way.

It's 1958, and Marlee Nisbett is a twelve-year-old girl in Little Rock, Arkansas. She is extremely shy and won't talk to anyone except her family. In this way, Marlee reminds me of myself.

Like Marlee, I'm naturally shy, and for a long time I wouldn't talk much except to my family and close friends, although I've never been afraid to speak up in class. One of my favorite passages in *The Lions of Little Rock* is when Marlee tells the reader about the lions she can hear roaring every night from the nearby zoo. Every night, as she hears the lions roaring, she thinks maybe, just maybe, the next day she'll wake up and start talking. But by morning, the lions are silent again, and she loses her courage.

One of Marlee's most fascinating qualities is how she compares everyone to a drink. Being quiet allows her to observe anyone around her, so to keep track of people, everyone is a specific beverage. Whenever a character changes, their drink changes too. For example, when Marlee realizes that her maid, Betty Jean, isn't as boring as she seems, Marlee remarks that


Betty Jean wasn't just plain water—"she had a twist of lime that was all her own."

On the first day of junior high, a day that Marlee is sure will be just as embarrassing as all other school days, Marlee meets Liz, a new girl who isn't afraid to speak her mind. To Marlee's amazement, Liz decides to sit next to her at lunch and agrees to work with her on a school project. Liz and Marlee practice at the zoo and Marlee starts to confide in Liz.

But on the day of the big presentation, Liz is gone. When Marlee finds out that her friend was a black student posing for a white student, she decides she doesn't care—she just wants her friend back. Unfortunately, no one else agrees with her. Her parents forbid Marlee to even call Liz.

This book reminds me of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*. The girls come from two very different families—one black and one white. *Romeo and Juliet* also had two conflicting families who were in a feud. And just like Romeo and Juliet, Liz and Marlee sneak out without their parents' permission because they need to be with each other. Betty Jean, Marlee's maid, reminds me of Juliet's nurse, because both are motherly figures.

With Liz gone, Marlee starts to change. She sneaks out to see Liz and becomes more outgoing. However, she starts to become a little careless. Red Dalton, the dangerous older brother of one of Marlee's classmates, notices how Marlee is friends with Liz. He comes up with a horrible plan to get Liz and her family out of town. And only Marlee can stop him.

I love a good historical fiction novel, and this was definitely one of them. The only thing I would change about this book is that I think the plot would have been much more dramatic if Marlee discovered that Liz was black towards the end of the book. I'm sure anyone who reads this book will find it as fascinating and inspiring as I do. 

A Monster

By Trentin Lyle Stalnaker

Illustrated by Matthew Weaver



Trentin Lyle Stalnaker, 11
Nitro, West Virginia



Matthew Weaver, 8
Kingwood, Texas

THE BRANCH SHOOK silently as the wind whistled through the oak trees. The little ball of fur jumped to another branch as I pointed the flame-red sight at it. It hopped around a little, found himself a nice, big acorn, and settled on a branch. He gnawed on the nut silently as I sat below, watching, thinking, and most of all, scared. I aimed the tip of the barrel up at the squirrel. I barely tapped the trigger... *Ka-powwww!!!!*

I flinched and turned my head away, hoping to God the tiny creature had dodged the death-wielding bullet. It was silent for about three seconds, then all of a sudden...

Thump! I tried to blink back my tears, but it just wasn't possible. I chucked the BB gun as far as I could throw it and sprinted away sobbing. Wh-why had I taken his life? He didn't do anything to me, I thought to myself. I ran inside and threw myself down onto the couch and began to soak its cushions with my miserable tears. After about an hour of sobbing, I decided I needed to confront the fear of what had happened. I slowly trudged toward the crime scene. There was just a BB gun... and some blood-soaked leaves. Then there was a rustling in the leaves behind a thick oak tree. I slowly tiptoed to the tree. I let out a loud gasp at what I saw. Lying in the leaves right in front of me was a squirrel with blood dribbling down the side of his head. He was alive... barely. I ran back to the house, grabbed a towel, and sprinted back. I wrapped the towel around the tiny ball of fur. I held him tightly against my chest. It was quite clear



I aimed the tip of the barrel up at the squirrel

I had found my next pet... even if it was illegal. I brought him back to the house. I had no idea how to explain this bizarre situation to my dad. My dad came out the door right at that moment.

“Hey, so... what is *that*?”

“Well, um, I kind of shot him, but he is still alive, and I feel horrible.”

“Son, you can’t keep that, it’s already half dead anyways.”

“But *Dad!*” I screeched.

“He’s just suffering; you may as well put him out of his misery.”

