



# MARYLAND VOICES

The Revival

Volume X

2020





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*Maryland Voices*, Vol. X

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Submissions are open to all high school students (grades 9-12) in the state of Maryland. The editing process is completely unbiased; the editors do not know any personal information (including the name) of the authors. Stories are reviewed without regard to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or age. For more information, visit us at [www.marylandvoices.home.blog](http://www.marylandvoices.home.blog) or email us at [cnfmarylandvoices@gmail.com](mailto:cnfmarylandvoices@gmail.com).



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# *Acknowledgements from the Editor-in-Chief*

Thank you to all of the students who submitted their stories for consideration. I speak for everyone when I say it was a fascinating experience to learn about your thoughts and revelations. I congratulate the 50 individuals who were chosen for publication. We encourage all Marylanders in grades 9-12 to submit their stories for consideration for Volume XI in the fall of 2020.

Thank you to all of the teachers who encouraged their students to submit. Special recognition goes to the following teachers, each of whom mentored at least one student that is published in these pages: Ms. Angela Balcita, Dr. Joelle Biele, Mr. Edward Brown, Ms. Diane Curry, Ms. Michelle McFarland, Mrs. Melissa Jacobsen, Mrs. Kristen McManus, Mr. Mark Riding, Ms. Renee Richards, Mr. John Sharbaugh, Ms. Katherine Yanson. Volume X would not have been possible without you. We hope you will continue to support our publication through the years.

Thank you to the entire editorial team who played the roles of regional directors, reviewers and editors. An asterisk \* denotes a graduating senior: best of luck in all of your endeavors.

Mariam Abd-El Shafy\*, Sasha Allen, Tomas Germanas, Sunny Gu, Jack Keane\*, Caleb McClatchey\*, Neha Rehman, Julia Stitely\*, Alexandra Valerio, Eleanor Zoller-Gritz\*

Thank you to Mr. Jeff Sharp, the Graphic Design Academy teacher at the Applications and Research Laboratory. You recommended our two wonderful designers and taught them many of the skills that are displayed in these pages.

Thank you to the designers: Changyu (Tammy) Chen and Kristin Daugherty. Tammy designed the front cover and brought my vision for the interior pages of this journal to life. Kristin gave our website a fresh look and designed the congratulations certificates to the Maryland Voices Top 3 Award winners. Both Tammy and Kristin put together the pages of Volume X and transformed the literary works of art into those of visual art as well.

Of course, thank you to Mr. Rus VanWestervelt. Maryland Voices would not have been reborn without you.





# Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Dear Reader,

*I present to you the revival of an old era and the birth of a new era.*

Our purpose, since 2002, has been to make the voices of Maryland heard. Creative non-fiction is, in my opinion, the best form of writing in which one can express their emotions and experiences. It allows the author to reflect and realize the deeper meaning behind their situation. The beauty of *Maryland Voices* is that we are a platform to bring the realizations from the minds of individual high school Marylanders to the minds of the world. The beauty of Maryland high school students having a way to reach many hearts with their experiences and realizations was a closed door from 2009. That was until 2019, when Mr. Rus VanWestervelt approached me with an offer to revive this journal.

Reviving *Maryland Voices* has been one of the greatest challenges I have ever undertaken and it resulted in one of my greatest triumphs. I wanted to pay tribute to the seven volumes before me while creating an entirely new experience for you, the reader. For example, we are continuing to use the same established logo. This year, three of the pieces displayed such exemplary mastery of creative nonfiction that I decided they needed special recognition. The three authors are recognized with the first-ever *Maryland Voices* Top 3 Award.

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges, for our journal included, that neither I nor anyone could have foreseen. We used to have physical copies of all of the manuscripts, but no one has seen them since March 13th, 2020 - the final day of school before coronavirus-related school shutdowns in Maryland. Our editors adapted to a shift in the entire system of reviewing and editing. We were unable to produce a print journal in the spring of 2020 like we initially expected. It is through the tireless work of our editors and designers that you see Volume X is in front of you: digitally, at least for now.

Let the voices of Maryland be heard: some will make you smile, some will make you laugh, some will make you ache, some will make you cry, but all will make you think. Ponder about their deeper meaning. These are the voices of Maryland high school students, determined to make an impact.

