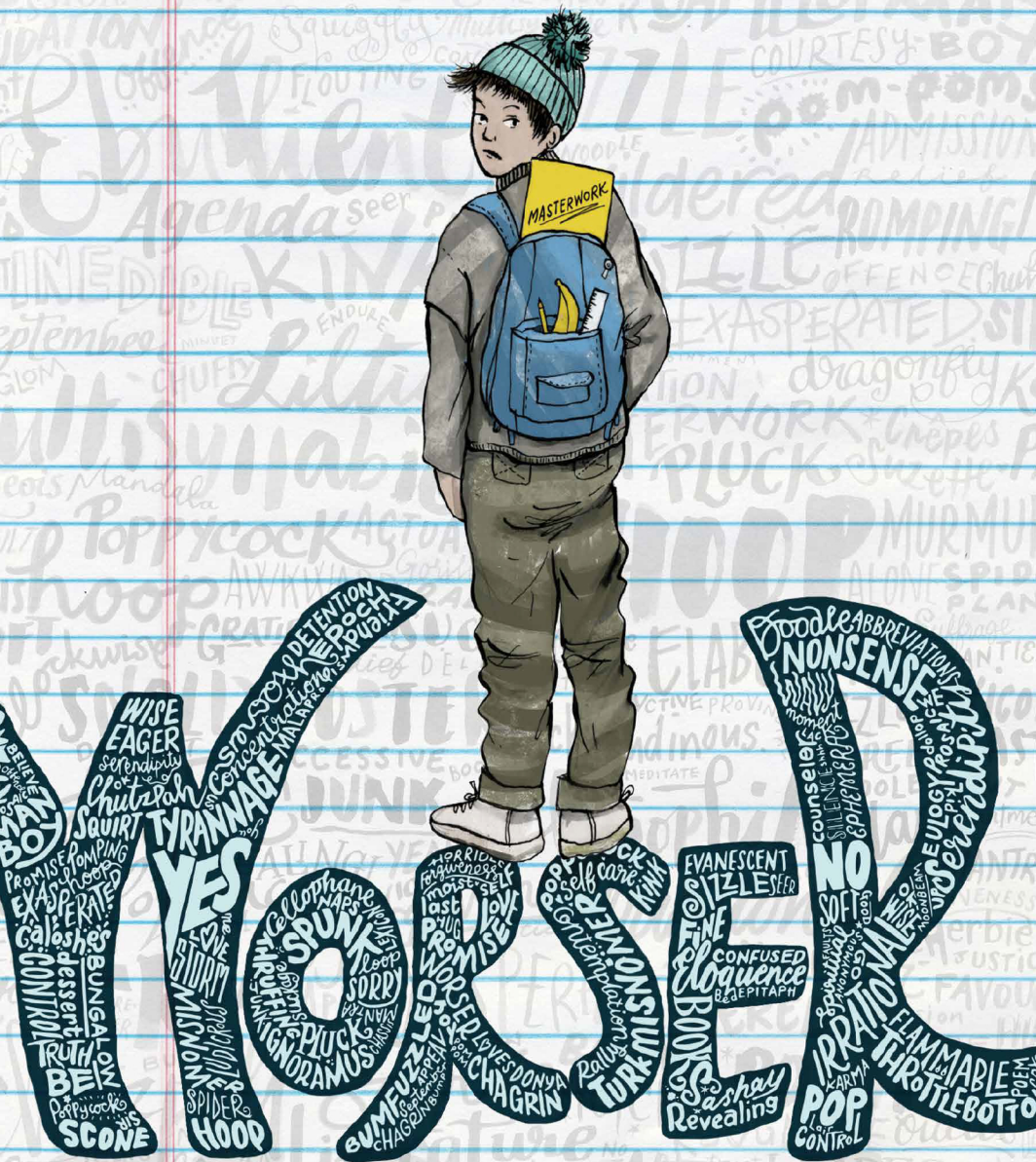


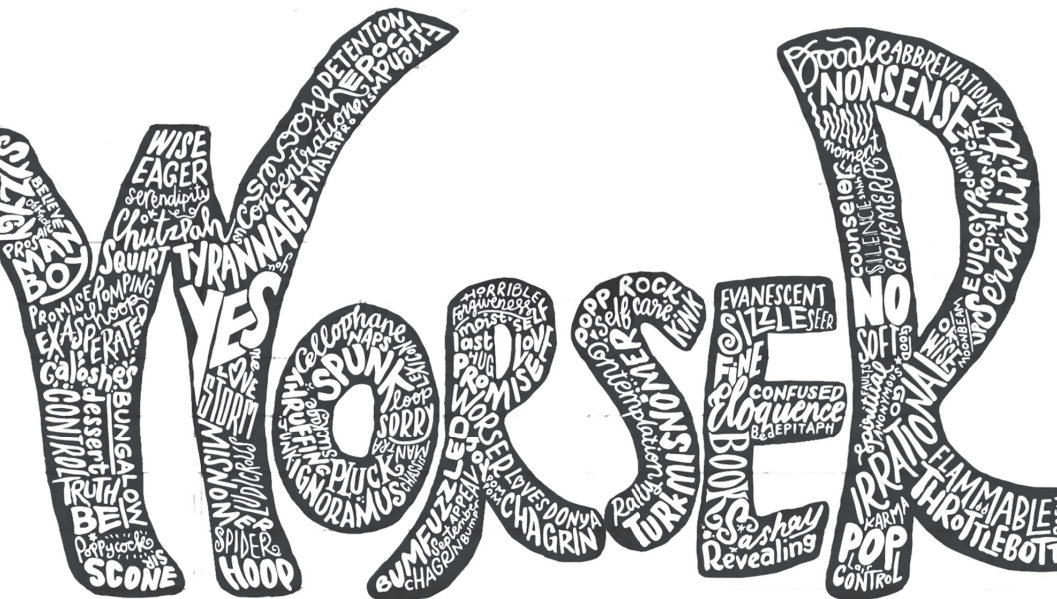
"Quite simply, a work of genius."—Kathi Appelt, NYT best-selling author of *The Underneath*, National Book Award Finalist, PEN USA Award, and Newbery Honor Award



JENNIFER ZIEGLER

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ONE

Rally

“I understand that you had quite a difficult summer, Will.”

Worser remained still and silent, refusing to even blink. Principal Ludlum knew nothing about him, no matter what the official records showed. For one thing, Mr. Ludlum kept referring to him as Will. No one called him that. To his mother and his teachers, he was William. He was called Worser by everyone else in school—including, once, accidentally (he hoped), the school secretary.

Mr. Ludlum appeared to be what Worser’s mother called a *standoffishial*—one of those administrators who hides in an office all day avoiding people. It was Mr. Vaccario, the assistant principal, who was the perceived figure of authority. He was the one who stalked the hallways of Oak Valley Middle School threatening students and had a face that was rough and red like a meatball.

Throughout sixth grade, Worser had rarely seen Mr. Ludlum. And he’d certainly never been in his office, not until ten minutes ago, at the end of his first week of seventh grade.

And Worser was not impressed.

Mr. Ludlum's stooped posture, rumbled suit, and unchanging expression of surprise-bordering-on-panic—as if he couldn't remember how he came to be in his current location—didn't exactly inspire fear. To believe that the title of *principal* gave him instant authority would be like believing a uniform gave a Boy Scout the ability to lead troops into battle.

“You probably think that what you did wasn't that bad. You probably think that because the school year has only just begun, we are going easy on offenders. You probably think that because you are an honor student”—the principal lifted the file that lay open on the table in front of him, making its sides flap like wings—“we won't take any serious action.”