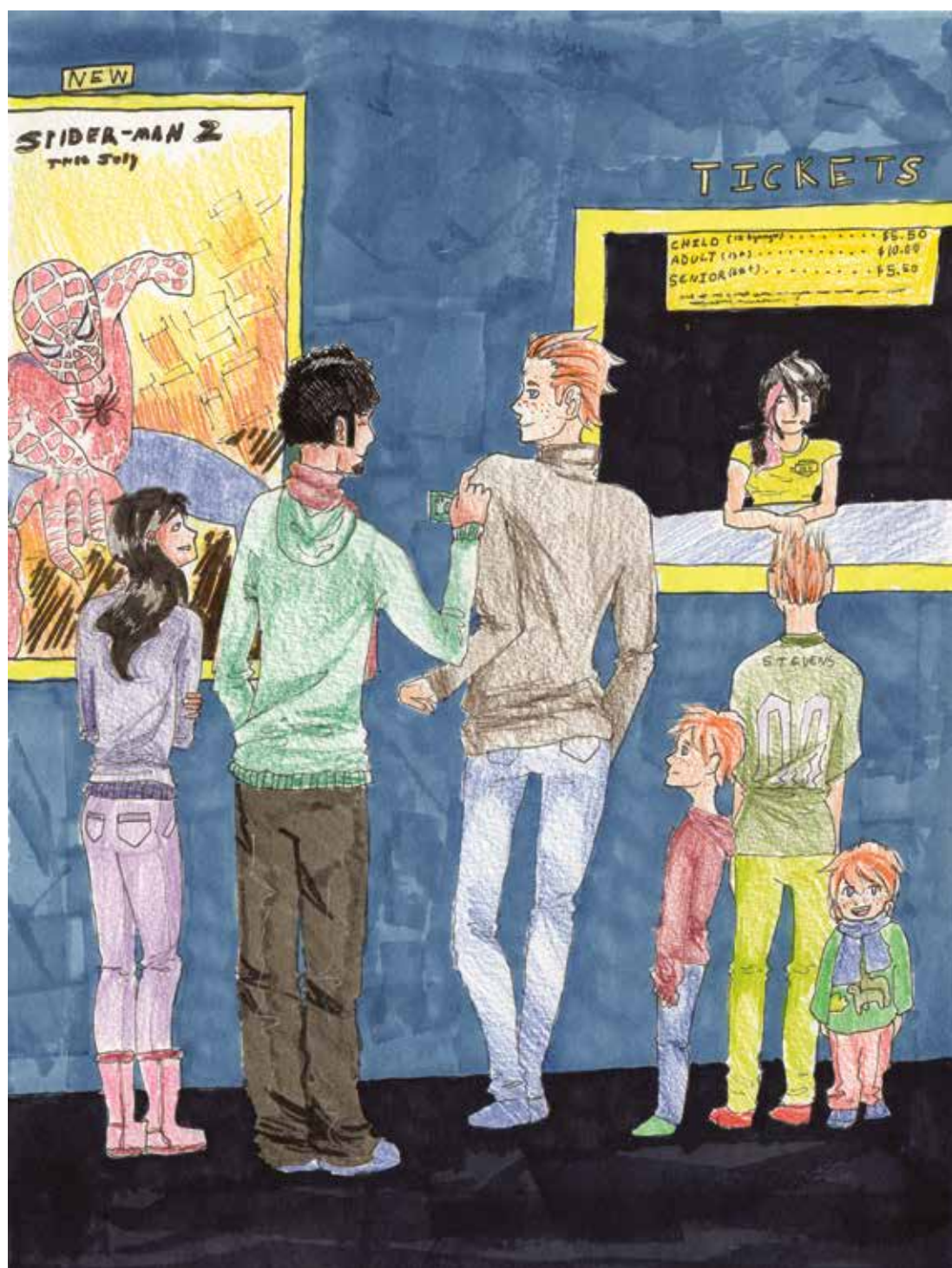
“*I’m not killing it and neither are you!!!*” I bellowed.

“Why did you shoot it?”

“I-I-I don’t know. I usually miss, and now that I hit him I feel terrible.”

“It’s OK, buddy, but he’s really really bad hurt.”

The bullet had literally pierced the poor thing directly in the eye, and it was working its way right into his brain. He would be able to casually stagger around for about three seconds, and then he would start paralyzing in his left side and fall over. He was nearly dead, and there was *nothing I could do to save him...* He would pass on into his afterlife. I would never forget how monstrous I felt that day. 🌀



"Excuse me, sir, I think you dropped this"

The Hero

By Shyla DeLand

Illustrated by Anika Knudson

THE NIGHT WAS BLACK and warm, the air thick and smoggy and choking with every breath. The girl and her father, walking home from the movies, did not speak. This was partly because of the empty humid night but mostly for some other reason, one that neither the girl nor her father understood. They were not close. The father tried but gave up when the girl avoided him or ignored him. The girl had tried but felt that he was too busy when she actually wanted to talk.

“You know how parents are,” she confided into the phone earlier that day and listened as her best friend, Leslie, began bemoaning the uncaring ways of *her* father, who didn’t understand how much she needed to go to this concert. It really was a matter of life and death. They both knew that.

The girl’s father, who had been sitting at the kitchen table, with his elbow on a newspaper and a cup of coffee continually in his hand, leaned a little closer to his friend, who had been patiently listening to the laments of the father.

“You know how teenagers are,” the father said, and his friend nodded. He *did* know how teenagers are.

Later that day, the father went into the girl’s bedroom and asked her if she’d like to go to the movies that night since they were showing *Spider-Man*. The girl was on the phone and had looked irritated when he came in, but now her eyes lit up and she giggled and nodded excitedly.

“I love Spider-Man,” she said. “My hero is Spider-Man.



Shyla DeLand, 12
Remsen, New York



Anika Knudson, 13
Tumwater, Washington

That's what Leslie and I were just talking about, isn't it, Leslie?" and she held out the phone so that her father could hear Leslie's assent that they had, indeed, just been talking about Spider-Man. The father was satisfied that he had done something right, but he felt out of place in the pale pink room with the posters of boy bands and movie stars everywhere, and so he left quickly.

They decided to walk to the movies, since it wasn't far and it was such a lovely day. When they got to the movie theater, the line was long. In front of them was a man with three little boys. He was lecturing them on something and holding a crumpled fist of bills.

"Now, boys, sit quietly," he said. "Act nice and grown up, all right?"

"Why can't you go in, Daddy?" the youngest asked.

"I can't, buddy," the man said and ruffled his hair. He made a sour face. "I only got enough money for you guys."

The girl looked up at her father. He had a strange look on his face and he was fishing around in his wallet. He pulled out a ten, bent over, stood back up, and tapped the man on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, sir, I think you dropped this," he said. The man stared at him, open-mouthed.

"Thanks, man," he said. The father nodded at him. Then the man turned back around. "Guess what, guys? I'm comin' with ya."

The boys cheered.

The girl looked up at her father. He

looked down and gave her a small, nervous smile. She looked down again.

Coming home, it was very dark. The girl wasn't afraid, and since she knew the way, she marched along, her arms swinging. Just then, a big dog leapt out of the shadows and, snarling, moved towards the girl. She screamed. Her father began to run. He had been quite a ways behind the girl, but now he caught up quickly and jumped in front of her. The dog barked at them and threw himself forward, but the father's foot met him and he fell back. He growled again but slunk into the shadows.

The girl and her father started walking again. They could hear the dog but he stayed where he was. They walked down the street, the girl still swinging her arms and trying to pretend her legs weren't weak. She glanced around to make sure none of her friends were out and about and then she grabbed her father's hand. The father silently thanked the dog.

After they got home, the phone rang. It was Leslie. The father was standing close to the girl and heard Leslie ask how the movie was.

"Fine," said the girl and flopped down on the couch. "Oh, Leslie, you'll never believe what happened!"

The father stood a little straighter and waited to hear her account of his generosity and bravery.

"Can you guess?" the girl cried. "Noo... I'll tell you. They showed Spider-Man without his shirt on!"

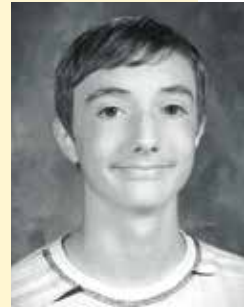
"Teenagers," the father muttered and went to bed.



