



**Audrey Kim, Age 18, Grade 12**  
**Glen A. Wilson High School**  
**Hacienda Heights, CA**

**Dear Ms. Anderson,**

(To the woman who gave me the hope not to give up on myself).

*“Loser.” “Bitch.” “Stupid.”*

Those were the words the girls taunted behind my back. I hate being the victim I told myself. I blocked myself off from them. I mentally muffled my ears. And still I heard those taunts reverberating through my head. I sat in the car on the ride home and I heard them. I sat quietly doing my homework and I heard them. I brushed my teeth, put on my retainers, and lay down in my bed and I heard them. And then I went to school the next day and there were the same girls, mocking me, threatening me. And I heard them. And every day was the same.

There was a time when I was too afraid to walk alone down the hallways of my school. A time when every step I took hurt me. Those girls may have had no idea what they were doing to me. Or maybe they did. Maybe they did it for that exact reason. I'll never know. There was so much anger inside of me, and I would be lying if I said I didn't feel it still. It was a time when I wasn't sure who I was, and so I convinced myself somehow that those girls were right: that I was a loser. I was stupid.

They say that once you have fallen into a certain way of thinking and you follow this way of thinking for some time that your neurons remember the pathway. They know instinctively the path of thought that you are searching for and follow it almost involuntarily. I had, for a very long time, been feeling sorry for myself. Sorry that I was the one without friends and being hurt day after day. Sorry that I was not smart enough, popular enough, or athletic enough. And soon my brain began to remember that I felt sorry for myself and that was all I did.

I fell into a deep depression. Every day was a struggle for me. I could barely roll myself out of bed and into my clothes. I walked into school with sweats on and a frown that could darken anyone's day. Eventually those girls probably moved onto another victim and decided to leave me alone. But even though they no longer taunted and pointed at me, I could still feel their dirty looks and hear the malice in their voices. I still felt so low that there was no place lower to fall. It took everything I had to pull myself out of the hole I had dug for myself so long ago.

And one day I found a book. It was an average-sized book, not too long, not too short. It had an interesting cover, so I opened it to page one and began reading. The main character's name was Melinda. She was darkly witty and completely captivating. The book was yours, by the name of *Speak*.

Melinda too was an outcast. She was a social pariah of her high school, a place so difficult to fit into, even when you're popular. She knew what it felt like to be, not only invisible, but hated. I saw in her all of things that I saw in myself. She was not perfect. She was not spectacularly beautiful, smart, kind, or brave. She was just brave enough to survive. She was not a stereotypical hero, but she became *my* hero. She had been hurt so badly, and she had survived. She had been hurt, yes, but not beyond repair. By the end of the novel she had taken back control of her life.

It gave me hope beyond words. It's amazing how such a normal object as a book can symbolize so much more. Of course, I was still sad on most days. I still dreaded going to school and I was still afraid of those girls. I was still afraid of myself, for that matter. I was afraid that I would never find myself. But I did. I became stronger. I built my own opinions and morals and I stuck to them. I made new friends. Over time, and with the help of inspirational novels and heroines like yours, I found myself stronger and better off for all the taunting and the pain. I realized that I was worth far too much to care what those girls said to me and about me. I was not stupid. And I was not a loser. I was far from it. I was special in my own way, just like Melinda. And I felt proud of the person I had become. So later, when those same girls came back to insult and threaten me again, I thanked them. I thanked them for making me more than I once was. I thanked them for making me happier, brighter, and worth more than their comments could ever mean. I thanked them for making me more like Melinda.

*I enjoy reading books, playing with dogs (especially my dog, Buddy), and watching movies. My favorite books include Speak, East of Eden, and The Phantom Tollbooth and I really do believe that a great book can change your perception of the world, yourself, and those around you. I love soft rock and electronic music and I am the epitome of a couch potato. My idea of a perfect day is curling up in bed with a book and cup of warm tea. I hope to become a doctor or be involved in the medical field one day.*

### L E V E L T H R E E



**Michael Murata, Age 16, Grade 10**  
**Palos Verdes Peninsula High School**  
**Palos Verdes, CA**

**Dear Yoshiko Uchida,**

I never thought my family was interesting. My parents have normal day jobs. My brother is attending a local college and I am just a student in high school. Although normal, we are special; we are Japanese-American.