

WOMEN'S STUDIES CELEBRATION
Women's History Month 2006

NOMINATION: Papers and projects done in completion of course work for Spring, Summer and Fall 2005 eligible for nomination. Students do not need to be enrolled Fall 2005 or Spring 2006 to be eligible.
(Students are encouraged to identify works they would like nominated and approach their professor to initiate the process.)

Instructor Karen Loeb _____ Dept. English _____

Course Number and Name Engl 411—Creative Writing Workshop: Fiction__ Semester completed Fall 2005__

Title of Nominated Work What My Mother Could Do With Brown Bags and Other Mysteries _____

Pick one-
CATEGORY:

Sampson:

☐ Undergraduate Research Paper
☒ Undergraduate Project
☐ Graduate

OR

☒ See
☒ Olson
☐ Kessler
☐ Turell
☐ Belter

(The judges retain the right to reassign categories for all nominated works.)

STUDENT INFORMATION:

Name Cynthia Hinkley _____

Email hinkleycynthia@hotmail.com__ Year/Major Graduated Fall 2005 Major: Engl-Creative Writing
Minor: Women's Studies_

Local Address E4079 Co. Rd. P Menomonie, WI 54751 _____

Local Phone (715) 232-8003 _____

****WHY DO YOU, THE INSTRUCTOR, RECOMMEND THIS AS AN EXEMPLARY STUDENT PAPER/PROJECT? (Attach a separate sheet.)**

As the nominating instructor, please notify the student and ask them to turn in the paper, or attach to your nomination form.

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Awards are sponsored by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, Helen X. Sampson Fund, and by private individuals. Research involving human subjects must conform to the guidelines given by the Institutional Research Board. Contact Research Services, 836-3405, with questions.

Submission deadline is February 13, 2006.

TO THE AWARDS COMMITTEE:

I'm very pleased to nominate Cynthia Hinkley's innovative literary work "What My Mother Could Do With Brown Bags and Other Mysteries." It's a work that combines prose (fiction) with poetry, and I'm not sure which category to place it in. The undergraduate project with literary works as a choice seems appropriate, but so does the See Award for poetry. I will rely on the committee to help out with this.

Cindy was in the fiction workshop I taught this past fall 2005. She put some excellent stories up for discussion, and this was her last piece. She was a bit hesitant because it included poetry, and it was a fiction class. I encouraged her to have it up for discussion, and overwhelmingly, the participants saw the poetry as meshing very well with the prose, as I do.

I was working with Cindy on her 1-credit Capstone also, and she wrote a substantial short story drawing from the same material as this piece: a mother who is emotionally disturbed and the impact it has on the family, especially one of the daughters. The style was quite different, with the Capstone piece using denser prose and being a more structured, identifiable narrative. Cindy had an idea for the "brown bag" piece from the beginning of the semester—we talked about it even before the class began, and it was interesting to see how it percolated all semester, working with the Capstone material, but veering from it in style.

It's about as creative a piece as I've seen in a long while. The imagery and details, from the sandwiches in waxed paper and three matches to light the gas stove to the squishy sole shoes of the woman hired to help out and knocking noodles from the wall, all bring us into poignant and often riveting moments. The poetry fits really well with each prose piece that comes before, making sense and taking us to a slightly new place at the same time.

Although this is not a usual narrative, there is a story with movement here. We first see the narrator when she's very young; then a bit older with the incident of her first period, her defiance in the poem when she threatens to go into the army, and finally, leaving home for college. I think it's an involving story, showing artfully the distress that this family is under. Thank you for considering it for an award.

Sincerely,

Karen Loeb,
English Dept.

What My Mother Could Do
with Brown Bags
and
Other Mysteries

Cynthia Hinkley
Fiction 411

What My Mother Could Do with Brown Bags

Brown Bag Lunches

My mom made all those bag lunches for all us kids every day. She would get out of bed in her nightgown and bare feet and go into the kitchen and line up five bags for five kids. We always had cold lunch because they couldn't afford to let us have hot lunches. Then she'd take a loaf of bread and lay out all this bread and all these sandwiches. Sixteen pieces of bread, my brothers got two sandwiches each. That's practically a whole loaf of bread. White bread and baloney.