Scared of the Dark

By Jacob Miller

Thunder crashes.
My world is turned into a dark abyss from which I will
forever fall.
Shadows creep around me as if monsters waiting for the
right moment.
Lightning strikes.
For a second I see my normal room with everything
in place.
But then the shadows come again and engulf me in fear.
A giant-eyed spider!
No, it's my electric fan.
A poisonous snake!
No, it's my belt on the floor.
I feel my eyelids start to drift down.
No! If I fall asleep they'll get me!
A little lower.
I'm too scared to sleep!
Almost closed.
I'm too scared to sleep!
I'm too... scared... to...



Jacob Miller, 12
Dunlap, Illinois



Could something this wonderful and abnormal happen to her, and no one else?

In the Woods

By **Tatum Schutt**

Illustrated by **Vaeya Nichols**

AT LAST, CARRIE THOUGHT, as “Fourth grade, Miss Ann” was called over the intercom. She grabbed her backpack and fought her way through the teeming hallway filled with excited children calling out goodbyes. Her first year at Crestview Middle School had been overflowing with new friends and experiences, but she couldn’t wait to be in the woods.

After an excruciatingly long carpool wait, Carrie was finally at home. She rushed up the stairs, almost tumbling over her little sister. “Do you want to make potions with me?” Bridgette asked.

Hurriedly, Carrie mumbled something about plans before flying over the remaining steps and changing like Superman into a T-shirt and shorts. She was about to rush out when she stopped to take a look at herself in the mirror. Had she changed during the school year? Big brown eyes, short curly red hair, and freckles all over her nose. Nope. She still was absolutely normal. Carrie sighed. At least she was going to the woods. If something special was ever going to happen to her, she always felt it would happen there.

Only at the beginning of the forest did Carrie realize she had forgotten her shoes. The woods were so peaceful, with honey-toned light drifting gently through the laced treetops, and soft moss creating a pillow. After walking awhile, Carrie stopped to rest on the banks of a stream. She was about to take a drink, when she stopped herself. As inviting as it looked, she knew that



Tatum Schutt, 12
Wilmington, Delaware



Vaeya Nichols, 11
Ozark, Missouri

in modern day only heroes in books could drink safely from streams. Regretfully, she was raising her head when she stopped as if she was a robot that had been abruptly turned off.

On the mossy bank opposite Carrie was a perfect miniature house. It was the size of a notebook, and the height of one if turned sideways. A white fence surrounded the house and yard. Its walls were the color of butter and the texture of stucco. It had a pair of tiny front windows and six more scattered about the sides of the house. All the windows had wooden mullions the size of toothpicks. They were even filled with stained red, blue, green, and yellow glass molded together. A beautiful wooden door the size of a large pink eraser and intricately carved with climbing vines stood between the windows. Carrie also noticed a tiny brass handle that at one point must have been a regular button. The red roof was neatly patched together with what looked like hardened tree sap. A stone path winding around the house led to a grove of miniature trees, perfectly manicured and one even having a swing dangling from a branch! Near the back of the house, a rectangle of exposed ground with tiny sprouts peaking up in neat rows could only be a garden. Lying near it was a watering can the size of a thimble. The pathway also turned into steps leading down the steep, sandy bank to a tiny wooden dock tied to which a pe-

tite boat bobbed in the current.

Carrie's big eyes widened further as she drank the scene like a warm glass of milk before bedtime. Could she be dreaming? Could something this wonderful and abnormal happen to her, and no one else? Was this the difference she had been waiting for? Her mind swarmed with questions.

She splashed across the stream to get a better look but stopped short when she noticed the flaming sun sinking steadily in the sky, casting shadows all around her. How far was she into the forest? She turned around but could not see the path she'd been following. Then she looked at the house where the evening sun through the glass was making tiny pictures on the moss.

It was later then she thought; she had best be getting back. Besides, it was the beginning of summer, and she had weeks to explore. Something like that couldn't just vanish, could it? Her parents were probably getting worried. Sadly, Carrie wiped her dripping feet on the moss and threw one last look over her shoulder before vanishing between the trees.

A SMALL FIGURE sitting in a nearby branch watched Carrie's retreating back. The girl with the flaming hair had come, just as He'd predicted, but left so soon? Yet the figure was not worried. She'd be back. Oh yes, she'd be back. ☸

The Separation

By **Isabella Reyes**

Illustrated by **Victoria D'Ascenzo**

A HAZE FILLED THE AIR, it was a warm summer day. I was awakened by the glistening sun rays that wrapped me so tightly in their heat. Shortly after I woke up, I was greeted by my mom and dad, smiling and happy as always; but I had noticed something very peculiar about my mother. She seemed uneasy, in a way I couldn't put together. I didn't pay much attention to it and shrugged it off. After eating a delicious breakfast, I took a shower, got ready, and went outside. I stepped out onto the porch and sat on the steps. The summer haze covered me in a blanket of warmth; I loved it. I loved summer, I loved Iowa, and I loved my life. I didn't have a worry in the world. From the lush green grass that tickled my feet, to the clouds bouncing above my head, I was content. This was July 15, 2006.

My father is a wonderful man, but he has flaws as everyone else does. With his jet-black hair, amazing smile, kind heart, jolly soul, and humor that could brighten up anyone's day, he was my father. He had friends everywhere we went. On the other hand, with a temper as short as a wick on a firework and anger as powerful as a raging bull, he was Eddie Reyes. The few times that I'd seen him argue with my mom, I never thought of him as my dad. I always liked to believe that he was actually just another person. How could my loving, caring, funny dad be such an angry and spiteful person? What I believed or wanted to think wasn't important at the time because my mom was done with him. She was packing up boxes of clothes inside the house



Isabella Reyes, 13
Burbank, Illinois



Victoria D'Ascenzo, 13
Lincoln University, Pennsylvania



I loved summer, I loved Iowa, and I loved my life

and was getting ready to load them into our truck. She was leaving and intended to take me with her.