*I present to you Maryland Voices: Volume X.*

Sincerely,  
Mary Samokhvalova  
Editor-in-Chief



# It's Good To Hear Your Voices Again

*Rus VanWestervelt, project director*

It's been more than ten years since we have published *Maryland Voices*, and there's a part of me that regrets this decade-long void of student voices being documented and shared. When I return to our issues from 2004-2009, I am reminded of how essential it was for us to share the voices of students post-September 11, 2001, and capture their thoughts and experiences as they pushed through an unimaginable time of America redefining itself in a time of vulnerability.

The reason for our absence was a logical and largely unavoidable one. Our journal has always been student-run. I've believed from the very beginning that the success of this journal is not founded on what I believe should be published, but what the teens of Maryland think is most representative of our current times. They select the voices that reflect the experiences of our teens from the Allegheny mountains, to the western and eastern shores of Chesapeake Bay, to the beaches along the Atlantic Ocean.

The Great Recession that hit us in late 2007 through mid-2009 forced many of our students to take on second jobs and devote more time to their familial needs. This meant trimming the extra-curricular activities and commitments that they had enjoyed in previous years. *Maryland Voices* was a casualty of that recession, as we were unable to sustain a team comprising high school students who could dedicate the necessary time to running the publication.

We tried to revive the journal a few times since then, but last year, we were finally able to build a strong team of student editors to make it happen. The result? Volume X, a statewide representation of the voices of Maryland teens in 2020.

It could not have happened at a better time, too. As we find ourselves facing great change throughout the state and the country, it has never been more important to publish the ideas and stories of our teens (once again, in a time of unimaginable vulnerability).

*Maryland Voices* is a home for the voices of high school students throughout our state. We encourage teachers to introduce this publishing opportunity to their students, and we encourage teens to submit their polished work to Volume XI.

Your voices matter today, and for years to come. We hope that the space we are providing you here at *Maryland Voices* contributes to the conversations that are making a difference in ways we can only begin to imagine for a better Maryland, and world, for all.



“

*Maryland Voices  
is a home for the  
voices of high school  
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our state.*

”



# *The Maryland Voices*

## *Top 3 Award*

Maryland Voices publishes the best creative nonfiction writing pieces by high school students in the state of Maryland, and has been doing so for each volume before this one. Yet starting with this year, I (the Editor-in-Chief) would like to personally recognize three pieces that demonstrate exemplary mastery of creative nonfiction. These three works of literary art received exceptionally high scores by our reviewers. Upon personally examining each of these three, I knew they deserved special recognition in Volume X. Please join me with a standing ovation in congratulating the following three authors:

Chris Fleschner from Loyola Blakefield  
Chloe Ann McGeehan from River Hill High School  
Daniel Yi from Marriotts Ridge High School

These voices speak for themselves. Congratulations to Chris, Chloe, and Daniel on your accomplishment.



“

*These voices  
speak for  
themselves*

”



# Supernova

Chris Fleschner



That red door opened slower than it ever had. I could see dozens of flashbacks in which the same door swings open, and she's standing there behind it with a sweet smile on her face, ready to give me a 'what took you so long' hug. Not today, no, that red door barely opened. It was like a movie scene where the door creaks open, and you watch and wait for the jump scare to knock the socks off your feet. I was oblivious. She asked me to come over; she said, "Can we talk about something?" I walked fifteen minutes wondering what it was about. Maybe something unspeakable happened to her best friend's mom, who has terminal brain cancer. Maybe her mom was going to be stuck in a different city for another two weeks for work. That mile-long walk was endless even though I was walking pretty quickly. All I could really think about was getting to see her. How naïve.

There were two cars in her driveway. That always meant everyone was home, everything was happy. I passed that blue Honda Pilot that tickled my heart every time I saw it. I walked up the two stairs to her front door and knocked. I heard steps getting louder and louder, just like an ambulance's siren as it's speeding closer towards you. The handle jiggled and twisted, then the door started to open, slower than it ever had. There was no genial smile this time. Just a pity-filled grin with a melancholy gaze full of nerves.