Worser waited for the eventual thesis statement. For all their talk about productivity, educators were some of the worst time-wasters on the planet. Being the son of a university professor—two when his father was alive—Worser knew that better than most.

“But,” the principal continued, “I'm afraid that's *not* how the system works.”

There it was. The main point—although not clearly stated. He'd padded it with the phrase *I'm afraid*. Then again, Mr. Ludlum looked a little afraid, so perhaps he accidentally let slip his true feelings. He also used the word *system* instead of *school*. This made Worser imagine himself and all the other students passing through a giant digestive tract toward the inevitable end. The metaphor, he decided, was apt.

“Will?” Principal Ludlum's voice lowered and took on weight—the same weight it had when he announced disaster drills over the intercom. “Why will you not answer me?”

Worser lifted his left eyebrow. “Because you haven't asked me any questions. You have used only declarative sentences.”

The principal's expression grew slightly more startled. He made a few random vowel sounds before clearing his throat. "Do you know why you were sent in here this afternoon?"

"Yes."

Worser's brief reply seemed to disappoint the principal. "Perhaps you would like to explain your misbehavior in your own words," he said with a sigh, his back sliding a couple of inches down his office chair.

"I was in the library reading, and apparently that went against school policy."

Principal Ludlum took off his glasses and rubbed the space between his brows. "It was not that you were reading. That was not the problem, was it? The problem was that you were supposed to be somewhere else. Do you remember where we asked all students to be at three o'clock, per today's special schedule?"

