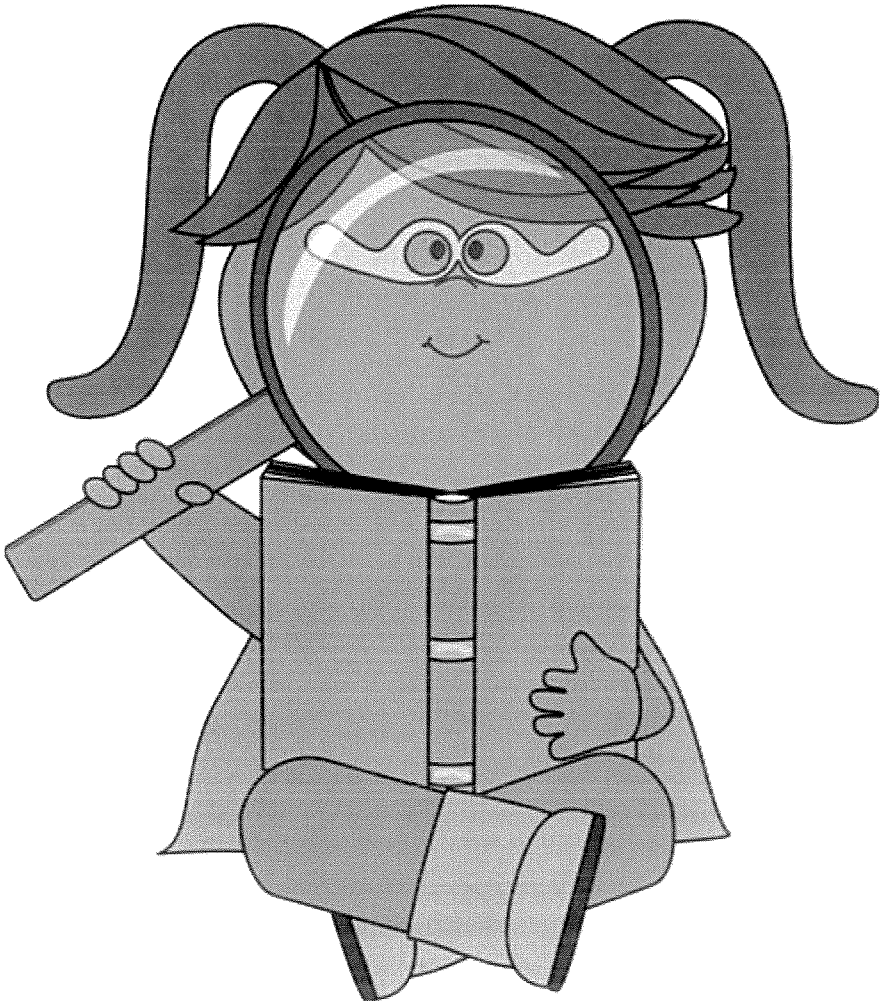
Literary Essay Mentor Texts



Name _____

Ways to Push Your Thinking

- In other words
- This is...
- **The important thing about this is...**
- As I say this, I'm realizing...
- This is giving me the idea that...
- **AN EXAMPLE OF THIS IS...**
- This shows...
- Another example of this is...
- This connects to…
- I see...
- The thought I have about this is…
- **THIS CONNECTS TO...**
- **I see...**
- The thought I have about this is…
- To add on...
- The reason for this is...
- ***Another reason...***
- This is important because...
- One the other hand...
- This is similar to...This is different from...
- **This makes me think...**
- THIS PROVES...

Fox

By: Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks

Through, the charred forest, over hot ash runs Dog, with a bird clamped in his big, gentle mouth. He takes her to his cave above the river, and there he tries to tend her burnt wing; but Magpie does not want his help.

"I will never again be able to fly," she whispers.

"I know," says Dog. He is silent for a moment, then he says, "I am blind in one eye, but life is still good.

"An eye is nothing!" says Magpie. How would you feel if you couldn't run?"

Dog does not answer. Magpie drags her body into the shadow of the rocks until she feels herself melting into blackness.

Days, perhaps a week later, she wakes with a rush of grief. Dog is waiting. He persuades her to go with him to the riverbank.

"Hop on my back," he says. "Look into the water and tell me what you see."

Sighing, Magpie does as he asks. Reflected in the water are clouds and sky and trees-and something else.

"I see a strange new creature!" she says.

"That is us," says Dog. "Now hold on tight!"

With Magpie clinging to his back, he races through the scrub, past the stringybarks, past the clumps of yellow box tress, and into blueness. He runs so swiftly; it is almost as if he were flying. Magpie feels the wind streaming through her feathers and she rejoices. "Fly, Dog, Fly! I will be your missing eye, and you will be my wings."

And so Dog runs, with Magpie on his back, every day, through Summer, through Winter.

After the rains, when saplings are springing up everywhere, a fox comes into the bush. Fox with his haunted eyes and rich red coat. He flickers through the trees like a tongue of fire, and Magpie trembles.

But Dog says, "Welcome. We can offer you food and shelter."

"Thank you," says Fox. "I saw you running this morning. You looked extraordinary." Dog beams, but Magpie shrinks away. She can feel Fox staring at her burnt wing.

In the evenings, when the air is creamy with blossom, Dog and Magpie relax at the mouth of the cave, enjoying each other's company. Now and again Fox joins in the conversation, but Magpie can feel him watching, always watching her. And

at night his smell seems to fill the cave-a smell of rage and envy and loneliness.

Magpie tries to warn Dog about Fox. "He belongs nowhere," she says. "He loves no one."

But Dog says, "He's all right. Let him be."