There was shouting from inside the house, I knew my dad had blown up again, and he was making a grand scene. Through the large glass window, I had seen the other person, I had seen Eddie Reyes. His face a burning red, a flame. He was shouting at my mom, saying that she wouldn't leave, that she would be back. Soon, he stopped, ran out of breath, I guess. Hesitantly, I reached toward the doorknob, afraid of what the future could possibly hold, but before I could get a hold of the doorknob, my mom charged

though the front door with the boxes in her hands. She started loading up the truck with boxes, and it seemed as if I didn't matter at the moment. I was just sitting on the porch watching, wondering what would happen to me when the dust settled. I wanted to talk to them, tell them to stop and apologize to each other, but I couldn't; I didn't have the courage. So I just sat there, as time moved so slow it almost froze. All I could do was wish, wish for a better day, wish it would all stop, or wish it was a bad dream; but all the wishing I had done, did nothing.

The time had come where I had to make a choice. It felt like hours had


passed. My mother came over to the steps, looked me in the eye, and formed as much of a smile as she could at the time. My father, who had been sitting on the couch in deep thought, rose up and walked out to the porch. You could feel the tension. The hate that was in his eyes was beyond scary. My mom took my hand and led me towards the truck. We got to the door, when suddenly, as if he just realized I was leaving, my father objected, saying that I should choose who I go with. My mother slowly and carefully thought it over, then asked me if I wanted to go to Chicago with her or stay here with Dad. Well, the obvious answer was my mom, but if you take away all the fighting and anger my dad had, he was the best dad ever. I was also scared if I didn't pick Dad, would he get angry with me like he did my mother? My dad was smiling at me, my mom as well, and I didn't know what to do. I was six years old and I had never made such a big decision. I chose my mom, my father's eyes softened, his face flushed, and his smile turned into a quivering lip. He was hurt and disappointed, but not angry. I felt somewhat guilty, as I never wanted to hurt my dad, no matter how scared I was. My stomach in knots and my body shaking, I jumped into the truck. I said goodbye to my

I never wanted to
hurt my dad, no matter
how scared I was.

father, and my mom and I were off.

It's a three-hour drive from Iowa to Chicago. It was the longest trip of my life. I sat back and just watched as the green fields and blue skies slowly turned into city streets and tall buildings. I hadn't slept the whole drive. I was too busy trying to figure out exactly what just happened. I knew my parents didn't get along, but I figured they would stick it out and someday we would be happy again. But I guess things don't always turn out like they do in movies; I learned that at

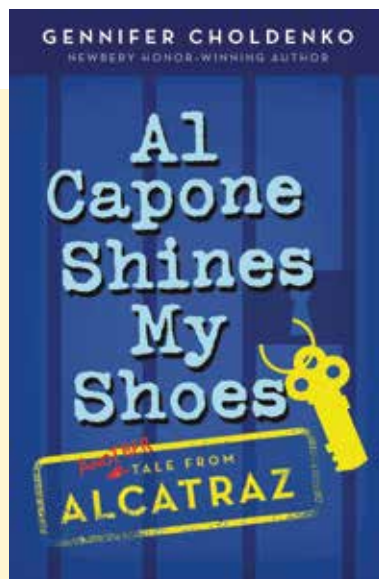
an early age.

The truck had stopped. I looked at where we were, and I recognized the house. It was my aunt's house. It's a cozy little place with a fence and park across the street. We were welcomed in, I reacted slowly and was still in shock but they didn't seem to mind. My cousins and aunt were so friendly and kind that for a second I forgot the things that happened, and I could tell that this was a new beginning. I must admit, sometimes I wonder what it would be like if we had gotten through all the pain and stayed. But I now know that everything happens for a reason. Don't wish for a better day, because those bad days make you who you are, and those better days make you who you wish you were. 

Book Review

By Jacob Zacks

Al Capone Shines My Shoes, by Gennifer Choldenko; Penguin Young Readers Group: New York, 2011; \$6.99



Jacob Zacks, 11
Herzylia Pituach, Israel


THOUGH I AM FASCINATED with American history, including Alcatraz, I was drawn to the book *Al Capone Shines My Shoes*, by Gennifer Choldenko, for different reasons. The main character's name is Moose, a nickname that I have been called for years. He has an autistic sister. After reading a review in *Stone Soup* by Richard Ma [May/June 2013] about Temple Grandin, a world-famous animal rights advocate with autism, I became interested in the symptoms of autism and how autism affects people. Choldenko has written a wonderful novel full of action and solving crimes and the importance of communication. This is the second book in the trilogy.

In *Al Capone Shines My Shoes*, Natalie, a sixteen-year-old girl faced with a severe case of autism, and her twelve-year-old brother, Moose, who is entrusted to take care of her, go on adventures with their friends. At first their life is more hectic than usual because they move to Alcatraz. Moose hates the move because he has to leave his old friends and make new ones, which he is not sure he can do. I know exactly how he feels because my parents are diplomats, so I have moved four times in eleven years. Moose makes a few friends on the island, such as Jimmy, a boy interested in science and flies; Annie, the best baseball play-

er on the island; and Piper, the warden's daughter and a giant troublemaker.

Moose faces many difficulties throughout this book, because in the first book, *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, Moose asks Capone to help him get Natalie into a school for autistic children. In this book we learn that, as recompense, Capone asks Moose to get yellow roses for his wife. The first problem is that if Moose is found helping Capone, his family will be thrown off the island. The second challenge is Moose needs to keep Annie quiet after she finds out about his deal with Capone when she accidentally gets Moose's laundry. Though I have never been in a situation where I have needed to repay a prisoner for something, I can imagine how nerve-racking it would be.

Throughout the second book, Moose shows cunning and quick thinking. For instance, Jimmy's younger sister gives their baby brother a penny. When Moose hears the baby stop crying, he discerns that something is wrong. He runs with the baby to the doctor's office and saves the baby's life. Moose also shows quick thinking when he and Piper spy on an event with Capone and other prisoners. When a guard spots them, Moose quickly comes up with an alibi.

At the end of the book, a conflict arises between Jimmy and Moose, and they stop talking to each other. Later they work as a team to elude capture. Throughout the book, danger and action play vital roles. They help build the suspense but also assist in the telling of the story and create vivid images that the reader can picture from the wonderful descriptions. The book also talks about the importance of relationships and how friendships can be broken apart but also mended once again. I would like to read the third book in the series for it is bound to have wonderful descriptions and great plot lines. 