Worser disliked this practice of asking obvious questions. It served no real purpose and succeeded only in making people feel like kindergartners.

"Yes," he replied. "Students were asked to report to the gymnasium at three o'clock. I felt that reading would be a better use of my time than watching cheerleaders spell *Oak Valley* with their bodies. I already know how to spell both *oak* and *valley*, as well as many other words."

"There is no reason to be snide, young man."

"I'm merely frustrated. I would think that in this age of video games and cell phones that school administrators would reward a student who wanted to read or write—not send him to the office."

Again, the principal let out a series of incomprehensible sounds before deflating with a long sigh. "You appear to

be...good with words,” he said. “Do you know what *rally* means?”

Worser, who had been occupying the chair across from Mr. Ludlum like a jellyfish in a teacup, suddenly leaned forward and elongated. He forgot his plan to be as unmoving and close-mouthed as possible.

“*Rally*,” Worser began. “I suspect you are referring to the noun form of the word, which means ‘a gathering of people with a common interest.’”

“Correct. Today we held a pep rally, a gathering designed to boost pride in one’s school community. I think you would agree that a sense of unity among you and your peers is important—at least as important as the words in the book you were reading.”

Worser’s hand clenched. “My peers? The same people who have teased me and kicked my backpack to the rear of the bus so often that I’ve decided to walk to and from school instead? The same people who delight in placing vile things on my chair and referring to me by a hateful and ungrammatical nickname? Do I think that a sense of unity with *them* is equal in value to words? No, I do not. Words elevate our species. They are the basis of civilized society. There is nothing more important than words.”

Worser knew this was the wrong answer, but he didn’t care. He would much rather report to in-school detention and sit between two future armed robbers than say that a school pep rally was worth as much as the written word. Principal Ludlum might not have realized it, but his question went right for Worser’s jugular. Worser had to defend himself.

The principal studied Worser, and Worser studied the

principal, waiting for the verdict. Would Mr. Ludlum dole out the sentence himself or call in that thug of an assistant principal? He hoped it wouldn't come to that. Not that he feared Mr. Vaccario's sweaty, vein-popping rants. He'd just had enough of school for one day and was eager to get home and work on more important things.

"Well—" Mr. Ludlum began in his lackluster voice. But he never got to complete his sentence, because right then the door opened, and a woman dressed from head to toe in purple stepped into the office.

"There you are, Potato," the woman said to Worser.

The school secretary's apologetic face peered around the doorframe. "Excuse the interruption, Mr. Ludlum. The boy's mother is here."

Worser winced. "She's *not* my mother."

Worser sat in the passenger seat of Aunt Iris's rattly, lima-bean-colored Volkswagen Squareback. Every bump bounced him hard enough to strain against his seat belt and was accompanied by a high-pitched, almost rodent-like squeak from somewhere in the machinery—but he didn't mind. His detainment in the school office had been demoralizing and pointless, and the ride was an assault on his senses, but at least he'd been spared the walk home.

"My, my," Aunt Iris kept repeating. She also appeared to be shaking her head, but that could have been due to the jostling motions of the car. After a half dozen *mys*, she regarded him with a saintly smile and said, "Well now, I suppose there's no good reason to tell your mom about your little disturbance, especially since that nice principal decided not to discipline you."

Before they'd left the office, Mr. Ludlum explained that he felt his "stern talking-to" was punishment enough and that—in a reversal of his earlier statement—he could be lenient because Worser was an honor student.

"But you are lucky Ms. Lucretia was home and able to sit with her. I really don't like leaving your mom in the care of others—even for just a little while. So no more monkey-shines, okay?"

Worser replied with a sound like *mmm*.

"Your mom is having such a terrific day, and I don't want to ruin it. She did wonderfully at her therapies, ate lots of lentil soup for lunch, and took a nice nap. It has definitely been a purple day. Deep and serene. Isn't that wonderful?"

Worser acknowledged Aunt Iris with a new sound—part sigh and part grunt.

"And she just loves listening to music on the radio. She wants me to keep it on that classical station. She particularly enjoyed that one song that went *ya DA da-da daaaaah...*" Aunt Iris continued warbling a melody with nonsense syllables, her right hand letting go of the steering wheel so that she could conduct an invisible orchestra.

"She does not like listening to music," Worser said. "You just think she does."

Aunt Iris was imagining things. His mother had always said music was a waste of time. Silence was her favorite background noise, as it was with him, too. Professor Constance Orser and her late husband, Professor Reginald Orser, twenty years older than she, had never owned a sound system, a television, or a cell phone. They had also, according to his mother, been the last in their respective departments at the university to own and operate a computer—and had only given in due to

pressure. Bound books had been their preferred methods of gathering information as well as entertainment.