That night, when Dog is asleep, Fox whispers to Magpie, "I can run faster than Dog. Faster than the wind. Leave Dog and come with me."

Magpie says, "I will never leave Dog. I am his missing eye and he is my wings."

Fox says no more that night, but the next day when Dog is at the river, he whispers to Magpie, "Do you remember what it is like to fly? Truly fly?"

Again Magpie says, "I will never leave Dog. I am his missing eye and he is my wings."

But later that day, as Dog runs through the scrub with Magpie on his back, she thinks, "This is nothing like flying. Nothing!"

And when at dawn Fox whispers to her for the third time, she whispers back, "I am ready."

While Dog sleeps, Magpie and Fox streak past coolibah trees, rip through long grass, pelt over rocks. Fox runs so fast that his feet scarcely touch the ground, and Magpie exults, "At last I am flying. Really Flying!"

Fox scorches through woodlands, through dusty plains, through salt pans, and out into the hot red desert.

He stops, scarcely panting. There is silence between them. Neither moves, neither speaks. Then Fox shakes Magpie off his back as he would a flea, and pads away.

He turns and looks at Magpie, and he says, "Now you and Dog will know what it is like to be truly alone."

Then he is gone. In the stillness, Magpie hears a faraway scream. She cannot tell if it is a scream of triumph or despair.

Magpie huddles, a scruff of feathers adrift in heat. She can feel herself burning into nothingness. It would be so easy just to die here in the desert.

But then she thinks of Dog waking to find her gone. Slowly, jiggety-hop, she begins the long journey home.

Gloria Who Might Be My Best Friend

by Ann Cameron
illustrated by Mike Reed

If you have a girl for a friend, people find out and tease you. That's why I didn't want a girl for a friend – not until this summer, when I met Gloria.

It happened one afternoon when I was walking down the street by myself. My mother was visiting a friend of hers, and Huey was visiting a friend of his. Huey's friend is five and so I think he is too young to play with. And there aren't any kids just my age. I was walking down the street feeling lonely.

A block from our house I saw a moving van in front of a brown house, and men were carrying in chairs and tables and bookcases and boxes full of I don't know what. I watched for a while, and suddenly I heard a voice right behind me.

"Who are you?"

I turned around and there was a girl in a yellow dress. She looked the same age as me. She had curly hair that was braided into two pigtails with red ribbons at the ends.

"I'm Julian," I said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Gloria," she said. "I come from Newport. Do you know where Newport is?"

I wasn't sure, but I didn't tell Gloria. "It's a town on the ocean," I said.

"Right," Gloria said. "Can you turn a cartwheel?"

She turned sideways herself and did two cartwheels on the grass.

I had never tried a cartwheel before, but I tried to copy Gloria. My hands went down in the grass, my feet went up in the air, and – I fell over.

I looked at Gloria to see if she was laughing at me. If she was laughing at me, I was going to go home and forget about her.

But she just looked at me very seriously and said, "It takes practice," and then I liked her.

"I know where there's a bird's nest in your yard," I said.

"Really?" Gloria said. "There weren't any trees in the yard, or any birds, where I lived before."

I showed her where a robin lives and has eggs. Gloria stood up on a branch and looked in. The eggs were small and pale blue. The mother robin squawked at us, and she and the father robin flew around our heads.

"They want us to go away," Gloria said. She got down from the branch, and went around to the front of the house and watched the moving men carry two rugs and a mirror inside.

"Would you like to come over to my house?" I said.

"All right," Gloria said, "if it is all right with my mother." She ran in the house and asked.

It was all right, so Gloria and I went to my house, and I showed her my room and my games and my rock collection, and then I made strawberry punch and we sat at the kitchen table and drank it.

"You have a red mustache on your mouth," Gloria said.

"You have a red mustache on your mouth, too," I said.

Gloria giggled, and we licked off the mustaches with our tongues.

"I wish you'd live here a long time," I told Gloria.

Gloria said, "I wish I would too."

"I know the best way to make wishes," Gloria said.

"What's that?" I asked.

"First you take a kite. Do you know how to make one?"

"Yes," I said, "I know how." I know how to make good kites because my father taught me. We make them out of two crossed sticks and folded newspaper.

"All right," Gloria said, "that's the first part of making wishes that come true. So let's make a kite."

We went out into the garage and spread out sticks and newspaper and made a kite. I fastened on the kite string and went to the closet and got rags for the tail.

"Do you have some paper and two pencils?" Gloria asked. "Because now we make the wishes."

I didn't know what she was planning, but I went in the house and got pencils and paper.

"All right," Gloria said. "Every wish you want to have come true you write on a long thin piece of paper. You don't tell me your wishes, and I don't tell you mine. If you tell, your wishes don't come true. Also, if you look at the other person's wishes, your wishes don't come true."

Gloria sat down on the garage floor and started writing her wishes. I wanted to see what they were –but I went to the other side of the garage and wrote my own wishes instead. I wrote:

1. I wish I could see the catalog cats.
2. I wish the fig tree would be the tallest in town.
3. I wish I'd be a great soccer player.
4. I wish I could ride in an airplane.
5. I wish Gloria would stay here and be my best friend.

I folded my five wishes in my fist and went over to Gloria.

"How many wishes did you make?" Gloria asked.

"Five," I said. "How many did you make?"

"Two," Gloria said.

I wondered what they were.

"Now we put the wishes on the tail of the kite," Gloria said. "Every time we tie one piece of rag on the tail, we fasten a wish in the knot. You can put yours in first."

I fastened mine in, and then Gloria fastened in hers, and we carried the kite into the yard.

"You hold the tail," I told Gloria, "and I'll pull."

