



the best midwestern
high school writing:
a celebration and
recognition



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Best Midwestern High School Writing: A
Celebration and Recognition of Outstanding
Prose

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Liberty Swan

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Lisle, IL

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I saw the tide take my brother and leave nothing but a fisherman's net and a hook in his memory. My dear brother... he had been a gentle soul in life, unfit to harm a single rodent hiding beneath his bed. Why the tide took him I cannot comprehend. He was there one day, but he was gone the next. But then, martial law took over. The big men with big guns and big tanks took care of our lives, rushing us out of our little funeral and dismissing the ceremony as unimportant. They made papa sign papers. They made mama cry. They told us that "our kind" were not to be trusted in any social gatherings whatsoever, funeral or no. But that was just the first of many more tragedies that were to come. That was the first of the four times my brother died.

The soldiers came for us next. They presented so foreign of a concept in our little world. Yet, as my mother often said, the enemy knew no bounds. But these people were not our enemy. In fact, these soldiers were our countrymen, and yet they treated us like slaves. I was only nine when they stormed into our village like they were on the beaches of Normandy, and filed us into a boxcar like animals. I left that day feeling much older than I had ever been. I felt older than I had been on any birthday or funeral or other such occasion. When the soldiers came for us, I felt as though I had gone through hell and back again.

"Where are they taking us mother?" I whispered, tugging along in my red Mary Jane shoes and my ill-fitting winter jacket, "Did we do something wrong?"

"*Nana-chan,*" My mother whispered right back, her red lips so beautiful against her golden face in the light of the waning moon, "Be quiet, alright, little one? It'll be all better soon, you'll see."

The biggest soldier up front spoke with cigar breath heavy on his lips. He had black tar teeth and a head so bald that not a single living thing remained upon it. He nudged my mother

with the butt of his gun, causing my father to protectively put his arm around her and glare at the man with a face full of hatred unlike any I had ever seen. “Do not touch my wife,” My father calmly asked of him.

“Tell her to stop speaking her Jap talk then,” The gruff man replied, “We don’t like you Orientals comin’ round these parts in the first place. Japanese just the first of a long list of yellowed peoples invading our country,” The man spat a foul stream of gunk into the corner of the boxcar, “Invading our planet more likely.”

The family next to us nodded quietly to my father. They were pleading for us not to talk. They were pleading with their eyes. By that small gesture they told us to bow under the yoke of servitude, to not speak our language at all if we wanted to survive.

That was the second time my brother had died. Our freedom to speak at all was taken from us. We were little more than cattle.

When the train stopped moving, the soldiers slid the doors back to open to the first sight of the sun that we had seen in days. My big sister cradled my baby brother on her hip. My mother held my hand so tightly that I was convinced she’d take it off altogether. My father simply adjusted his hat to fit lower over his dark eyebrows, his eyes pensive. He made a move to pick up our carrying cases, but the soldiers stopped us from reaching them.

The big Texan said, “You won’t be needing that luggage bag anymore, Jap man,” He smiled a cruel, slow smile that made me feel very cold on the inside, “You’re in *our* territory now.”

My father, it seemed, was finally fed up with our mistreatment. He began to speak harshly against the reigning officer. I thought that my father was a very brave man, but that his

bravery was misplaced. The time for the Samurai was over. At this moment in time, my father was the last Samurai that ever lived, and he didn't even have a decent suit of armor.

“What is the meaning of this?” My father shot back at the Texan, “We are just as American as you are. Sir, I've worked for America since I first step foot on your soil. I cooked for your women, labored for your men, and taught your children all that I had known. I demand respect, sir, and am receiving nothing of it!”

The Texan just shook his head and kept on smiling in that cruel, cruel manner. “So the yellow man *does* talk,” He cussed then in words so foul that my nine-year old ears had never beheld such vocabulary before, “You'll get yours, you yellow-bellied invader.” He then began to laugh so hard that I was convinced that his sides would literally split open. When he was done laughing, he pushed us out of the boxcar and onto our feet. We were then forced to march for what seemed to be an eternity. My poor sister was failing under the weight of my brother. My mother kept on squeezing my hand and my father looked as though his face had been broken into a million pieces.

I could do nothing on this march save for despairing that the scary men were going to kill us by the end of it. They were going to pick up their guns and pick us off one by one by way of firing squad. It was torture to believe at so young an age that you were little more than cattle at the ready to be slaughtered. I sincerely believed that these men were going to kill us. The whispers around us did not serve to calm my nerves. The fellow Japanese families converged within themselves in a panic.

They call it the Relocation... the President ordered... They don't care if we are issei or nissei or damn well American born... What will they do once we get...

We are going to die...

We are all going to die.

I held my hands over my ears. “No, don’t do that, *Nana-chan*,” My mother soothed, picking me up wearily and holding me close to her. She began to stumble under my weight, but she continued to carry me as I bawled, “Once we get there, you’ll see. It’ll be just like home again... only different.”

I wasn’t convinced. I had my eyes closed the whole time we were marching. I am unsure as to whether I had dozed off or not, but when I opened my eyes, I was face-to-face with a long wire fence. The fence had been tipped at the topmost corners with barbed wire and nails on a shoddy-forged length of twine. I gave a little cry of fear at that. Maybe we really *were* cattle. Maybe these men were going to eat us.

I looked to judge the reactions of my family. My father was as stony-faced as ever, just like the warriors of the fables, and my mother looked like a tragic hero as she broke a sweat trying to carry me into the barbed-wire enclosure. My sister was tiring quickly, but she was young yet. Her beautiful clothing was marred by sweat as she hoisted my baby brother higher up her hip. The soldiers were ever watchful from a mockingly respectful distance. They flanked the last family at the rear by about three meters.