“Oh, but she does enjoy it,” Aunt Iris said. “I know so.”

“How? Did she tell you she likes it?”

Aunt Iris stopped singing. “That’s a terrible thing to say.”

Worser closed his eyes—his best strategy for dealing with Aunt Iris. He was not used to interacting with someone of her nature for extended periods of time. Aunt Iris was emotional, expressive, eager, ebullient. A walking string of *e* modifiers. *Eeeeeeee!* Worser, meanwhile, was bookish and standoffish, and preferred hushed tones—all words with *shhh* appropriately enough. Opposite sounds, opposite personalities.

He supposed he should feel guilty for what he’d said, but he didn’t, especially since it rewarded him with silence from his aunt. For the next few minutes, all he heard were the screeches and rumbles of the car. When he opened his eyes again, the Volkswagen was pulling onto the cracked cement driveway next to his mom’s Nissan.

Aunt Iris met his gaze. “Please be patient and kind, okay?”

Worser wasn’t sure if his aunt wanted him to be patient and kind to her or to his mother, but he nodded.

This seemed to appease her, because she simultaneously switched off the car and switched on her singing. “*Ya DA da-da daaaaah...*”

As she and her scarves fluttered up the walkway and through the front door, Worser pretended to fumble with something in his backpack in order to lag behind on the porch—another way of coping. He needed a brief pause—a semicolon, or perhaps an ellipsis—so he could transition. Not from school to home or outside to inside, but from what was to what now is.

He bounced on the loose boards and studied the shadows cast by light straining through the contents of five hanging baskets. Spider plant had begotten spider plant, which had begotten more spider plants—hundreds of the spindly spawn—most of them now shriveled and dead from the Texas heat, creating a thatched curtain over the porch front. Aunt Iris often bemoaned that they were probably beyond saving, and that she'd one day get rid of the poor carcasses. But Worser hoped not. He actually liked the cover they provided and admired the stubborn way they remained tethered to one another.

“Oh, here he is.” Ms. Lucretia, their next-door neighbor, was stepping onto the porch. “We were just wondering what was keeping you.”

“You still out there, Potato?” Aunt Iris poked her head around the front door.

Worser was annoyed at being interrupted, annoyed that his aunt would ask about the obvious, and annoyed that she persisted in calling him Potato. He already felt as if he were the only seventh grader in town who hadn't launched into puberty—and being referred to by the nickname she'd given him as a baby didn't help. Then again, as he studied his rounded shadow on the porch floor, he had to admit his short, stout shape did look rather potato-like. Perhaps she couldn't help herself.

Ms. Lucretia crossed her arms. She never smiled—at least at him. Normally, he was fine with that, as he despised it when grown-ups gave condescending smiles. She also didn't give him wide-eyed pitying looks like most of the adults he'd recently interacted with—another plus. She'd been his neighbor his entire life and usually just said things like “Hello” or

“Tell your mother I accepted a package for her” or “Don’t you dare step on my flowers.” All acceptable in his view. But in that moment, as she stared at him, he felt entirely too seen.

“You should go on in,” Ms. Lucretia said as she headed toward her house.

Worser sighed, shouldered his backpack, and stepped through the open front door.

His mother was standing in the foyer, waiting for him. “Be! Be! Be!”

“Hi, . . . Mom.” Worser heard the pause in his greeting and hated himself for it.

He wondered when he would get used to thinking of this person as his mother. It had been three months since the stroke—a bursting blood vessel that laid waste to a section of his mother’s brain the same way a bomb could level a town and cut off key supply routes.

Everything about her had changed. She held her head at a new sideways angle, more upturned than before. Her brisk trot had turned into a shamble. Her eyes were wider, her mouth a tilde—higher on her left, slack on her right. The hair she’d always kept in a no-nonsense bob was growing out shaggy and wild, except for a section of very short hair above her left ear where she had been shaved for the operation. And her power of speech was gone.

“Be!” She smiled at him and held up her thin, shaking arms. Dr. Constance Orser, professor of rhetoric, had lost all her words.

Worser had spent his summer waiting in rooms: actual waiting rooms, plus hospital rooms, Aunt Iris’s apartment, and the lobby of the rehab facility. First, he waited to learn whether his mother would survive. Next, he waited for her

to regain consciousness. After that, he waited for her to be transferred to the rehab facility. Now he waited for her return. She had been back at home for three weeks, but she herself had not come back.