We ran through the back yard with the kite, passed the garden and the fig tree, and went into the open field beyond our yard.

The kite started to rise. The tail jerked heavily like a long white snake. In a minute the kite passed the roof of my house and was climbing toward the sun.

We stood in the open field, looking up at it. I was wishing I would get my wishes.

"I know it's going to work!" Gloria said.

"How do you know?"

"When we take the kite down," Gloria told me, "there shouldn't be one wish in the tail. When the wind takes all your wishes, that's when you know it's going to work."

The kite stayed up for a long time. We both held the string. The kite looked like a tiny black spot in the sun, and my neck got stiff from looking at it.

"Shall we pull it in?" I asked.

"All right," Gloria said.

We drew the string in more and more until, like a tired bird, the kite fell at our feet.

We looked at the tail. All our wishes were gone. Probably they were still flying higher and higher in the wind.

Maybe I would see the catalog cats and get to be a good soccer player and have a ride in an airplane and the tallest fig tree in town. And Gloria would be my best friend.

"Gloria," I said, "did you wish we would be friends?"

"You're not supposed to ask me that!" Gloria said.

"I'm sorry," I answered. But inside I was smiling. I guessed one thing Gloria wished for. I was pretty sure we would be friends.

Boar Out There by Cynthia Rylandt

Everyone in Glen Morgan knew there was a wild boar in the woods over by the Miller farm. The boar was out beyond the splintery rail fence and past the old black Dodge that somehow had ended up in the woods and was missing most of its parts.

Jenny would hook her chin over the top rail of the fence, twirl a long green blade of grass in her teeth and whisper, "Boar out there."

And there were times she was sure she heard him. She imagined him running heavily through the trees, ignoring the sharp thorns and briars that raked his back and sprang away trembling.

She thought he might have a golden horn on his terrible head. The boar would run deep into the woods, then rise up on his rear hooves, throw his head toward the stars and cry a long, clear, sure note into the air. The note would glide through the night and spear the heart of the moon. The boar had no fear of the moon, Jenny knew, as she lay in bed, listening.

One hot summer day she went to find the boar. No one in Glen Morgan had ever gone past the old black Dodge and beyond, as far as she knew. But the boar was there somewhere, between those awful trees, and his dark green eyes waited for someone.

Jenny felt it was she.

Moving slowly over damp brown leaves, Jenny could sense her ears tingle and fan out as she listened for thick breathing from the trees. She stopped to pick a teaberry leaf to chew, stood a minute, then went on.

Deep in the woods she kept her eyes to the sky. She needed to be reminded that there was a world above and apart from the trees-a world of space and air, air that didn't linger all about her, didn't press deep into her skin, as forest air did.

Finally, leaning against a tree to rest, she heard him for the first time. She forgot to breathe, standing there listening to the stamping of hooves, and she choked and coughed.

Coughed!

And now the pounding was horrible, too loud and confusing for Jenny. Horrible. She stood stiff with wet eyes and knew she could always pray, but for some reason didn't.

He came through the trees so fast that she had no time to scream or run. And he was there before her.

His large gray-black body shivered as he waited just beyond the shadow of the tree she held for support. His nostrils glistened, and his eyes; but

Boar Out There from: Rylandt, C. (1988). *Every Living Thing.* New York NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.

astonishingly, he was silent. He shivered and glistened and was absolutely silent.

Jenny matched his silence, and her body was rigid, but not her eyes. They travelled along his scarred, bristling back to his thick hind legs. Tears spilling and flooding her face, Jenny stared at the boar's ragged ears, caked with blood. Her tears dropped to the leaves, and the only sound between them was his slow breathing.

Then the boar snorted and jerked. But Jenny did not move.

High in the trees a bluejay yelled, and, suddenly, it was over. Jenny stood like a rock as the boar wildly flung his head and in terror bolted past her.

Past her...

And now, since that summer, Jenny still hooks her chin over the old rail fence, and she still whispers, "Boar out there." But when she leans on the fence, looking into the trees, her eyes are full and she leaves wet patches on the splintery wood. She is sorry for the torn ears of the boar and sorry that he has no golden horn.

But mostly she is sorry that he lives in fear of bluejays and little girls, when everyone in Glen Morgan lives in fear of him.

Boar Out There from: Rylandt, C. (1988). *Every Living Thing.* New York NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Eleven
By Sandra Cisneros

What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two, and one. And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't. You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today. And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are – underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid, and that's the part of you that's still ten. Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mama's lap because you are scared, and that's part of you that's five. And maybe one day when you're all grown up you will need to cry like if you're three, and that's okay. That what I tell Mama when she's sad and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one. That's how being eleven years old is.

You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say Eleven when they ask you. And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.

Only today I wish I didn't have only eleven years rattling inside me like pennies in a tin Band-Aid box. Today I wish I was one hundred and two instead of eleven because if I was one hundred and two I'd have known what to say when Mrs. Price put the red sweater on my desk. I would've known how to tell her it wasn't mine instead of just sitting there with that look on my face and nothing coming out of my mouth.

"Whose is this?" Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. "Whose? It's been sitting in the coatroom for a month."

"Not mine," says everybody. "Not me."

"It has to belong to somebody," Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It's an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump-rope. It's maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn't say so.

Maybe because I'm skinny, maybe because she doesn't like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldivar says, "I think it belongs to Rachel." An ugly sweater like that, all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes that sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.

"That's not, I don't, you're not...Not mine," I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four.

"Of course it's yours," Mrs. Price says. "I remember you wearing it once." Because she's older and the teacher, she's right and I'm not.