"Come in." For the first time, those words made me question if her blue eyes were letting me go. It's crazy how fast you learn. The silence was screaming my ear off. I knew what was going to happen but with all my heart I did not want to hear her say it.

"...I've liked you for a long time, but recently my feelings have changed." What did I do to deserve this?

"It's not that I like someone else, things are just different." Then, "I think we should break up." She said so much more but my picky ears wished they were drowning in silence. I heard everything, but I wasn't listening. I didn't want to. Standing there was the first time my soul cried. Tears trickled down her pale face, and mine. We both stood there for some time avoiding each other's tear-filled stares. I knew right then and there that I was going to miss this place. I took a look around and saw so many mementos of happiness. All of our firsts and lasts playing like a movie in my head. The scenes were short but spoke millions. Did I deserve it? I just didn't understand.



Before I left, I turned around and looked at her one last time. I wanted to say one last thing: “Good luck with school this year.” And that was that. My head fell to my chest, I turned around, and I moved out of my second home.

A year of being the closest friends with crushes and six months of being even more were finally becoming just memories. The thing is, that’s when they finally become that much more real. When I left, the door closed faster than it ever had, although I was walking even faster. I had one mile alone ahead of me. My first breakup after a long-term relationship and I had to walk alone in the street all the way home. I must have been a beacon, because I looked up at the flashing headlights to see my mom right there in front of me. She had to know it was going to happen. And sure enough, she did. Instantaneously, I was angry, no longer sad. How could she let me go with no warning? Because she loves me. She let me learn. All I have to say about that now is thank you. If I could go back to that day and say “thank you” to all the people who made a difference in my life, I’d have a few less regrets.

“  
*For the first time, those words  
made me question if her blue  
eyes were letting me go.*  
”

That day, I grew up faster than Tom Hanks in *Big*. My ex-girlfriend taught me exactly who I was, and the breakup taught me exactly what I lost sight of. It’s silly, but I would never trade that day for anything. I wouldn’t redo it either. I lost track of what mattered most to me in my life, and she helped me find it. I have so much respect for her too; breaking up with me had to be a high hurdle. Again, if I could go back and say thank you for everything, I’d already have the most important thing crossed off my bucket list. That day taught me some of my most important and valuable lessons. I realized so much about what growing up is and where I’m supposed to go from here. When I look back at this experience, I see the brightest supernova in the night sky. All my experiences led to something even more brilliant. Only, it takes an explosion to see the beauty in it.

\*\*\*

Loyola Blakefield, Baltimore County





# Puzzled

*Chloe Ann McBeehan*



My great grandfather, the late Ambassador Paul Clement Daniels, was a math wizard with a penchant for puzzle solving. Unlike the vast majority of his former classmates at the private boys' school Phillips Academy Andover, he came from modest beginnings. His father's early death left him unable to pay for college. He valued education, so rather than settling for the little life seemed to offer, he took the initiative to apply for various jobs - at first as a shoe polisher, and later as a magician. Eventually getting into college, his mathematical mind began to shine as brightly as the shoes he had scrubbed with great care, for Paul Daniels saw life as a puzzle.

My mother fondly recalls the streams of tobacco smoke wafting and encircling his leather chair, his lips pursed and clenching the pipe as he focused on the series of questions printed in nondescript black and white font, his hands stained grey from the old newspaper typeset. He would take on the daily crosswords, Monday being the easiest up until the hardest puzzle on Saturday. However, for Paul, he loved to take this word challenge up yet another notch. He began having his daughter, my grandmother Jean, cut out and remove the matrix or "roadmap" of squares forming the puzzle itself; thus, he would test his mental agility by answering the across and down questions without any clue as to the number of squares each answer held. As such, he literally forced himself to become a master architect, all without moving an inch: smoking, studying, deconstructing, and then rebuilding. In doing so, the quintessential American puzzle that stumped even the most educated was taken to a whole new level. He would simultaneously solve each question and piece together the puzzle sequence word-by-word based on the solutions. Like magic, the glorious two-dimensional matrix of boxes would re-emerge with a litany of words meticulously filled in, letter by letter. Ingenious. This outside-the-box thinking would help serve him later when he became the youngest United States foreign service diplomat, ambassador to Honduras, then to Ecuador, and dignitary to the Antarctic Treaty to negotiate with some of our toughest foreign relations a truce - for our greatest global superpowers to set aside our differences and to find peace and commonality in declaring Antarctica a place for collaborative scientific research - a safe harbor from exploitation and war.





