

Dancing With The Pen

a collection of today's best youth writing

Edited by Dallas Woodburn

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About Write On! For Literacy

About Dallas Woodburn

Dancing in all its forms cannot be excluded from the curriculum of all noble education; dancing with the feet, with ideas, with words, and need I add that one must also be able to dance with the pen?

- Friedrich Nietzsche

Take My Hand

by Lucia Kemeng Chen

Scotland, 1189

Simon Darnell was six years old when he met his first Scotsman and fought his first fight. Kennan Maclachlan was of the same age when he met his first Englishman and fought... well, suffice to say, it was far from his first fight.

It started during the Border Festival, one of the few peaceful days in an age of war and unrest. The Scottish and English would stomach the sight of each other for three entire weeks while enjoying grand feasts and competitions. But the animosity never faded.

So when the wiry English boy toppled the makeshift fortress of twigs and stones Kennan had spent the past hour constructing, the latter decided to retaliate.

Naturally, Kennan, having the greater strength and experience, swiftly overpowered the small and skinny Simon. But Simon was as stubborn as he was proud, and it wasn't long before Kennan was down in the dirt, spewing out lumps of mud.

That was when the fight truly began. Punches and kicks were heavily meted out as the two boys brawled. A solid punch to Simon's jaw finally brought him crumpling to the ground. Simon squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the next blow. A moment passed. Then two.

When he finally deemed it safe to crack open an eyelid, Simon was astonished to see an outstretched hand. His opponent had a smile on his face and a trace of laughter in his greenish-gold eyes.

"Come on, take my hand," the Scot said. When Simon didn't budge, he added, "Yer not afraid are yeh, English?"

"Course not!" Simon cried out indignantly. "You should be the one that's afraid, cos I can make your left eye just as purple as your right!"

The Scot laughed. "Yer not bad for an English." He pulled Simon to his feet. "I'm Kennan, future laird of the Maclachlan clan," he announced pompously.

Simon shook his outstretched hand. "And I'm Simon, future... uh... future soldier," he concluded. "I'm going to fight in King John's army."

"Ha! Papa says he can take down King John with one hand tied behind his back!"

"I bet I can take *you* down with both hands tied behind my back!"

"Want to try?" Kennan threatened, the fire returning to his eyes. Simon was already lunging for his throat. Within seconds, the boys were again rolling on the ground.

"Peace! Peace!" Kennan finally called out.

"Too scared, Scot?" Simon taunted.

"No, it's just that Mother's making mincemeat pie, and I want to get to the cottage before Alec eats it all." Kennan was halfway down the hill before he turned back. "D'yeh want to come for supper?"

"No way! I – " Simon began before his stomach let out a loud growl. He looked up at a smirking Kennan. "Well, I s'pose I can bear with you a little while longer if I'm getting mincemeat pie."

And so a friendship began.

1193

Dear Simon,

Papa says we kinnah be friends no more. He says I kinnah talk to you 'less you start speaking Gaelic and wearing plaid. Seeing as yer English, I dinnah think that's happening very soon.

*Good-bye,
Kennan*

1206

Friend,

Should our armies ever clash, know one thing: I will not raise my sword against you.

Sir Simon Darnell of King John's Army

1212

"We've caught another one, Laird Kennan."

"Aye, Cormag," Kennan Maclachlan said as he accepted the warrior's sword and strode down the hill. "Those Englishmen have been coming in droves lately. Blasted nuisances."

"Gavyn wanted to do the beheadin', but I thought you might want to, being laird an' all," Cormag remarked.

Kennan groaned. In truth, he hated beheading – English or otherwise. But what Cormag said was true; he was laird, and the clan always came first.

Cormag led him to where Gavyn waited with the bound soldier. Kennan tightened his hold on the sword and inhaled sharply, dreading the duty before him.

That was when the Englishman turned to face him.

Kennan dropped the sword, his lips inadvertently tugging upward. "Simon."

"Thank God, Kennan! Thought I was going to be beheaded back there."

Simon's relief was starkly evident.

"Keep yer mouth shut, English. Yer pollutin' the Highland air," Gavyn growled.

"An' don't yeh be speakin' to the laird like that," Cormag spat.

Kennan frowned. "Gavyn, Cormag –"

"For heaven's sakes Laird, if yer not going to behead him soon, I'd be happy to do the duty," Gavyn interjected.

“That won’t be necessary,” Kennan said, staring at the sword on the ground. The clan. The clan always came first. Hands shaking, he bent to retrieve the sword. Then, eyes trained on the ground, he strode toward Simon.