Not mine, not mine, not mine, but Mrs. Price is already turning to page thirty-two, and math problem number four. I don't know why but all of a sudden I'm feeling sick inside, like the part of me that's three wants to come out of my eyes, only I squeeze them shut tight and bite down on my teeth real hard and try to remember today I am eleven, eleven. Mama is making a cake for me tonight, and when Papa comes home everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you.

But when the sick feeling goes away and I open my eyes, the red sweater's still sitting there like a big red mountain. I move the red sweater to the corner of my desk with my ruler. I move my pencil and books and eraser as far from it as possible. I even move my chair a little to the right. Not mine, not mine, not mine.

In my head I'm thinking how long till lunchtime, how long till I can take the red sweater and throw it over the schoolyard fence, or leave it hanging on a parking meter, or bunch it up into a little ball and toss it in the alley. Except when math period ends Mrs. Price says loud and in front of everybody, "Now, Rachel, that's enough," because she sees

I've shoved the red sweater to the tippy-tip corner of my desk and it's hanging all over the edge like a waterfall, but I don't care.

"Rachel," Mrs. Price says. She says it like she's getting mad. "You put that sweater on right now and no more nonsense."

"But it's not –"

"Now!" Mrs. Price says.

This is when I wish I wasn't eleven, because all the years inside of me – ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one – are pushing at the back of my eyes when I put one arm through one sleeve of the sweater that smells like cottage cheese, and then the other arm through the other and stand there with my arms apart like if the sweater hurts me and it does, all itchy and full of germs that aren't even mine.

That's when everything I've been holding in since this morning, since when Mrs. Price put the sweater on my desk, finally lets go, and all of a sudden I'm crying in front of everybody. I wish I was invisible but I'm not. I'm eleven and it's my birthday today and I'm crying like I'm three in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can't stop the little animal noises form coming out of me, until there aren't any more tears left in my eyes, and it's just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast.

But the worst part is right before the bell rings for lunch. That stupid Phyllis Lopez, who is even dumber that Sylvia Saldivar, says she remembers the red sweater is hers! I take it off right away and give it to her, only Mrs. Price pretends like everything's okay.

Today I'm eleven. There's a cae Mama's making for tonight, and when Papa comes home from work we'll eat it. There'll be candles and presents and everybody will sing Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, Rachel, only it's too late.

I'm eleven today. I'm eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. I wish I was anything but eleven, because I want today to be far away already, far away like a runaway balloon, like a tiny *o* in the sky, so tiny-tiny you have to close your eyes to see it.

Fireflies
By Julie Brinckloe

On a summer evening I looked up from dinner, through the open window to the backyard. It was growing dark. My treehouse was a black shape in the tree and I wouldn't go up there now. But something flickered there, a moment – I looked, and it was gone. It flickered again, over near the fence.

Fireflies!

"Don't let your dinner get cold," said Momma.

I forked the meat and corn and potatoes into my mouth. "Please, may I go out? The fireflies –" Momma smiled and Daddy nodded.

"Go ahead," they said.

The jars were dusty, and I polished one clean on my shirt. Then I ran back up, two steps at a time.

"Holes, " I remembered, "so they can breathe." And as quietly as I could, so she wouldn't catch me dulling them, I poked holes in the top of the jar with Momma's scissors.

The screen door banged behind me as I ran from the house. If someone said, "Don't slam it," I wasn't listening.

I called to my friends in the street, "Fireflies!" But they had come before me with polished jars, and others were coming behind.

They sky was darker now. My ears rang with crickets, and my eyes stung from staring too long. I blinked as I watched them – *Fireflies*! Blinking on, blinking off, dipping low, soaring high above my head, making white patterns in the dark.

We ran like crazy, barefoot in the grass. "Catch them, catch them!" we cried, grasping at the lights.

Suddenly a voice called out above the others, "I caught one!" And it was my own. I thrust my hand into the jar and spread it open. The jar glowed like moonlight and I held it in my hands. I felt a tremble of joy and shouted, "I can catch hundreds!"

Then we dashed about, waving our hands in the air like nets, catching two, ten – hundreds of fireflies, thrusting them into jars, waving our hands for more.

Then someone called from my house, "It's time to come in, now," and others called from their houses and it was over. My friends took jars of fireflies to different homes.

I climbed the stairs to my room and set the jar on a table by my bed. Momma kissed me and turned out the light. "I caught hundreds," I said.

Daddy called from the hallway, "See you later, alligator."

"After a while, crocodile," I called back. "I caught hundreds of fireflies – "

In the dark I watched the fireflies from my bed. They blinked off and on, and the jar glowed like moonlight. But it was not the same. The fireflies beat their wings against the glass and fell to the bottom, and lay there.

The light in the jar turned yellow, like a flashlight left on too long. I tried to swallow, but something in my throat would not go down. And the light grew dimmer, green, like moonlight under water.

I shut my eyes tight and put the pillow over my head. They were *my* fireflies. I caught them. They made moonlight in my jar. But the jar was nearly dark.

I flung off the covers. I went to the window, opened the jar, and aimed it at the stars. "Fly!"

They the jar began to glow, green, then gold, then white as the moon. And the fireflies poured out into the night.

Fireflies! Blinking on, blinking off, dipping low, soaring high above my head, making circles around the moon, like stars dancing.

I held the jar, dark and empty, in my hands. The moonlight and the fireflies swam in my tears, but I could feel myself smiling.

Slower Than the Rest

By: Cynthia Rylant

Leo was the first one to spot the turtle, so he was the one who got to keep it. They had all been in the car, driving up Tyler Mountain to church, when Leo shouted, "There's a turtle!" and everyone's head jerked with the stop.