She'd make all these sandwiches and wrap them up in wax paper. She had that down pat how to wrap up that wax paper. Then she put an apple in each bag or a banana. And a dessert. And you know what dessert was? It was a Twinkie. Or two cookies. And then we'd buy our milk when we got to school.

But that's not the point of this story. The point of this story is that it was her job to get up and make those sandwiches. And then she went back to bed. Who knows what she did while we were gone at school? But no matter how ill she was, she always got up and made those sandwiches. She was committed to doing that job.

What my mother could do with those brown bags! We had to get up and make our own breakfast. And dress ourselves. Cold cereal and milk. But she always made those sandwiches. And she wrote our name on the outside of each bag so we had the right bag. And she'd leave the kitchen and leave all those bags neatly folded on the kitchen counter with a crease and our name written on the front Donny, Kari, Jeff, Steve, Bethene, lined up in a row. Mine was last cause I was the youngest. And when we were ready to go to school we'd grab our bag and holler down the hallway, "Bye Mom!"

why does she have to go?

some days
she never got up

i was hungry
it took three matches
to light the gas stove
flames leaped at me
canned tomato soup
peanut butter jelly sandwiches
she ate hers on a tray
in her room

she would get well
i was sure
if i could make her happy
but she cried
in her bed

the second time my dad
and the psychiatrist
locked my mother up
i was eight

to get some rest
my daddy said

in mother's absence

bertha
a black woman
standing in the kitchen
squishy sole shoes
and floral apron
ignores me
watching her
from the back hall

bertha
a black woman
standing in the basement
piles of laundry
washer whining
ignores me
peeking at her
from the top stair

bertha
a black woman
standing in the kitchen
after school
a full plate of warm cookies
watches me
reach for something
i'm not sure i can have

Brown Bag on the Doorstep

The only German Shepard dog I knew growing up lived with our neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Jerga, and the dog liked doing his business in our yard. They bought the three acres next to us because my parents could only afford one acre with our house. Their lot was the whole corner of woods between the road and the lake shaped like a quarter of a pie. They built a new house with the garage facing our yard and the driveway running parallel to our yard. They never had kids, but they had pigeons.

Mr. Jerga told us he was going to build a pigeon coop so he could move his birds from their old house, but that they wouldn't be noisy or smelly. His hair was clipped as short as his sentences and he wouldn't look at you when he talked. My mom said, "He's an odd duck." It was the only time we heard more than a few words from him.

It was a nice looking building. A miniature rectangle house with a shingled roof. He built it a couple feet from the property line. Then he put up a tall wood fence all the way down that side of the yard. There was plenty of space to put a pigeon coop on those three acres but no, they had to build the pigeon coop on the top corner of their lot right next to our yard. The pigeons flew around, a large gray flock, twice a day, mostly over their yard and beyond. How did he train them to do that? When I was outside I'd hear the whirring and look up. Just over the tree tops they'd come swooping by and be gone for another circle round. I guess he raced them in contests. My mom was mad, but what can you do? It's their property. At least he told us what he was going to do before he did it.

But something else made my mom madder than the pigeons. Their big dog, Roger, had three acres of prime wooded lot to do his business, but he would walk around

the end of the fence and leave his poop in the corner of our yard. Big poop. She'd stand at the kitchen window, brows furrowed, muttering in anger, "There he is again. In our yard!"

We had two dogs but they were little. His wasn't like our dogs', which would dry up in the sun or melt in the rain. My mom was mad. We had a vegetable garden over there so we had reason to walk there.

One day she got a shovel and a brown paper lunch bag. She put a big pile in the bag and marched over to their house when they weren't home and left it in front of their garage with the top folded over, neatly like she did our bag lunches for school.

Mrs. Jerga came home with guests in her car. Two older ladies. She got out of the car and found the bag like a gift at her doorstep. If Mrs. Jerga had ignored any neighborhood gossip about my mother, she now would have complete comprehension about what it might mean living next door.