When I moved my head to examine the enclosure more, I saw that we were actually in the middle of an encampment, completed with barracks. My older sister, Kira, winked back at me when she noticed my wandering eyes. She shuffled over to where I dozed delicately and joked, “It’s just like summer camp, *Nana-chan*. It just has less boys and more wire.”

“*Oneesan...*” I sniffed a little bit, tired from crying for so long. I was sure that my eyes were red and puffy by now, but I was nine at the time, so personal appearances didn’t really bother me all that much, “*Oneesan...*” I whined again, “I’m scared *Kira-san...*”

Kira maneuvered herself so that Ryoma could sleep comfortably while he rested on her other hip. She moved her free hand over to pat my head and ruffle my thick, black hair, “Oh, Nana,” She gave me her best attempt at a grin, “You just gotta be brave, Nana. It isn’t awfully hard to do that, now is it?”

A soldier passed us by then, ordering us to fill out cards while he stamped them with a glint of superiority in his distant, blue eyes. When he passed Kira by, his eyes tended to linger over her form. Kira retaliated by drawing her shawl further over her shoulders. When father saw this, he became very angry. He shouted out against the young soldier in a blur of both English and Japanese. His words sounded broken. The soldier left for the time being, but papa looked so worn out and tired by his outburst. Mama looked very frightened.

That was the first time we had ever seen our papa cry.

This was the third time my brother died.

“Do we have no dignity?” My father seethed to the air around us, “Do we have no respect?”

My mother chose not to answer. My sister stared downwards with a shamed face, as though it was *she* who had done so awful a deed. She then focused on tending towards the whimpering Ryoma who had begun to cry when he saw my father lash out so wildly. I asked my mother to be let down so that she could care for the paperwork better. Mama sighed with relief at that, kissing my forehead and praising me for being such a thoughtful girl. She then focused on

that pathetic slip of paper as though it were the Rosetta's Stone. I guess that would either make the American soldiers Napoleon or the Egyptian Pharaohs. That would make us either foot soldiers of a great army, or the Hebrew slaves without their Moses.

I entwined my fingers deep within the barbed wire. I cut my finger and winced when I saw a droplet of blood well up from the skin. I began to suck on the wound, hoping that the bleeding would stop soon. From the distance, I heard the shouts of soldiers ordering for the others to close the gates and lock up tight. The Texan stood guard over all of us. He had taken a lighter and began to burn the end of a cigarette. He took great pleasure in smoking in front of all of us, as though partaking in some great luxury that were not allowed to have.

I stared hard at my surroundings, wondering at the irony of it all. I was sucking in blood and the life it represented while the Texan was taking drags of pure, smoking death. I hoped that he would die. With all my nine-year old heart...

I wanted all of them to *suffer*.

That was the fourth time my brother died. He died when the world turned to ash around us, and the wire was all that we had left. We were nothing but cold, metal wire. We were people broken on the edge of a string. We were Americans true, and yet the others saw us only as invaders from another land, far across the seas and the oceans and the beaches. We were as foreign to them as they were to us, though we were just as American, if not more so.

Give us liberty... or give us death.

I closed my eyes, my head against the cold, barbed wire. A rusted voice called out to us from the darkness, ordering us to our barracks to sleep for the night. We were filed outwards, shoulder to shoulder into our little houses with our little numbers. Our clothes were caked in dust

and our hair with grime, but we could do nothing against it. We could not even wash without supervision.

When we got to our barracks, we learned that we would have to share it with another family. It was ridiculous, really, having to share a pig sty with five more people to cram in. Even the sardines had more leg room than we did. Mama hung a curtain down the middle of the room, casting a pointed glare at the older boys from the other family to stay clear away from Kira. Kira rolled her eyes, whispering to me about how Mama was the fiercest woman there ever was when it came to her daughters. We heard the soldiers singing as we sat there in the dark. As the sunlight faded to moonlight, we closed our eyes. I imagined that the soldiers were little birds, out there in the darkness. They were nothing more than paper swans rustling in the wind.

I opened my eyes. Wedged between the warmth of my sister and my mother, I forgot for a moment where I was. When I remembered, a single tear fell down my cheek. I turned to search for Kira and found her eyes wide awake, teasing Ryoma with a bit of string tied about her finger as she stroked his fat, round baby cheek. She gave me a sad smile when she saw me peeking as she played with Ryoma, who slept in a nest of blankets and cushions in a makeshift cradle on the floor. “Can’t sleep, *Nana-chan?*” She whispered, her eyes surrounded by dark circles from forgetting to clean off the rest of her makeup, “Ah, me neither, Nana...Me neither.”

She turned around, moving to glide gracefully back into bed. She held up her fist, and when I pried her fingers back, I found her holding tissue paper. I sighed in wonder. How did she find tissue paper here?

“It was in my pocket,” She laughed, “The soldiers didn’t think to search a woman’s pockets, now did they?”

She turned around, and I heard the crunch of paper as she began to fold it. “Don’t look, Nana,” She teased, “You know, considering we’re so *American* now, maybe we should think about giving you a more American name. How about...Hannah?”

I made a face. I liked Nana better.

When Kira turned around, I laughed with delight. It was a paper swan. Kira had folded my favorite origami animal out of just a scrap of tissue paper. Kira bent down and kissed the swan’s wing, bending it in the process. She left her red lipstick smudged all over it, but that didn’t matter. It smelled like Kira.

I cradled the little bird with me as I fell asleep.

When I slept, I dreamt that I had wings.