Leo's father grumbled something about turtle soup, but Leo's mother was sympathetic toward turtles, so Leo was allowed to pick it up off the highway and bring it home. Both his little sisters squealed when the animal stuck its ugly head out to look at them, and they thought its claws horrifying, but Leo loved it from the start. He named it Charlie.

The dogs at Leo's house had always belonged more to Leo's father than to anyone else, and the cat thought she belonged to no one but herself, so Leo was grateful for a pet of his own. He settled Charlie in a cardboard box, threw in some lettuce and radishes, and declared himself a happy boy.

Leo adored Charlie, and the turtle was hugged and kissed as if he were a baby. Leo liked to fit Charlie's shell on his shoulder under his left ear, just as one might carry a cat, and Charlie would poke his head into Leo's neck now and then to keep them both entertained.

Leo was ten years old the year he found Charlie. He hadn't many friends because he was slower than the rest. That was the way his father said it: "Slower than the rest." Leo was slow in reading, slow in numbers, slow in understanding nearly everything that passed before him in a classroom. As a result, in fourth grade Leo had been separated from the rest of his classmates and placed in a room with other children who were as slow as he. Leo thought he would never get over it. He saw no way to be happy after that.

But Charlie took care of Leo's happiness, and he did it by being congenial. Charlie was the friendliest turtle anyone had ever seen. The turtle's head was always stretched out, moving left to right, trying to see what was in the world. His front and back legs moved as though he were swimming frantically in a deep sea to save himself, when all that was happening was that someone was holding him in midair. Put Charlie down and he would sniff at the air a moment, then take off as if no one had ever told him

howslowhewassupposedtobe.

Every day, Leo came home from school, took Charlie to the backyard to let him explore and told him about the things that had happened in fifth grade. Leo wasn't sure how old Charlie was, and, though he guessed Charlie was probably a young turtle, the lines around Charlie's forehead and eyes and the clamp of his mouth made Leo think Charlie was wise the way old people are wise. So Leo talked to him privately every day.

Then one day Leo decided to take Charlie to school.

It was Prevent Forest Fires week and the whole school was making posters, watching nature films, imitating Smokey the Bear. Each member of Leo's class was assigned to give a report on Friday dealing with forests. So Leo brought Charlie.

Leo carried the box to his classroom and placed it on the wide windowsill near the radiator and beside the geraniums. His teacher called attendance and the day began.

In the middle of the morning, the forest reports began. One girl held up a poster board pasted with pictures of raccoons, and squirrels, rabbits and deer, and she explained that animals died in forest fires. The pictures were too small for anyone to see from his desk. Leo was bored.

One boy stood up and mumbled something about burnt-up trees.

Then another got up and said if there were no forests, then his dad couldn't go hunting, and Leo couldn't see the connection in that at all.

Finally, it was his turn. He quietly walked over to the windowsill and picked up the box. He set it on the teacher's desk.

"When somebody throws a match into a forest," Leo began, "he is a murderer. He kills trees and birds and animals. Some animals, like deer, are fast runners and they might escape. But other animals"-he lifted the cover off the box-"have no hope. They are too slow. They will die." He lifted Charlie out of the box. "It isn't fair," he said, as the class gasped and giggled at what they saw. "It isn't

fair for the slow ones."

Leo said much more. Mostly he talked about Charlie, explained what turtles were like, the things they enjoyed, and what talents they possessed. He talked about Charlie the turtle and Charlie the friend, and what he said and how he said it made everyone in the class love turtles and hate forest fires. Leo's teacher had tears in her eyes.

That afternoon, the whole school assembled in the gymnasium to bring the special week to a close. A ranger in uniform made a speech, then someone dressed up like Smokey the Bear danced with two others dressed like squirrels. Leo sat with his box and wondered if he should laugh at the dancers with everyone else. He didn't feel like it.

Finally, the school principal stood up and began a long talk. Leo's thoughts drifted off. He thought about being home, lying in this bed and drawing pictures, while Charlie hobbled all about the room.

He did not hear when someone whispered his name. Then he jumped when he heard, "Leo! It's you!" in his ear. The boy next to him was pushing him, making him get up.

"What?" Leo asked, looking around in confusion. "You won!" they were all saying. "Go on!"

Leo was pushed onto the floor. He saw the principal smiling at him, beckoning to him across the room. Leo's legs moved like Charlie's-quickly and forward.

Leo carried the box tightly against his chest. He shook the principal's hand. He put down the box to accept the award plaque being handed to him. It was for his presentation with Charlie. Leo had won an award for the first time in his life, and as he shook the principal's hand and blushed and said his thank-yous, he thought his heart would explode with happiness.

That night, alone in his room, holding Charlie on his shoulder, Leo felt proud. And for the first time in a long time, Leo felt *fast.*

The Marble Champ

By: Gary Soto

Lupe Medrano, a shy girl who spoke in whispers, was the school's spelling bee champion, winner of the reading contest at the public library three summers in a row, blue ribbon awardee in the science fair, the top student at her piano recital, and the playground grand champion in chess. She was a straight-A student and—not counting kindergarten, when she had been stung by a wasp—never missed one day of elementary school. She had received a small trophy for this honor and had been congratulated by the mayor.

But though Lupe had a razor-sharp mind, she could not make her body, no matter how much she tried, run as fast as the other girls'. She begged her body to move faster, but could never beat anyone in the fifty-yard dash.

The truth was that Lupe was no good in sports. She could not catch a pop-up or figure out in which direction to kick the soccer ball. One time she kicked the ball at her own goal and scored a point for the other team. She was no good at baseball or basketball either, and even had a hard time making a hula hoop stay on her hips.