As a child, I could not believe the stories my mom passed on about “Bampa” (her youthful lisp for “grandpa” as a toddler that somehow stuck) - stories that I wouldn’t truly understand and appreciate until this year.

It was September of 2019. Fall was beginning to make an appearance. Along with the crisp air and falling leaves, it brought the start of my sophomore year of high school. Unlike Paul, my high school is public, and yet far more “rich” in social, economic and cultural diversity than had been my great grandfather’s experience at Andover. Everything seemed to fade into the background during my first week back as I figured out where my classes were and the new classroom dynamics I’d have to adapt to in order to survive another year. However, by the second week, things began to slowly settle down, giving rise to the whispers.

“Did you hear about the plan?”

“Are you affected?”

“Do you think they’ll let this pass?”

“ *Like magic, the glorious two-dimensional matrix of boxes would re-emerge with a litany of words meticulously filled in, letter by letter.* ”

What was happening? I asked around, only to receive incredulous looks. I seemed to be the only one still unaware of the crossword puzzle I had become ensconced in. And just like my great grandfather's puzzles printed in the New York Times newspaper, this new puzzle also had a theme: desegregation and equity.

“The Board of Education superintendent Dr. Martirano proposed a plan that redistricts over 7,400 people in Howard County to different schools.”

I laughed. There was no way they would let this pass. Moving over 7,400 children... Impossible. And even if it passed, I wouldn’t be moved. I lived in one of the oldest River Hill communities, anchored to a specific school polygon. They can’t just do that, right?



I decided to focus on school and forget about the nonsense that was Dr. Martirano's plan. And so I went about the next few weeks of my life, ignorant to the series of questions buzzing across my school and down my own street.

At first I refused to listen to any comment about the legislation actually going through. That was until September 17th. It was on that date that River Hill's gossip center, also known as the school's cafeteria, exploded as if the delicate map of our school community had been ripped to shreds.

"They start the hearings today. Can you believe it? I looked at the plan and I'd be moved."

"I would too."

"So would I!"

All eyes seemed to travel to me, silent questions wondering if I was being moved or if I had any further information to add. To be honest, I didn't have a clue. I didn't want to face the reality of this redistricting plan being true. The polygons, seemingly intact pieces on the board that was Howard County, were suddenly being cut out. The dynamic that was our community was being altered and we were rendered helpless in a sea swimming with numbers. I didn't want to think about being helpless, so I didn't think about the plan at all. The next thing I knew, three people pulled out their phones, opened up a map, and informed me that I would be going to Wilde Lake next year if the plan went through.

“

*The dynamic that was our community was being altered and we were rendered helpless in a sea swimming with numbers.*

”

My world seemed to stop. Everyone else continued eating as if what they said was just some note they took down in class with no actual bearing on my life. I was going to lose my friends, my team, and the teachers that cared about me.



My lunch table continued to talk about the upcoming hearing, and I was only able to register bits and pieces as I talked myself out of a downward spiral. Classes seemed heavier all of a sudden. As if everyone was thinking about the next year and the would-be missing faces. Everyone faced the threat of either losing friends or being lost themselves. My mind kept returning to my great grandfather. He cut out the pieces to crosswords, but I wasn't a game. My community wasn't a game. How could the Board snip apart and rearrange polygons when inside each polygon were families with living, breathing children that no longer knew what their future held? This hurt began to brew into anger. Some students channeled this anger into threats to the board members while others took action. Over five hundred students signed up to testify, extending the school board process by a week. I thought about testifying, but life seemed chaotic enough. I still continued on denying the reality of the situation at hand. Another week went by and I tuned in online to see students in my very school using their voice like a force to be reckoned with. Realization seemed to click then. If I was going to be moved, I wanted to feel like I tried to make a difference. That I didn't idly stand by and let adults make life-changing decisions without my opinion on the matter. I deserved better. My siblings deserved better. The children and students who weren't able to testify deserved better.

