

Letters about Literature 2010 Michigan – Winners compilation
LEVEL II Winner - Callahan Katrak

Dear Suzanne Fisher Staples,

My heritage was shrouded in the deserts and lost to me until *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* revealed the life of my ancestors, bits of which still shine through in my father. Though we have grown up in nearby states, you in Pennsylvania and I in Michigan, you have traveled to a part of the world that I have never seen, a place in the deserts of southwest Asia where my father's relatives once roamed. His elders have passed, taking the past with them. Shabanu and her family lived in Pakistan and were Muslims, unlike my father's relatives who settled in India and were Zoroastrians, yet they had many common ways of living.

When reading about Shabanu, sometimes it felt as if I was looking at a mirror image of myself. I could picture myself curled up next to the newborn camel, Mithoo, as Shabanu did in the book. Though we share the same soft spot for animals, both of us have spunky personalities and want things our way. Like Shabanu, I do not enjoy housework and protest that I'd rather be outdoors where I can feel free with the wind billowing across the earth. As we enter the teen years we don't care much about appearances; our long hair is pulled out of the way and our deep complexions are darkened further by the dirt we get into exploring the land around us. Thinking and vocalizing our opinions about what's best for ourselves, our families, and those who surround us on our journey through life is something we do.

The traditions that my paternal ancestors share are similar to those of Shabanu's family's Cholistan culture. Both favor boys over girls, though neither of our families believes that this should be so. In both cases, our fathers appreciate our strong, independent personalities. Still when we're not obedient quickly enough, they occasionally burst in to anger with eyes glaring, voices booming, and tongues clicking disapproval, though mine would not beat me as Shabanu's did. As fathers, they act out of concern for their families, lounge in lungis, eat chupulas, and use up water making tea. Our fathers have lost their fathers, but the extended family members weigh in with advice. In preparation for the wedding, Shabanu and her sister were given spices to brighten their skin. Similarly, upon learning of my birth, my grandmother, who didn't live long enough to see a picture of me, counseled my parents to lighten my dark skin with milk and turmeric. Reading this story helped me understand that family, and especially fathers from that part of the world, have greater control over the lives of their girls than most fathers in America do. I now see my father and his actions, which I have often thought to be overreactions, in a whole new light.

Thankfully, my father and I have had more choices in our lives than Shabanu and her father had in their lives. Shabanu was forced by her family and their situation to marry an old man, but I have the opportunity to enjoy the freedoms of America. I don't have to keep my secrets and dreams in my heart like Shabanu. I pursue my own pleasures like soccer and my dreams about becoming a dentist openly, loudly, and joyfully. *Daughter of the Wind* swept away the sand that covered my past and showed me the need to embrace it as I make my own path to my future.

With gratitude,

Callahan Kashmiri Katrak