Rain Tears

By **Isabella Widrow**

Illustrated by **Elenia Henry**



Isabella Widrow, 11
Olympia, Washington



Elenia Henry, 11
Bel Aire, Kansas

PRESENT DAY

AUGUST 2013

SOMETIMES THINGS HAPPEN in life that make you want to cry for an hour. Sometimes things happen in life that only time can heal. When these things happen, you can remember everything clearly, clear as freezing ice on a cold October day. They aren't anything extremely drastic, like a grandmother in the hospital, never to come out again, or one day being able to walk and the next being strapped into a hard metal wheelchair. They aren't little things either, like a scraped knee or a balloon flying higher and higher into the sky, until it's lost forever into the blue. They're kind of in the middle of these things, suspended in between. They happen quickly. In a week or a couple of days. They're sad and bittersweet. Cold and chilling. They shake you until you flop onto your living room couch, exhausted. But in the end, you emerge stronger.

This is how it happened to me.

MAY 25, 2011

I RAN TOWARD MY SCHOOL as I heard the bell ring, signaling the end of recess. I had heard that bell for the past three years that I had been at Lincoln Elementary. I was in second grade at that time and was content with my wonderful friends, my school, and my teacher, Steve Cifka. Lincoln is different from other schools, and I like it that way. There were split grades (I was in a second- and third-grade class), we had a



What I saw in the classroom surprised me

humongous organic garden, and students called staff and teachers by their first names.

It was late May and pouring down rain. I lived in Olympia, Washington, and people around here joke that summer doesn't start until after the Fourth of July. Judging by that wet Wednesday afternoon, it was definitely true. I pushed open the door that led into the building and heard it shut with a dull *bam*. I noticed wet footprints on the blue-and-yellow diamond-shaped floor tiles.

The halls were quickly clearing, and I had to get back to my classroom. I bounded up the three flights of stairs, which made my calves feel like they were going

to explode. I pushed open our classroom door and hurried into the room breathlessly.

My teacher, Steve, was standing in the middle of the room playing his ukulele. Steve was wearing his usual outfit: a brown-and-green plaid shirt that went down to his upper thighs with a white T-shirt underneath. He had beige pants with brown buttons for the pockets. He also wore brown Keen sandals with socks underneath, which I thought was slightly strange. He had a faded, light brown beard that was peppered with white. Steve wore glasses, and I thought he was in his late sixties.

What I saw in the classroom surprised

me. After recess, we usually had to work on our spelling words. But instead of kids working on spelling, I saw my classmates in a circle around Steve, who was playing his ukulele. I wondered what was going on, so I walked up to Steve. "Why aren't we working on spelling?" I asked, trying to tease the worry out of my voice. Steve only shook his head.

I sat at my usual spot at the carpet and thrummed my fingers nervously. When everyone was gathered in front of him, Steve told us that he was going to talk about something serious. Whispers broke out in the classroom. I thought about all the horrible things that could have happened. Did someone's parent die? Did another school burn down? I considered the ideas in my head but knew they were not reasonable. I looked around at my classmates. Some had knitted eyebrows, and some had wrinkled foreheads. Others were staring blankly or whispering. I was worried.

Steve started talking about retirement while still strumming his ukulele. I started to feel impatient. Why couldn't he just tell us what he wanted to tell us and get it over with? I felt my stomach tighten like a squeezed lemon. I looked at Steve, and he was smiling. But underneath that smile was a look of sadness. Uh oh. I think I knew what was going to happen. Finally Steve said the words that would make me cry for an hour. I wished that these words were never in the English language. But they were. "I'm going to retire," Steve said.

Some people think that words aren't powerful. They are.

I felt as if I was struck by lightning. I felt as if I was buried in a pile of cement. I felt crushed. Lincoln School had mixed grades. Steve's class was made up of second- and third-graders. I was in second grade. "Lucky me," I thought sarcastically.

I was looking forward to third grade for so long. A few minutes ago I could picture myself as a third-grader walking into Steve's class and saying hi to my friends, learning how to knit a scarf for my mother, and running in the playing field to the fence and back during recess. Now all I could picture for third grade was walking into an unfamiliar classroom feeling sweaty and awkward. Steve started to talk again, his voice sounding warm, yet tired. "I've been teaching for over thirty years and I'm sad that I'm going to retire," he began. "But I wanted you to know that I love this school, I love my job, and I love this class."

I felt as if I was falling. Falling into darkness and cold. I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to say. All I could do was fall down, down, down. I heard a stifled sob from one of my classmates. I felt like I was going to cry too. I looked up at the ceiling to keep my tears from falling. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, I was *not* going to cry at school. But my tears rolled heavily down my face, and I hid my face in my hands and swatted at my black hair that was plastered to my face and in my eyes. I looked up at some boys pretending to shoot each other. I



"Mama," I asked, "can I stay home from school?"

stared numbly at them. How could they be so blind? One of the greatest teachers I had ever known was retiring.

When my father picked me up after school he said it was like a funeral in our classroom. To tell the truth, it was. Tears were dripping down pale cheeks, and eyes were shining with moisture. A boy in my class named Evan was predicting how many tissues we would use up. The result would have been interesting.

I walked home with my dad and sister in the rain, and everything was a blur of watercolor. Colors melted into drips until they all turned into blues and greens. My tears and rain made the world dissolve before my eyes. The words "no more" were

stuck in my head and chanted there like an eerie mantra. All I could feel and all I could see was rain, rain, rain.

I WOKE UP the next morning feeling awful. My head was a mixture of fuzziness, my throat was throbbing, and my nose was as stuffed up as my mom's cotton balls that she used to clean her face. I went over what happened yesterday. I swore inwardly. Steve said he was retiring at the end of the school year. Just the thought made me want to cry all over again, and for a few minutes, I did.

I thought about Steve some more and then decided that I did not want to go to school. Why should I? I was feeling awful,

and I felt like I needed some rest. I went to find my mom to see if she would approve.

I found her in her bathroom, curling her hair with the black curling iron. The lights on the ceiling were sickeningly bright, and I winced. “Mama,” I asked, “can I stay home from school?”

My mother looked at me hard. “Why?”

“My throat hurts, my nose is stuffed, and I have a headache.”

“That sounds like a cold.”

“So?”

“Isabella,” she turned and faced me, “you don’t have to stay home from school for a cold.”

I sighed and slunk out of my mother’s bathroom like a cat that had been defeated in a fight. Why couldn’t I stay home? Why couldn’t my mom see that I was sick? Why did my teacher have to retire? Why couldn’t it be some other teacher? Why couldn’t some wizard wave his wand to make Steve teach one more year? Questions buzzed in my head like killer bees.