Later she knocked at our front door with a sharp rap. I could see her small frame through the window curtains and when I opened the door she had tears in her eyes. Through tight lips she said, "Is your mom home?" Of course, my mom was always home. I huddled in a living room chair nearest the front hall and I heard Mrs. Jerga say, "You could at least have talked to me first!" I don't know if she expected an apology but she'd never get it. The conversation was short. The door slammed shut and that was the end of it, but sometimes Roger slipped up.

memories that disappear

a neighbor lady heard
it was my ninth birthday
and baked a cake
“poor dear,
it must be hard
with your mother ill”

i wasn't
a poor dear
and my mother
was not ill
and i didn't
like carrot cake

mom came home
the next weekend
she talked slow
her face was blank
she asked
where did you get
those red slippers?
from you, i said
last christmas

this must be
what daddy meant
the hospital
erases her memory

Brown Bag Special Delivery

I was thirteen. It came gushing out, warm and sudden at exactly the same time I was walking past the girl's bathroom on my way to lunch. I rushed into the bathroom. There was lots of blood filling my underwear. I panicked and started crying.

There was a girl I hardly knew, Paula, standing at the sinks and when I came out she saw me crying and asked me what was wrong. She would borrow me a nickel to buy a napkin from the machine but she didn't have one. She told me to go back in and put a wad of toilet paper in my underpants and she would walk to the office with me so I could call my mom.

Paula told the secretary while I quickly looked around the office to see who else might hear, thankful there was only one other woman there at the time. The secretary said, "Oh, dear. Could we call your mother? Is she home?" She dialed the number and Paula told my mom what happened and my mom said she would bring me what I needed. Those were the days when the napkin was held in place by a belt so even if I had a nickel to buy a napkin it wouldn't have stayed in place.

The secretary said, "Go on ahead to lunch and check back after to see if your mom has come." That day I was wearing a bright orange corduroy suit with a short tight skirt and a blazer. I was afraid the blood would seep through the toilet paper while I was eating.

When I went back to the office, there was a brown paper lunch bag creased at the top on the secretary's desk. The secretary was gone, so I took a peek inside the bag. Yes,

my mom had come and gone. I imagined her driving the family station wagon to school and driving home again, happy to feel needed.

I felt empty.

for mom

kids
up the hill
on the rock

we should dig this up
give it a push
watch it roll
down the hill
across the road
into our yard

she likes rocks

one day
brothers and shovels
dig and dig
sun and sweat
too big
for kids

she sees it
sitting there
exposed
from the kitchen window
in the prison of her need

it's too big
for us kids

What Else Can We Suppress?

frugal grapes

no singing, hugging
that i remember

i do remember
green bananas one day
almost yellow the next
a hungry child
after school
angry words marched
through the house
WHO ate that banana?

all of us guilty
our way
to understand fairness

Our Cold Dish

We were supposed to be going to a potluck that started in the late afternoon, but she was in her bedroom again. Usually they made some excuse not to go to social gatherings. Usually it was because my mom was not feeling well. But they were the church friends, people who my parents knew when they were first married. It seemed like my dad thought we should go this time.

I walked into the kitchen, "Are we going, dad?"

"I guess so. I'm going to go ahead and make the tuna salad." We always made tuna salad to bring to potlucks. There were seven of us and you could make a lot of it with two cans of tuna and lots of noodles and peas. My dad, a small, slim man, was in the food business and he knew how to make things look good. He would put the tuna salad in a pretty bowl, slice hard-boiled eggs on top and sprinkle it with paprika, "to give it color" he said.

I walked down the long hall to the bedroom I shared with my sister. My parents' bedroom was across the hall and the door was shut so it was dark there in that corner. I tried to read my latest Nancy Drew mystery but couldn't concentrate. Dad walked down the hall into the bedroom and muffled voices came out, then he went back into the kitchen because the timer had gone off for the noodles.

The next thing I knew something bad was happening in the kitchen. Mom was hollering, there was a bang like something hit the wall. She was crying and Dad was following her saying, "Tessa, stop it. Calm down." There was a scuffle at the bedroom

door, but he got it open and went in. He never raised his voice to her; the doctor had said "use only love and kindness."

When it was quiet again, I went to see what happened. There were macaroni ring noodles clinging to the wall and to the outside of the broom cabinet, in a wide sweep. Some started to fall off to join the rest on the floor. I stood there staring at the mess, gulping. My sweet mother threw a pan of noodles at my dad - it was always his fault. The big soup pan was lying on its side and I picked it up and put it in the sink. My dad came back, the muscles in his jaw line working hard. He took a paper bag out of the broom closet and started knocking noodles from the wall onto the flat bag. "I'll clean it up. You go."