Every morning he expected his mom to talk to him again, to share an interesting tidbit from the *New York Times* or read aloud a laughably incongruous sentence from a student's paper—or even criticize him. But at present all she could manage were random syllables beginning with *b*.

Rally. In verb form it meant to recover, bounce back. Worser's mother had not yet rallied.

TWO

Bear

After a snack of leftover lentil soup and more talk from Aunt Iris about how purple a day it had been, Worser finally made it up to the comfort and privacy of his room. Here there were no distractions. No bright colors, taped whale songs, or strange herbal fragrances. A smell did, in fact, emanate from his room—a sour odor, like lunchmeat a few days past its expiration date. But Worser couldn't detect it anymore, having become desensitized to it over the years.

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a large loose-leaf binder. It was battered and cracked, and the seam in the front was starting to give way. Tucked inside the clear plastic pocket on the cover was a yellowing piece of notebook paper that read, in nine-year-old Worser's careful lettering, *Masterwork by William Wyatt Orser*.

The binder was full—perhaps a bit too full, which contributed to the strain on the cover. Not counting the 17 empty pages in the back, there were 321 pages of writing—all lists of important observations Worser had made over the past three and a half years. Observations about words.

Worser took the pile of folded, freshly laundered shirts

that Aunt Iris had placed on the foot of his bed and transferred them to the floor. He sat on them as he settled into his usual at-home work spot: on the carpet with his back against his bed. As he stared down at the clean blue lines of the paper, he felt the usual quiet excitement—that subtle fizzy sensation surging through his body, concentrating in his fingertips.

He tapped his pen against his lips a few times as his thoughts whirred into a higher, smoother gear. Then he hunched over the notebook and wrote at the top of the page “Word Contradictions.” He had Aunt Iris to thank for this latest entry. Their conversation in the car had spurred the idea.

“If *terrific* can mean the opposite of *terrible*, why isn’t *horrific* the opposite of *horrible*?” he wrote.

Good. What else? He knew that *flammable* and *inflammable* meant the same thing, even though they looked like opposites. Also, there were other words that seemed as if they should be antonyms but were actually synonyms, like the nouns *caretaker* and *caregiver* and the verbs *bone* and *debone*. *Reckless* sounded as if it meant “disaster-free” when, in fact, it meant “careless and prone to accidents.” And *last* could mean, as an adjective, “belonging to the end of something” or, as a verb, “to endure.”

Yes, this was a worthy topic for a new entry. As he wrote down his observations, his tongue absently tapped the corners of his mouth, and the lingering annoyance over the events at school and the drive home ebbed away. The sounds of recorded marine animals and Aunt Iris’s prattling disintegrated into easy-to-ignore static. He was, finally, alone with his thoughts.

As Worser leaned against his bed and stared up at the

dingy spray-acoustic ceiling, his hands slid backward beneath the bed frame. He was just pondering how *clip* can mean both “to adhere” and “to cut off” when he felt a sharp pain in his left hand.

“Ow!” He glanced under the bed and found Seersucker (Seer for short), one of his aunt’s cats, glaring at him. Ears back, pupils like shivs. Worser cupped his throbbing hand in his other and noted four thin red stripes across the knuckles.

For as long as Worser could remember, his bedroom door wouldn’t completely shut. Seer had apparently decided to take advantage of this and make himself Worser’s antisocial, homicidal roommate. While the other cat, Gingham (Ging for short), was skittish, ghostlike, and rarely seen, Seer always seemed to be lying in wait around corners and under furniture.

Worser scrambled to his feet and opened the door all the way. “Get out, you sadist!” he shouted.

Seer made a demonic noise, part growl, part shriek, that culminated in a fang-bearing hiss before running out of the room—a blur of fluff, stripes, and malevolence.

After making sure there were no other lurking creatures, Worser slammed his door—which, except for the satisfying noise, made no real difference since the door immediately reopened. He then plunked back into his spot and tried to regain that highly charged focus. But it was no use. The fizzy feeling was gone, and so was his concentration.

Grumbling, Worser packed up his Masterwork. He needed to escape to somewhere peaceful, private, and cat-free.

Luckily, he had a place.

Worser had discovered his secret hideout a year ago while searching for a shortcut to middle school. The bus had become

unbearable. Loud and jam-packed, full of hurled insults and projectiles—with sixth graders the special targets. Worser couldn't get a seat to himself—no one could—and whoever ended up sitting with him teased him relentlessly. Even the band kids picked on him.