It wasn't until last year, when she was eleven years old, that she learned how to ride a bike. And even then she had to use training wheels. She could walk in the swimming pool but couldn't swim, and chanced roller skating only when her father held her hand.

"I'll never be good at sports," she fumed one rainy day as she lay on her bed gazing at the shelf her father had made to hold her awards. "I wish I could win something, anything, even marbles."

At the word "marbles," she sat up. "That's it. Maybe I could be good at playing marbles." She hopped out of bed and rummaged through the closet until she found a can full of her brother's marbles. She poured the rich glass treasure on her bed and picked five of the most beautiful marbles.

She smoothed her bedspread and practiced shooting, softly at first so that her aim would be accurate.

The marble rolled from her thumb and clicked against the targeted marble. But the target wouldn't budge. She tried again and again. Her aim became accurate, but the power from her thumb made the marble move only an inch or two. Then she realized that the bedspread was slowing the marbles. She also had to admit that her thumb was weaker than the neck of a newborn chick.

She looked out the window. The rain was letting up, but the ground was too muddy to play. She sat cross-legged on the bed, rolling her five marbles between her palms. Yes, she thought, I could play marbles, and marbles is a sport. At that moment she realized that she had only two weeks to practice. The playground championship, the same one her brother had entered the previous year, was coming up. She had a lot to do.

To strengthen her wrists, she decided to do twenty push-ups on her fingertips, five at a time. "One, two, three . . ." she groaned. By the end of the first set she was breathing hard, and her muscles burned from exhaustion. She did one more set and decided that was enough push-ups for the first day.

She squeezed a rubber eraser one hundred times, hoping it would strengthen her thumb. This seemed to work because the next day her thumb was sore. She could hardly hold a marble in her hand, let alone send it flying with power. So Lupe rested that day and listened to her brother, who gave her tips on how to shoot: get low, aim with one eye, and place one knuckle on the ground.

"Think 'eye and thumb'—and let it rip!" he said.

After school the next day she left her homework in her backpack and practiced three hours straight, taking time only to eat a candy bar for energy. With a popsicle stick, she drew an odd-shaped circle and tossed in four marbles. She used her shooter, a milky agate with hypnotic swirls, to blast them. Her thumb *had* become stronger.

After practice, she squeezed the eraser for an hour. She ate dinner with her left hand to spare her shooting hand and said nothing to her parents about her dreams of athletic glory.

Practice, practice, practice. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze. Lupe got better and beat her brother and Alfonso, a neighbor kid who was supposed to be a champ.

"Man, she's bad!" Alfonso said. "She can beat the other girls for sure. I think."

The weeks passed quickly. Lupe worked so hard that one day, while she was drying dishes, her mother asked why her thumb was swollen.

"It's muscle," Lupe explained. "I've been practicing for the marbles championship."

"You, honey?" Her mother knew Lupe was no good at sports.

"Yeah. I beat Alfonso, and he's pretty good."

That night, over dinner, Mrs. Medrano said, "Honey, you should see Lupe's thumb."

"Huh?" Mr. Medrano said, wiping his mouth and looking at his daughter.

"Show your father."

"Do I have to?" an embarrassed Lupe asked.

"Go on, show your father."

Reluctantly, Lupe raised her hand and flexed her thumb. You could see the muscle.

The father put down his fork and asked, "What happened?"

"Dad, I've been working out. I've been squeezing an eraser."

"Why?"

"I'm going to enter the marbles championship."

Her father looked at her mother and then back at his daughter. "When is it, honey?"

"This Saturday. Can you come?"

The father had been planning to play racquetball with a friend Saturday, but he said he would be there. He knew his daughter thought she was no good at sports and he wanted to encourage her. He even rigged some lights in the backyard so she could practice after dark. He squatted with one knee on the ground, entranced by the sight of his daughter easily beating her brother.

The day of the championship began with a cold blustery sky. The sun was a silvery light behind slate clouds.

"I hope it clears up," her father said, rubbing his hands together as he returned from getting the newspaper. They ate breakfast, paced nervously around the house waiting for 10:00 to arrive, and walked the two blocks to the playground (though Mr. Medrano wanted to drive so Lupe wouldn't get tired). She signed up and was assigned her first match on baseball diamond number three.

Lupe, walking between her brother and her father, shook from the cold, not nerves. She took off her mittens, and everyone stared at her thumb. Someone asked, "How can you play with a broken thumb?" Lupe smiled and said nothing.

She beat her first opponent easily, and felt sorry for the girl because she didn't have anyone to cheer for her. Except for her sack of marbles, she was all alone. Lupe invited the girl, whose name was Rachel, to stay with them. She smiled and said, "OK." The four of them walked to a card table in the middle of the outfield, where Lupe was assigned another opponent.

She also beat this girl, a fifth-grader named Yolanda, and asked her to join their group. They proceeded to more matches and more wins, and soon there was a crowd of people following Lupe to the finals to play a girl in a baseball cap. This girl seemed dead serious. She never even looked at Lupe.

"I don't know, Dad, she looks tough."

Rachel hugged Lupe and said, "Go get her."

"You can do it," her father encouraged. "Just think of the marbles, not the girl, and let your thumb do the work."

The other girl broke first and earned one marble. She missed her next shot, and Lupe, one eye closed, her thumb quivering with energy, blasted two marbles out of the circle but missed her next shot. Her opponent earned two more before missing. She stamped her foot and said "Shoot!" The score was three to two in favor of Miss Baseball Cap.

The referee stopped the game. "Back up, please, give them room," he shouted. Onlookers had gathered too tightly around the players.