But before he swung, Kennan made the mistake of looking into his old friend’s eyes, and the mix of sadness and resignation he saw there made him pause mid-swing.

“The clan comes first, Kennan,” Simon whispered.

“Aye, it does,” Kennan murmured. He slashed his sword through the ropes binding Simon’s wrists and ankles. “And I’m going to do the Maclachlan clan a great service today by sparing them from the sight of blood.”

“What in God’s name are yeh doin’?” Cormag bellowed. “He’s an Englishman!”

“Yer commitin’ an act of betrayal!” Gavyn’s voice was vehement.

“No, I’m committing an act of friendship,” Kennan announced in a steely tone that silenced his men.

“Take my hand,” he said to Simon. “Unless yer afraid?”

Simon chuckled as he accepted Kennan’s proffered hand. “You should be the one that’s afraid, cos I can make your left eye just as purple as your right.”

“Want to try?”

“I think I’ll settle for some mincemeat pie. I have yet to find someone who makes it better than your mama.”

“Laird?” Cormag ventured, an uneasy expression on his face.

“Aye, Cormag. Tell Cook to set an extra place at the table. We have a special guest tonight.”

Cormag and Gavyn were left gaping in disbelief as the two friends – one Scottish, one English – strolled down the hill.

Lucia Chen is a sophomore in high school. When she’s not writing, she enjoys holing up at the library with a good book or running with her high school’s cross country team. In addition to short stories, Lucia has dabbled in poetry and is currently at work on her first novel. She lives in Michigan with her mom, dad, and little brother.

I Live In Song

by Sidney Hirschman

I live in song
Where I dance
Where I sing
Music flows into me
And is ever-present.
I cannot
Will not
Be any other way
The world may go on
But I live in song.
Where the birds chirp melodies like singers
So familiar
Where the rhythmic winds stir through the trees
That rustle like a pair of maracas
Where the rivers rush and crash
Like dancers stamping their feet.
The work may go on
But I will always
Live in song.

Sidney Hirschman lives in Northern California with her family and pets. She enjoys reading, writing, and musical theater. This is her first published work.

For The First Time In A Long Time

by Kienna Kulzer

I stared out the kitchen window as my hands rinsed the dishes. I used to play out there all the time, but now that my dad is in a wheelchair, there just isn't time. I watched as a scruffy brown dog wandered across the grass. It was a stray that had been around for weeks. I turned off the faucet and ran outside to pet him.

The dog licked my face while I stroked his soft fur. Then he rolled over and I scratched his belly.

"Lizzy?" Dad called as he made his way through the front door. His face lit up in surprise when he saw the dog.

I turned to face him. "Can we keep him? Please?" I begged, running my fingers through the dog's fur.

My dad considered my plea for a minute. Finally, he said, "Oh, all right. It's your reward for being such a trouper."

"Thank you!" I shouted and ran to hug him.

After thanking Dad a thousand times, I led the dog into my room. I sat on my bed and patted the spot next to me. He turned around in a circle before lying down.

"I'll call you... Buttons," I said.

Buttons made a weird face, and then started talking. Really talking. To me.

"Um, hello, Lizzy," he said. "It's great to meet you. Buttons is a good name 'n' all, but would you mind calling me Harvey? That's my real name."

"You... you talk?" I stuttered.

"Well, yes. I can only be heard by people who have experienced extreme hardships. My owner, Samantha, is blind and deaf. She can hear me, too. Why can you hear me?" he asked. I looked down at my feet.

"Sorry," Harvey the dog said. "You don't have to answer that. I was just wondering, that's all."

I took a deep breath and told him about the last few months. I told him about how my best friend, Tiffany, had moved away to the East Coast. Then, just a week later, my parents got into a horrible car accident. A drunk driver ran a red light and smashed into them. The car flipped. I wasn't with them; I was at home with a babysitter. My mom died an hour later in the hospital. Dad broke part of his back and is now in a wheelchair. Now I do almost everything around the house because Dad can't get around very well. He had to quit his job as a construction worker, and now works part-time at a grocery store.

Harvey listened intently the whole time. He even snuggled up against me when I started crying. I always cry when I talk about my mom. I fell asleep with Harvey curled next to me.

We spent the whole weekend together. I took Harvey to the park. We ran around and played Frisbee and tag. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I had a friend. I was really excited when the school secretary phoned saying there'd be no school on Monday because of meetings.

In the middle of the night on Sunday, Harvey woke me. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. "What?" I asked.

