

## Letters About Literature 2017 – Level 3 Maryland State Winning Letter by Angela Estavillo

Dear Richard Lewis,

To start, I believe it's important to admit that I do not have the slightest idea of what it's like to experience something truly devastating. I am privileged. But the tragic reality is there are people out there who aren't fortunate enough to experience the privileges I perceive to be burdens. Even when I am disturbed by events depicted on the news, those worlds are distant. They are not my tsunamis. But even if you do not feel a tsunami, even if you are not the one who drowns in it, it is still there. It still destroys.

Coming from a family of immigrants, I remain in an odd middle ground in which I am well aware of the struggles faced by my relatives who still live in the Philippines, but it is not a part of my life here in America. In my mind, the urge to complain about my course load is met by the awareness of my father's previous hardships, a remembrance of his stories about how he barely had shoes for walking to school, much less the books he needed. And today, my relatives abroad still encounter tsunamis (or, more precisely, typhoons and flooding) completely foreign to me; the country's location along the typhoon belt means that the possibility of those natural disasters is ever-present.

In your book, *The Killing Sea*, an American girl on vacation in Indonesia had to experience a plight in order to care about it: she had to see the dead body of her mother, feel the agony of holding her sick brother while realizing tomorrow those same hands might lie still, and suffer the unrelenting panic of searching for her father, whose fate was unknown. But perhaps the message is that we shouldn't have to.

Oftentimes, we feel some sense of pity or sympathy for the victims of disasters and calamities, but the minute we turn off our televisions, we go back to our lives, burdened by our own perceived tsunamis. Even worse, I see this attitude adopted towards those who are victimized by societal oppression. There is judgment towards those who suffer through what we could never understand—*why can't they just swim away?* And this ignorance, this disregard means seeing a drowning person from the safety of the shore, then turning your back to them because you're concerned about the rain that's getting in your face.

It frightens me that it seems many people today are moving backwards, that their perceptions of anyone who is different from them are driven by fear and narrow-minded presumptions. Yet through the story of two teenagers, you imparted a powerful message on how compassion toward even those we do not know is key. Ruslan and Sarah, a boy and a girl from completely different worlds who were simply brought together by the same tragedy, formed a relationship that transcended any cultural, economic, or religious boundaries. Sarah went from deeming the cultural headscarf as "soooo barbaric" to genuinely caring for the people of that culture, because ultimately, all of us may encounter the same tsunamis.

In an increasingly divided world, the solution is ideally simple but appears so difficult to put into action. It is a concept that we learn as children: to place ourselves in another's shoes. And yet, instead of adopting those fundamental principles we learn from a young age, we choose to act as children in another way: petty, immature, insensitive. But now more than ever, it is about listening and elevating the voices that have not been heard. It is about looking out for the people that go unseen. It is about being willing: willing to be aware, to care, to help.

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To you, sir, I say thank you, not only for poignantly placing a human fact to unimaginable tragedy, but for inspiring us to show more humanity, for that is the essence of who we are and who we should be.  
*Teurimeng geunaseh.*

With humility and gratitude,  
Angela Estavillo