The whole morning I pretended I felt fine. I did and said regular things. I turned in homework, doodled on my math sheet, and listened to Steve talk about the elderly seniors who were visiting us that day. But inside me felt like the opposite of normal. I felt tired, cranky, hot, and sick. I asked to lie down.

Steve told me I could lie down in the closet/coatroom where a pile of pillows lay. I sat there for about half an hour and finally decided to go to the nurse’s office.


I asked Steve and he said yes.

Inside the nurse’s office was horribly white, and I felt like a moth trapped in a lamp shade. Colors and dots danced before my eyes in a blurry spectrum. I cried softly in frustration of the mess I was in. I looked like I had just taken a red-eye flight. I didn’t have any kind of fever or flu but I asked to go home anyway. As I walked home from school, birds twittered, flowers bloomed, and the sun came out from behind the clouds. Everything seemed like some ending to a cheesy movie, where the heroine realized she was going to be all right. This isn’t Hollywood, I thought to myself. But the thought lingered. Maybe, *just maybe*, I was going to be OK.

JUNE 2011

THE LAST DAY of school was warm and sunny. The Wednesday Steve announced his retirement felt like a bad dream. It had stayed in my memory, clear as crystal, but in the end, I got through it.

I had about an hour left of second grade, and I knew it was going to be wonderful. Steve read the class a story, my classmates and I told each other compliments, and we sang songs. Finally, Steve called each of us up and told us what “gifts” we had. When it was my turn, he said, “You’re very kind to other children and I loved having you in my class. One day I’ll walk into a bookstore and see a book written by you.”

I looked into his deep brown eyes and smiled. “I promise you will.” 

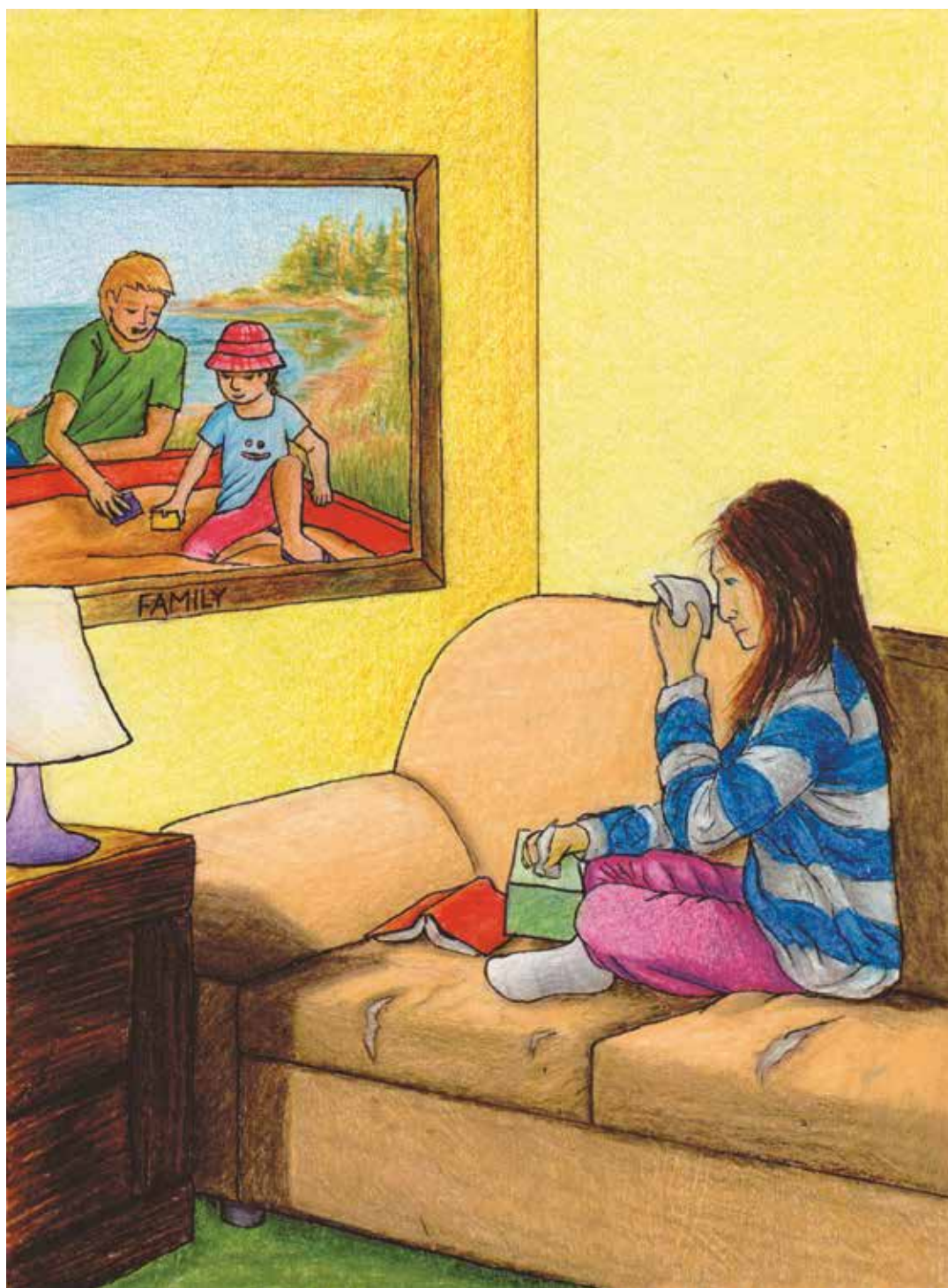
My Eyes of Sea

By Elina Juvonen

My eyes are the color
of the sea
at night,
when the sun goes down
and the moonlight shimmers
when the first star twinkles
and the sky echoes the
hue of the sea
that is when my eyes
are drops of ocean



Elina Juvonen, 13
Berkeley, California



I wipe the tears from my moistened eyes and look at the photograph

Teetering on the Edge

By **Emily Knopf**

Illustrated by **Gordon Su**

ILIE ON MY STOMACH, my elbows standing to support my heavy head, my thin navy-striped cotton shirt the only thing that separates my skin from coming into direct contact with the torn and uncomfortable rough beige surface of the old couch.

Tears cascade effortlessly from my glazed, pale blue eyes, the saltwater creating a trail down my colorless cheeks and chapped lips and making a tiny puddle on the couch that then slips onto the olive carpet as I move. My ruffled, stick-straight, long dark brown hair is an annoyance; it comes into my eyes and I push it away, wishing that I had a rubber band to tie it all back.