He hesitated before answering. "You know how I said my owner was Samantha? Well, it's been really nice here. I love it. But, Lizzy, I really need to get back to her. She needs me. I'm sorry. Really."

"But I need you!" I begged softly, a tear rolling down my cheek. "Please. You're my only friend."

"I need to find Samantha," Harvey said. "Will you help me?"

Even though that was the last thing I wanted to do, I nodded. I felt like it was my duty. To Harvey.

The next day, Harvey and I left my house and walked down the street. "I think I remember how to get there," Harvey said. "But I might need some help."

We'd only walked about half a mile when he stopped in front of a small brick house.

"I don't get it, Harvey," I wondered aloud. "What did you need my help for?"

"I didn't," he replied. "I just wanted you to meet her. C'mon."

Harvey led us to the back door. I opened it. Samantha's room was the first one. She sat up as soon as we walked through the doorway.

"Harvey?" she asked.

"Yes, it's me," he answered. "And I've brought someone with me. Her name is Elizabeth. I think you two will be great friends."

He was right.

Kienna Kulzer is an eighth-grader at Cabrillo Middle School in Ventura, California. She loves any kind of creative writing, especially short stories and songs. Her other hobbies include hanging out with friends, reading, running, and skiing.

Coming/Going Home

by Emma Elisabeth McNairy

My happiest moment occurs every time I come home. You see, I am fifteen and go to boarding school. I love it there, but I am human and get homesick. I need my mum, and yearn for my very own bed and an escape from constant school life. So for me, there is no happier time than coming home.

The moment I see my mum's car drive up to the school is exhilarating; taking the highway exit to go back to my hometown relieving; and collapsing in my perfectly rumpled bed satisfying. However, the best, happiest moment of all is getting a hug from my little sister.

She comes down the steps of the school bus; her backpack, not quite secure on her shoulders, slips from one arm. I itch to straighten it. Finally, firm on the sparse, scratchy grass of our front yard, she pauses to adjust the straps. She resumes walking, then – looks up. When she sees me, though I am just an ordinary person grimy with travel, her grin is gorgeous. Seeing her is better than any moment in a movie, more true than poetry – she is more beautiful, shining, real than the sun. She runs to me, I to her. We hug and I bury my face in her hair, which smells of flowers because she never fully rinses out shampoo.

She has grown; every visit I find her taller than I remembered. Next vacation, I won't be able to tuck her head under my chin when we embrace. Soon, she will knock me over when she runs to me. Sometimes her hair is longer. Other times, she has had it cut, though I have not gone to the hair-cutter with her, reading trashy magazines in the waiting room and then laughing with her about the ridiculous "10 Hottest Beauty Trends!"

Every time I come home something has changed, and I scramble to spot the differences. But these are not thoughts for a first-hug-home, and I put them aside. Instead, I bask in the joy of being with my little sister again. I draw back, noticing how well she fits my old T-shirt, which she must have taken from my closet while I was gone. Part of me wants to stop the change, freeze this moment, so that I will always recognize every inch of my sister, so that none of her will ever be foreign. Yet I am content, delighted that she can be a bit alien, yet still love me; that she is not precisely how I last pictured her, yet I still love her.

She says my name, and her voice – perhaps a bit lower than before – resounds in me as it always has.

Emma Elisabeth McNairy is a boarding-school student in North Carolina. She enjoys taking walks, listening to NPR, and going to art museums. She likes old films, fountain pens, her family, and writing in the third person about herself.

Winter

by Bryce Perea

Winter is the time
For Jimmy.
He loves to snowboard –
Started when he was three
And now he is fourteen.
His favorite season
Is winter.

One winter day
Jimmy was snowboarding
Down the mountain.
He heard a grumble.
Looked behind him and saw
A wall of snow.

He snowboarded
Down that mountain
For his life.

Finally, he reached the bottom.
Beat the avalanche.
He said,
*Thrill is the reason
I love the winter.*

Bryce Perea is fourteen years old and attends eighth grade at Sidney Middle School in Ohio. He loves playing the drums and bass guitar. He also loves to snowboard.

i am me

by rachel phillips

like a leaf has two sides
veins stretching as fingers
clinging to the branch
so is a name.
such a funny thing – a name is just
a word
a sound
some letters.
but it isn't just
all that.
a name is a path
that you can travel
to find your true self.
it doesn't have to be just
your birth name or
your nickname.
it longs to be more than just
all that.
it is the essence of
your soul
deep within.
your own identity.
it is the reason you can
say i am me
and i am proud.

