Samantha Johnson graduated from Batavia High School. Here at NIU, she is an English major with interests in professional editing and writing. She is the president of PRISM and is also involved with the Straight Talk Speaker’s Bureau. Samantha’s experience in writing this essay is unique because it is not a topic she often talks about.

Samantha wrote this essay in Lisabeth Swisher’s English 103 course during the fall of 2010.
People always told me that my mother was ahead of her time. I never saw it when I was young; to me she was just my mother, the woman who sewed my Halloween costumes and walked me to school every morning. It wasn’t until I grew up that I appreciated her for more than just that. The older I got, the more I began to see her as a person. I no longer thought she was like all the other mothers of my classmates. I now saw the long, full black skirts she wore with dark motorcycle boots in the middle of the summer, noticed the way her hair was a different shade of red every week, heard her bicker with elderly women selling earrings for five dollars at a garage sale. I now watched her tend her garden with love and determination, saw the faces of men grow wistful as she strutted past, and marveled at the expertise with which she threw spices into the huge pot of tonight’s dinner. I see the reality of her life clearly now, but the memories of time spent with her in the evenings of my childhood will always stay as they were, preserved in her garden.

She would let me watch her cook every night, except on the nights when she wasn’t herself. Some days she couldn’t get out of bed; my father would tell me that sometimes her medicine didn’t work enough for her. Sometimes she became the little girl again, who cried as her mother beat her. Sometimes she thought about the child she’d lost and the one that had simply slipped through her fingers and left without a word. Sometimes she couldn’t handle a family; she would leave, drive away for days, and come back with no explanation. I didn’t understand her back then, when I was young; I could only see what she showed me. On good days, we would eat dinner together as a family. For me, it wasn’t the dinner that was important. If I happened to be downstairs in the living room at the right time (around eight o’clock; my mother rarely ate dinner before nine) I would be beckoned into the kitchen, where several pans were already sitting on the gas stove, and invited to cook with my mother. There were never any recipes involved; she knew exactly what to put in and when. By the time I joined her, her hair would already be sticking to her forehead from the steam rising from the boiling water. There would be a chicken roasting in
the oven, covered in olive oil and rosemary. As I watched her
move around the small kitchen, she added a skillet to the top of the
stove, rearranging the metal pans to fit another. She poured in a
small puddle of golden oil she took from the refrigerator, leftover
from other dinners. The oil slowly spread around the pan, rippling
slightly from the heat; she’d already cranked the fire up to the
highest setting. Our dogs milled around our feet, getting caught
underfoot, their eyes begging for a scrap. My mother shooed them
gently. Once everything on the stove was taken care of, she tilted
her head and smiled down at me.

“Will you come out to the garden with me?” she asked. I
nodded eagerly. She took a ribbon from the counter and quickly
tied her hair (garish fire-engine red today) into a loose ponytail. The
sun was just beginning to set in the small kitchen window, the sky
turning a lazy summer orange. I followed my mother outside, both
of us barefoot; the grass was cool and wet from a five-minute
rainstorm earlier in the day. We walked along the winding brick
path to my mother’s garden, passing the wishing pond, where she
had placed several small cement figurines. A stone and brass
mermaid lounged on a rock, half submerged under the water, a
turtle sat unblinking on the bottom of the pool, and a delicate
dragonfly hovered on a thin wire, suspended in flight an inch above
the surface. The sunset reflected on the water, its picture broken by
water bugs skimming around the top. Fireflies began to flicker all
around us, illuminated in the darkening yard. My mother’s flowers
grew with wild abandon around the pond; irises and rose bushes
and lavender poured into each other, dim in the coming dark. My
mother knelt down and drew me up next to her with her cold, thin
hands, her blue jeans staining from the damp grass. She smelled of
Blue Grass perfume and talcum powder.

“Watch these flowers,” she said softly, “they’re going to
bloom soon.” I focused my attention from her ice blue eyes to the
flowers hanging before us. They looked like white stars, soft and
gentle with five points, folded in on themselves. As we watched
silently, the sky grew darker, orange turning to gray, the sun finally
tipping over the horizon, and the flowers slowly began to uncurl.
They opened fully, spreading out among their dark green leaves,
shining in the gloaming like the faint moon overhead. My mother
leaned forward and pressed her nose to them, smiling when I did.
She looked at me with an expression I wouldn’t understand for
years. She said they smelled a little like lilies; I could never smell them.

All of a sudden my mother pulled us both up in a flurry, breaking the twilight magic, running across the yard to her herb garden. I imagined that the pots inside were overflowing as they bubbled. She grabbed handfuls of everything she could see in the fleeting light: mint, cilantro, basil, thyme, dill, parsley, sage, oregano. The scents of each filled the air as they were torn from their plants. As an afterthought, she tore off a couple of leaves of Lamb’s Ears and pushed them into my hand. She knew I loved the feel of them. Dumping everything into the pouch she had made out of the front of her shirt, my mother hurried us both back into the house, picking off a few of her dried chilies hanging from the rafters of the porch. Back in the house, I sat on the counter as she did damage control on the mess of boiling water all over the stove. I watched her for a few minutes and looked back outside. The moonflowers, all but a few completely opened by now, twirled soundlessly in the dark. I stroked the soft skin of the Lamb’s Ear and closed my eyes, still stuck in the garden outside.

Over the years, my mother changed in my eyes time and time again. Though as a child I didn’t see her pain when she would take me to the garden with her, I now understand everything she ever said or did. The looks she would give me were begging me to not become like her, to stay away from the hardships she had gone through. Today, I look at my mother and see a woman who tried her hardest to overcome her life and didn’t always succeed. My memories of her are bittersweet, stressed by weariness and love and sorrow. Occasionally, though, I’ll still pick a leaf of Lamb’s Ear or see a moonflower at night or smell the fresh scent of cilantro in the air, and I’ll be back in my mother’s garden.