

## Honorable Mention, Writing Division

### Valley of Compassion by Chris McAvoy

Big Ideas. Big Names. A Big Year.  
Michael Pollan, Alfie Kohn, Mary Oliver, Dalai Lama on his way, Special Olympics,  
record salmon counts, an historic election.  
Local food, building community, DNA, nature-spirit poems, "yes we can"  
Softly, consistently reminding us  
Until we can call the thoughts our own:  
Compassion in our food, in our schools, in the nation.  
Compassion.  
Compassion.  
It floats the mind  
Lifts the soul.  
But, lest we forget, the intimate and local also instruct.  
"Have you ever been on the other side of the tracks?" He says abruptly  
as he pulls the remaining bread and canned beans from the table  
It's 7 pm.  
I've been busy moving and working now for 13 hours.  
I sit, tired, with my son and my students  
to the last of the 16 pounds of joes we have slopped onto plates in a mad and mindless  
fury  
"You don't know what it does...to your head...to your heart"  
he laments  
"Until you've been there"  
introducing us to unknown pains.  
He's young. Maybe 25.  
As we look in his eyes, the wall of separation crumbles.  
Together, we shoulder his burden.  
He thanks us in a way that no frilly hallmark card ever had the nerve to imagine, and then  
slips into the night air.  
We sit in silence. Unmoving.  
We breathe.  
We work to digest what has been put on our plates.  
We are suddenly aware of our families. Our warm homes. Our comfortable beds. We are  
aware of our "stress"  
jobs we love, bills, family frictions, college applications, homework.  
We are painfully aware of our own fetid complaints.  
He helps us talk about love and family and pain and longing.  
We are family.  
We clean up. We go home.  
We carry a new stone in our heart.  
A new commitment.  
He remains nameless.  
and homeless.

He teaches us about pain and suffering and service and hope.

It will not be on a test.

It will not leave us untested.

We are the ones we've been waiting for!

Yes.

We.

Can?