At first, it seemed he had only two alternatives, neither of them appealing. One would involve crossing a terrifying intersection where his neighborhood's main street met the highway, just as it became part of the new tollway. The number of dead skunks, possums, and armadillos at the intersection was a powerful enough warning to prevent him risking it. The second would involve a more tortuous route that would avoid the deadly juncture but require him to get up twenty minutes earlier to allow enough time.

When he consulted a map, Worser noticed a peanut-shaped green space marked MESA SEGURA NATURE PRESERVE that hugged the northern edge of his neighborhood. From the looks of it, if he cut diagonally through the green space, it would lead him to another group of residential streets—one of which led to his school. The entire walk would probably take ten minutes, tops. Determined, he set out to find this route.

The green space turned out to be lovely. It was full of trees—some tall and sturdy, others dark and twisty—that strained the sunlight and muffled the noises of the nearby roads. The ground was cushiony, dotted with occasional rocks, feathery ferns, and big green plants with long, tentacle-like leaves. Unfortunately, the space was also divided lengthwise by a limestone bluff approximately two stories deep, something that hadn't been apparent on the map. Worser had held tight to one of the gnarled trees and peered over the edge. Immediately below, the land was flat and scrubby, with

smaller and far fewer trees, and it appeared to be in the process of turning into residential lots, given the coral-colored tape dividing it into rectangles. This open land ended at a road and the neighborhood of split-level, ranch-style homes that led to his school.

He figured there had to be a safe way down. For the next half hour, he searched for a path—to no avail. It was becoming increasingly clear that he'd have to wake up earlier and use the more circular, time-consuming route, as the only way he could use the green space would be via hang glider in one direction and climbing gear in the other.

That's when a miracle had happened.

As Worser leaned defeatedly against a tall red oak, he'd noticed a timeworn piece of wood nailed into the tree. He discovered another roughly twenty inches above it. Then another and another—a set of seven rungs total, all leading up to a wooden platform. Worser, who detested physical activity, including rope climbing in gym class, nonetheless found himself clambering up.

He had no idea how old the tree house was, but it was in good enough shape to make him feel safe. The platform was weather-beaten, yet solid, and only one of the rungs near the top was slightly wiggly. Everything else appeared to be sound. After carefully checking for any exposed nails or hidden hornets' nests, he leaned back against the tree trunk, feeling strangely exhilarated.

And that was when a second miracle happened.

From his perch, he could see over the trees and down the bluff to the road with ranch-style homes, well-kept lawns, and minivans in the driveways. One house, gray brick with creamy white trim and shutters, seemed familiar

to him. He couldn't quite place it at first. But not five minutes later, a dark green Volvo pulled up and four people got out. He knew them immediately. A father, mother, daughter, and son. The tree house had provided him with a clear, albeit faraway view of Donya Khoury's residence.

Donya—daughter of Dr. Jasar Khoury, professor of poetry and a colleague of his mother's at the university. Donya—who was basically the same age, in the same grade, and had shared three classes with him in elementary school and Advanced Language Arts with him in sixth grade. Donya—the only person outside his family about whom he spent time thinking. Worsler felt it was a coincidence too wondrous to ignore and decided then and there to claim the tree house as his own.

Now, almost a year later, he glanced over at Donya's house, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. He visualized her completing her homework at the dining room table. Or maybe flopped on the sofa with her cell phone cupped in her hands. Or doing whatever it was ordinary twelve-year-old girls did at home after school.

Of course, Donya wasn't ordinary. Donya was a being so extraordinary, he counted himself lucky to regularly inhabit the same building she was in. Eight years earlier, four-and-a-half-year-old Donya had handed four-year-old Worsler a doughnut in the break room beside her dad's office and said, "You're smarter than other kids, aren't you?"

"Yes," he'd replied.

From then on, he'd revered her, usually in silence and from a distance, but with the same indescribable urgency that compelled monarch butterflies to migrate to Mexico and drove king salmon thousands of miles upriver.

His feelings hadn't lessened by the time they started

middle school. Worser thought Donya had the most stunning and exquisite face of any human—the way her eyes lit up and her eyebrows pushed against each other while she read; the way she glared at the heavens whenever she observed asinine behavior at school, as if cursing an invisible god for filling her world with such stupidity; the way she never seemed to wear that expression while observing him.

Daylight was dimming, and shadows were stretching. If Worser wanted to use this time to work, he had to put aside all thoughts of Donya. For the next twenty minutes he tried to write about contradictory words and phrases, but he was too fidgety to think straight. He was still mad at Principal Ludlum, and mad at his aunt for fussing over his mom and swirling about his home. Emotions were pesky things that got in the way of the ordered thinking he needed for his Masterwork. Since his mom’s stroke, he’d been especially bad at managing them.