I lift my wet face up to the small picture that hangs crookedly in a rusty brass frame on the tawny wall with the word “Family” inscribed into the metal. I wipe the tears from my moistened eyes and look at the photograph. A little girl plays in a plastic red sandbox, her chubby toddler legs in bright pink shorts and tiny sparkly purple sandals on her miniature feet. Over her curly brown pigtails she wears a pink plaid sun hat and on her little baby-blue shirt is a pink smiley face that matches her rosy cheeks and humongous sparkling blue eyes. A thin, lanky eight-year-old kneels behind her, his green shirt wet from swimming, his dark blue bathing suit dripping onto the grass, and his golden bangs catching the sunlight and falling into his deep blue eyes. There is a big gap where his two front teeth should be, but his smile is still bright, his dimples are dents in his long oval face as he leans close to the baby. They’re happy. Who would



Emily Knopf, 13
Teaneck, New Jersey



Gordon Su, 12
Milpitas, California

have that thought that the little girl's curls would turn into straight dark hair, that her chubby frame would grow to be freakishly taller than everyone else in her grade, and that her scrawny older brother would become a tall muscular nineteen-year-old. Who would have even considered the possibility that when he turned eighteen he would tell his parents and younger sister that he wanted to join the U.S. military.

I LET MY MIND wander and don't stop the few tears that spill from my damp eyes. All the memories of Randy creep into my consciousness and I replay them. I can still remember the day we went to the carnival like it was yesterday. It was a sunny summer day and the wind blew through my long mahogany hair and pulled on my thin pink T-shirt as we walked past the endless rows of games and breathed in the intoxicating scents of hot dogs and cotton candy. Children ran around us, squealing with joy, and their parents chased after them. A giant Ferris wheel loomed over all the other rides. It was made of white metal and creaking colorful wooden planks. The seats looked unsafe as they treacherously swayed back and forth. Randy saw my fearful expression. "Come on," he said, a smile creeping up onto his acne-covered teenage face, "we're going."

"What?!" I yelled, my eyes growing wide with fright. "No, we can't!"

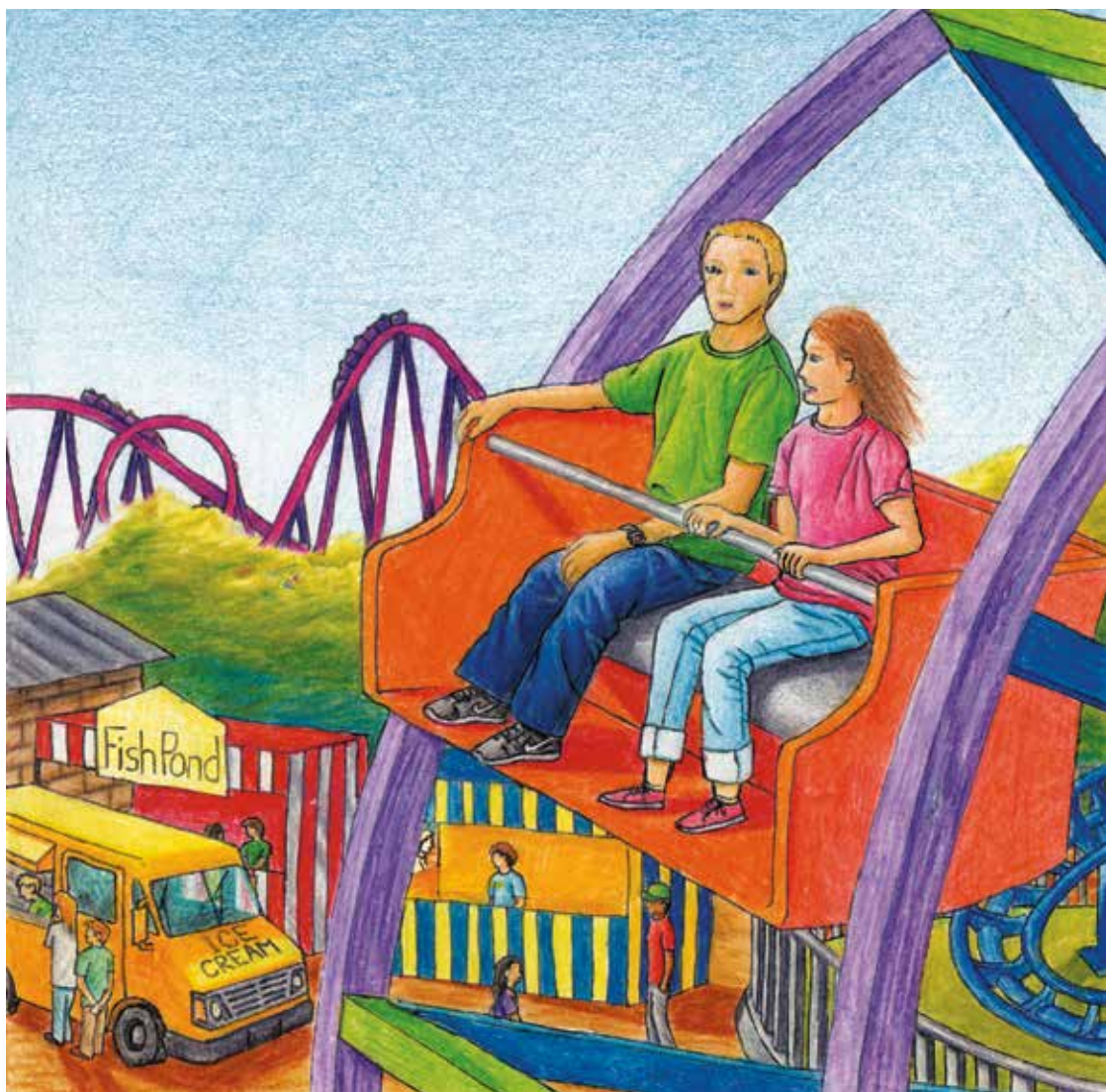
"We're going, Anna," he declared, locking his blue eyes with mine. "You can't be

afraid of a Ferris wheel!"