Lupe then earned three marbles and was set to get her fourth when a gust of wind blew dust in her eyes and she missed badly. Her opponent quickly scored two marbles, tying the game, and moved ahead six to five on a lucky shot. Then she missed, and Lupe, whose eyes felt scratchy when she blinked, relied on instinct and thumb muscle to score the tying point. It was now six to six, with only three marbles left. Lupe blew her nose and studied the angles. She dropped to one knee, steadied her hand, and shot so hard she cracked two marbles from the circle. She was the winner!

"I did it!" Lupe said under her breath. She rose from her knees, which hurt from bending all day, and hugged her father. He hugged her back and smiled.

Everyone clapped, except Miss Baseball Cap, who made a face and stared at the ground. Lupe told her she was a great player, and they shook hands. A newspaper photographer took pictures of the two girls standing shoulder-to-shoulder, with Lupe holding the bigger trophy.

Lupe then played the winner of the boys' division, and after a poor start beat him eleven to four. She blasted the marbles, shattering one into sparkling slivers of glass. Her opponent looked on glumly as Lupe did what she did best—win!

The head referee and the President of the Fresno Marble Association stood with Lupe as she displayed her trophies for the newspaper photographer. Lupe shook hands with everyone, including a dog who had come over to see what the commotion was all about.

That night, the family went out for pizza and set the two trophies on the table for everyone in the restaurant to see. People came up to congratulate Lupe, and she felt a little embarrassed, but her father said the trophies belonged there.

Back home, in the privacy of her bedroom, she placed the trophies on her shelf and was happy. She had always earned honors because of her brains, but winning in sports was a new experience. She thanked her tired thumb. "You did it, thumb. You made me champion." As its reward, Lupe went to the bathroom, filled the

bathroom sink with warm water, and let her thumb swim and splash as it pleased. Then she climbed into bed and drifted into a hard-won sleep.

The Other Side

By: Jacqueline Woodson

That summer the fence that stretched through our town seemed bigger. We lived in a yellow house on one side of it. White people lived on the other. And Mama said, "Don't climb over that fence when you play." She said it wasn't safe.

That summer there was a girl who wore a pink sweater. Each morning she climbed up on the fence and stared over at our side. Sometimes I stared back. She never sat on that fence with anybody, that girl didn't.

Once, when we were jumping rope, she asked if she could play. And my friend Sandra said no without even asking the rest of us.

I don't know what I would have said. Maybe yes. Maybe no.

That summer everyone and everything on the other side of that fence seemed far away. When I asked my mama why, she said, "Because that's the way things have always been."

Sometimes when me and Mama went into town, I saw that girl with her mama. She looked sad sometimes, that girl did.

"Don't stare," my mama said. "It's not polite."

It rained a lot that summer. On rainy days that girl sat on the fence in a raincoat. She let herself get all wet and acted like she didn't even care. Sometimes I saw her dancing around in puddles, splashing and laughing.

Mama wouldn't let me go out in the rain. "That's why I bought you rainy-day toys," my mama said. "You stay inside here—where it's warm and safe and dry."

But every time it rained, I looked for that girl. And I always found her. Somewhere near the fence.

Someplace in the middle of the summer, the rain stopped. When I walked outside, the grass was damp and the sun was already high up in the sky. And I stood there with my hands up in the air. I felt brave that day. I felt free.

I got close to the fence and that girl asked me my name. "Clover," I said. "My name's Annie," she said. "Annie Paul. I live over yonder," she said, "by where you see the laundry. That's my blouse hanging on the line."

She smiled then. She had a pretty smile.

And then I smiled. And we stood there looking at each other, smiling.

"It's nice up on this fence," Annie said. "You can see all over."

I ran my hand along the fence. I reached up and touched the top of it.

"A fence like this was made for sitting on," Annie said. She looked at me sideways.

"My mama says I shouldn't go on the other side," I said.

"My mama says the same thing. But she never said nothing about sitting on it."

"Neither did mine," I said.

That summer me and Annie sat together on that fence. And when Sandra and them looked at me funny, I just made believe I didn't care.

Some mornings my mama watched us. I waited for her to tell me to get down from that fence before I break my neck or something. But she never did.

"I see you made a new friend," she said one morning. And I nodded and Mama smiled.

That summer me and Annie sat on that fence and watched the whole

wide world around us.

One day Sandra and them were jumping rope near the fence and we asked if we could play. "I don't care," Sandra said.

And when we jumped, Sandra and me were partners, the way we used to be.

When we were too tired to jump anymore, we sat up on the fence, all of us in a long time.

"Someday somebody's going to come along and knock this old fence down," Annie said.

And I nodded, "Yeah," I said. "Someday."

Spaghetti

By Cynthia Rylant

It was evening, and people sat outside, talking quietly among themselves. On the top stoop of a tall building of crumbling bricks and rotting wood sat a boy. His name was Gabriel and he wished for some company.

Gabriel was thinking about things. He remembered being the only boy in class with the right answer that day, and he remembered the butter sandwich he had had for lunch. Gabriel was thinking that he would like to live outside all the time. He imagined himself carrying a pack of food and a few tools and a heavy cloth to erect a hasty tent. Gabriel saw himself sleeping beneath the glittering lights of a movie theater, near the bus stop.

Gabriel was a boy who thought about things so seriously, so fully, that on this evening he nearly missed hearing a cry from the street. They cry was so weak and faraway in his mind that, for him, it could have been the slow lifting of a stubborn window. It could have been the creak of an old man's legs. It could have been the wind.

But it was not the wind, and it came to Gabriel slowly that he did, indeed, hear something, and that is did, indeed, could like a cry from the street.

Gabriel picked himself up from the stoop and began to walk carefully along the edge of the street, peering into the gloom and the dusk. They cry came again and Gabriel's ears tingled and he walked faster.