Worser had just started ruminating on how *fine* can mean both “high-quality” and “ho-hum,” when he heard the steady crunching of dry leaves. Someone was coming. It happened occasionally. Hikers passing by or stopping to check out the view from the top of the bluff. The first few months after he’d discovered his secret place, he worried someone would show up, claim the platform as their own, and order him down. But no one ever did. And no one else ever seemed to see it. The red oak was well hidden among other trees and plants, and the rungs were the same gray shade as the tree trunk. Besides, people so rarely glanced up.

Judging by the sounds, the person was coming closer. Now, in addition to the tramps and snaps, he could hear low grunts. Maybe an animal? A wild boar or mountain lion? He knew the former couldn’t climb trees, but he wasn’t sure

about the latter. He grasped his pen like a knife and waited for the creature to reveal itself.

And then, twelve months since miracles one and two, miracle number three happened. The creature turned out to be Donya, marching through the trees grumbling to herself. He recognized her dark wavy hair against the Day-Glo green hoodie she always wore—even on late-summer days like today.

Worser was so stunned by the sight of her, he let go of the pen he'd been holding as a makeshift weapon. It bounced off Donya's head just as she passed underneath.

"Ow!" She frowned up at him.

"Sorry."

"Worser?"

"Hi."

"Is this your pen?"

"It's all right. I have another."

"What are you doing here?"

"Just sitting and writing. I have my algebra homework with me, too."

Donya wandered around the tree, looking it up and down. "I had no idea this was here. Is this your spot?"

"My... spot?"

"Yeah. You know. Your place to get away from it all."

Worser nodded. "Yes, *refuge* is the term I'd use."

Donya knelt and peered over the edge of the steep bluff—an action that made Worser vibrate with worry.

"I used to have a spot," she said, gazing down. "There was an empty field across the street from our house, and I'd go sit under this big pecan tree and clear my mind. But last year they built our new neighbor's house and fenced in the tree. I wish I were under it now."

“You c-can...” Worser’s voice shook. He took a breath and restarted. “You’re welcome to come up here. I’ll share my spot.”

She shook her head. “Can’t. I’m afraid of heights.”

“Actually, that’s a misnomer. Fear of heights is really a fear of falling. Just like fear of the dark is a fear of what might be *in* the dark, not the darkness itself.”

Donya stood and clapped dirt from her hands. “I should go. It’s been a bad day. I really don’t feel like talking or getting lectures on word usage.”

Worser watched as she crashed through the nearby thicket, the vivid green of her hoodie fading into the celadon-and-olive tones of the surrounding foliage.

He wished he’d thought of something else to say. He could have told her she could keep the pen. He could have complimented her on her fluorescent hoodie. He could have praised her on her correct usage of the verb *to be* in the subjunctive form: *I wish I were under it now*. His comment about fear of heights wasn’t meant to be critical; he just wanted people to say what they meant. It wasn’t Donya’s fault those inaccurate terms had found their way into the lingo.

Worser decided to head home. He’d been in the tree house for an hour and hadn’t made any real progress on his Masterwork. The only thing he’d accomplished was to do to Donya what Seer had done to him: Though by accident and without drawing blood (thankfully), he’d driven her away in frustration.

“Beh?”

Worser ignored his mother and turned to a new page in a book titled *Forgotten English*.

“Beh?” his mother said again. She kept shifting against the pillows that propped her up in her hospital bed, her eyes staying on him the whole time. “Beh?”

He realized he should be happy she’d progressed to a new sound—a short *e* syllable rather than her usual long *e*—but it still didn’t make sense. Also, her rising pitch made it come off like a question. Regardless, he couldn’t understand it and felt it would be best to carry on as if nothing were happening.

“*Thruffing*,” he read aloud. “Lincolnshire dialect for ‘the whole matter.’ *Thruff*—I wonder if that’s related to the word *through*? Or perhaps *thorough*?”

Over the years, this was how they’d usually spent their after-dinner hours, reading to each other. His mother would read lists of the most commonly misspelled words or passages from grammar textbooks—grammar being her favorite subject, even if she did say it was a Sisyphean effort to try to teach it to hormonal college students. Etymology was another interest, and Latin, to an extent. She felt that conjugating Latin verbs was a waste of time, but she did want Worser to grasp common roots and see how English sprouted out of them—not unlike the way a thin green runner would shoot from a half-dead spider plant on the porch. In turn, Worser read to her, graduating from picture books to more complicated fare. He liked to try to stump her with rare words and phrases—those that were used only in particular regions or industries, or that had fallen out of favor over the years.

