

Level I

First Place Winner

Qiwen Wu

(Grade 5: Birchwood School, Cleveland. Sponsor: Karen Kufahl)

Letter to author Thanhha Lai concerning her book, *Inside Out and Back Again*

Dear Thanhha Lai,

I spent my first six years of childhood in China. Almost every day my family and I would drive to a huge park, one that took about two hours to walk through. We would pick star fruit from the low branches and marvel at the wonders of nature. Besides enjoying the beautiful scenery, my extended family lived nearby, and I saw them almost every day. I recall during Chinese New Year we would watch the televised gala together while feasting on traditional hot pot. These moments are precious to me.

Then one day, my dad announced that our family would emigrate to the United States so I could attend school there and join his parents, who had already immigrated. I was startled and filled with anxiety, while at the same time, half-looking forward to this adventure. I decided to treasure the days I had left in my homeland until the day of my voyage to the U. S. However, upon arriving in America, I suffered from realizing my Chinese childhood consisted of mere memories I would never again experience. This was very upsetting.

After reading your book *Inside Out and Back Again*, I suddenly realized that I was not the only child who has had to adapt to a new country. In the story, Hà departed from her home unwillingly, just like I left my friends and the place I had known my entire life. When I reached America, I didn't know anyone except for my loving family. Many people told me, "The past is past; forgive and forget," but somehow I just couldn't forget China. The moment I read your book I felt like someone finally understood my struggle. I knew what Hà experienced when she arrived and had to learn a new way of living in a foreign country.

Hà's family was adopted by a cowboy who helped them settle, similar to the way my aunt helped my family by renting a house for us. I also had to go to school and learn a new language. I had no friends and didn't know what to do, but I am more fortunate than Hà. I don't get bullied like she was by the boy who pulled her hair and poked her. I also had more background about America than she did. Still, we were very similar. We had to get used to new teachers and students. Hà eventually learned how to speak English, make friends, and celebrate holidays, just as I did. Reading about her trials made me feel less alone, as if I could confide in her.

Like Hà, I left memories, friends, and my extended family. Hà missed her papaya tree, the place she loved, and the sense of unity and togetherness before her father left. I also realized when a family is together, they always have hope. I now recognize that in the future, what I am waiting for will come, like friends, and the loneliness will go away. On the golden river Kim, near which Hà had once lived, life flows like this. The river washes pollution away and replenishes and revives it with fresh water. Your book taught me to wait patiently for blessings to come into my life. Thank you for showing me that many other people suffer as Hà and I did, yet have learned to face the future with anticipation.

Sincerely,

Qiwen Wu, age 11