He grabbed me by the hand and dragged me through the crowd of people with only a couple "excuse me's" as he pushed past children and old people until we got to the horrid ride. Randy took out some pink paper tickets for the ride and handed them to the ticket taker. The ticket taker waved his hand towards a bright orange seat with chipped paint. We sat down and I could feel myself shake with dread as the silver metal bar was pulled down, locking us inside. Randy smiled with a relaxed expression and sank back into the colorful seat. I could hear the gears turning and our seat slowly began to ascend up to the clear blue sky. As we climbed higher, my fear slowly subsided; I realized that there was really nothing to be afraid of. I was amazed as we slowly descended back to ground level and then up again. Randy could see my smile and, satisfied with himself, muttered, "I knew you would like it!"

I was happy, and when the Ferris wheel ride was over, I suggested that we go on again. Randy's blue eyes were lit up with pride as he gave the ticket taker two more tickets, and we both squealed with joy as the ride began again.

I smile to myself now, thinking of how Randy made me overcome my silly fear of Ferris wheels. He was always doing crazy stuff like that as a teenager. When Mom and Dad weren't home we would make crazy deserts in the blender, pouring in anything from chocolate to canned tuna to make a crazy, disgusting-tasting treat



"I knew you would like it!"

and then cleaning it up before they got home. He taught me how to skateboard, strapping me in elbow and knee pads and buckling a helmet tightly on my head and then pushing me down the empty street until after thousands of falls I managed to stop myself.

Of course we had fights. He didn't want

me in his room and didn't want me to talk to his friends. I didn't like his annoying rock music pounding in my ears and vibrating the floor while I played with my Barbie dolls, or when he hogged the computer for hours at a time. We argued over whose turn it was to do the dishes or the laundry, who had to take out the garbage,

and most of the time, who started one of those arguments in the first place.

IT WAS A WARM DAY in May when he told us. We were sitting around the honey-colored kitchen table eating spaghetti and meatballs, which we ate every Tuesday night. He put down his utensils and cleared his voice. “Mom, Dad, Anna,” we all looked at him, “I know this is going to sound crazy, but,” he coughed, “after I graduate next month, I want to join the military.”

My mom’s blue eyes popped wide with disbelief and my dad almost choked on his pasta, his face redder than the tomato sauce. “You what?!” my parents said in unison, their eyes locked then focused on him. “Why?” my mom yelled, her hands flapping in confusion, agitating her golden curls.

“Are you insane?! You’re only eighteen!” my dad said, his expression angry and confused. “You’re just a child! You could be killed!”

Randy wasn’t alarmed by these demands, as though he had been expecting them. He smiled coolly and calmly, his deep blue eyes mellow, and his pale skin and light lips opening up to a smile. “This is what I really want to do,” he remarked. “I want to contribute to this country and show America how important it is to me by protecting it.”

It was like he had rehearsed it, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had come up with the idea a couple weeks before and ever since then been practic-

ing how to convince Mom and Dad to let him go.

I sat at the end of the table, shocked by the news. I watched the scene between him and my parents like a tennis match, looking from my parents to Randy to see their comebacks. How, I thought, can my brother, the boy who always likes to have fun, want to fight in the army?!

I was a witness to my parents slowly settling in their seats as Randy fully explained to them his plan to apply and then hopefully be physically fit enough to be part of this special force he wanted to join. Unbelievably, my parents actually allowed their son to go off and fight in the army.

We all thought we knew that Randy was just the tall thin boy he had always been, never that interested in sports, more absorbed in goofing around and having fun; we thought that he wouldn’t even be strong enough to do a single push-up. Never would we have guessed that when the military officials tested him for physical fitness he got an above-average score. We would have never contemplated even the remote possibility of seeing him dressed in his green camouflage uniform and his golden hair shaved off, replaced by a matching camouflage hat. Never, ever, would we have imagined him going to Afghanistan to be on duty, wearing a thick black helmet with a big black M16 gun in his rough gloved hands held tight against his black flak jacket.

Randy visited home whenever he could. We would pick him up at the air-

port and I would jump into his newly muscled arms. He would tell us about his friends in his unit and all the things they did while they were off duty and all the amazing adventures he had. Even when he was home, it was only for less than two weeks, and then he would be off again, right in the middle of combat.

We skyped and chatted whenever we could find time, early in the morning or extremely late at night. He would never act frightened during a live chat.

He would always smile casually and talk to us like he was at a fun summer camp and having an amazing time, not in a war zone.

WHEN THEY CAME I was in the living room reading a book. There was a brisk knock at the door. My mom went to the door and my dad followed behind her. The dark wood door creaked open to reveal two men in uniform, their white hats glowing beneath the porch light and the gold buttons down the middle of their shirts reflecting off the light. My heart stopped. As the words slipped out of their mouths, my book fell to the ground. My world went into slow motion and I felt like I couldn't breathe. My mom fell to her knees and cried into her hands and my father's eyes burst, exploding with tears as he shook his head in disbelief. The officers stood at the doorway, their faces expressionless and no more words

**Never, ever, would
we have imagined him
going to Afghanistan**

to say but, "We wish good luck to you and your son, hopefully everything will go OK." They made it sound as though he was on vacation and that his plane was delayed in coming home. Then with an awkward salute, with no acknowledgment of the terrible words that were daggers in


our swollen hearts, they walked down the stairs and into the darkness of the evening, leaving us in our distress.

The door was closed behind them, and I ran to my parents. We encircled

each other, our tears and whimpers blending into one sound of agony. Randy, my brother, my parents' only son, was MIA, missing in action.

That episode must have only been an hour ago, but it feels like years have gone by with Randy's disappearance. The doubt and worry of not knowing where he is, not knowing if he's dead or almost dead, is like a rock that sits on the edge of a cliff, not stable, but not falling.

I need to know that he's OK, I need to know that he will come home. I need my brother because he is the most important thing in the world to me.

When I was little I would do anything to get a new shirt or a fabulous Barbie doll. Last year, for my twelfth birthday, I asked for a new bike. But those things don't matter, I don't need them. All I need right now is for Randy to come home safely, and I would never ask for anything else ever again. 



Bonus Materials

On Our Website

- Weekly posts from writing teacher Jenn Stefaniak.
stonesoup.com/blog
- A feature about child composer Jahan Raymond, including video and sheet music.
stonesoup.com/jahan
- Hundreds of stories, poems, and book reviews from past issues—FREE in the *Stone Soup* Archive!
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In Our iPad Edition

- Beautiful piano music performed by eleven-year-old composer Jahan Raymond. (March/April 2014 edition)
- Children's art from Jordan. (March/April 2014 edition)
- Children's art from Egypt. (May/June 2014 edition)
- Bonus stories and poems; creative writing activities. (all editions)

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Honor Roll

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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