Now their evening reading time was considerably shortened. Instead of taking place in the living room, it took place in the study—which was being used as his mother’s bedroom since she couldn’t yet handle the stairs. And now it was only

Worser doing the reading, although he still chose the same subject matter.

“*Throttlebottom*,” he went on. “A shrewd—”

“Potato?”

Worser glanced up. Aunt Iris’s head—all unruly hair, woven earrings, and sheepish grin—was poking into the room.

“What?” he asked.

“I don’t think she’s enjoying this. Why not read *Alice* to her?” She pointed to a leather-bound edition of *Alice in Wonderland* that had been pulled off the shelf, dusted clean, and set on his mother’s nightstand. “She loved hearing me read the first chapter today.”

“Nonsense.”

“Why do you doubt me?”

“I’m saying that book is full of silly nonsense, not to mention written by a suspected pedophile,” he said. “You don’t know what she likes.”

“I’m her sister. I grew up with her. I can tell when she’s happy and when she isn’t.”

“I’m her son, and I’ve lived with her my whole life. I know how she feels about Lewis Carroll. The only reason we have that book is that some clueless acquaintance gave it to her years ago.”

“I gave it to her.”

“I rest my case,” Worser mumbled.

Aunt Iris’s sigh seemed to defy normal lung capacity. “Fine,” she said. “Then why not read her a different story?”

“She doesn’t like stories. She likes words.”

“That doesn’t make sense. If someone likes words, they like stories.”

Worser squeezed his eyes shut. “You’re not like us. You wouldn’t understand.”

The curl of Aunt Iris's brows showed him he'd hurt her feelings. He tried to enjoy it, ignoring the heaviness that seeped over him like cold mud.

"I refuse to fight," she said. "I truly hope you two enjoy yourselves. Just remember that she had a long day today and that you'll have more time with her tomorrow and Sunday. She'll need to go to sleep soon."

After Aunt Iris closed the door, Worser grumbled, "What a chuffy snollygoster."

"Beh?"

"Sorry you had to witness that. I was only saying—" Glancing up, he noticed his mother had stretched out her hand, reaching for a framed photo on the side table. It was of Worser as a two-year-old, wearing only a diaper and hugging a stuffed bear. His aunt must have had it framed and placed it there. For all her complaining about clutter, she sure brought in a lot of it herself.

A new thought tugged at him.

"Wait. You want the bear? Is that what you're saying? *Beh* means 'bear'?" he asked.

His mother grinned back at him. It was weak and slightly lopsided, but clearly a smile. "Beh," she said again, raising both arms.

"I'll have to go and get it," he said. "I'll be right back."

He set down *Forgotten English* and hurried upstairs to his room.

The bear. Other than the books he had teathed on, ripped, and covered in drool, the bear was his only memorable toy from childhood. He wasn't sure where it had come from, or if it ever had a name, but he dimly recalled carrying it around.

Sometime during his grade school years, he'd abandoned it,

setting it on top of the high bookcase in his room. Now and then he spotted it as he lay sprawled on his bed, but otherwise he never gave it any thought. Why his mother wanted it was a mystery.

The bear was slumped despondently against an unused Battleship game. The bookcase was tall, and Worser couldn't remember how he'd gotten the bear up there. Maybe his younger self had tossed it several times until it landed.

He fetched a chair from his mother's bedroom, which was now his aunt's bedroom. Standing on the seat and stretching out his arm, he was able to grasp one of the bear's paws between his fingers and pull it down.

By the time he got downstairs, his mother was lying back in apparent sleep. Her face had gone completely slack and her eyes were closed, though her right eye tended to stay open a tiny bit ever since the stroke. His errand had taken too long—and she was exhausted after her triple shot of speech therapy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy that day. He'd have to give it to her tomorrow.

As Worser turned to leave, his shoulder accidentally hit the doorjamb.

"Ow," he muttered.

"Be?"

His mother's eyes were open, watching him. Again, she smiled, and again he focused on the slight tilt and felt guilty.

"Sorry I woke you. I brought him down like you asked." He walked to her side and tucked the bear under her left arm. "See? There he is."

His mom glanced down at the bear then up at Worser again. "Beh?" she said, her voice low and crackly.

"Yes. Bear." He stood there, unsure of what else to do.

She seemed more confused than happy. Then again, he wasn't confident in his ability to read her lately. He decided she was probably just tired and that he should leave so she could sleep.

“Beh?” she said again, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“Yes. I got you the bear. Rest now, Mom.” He watched her image slowly disappear as he closed the door—and was ashamed of the relief he felt when it clicked shut.