He stared into the street, up and down it, knowing something was there. The street was so gray that he could not see...But not only the street was gray.

There, sitting on skinny stick-legs, wobbling to and fro, was a tiny gray kitten. No cars had passed to frighten it, and so it just sat in the street and cried its windy, creaky cry and waited.

Gabriel was amazed. He had never imagined he would be lucky enough one day to find a kitten. He walked into the street and lifted the kitten into his hands.

Gabriel sat on the sidewalk with the kitten next to his cheek and thought. The kitten smelled of pasta noodles, and he wondered if it belonged to a friendly Italian man somewhere in the city. Gabriel called the kitten Spaghetti.

Gabriel and Spaghetti returned to the stoop. It occurred to Gabriel to walk the neighborhood and look for the Italian man, but the purring was so loud, so near his ear, that he could not think seriously, as fully, as before.

Gabriel no longer wanted to live outside. He knew he had a room and a bed of his own in the tall building. So he stood up, with Spaghetti under his chin, and went inside to show his kitten where they would live together.

Those Shoes
By Maribeth Boelts

I have dreams about those shoes. Black high-tops. Two white stripes.

"Grandma, I want them."

"There's no room for 'want' around here – just 'need,'" Grandma says. "And what you need are new boots for winter.

Brandon T. comes to school in those shoes. He says he's the faster runner now, not me. I was always the fastest before those shoes came along. Nate comes to school in those shoes. Antonio and I count how many times Nate goes to the bather – seven times in one day, just so he can walk up and won the hall real slow.

Next, Allen Jacoby and Terrence each get a pair.

Then one day in the middle of kickball, one of my shoes comes apart. "Looks like you could use a new pair, Jeremy," Mr. Alfrey the guidance counselor, says. He brings out a box of shoes and other stuff he has for kids who need things. He helps me find the only shoes that are my size – Velcro – like the ones my cousin Marshall wears. They have an animal on them from a cartoon I don't think any kid ever watched.

When I come back to the classroom, Allen Jacoby takes one look at my Mr. Alfrey shoes and laughs, and so do Terrence, Brandon T., and everyone else. The only kid not laughing is Antonio Parker.

At home, Grandma says, "How kind of Mr. Alfrey." I nod and turn my back. I'm not going to cry about any dumb shoes. But when I'm writing my spelling words later, every word looks like the word *shoes* and my grip is so tight on my pencil I think it might burst.

On Saturday, Grandma says, "Let's check out those shoes you're wanting so much. I got a bit of money set aside. Might be enough – you never know." At the shoe store, Grandma turns those shoes over so she can check the price. When she sees it, she sits down heavy. "Maybe them write it down wrong," I say. Grandma shakes her head.

Then I remember the thrift shops. "What if there's a rich kid who outgrew his or got two pairs for Christmas and had to give one of them away?"

We ride the bus to the first thrift shop. Black cowboy boots, pink slippers, sandals, high heels – every kind of shoes except the ones I want. We ride the bus to the second thrift shop. Not a pair of those shoes in sight. Around the corner is the third thrift shop...I see something in the window.

Black shoes with two white stripes. High-tops. Perfect shape. $2.50. THOSE SHOES.

My heart is pounding hard as I take off my shoes and hitch up my baggy socks. "How exciting!" Grandma says. "What size are they?" I shove my foot into the first shoe, curling my toes to get my heel in. "I don't know, but I think they fit." Grandma kneels on the floor and feels for my toes at the end of the shoe. "Oh, Jeremy..." she says. I can't spend good money on shoes that don't fit.

I pull the other shoe on and try to walk around. "They're okay," I say, holding my breath and praying that my toes will fall of right then and there. But my toes don't fall off. I buy them anyway with my own money, and I squeeze them on and limp to the bus stop.

At home a few days later, Grandma puts a new pair of snow boots in my closet and doesn't say a word about my too-big feet shuffling around in my too-small shoes. "Sometimes shoes stretch," I say. Grandma gives me a hug.

I check every day, but those shoes don't stretch. I have to wear my Mr. Alfreys to school instead. One day during math, I glance at Antonio's shoes. One of them is taped up, and his feet look smaller than mine. After school, I head to the park to think. Antonio is there – the only kid who didn't laugh at my Mr. Alfrey shoes.

After school, I head to the park to think. Antonio is there – the only kid who didn't laugh at my Mr. Alfrey shoes. We shoot baskets – a loose

piece of tape on Antonio's shoe smacks the concrete every time he jumps. I think, I'm not going to do it.

We leap off the swings. I'm not going to do it.

We race from one end of the playground to the other- I'm not going to do it! " say.

"Do what?" Antonio says, breathing hard.

Grandma calls me for supper and invites Antonio over, too. After supper, he spies my shoes. "How come you don't wear them?" Antonio asks. I shrug. My hands are sweaty. – I can feel him wishing those shoes were his.

That night, I am awake for a long time thinking about Antonio. When morning comes, I try on my shoes one last time.

Before I can change my mind, the shoes are in my coat. Snow is beginning to fall as I run across the street to Antonio's apartment. I put the shoes in front of his door, push the doorbell – and run.

At school, Antonio is smiling big in his brand-new shoes. I feel happy when I look at his face and made when I look at my Mr. Alfrey shoes.

But later, when it's time for recess, something happens. Everywhere, there is snow. "Leave your shoes in the hall and change into your boots," the teacher announces.

Leave your shoes in the hall. It's then I remember what I have in my backpack. New boots. New black boots that no kid has ever worn before. Standing in line to go to recess, Antonio leans forward and says, "Thanks."

I smile and give him a nudge…."Let's race!!!!"