I plunked down in the big green chair in the living room by the tall windows that covered one entire wall facing the lake and stared out at the trees and water. A gray squirrel made his way slowly across the yard looking for acorns. He traveled in a wide circle under the two large oak trees, stopping only to stuff another nut into his cheek.

When we got to the potluck, we were late and most people had already eaten, but our bowl of tuna salad was placed on the long table with all the other food, half gone already. My mom stayed by my dad's side. I wandered around after I ate, not knowing any of the other kids, except my brothers and sister, and came back through the dining room where the food table was set up. We were pretending that our potluck dish was the same as the others, but I knew the difference.

frugal heart

not from child eyes
i saw her
for the first time
after thirteen
confusing years
loving her
trying to
from my crippled heart

i swear
i'm leaving for good
when i'm eighteen

i counted days
and years
at seventeen
the army! i cried
i will be free
no more waiting
for her love

she cries too
a cry
i haven't heard
for so long
don't go
i love you

How It Was to Be

When "No" is the Right Thing

Not one of us had left home yet. My brothers were working and going to college; my sister, Kari, was reading books and feeding her depression with ice cream and cookies. Dad worked long hours and slept in his recliner rocker after dinner and on weekends. Mom hid from the world. She didn't clean house. Dad, Kari, and I cooked and shopped for groceries. The boys did yard work and took care of the dogs. Mom washed clothes on Mondays.

I was in a hurry to leave home. One day in the spring I asked my mom, "Could I use the station wagon to get a job for the summer?" Dad had a company car, the boys had their own cars, and mom and Kari never went any where.

She answered me with a "No."

"But I need a job!"

"No, you don't."

That was it. I gritted my teeth - my mother was trying to hold me back. Instead of working, I would be spending the whole summer at home. I would be doing nothing. But as it turned out, I wasn't doing "nothing." I was lying in the bottom of a raft with my arms over the sides, paddling with my hands, in a swim suit, getting a suntan. Watching. And listening. To everything. Immersing in marsh and lake, bugs and turtles and muskrats, my own backyard.

On our side of the lake, there was a little island attached to the peninsula. At the shore's edge was an old log full of turtles - mud turtles, all lined up sunning on the log. I would move in real slow, as slow as I possibly could. How close could I get before they

started jumping off, one by one, till there was nobody left on the log? I began to feel a kinship with those turtles because I was like them, basking in the sun every day in my raft.

After the summer of water and freedom I entered my senior year knowing the answer to my next step. I switched my class schedule from business to the sciences. I decided to look for a college that specialized in water biology. That summer pointed me to my future, got me ready to leave family and it all started with her “no”.

When "No" Disowns Me

Ely, Minnesota sits next to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, the Superior National Forest, and is home of outdoor adventures like skiing, biking, fishing, camping, canoeing, and long winters – everything I loved, including a water quality program at the community college. My mind was made up. Now I just had to figure out a way to get there.

One night my dad and I were sitting at the kitchen table, financial aid papers scattered all around, pouring over the fine print on how to fill out the forms. Finally, we came to the section on parents' income. My dad pulled out his completed income tax to fill in the correct numbers. Mom did not want to be a part of this but for some reason she was at the kitchen sink busying herself.

Dad read, "For parent's contribution, fill in the dollar amount." He looked at the form and said, "Hmm. We should ask mom about this one." Then he looked at me and I shook my head okay.

"Say, Tessa, what should we put down for how much we can give Bethene for college?"

She squeezed out the dish rag and said curtly, "Zero."

"I'd like to put something down..."

"No. She's leaving, she gets nothing."

last to hatch, first to fly

a few boxes
my skis
bike in the trunk
me, mom, dad
the long drive
to the north

at mary manske's
a square white haired lady
in the big square house
across from zup's grocery
on main
we huff and puff
past the majestic
carved banister
carry boxes
up to the blue room

my bike to the garage
dad hugs me and smiles
through wet eyes
then he's gone
to pull the car 'round

mom at the front door
steps over the threshold
looks back
i search her eyes
starving for what is not for me

one brief hug
bye
i shut the door

this is how
it has to be