Rachel Phillips was born in Iowa and moved to Mozambique, Africa for two years. She currently lives in California with her parents, a dog, and two very fat cats. Rachel wants to become an international journalist and eat an unprecedented amount of olives.

Jesusita Fire

by Hailey Sestak

On Wednesday afternoon
in the mountains of Santa Barbara
the fire began.
No time for evacuation preparation.
Not a chance to make plans.

Difficult to pretend like everything is okay
when it feels like the Jesusita Fire
is here to stay.

The world seems to have come to an end.
The fire does not know when to stop.
We cannot defend
all the homes and lives.
You can hear the town cry.

Half the town is burning.
My friends' houses are gone.
Nothing left.

I can't stop thinking,
what if my house wasn't here?

Life isn't always fair.

My family and I gather
in the living room
to watch.
On the news, Channel 703,
we see eyes crying, hearts dying
for the loss of the beautiful Santa Barbara
we knew.

Hailey Sestak moved with her family from Minnesota to California when she was eleven years old. Now, she is a sophomore in high school. She participates in four theater productions a year so she is almost always busy rehearsing or performing!

About Write On! For Literacy

Write On! For Literacy was founded by Dallas Woodburn in 2001 to encourage young people to discover confidence, joy, self-expression and connection to others through reading and writing.

Projects include:

- Annual Holiday Book Drive: as of December 2010, nearly 12,000 new books have been collected, sorted and distributed to disadvantaged youth. Donation sites include Boys and Girls Clubs, Project Understanding, Casa Pacifica, and the Ventura County Migrant Education Services. We have been told that for many recipients, these books are the only gifts they receive.
- Writing Contests: categories of short story, essay, and poetry for young writers in elementary school, middle school, and high school. Gift certificates to bookstores are awarded as prizes.
- Summer Writing Camp: held annually in Ventura, California for young writers ages 8-18. Students have FUN while also learning how to improve central components of their writing, including dialogue, characterization, plot and setting, through various creativity-inducing writing exercises.
- Classroom Visits: Dallas regularly visits schools to speak about her career as a writer and the importance of reading and writing.
- Online Resources: visit www.writeonbooks.org for author interviews, book reviews, inspirational quotes, and more. Dallas also interacts with youth – and adults – through her blog <http://dallaswoodburn.blogspot.com> and her free monthly email newsletter. Subscribe at www.writeonbooks.org.

Interested in joining Write On! For Literacy?

We are always looking for new members who are passionate about reading and writing! Visit www.writeonbooks.org to learn more about what we do and share your ideas. You can also volunteer to host an event or start a chapter of Write On! in your town.

About Dallas Woodburn

Dallas published her first book, a collection of short stories and poems titled *There's a Huge Pimple On My Nose*, when she was in fifth grade in 1998. A few months after publication it received a glowing review in the Los Angeles Times: "If you simply want to enjoy some remarkable writing, it would be hard to find a book more satisfying." *Pimple* has now sold more than 2,600 copies nationwide.

In 2005, Dallas worked with iUniverse to publish her second collection of stories, *3 a.m.*, which also garnered rave reviews and was featured on the nationally syndicated PBS book talk show "Between the Lines" hosted by the very talented and charismatic Barry Kibrick. Dallas's short fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in numerous literary magazines including Monkeybicycle, Arcadia Journal, Cicada, flashquake, and The Newport Review, among others. She has also published more than seventy articles and essays in national publications including Family Circle, Writer's Digest, Motherwords, The Los Angeles Times, and eight *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. Since 2004, she has written the words and storyline of a monthly comic strip for the youth anti-drug magazine Listen.

Dallas has been interviewed on The Early Show on CBS and numerous radio programs. Her volunteer work has been recognized with a Jackie Kennedy Onassis/Jefferson Award, a Congressional Award Gold Medal, and most recently a 2010 "Best of You" award from Glamour Magazine and Sally Hansen. In addition to her work with Write On!, Dallas has lead workshops at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference and teaches a summer writing camp in her hometown of Ventura, California. She also serves as Youth Director on the board of the nonprofit organization SPAWN (Small Publishers, Artists and Writers Network).

In 2009, Dallas graduated *summa cum laude* from the University of Southern California with a B.A. in Creative Writing and a minor in Entrepreneurship. During her undergraduate years, she spent a semester studying abroad at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. In August 2010, she entered the wonderful M.F.A. program in Fiction Writing at Purdue University.

When she's not at the keyboard, chalkboard or reading a good book, Dallas enjoys running, cooking, traveling, and spending time with loved ones.