“  
*He cut out the pieces to cross-  
words, but I wasn't a game.  
My community wasn't a game.*”

A week passed, the small window for children to speak closed and my voice remained unheard. I was sad, but school was still my number one priority. I continued on with my daily life and things seemed to settle down. I was fine. I wouldn't be ripped from my friends, teachers, and community. Clearly the denial continued, for it seemed the only way to keep me afloat and playing the game.

It was Friday October 4th. My mom barged into my room practically yelling, “Chloe, our neighbor signed us both up to testify this upcoming Thursday, you have four days to come up with what you're going to say!” I was excited that I would get a chance to share my voice after all, but... four days. Four days to write something that was different from



the hundreds of other students who had already gone before. How could I make my own voice heard above the commotion?

I immediately began thinking. Three minutes in front of the Howard County Board of Education was all I'd get, so I needed to be strategic. What approach would I take? Everything had already been done - longer bus rides, separation from friends, rising property values. Where did I fit in all of this? I knew if I was going to come up with something honest and meaningful, I needed to let myself feel the pain. Feel the emotions that I had been struggling to keep down in order to remain calm.

What most people didn't know at the time was that my parents went through a five-year long divorce escalating to all levels of court, and continuing today. When my home became a war zone, my parents the two sides, accusation the bullets, and my siblings and I the collateral damage, I sought solace in the stability of my high school, River Hill. The thought of losing my support system tore me apart as I let myself truly comprehend the implications of the legislation. This would be my angle. For all the kids out there with broken families that needed their school more than anything.

My fingers flew across the keyboard, driven by the all-consuming need to get the adults to better understand the implications of their redistricting plan. Thursday came around quicker than I would have wanted, but it was done. My testimony was completed and polished to the best of my ability.

I went through school thinking solely about the three minutes I was allotted. Cross Country practice was a blur, and my teammates seemed to notice. When they discovered why, they all promised to watch me live on TV. Their immediate support eased my nerves and confirmed why I had spent the last four days writing and rewriting what I would say. It had to be perfect.

I entered the Howard County official Board of Education building and signed in. It was happening. This was not a game any longer - and the stopwatch was about to commence. My mother took me down the dark, daunting hall and into the room for testifying. Looking around me, there were rows of chairs in front of an elevated table where the board members already sat. Jennifer Mallo, co-author of the controversial redistricting plan, occupied the seat three across from the left. Board member Christina Delmont-Small, believing the plan to have been made on incorrect data, was two down from the right. Both looked frustrated.

The chairs were numbered and residents of Howard County were already beginning to find their seats. A small wooden table sat up front with microphones that ensured the Board could hear us. We would not be ignored. An assistant ran us through the standard procedure; we would each have three minutes allotted to testify and should start immediately even if the person before us ran over their time. They were stricter than I expected, so it was a good thing I made sure to cut my prepared testimony to be just under the time limit.



Because I was testifying a week after all the children had gone, I was the only student in the room full of adults. At first, I was intimidated, but I soon found myself content with the situation. I wanted my voice to be taken as seriously as an adult. I was aware age tainted my credibility but I was hoping that by going with the adults, I would at least stand out.

Listening to the adults before me both inspired me and left my heart pounding. There was an actual child psychologist present. How could I compete with this? And then I realized. I wasn't competing with them to be heard. We were on the same side. We all wanted the same thing – to stop the removal of children from their schools.

Soon enough it was my turn. The countdown began and I was off, lost in a cloud of passion and pain. I remained composed, and spoke from my heart. Tears welled in my eyes as I looked into Dr. Martirano's eyes and concluded, "My county is better than this. My county promotes the building of roots that hold me and so many other children of divorced parents to the ground today, and I pray that my county won't let this heartless piece of legislature pass".

*“ And then I realized. I wasn't competing with them to be heard. We were on the same side. ”*

It was over. My time was up. I hoped it had been enough, but even if it wasn't, I was proud to advocate on behalf of the 3,194 elementary, 1,351 middle and 2,851 high school students that would be moved like cattle if the plan went through.

The next day at school, I was greeted by new faces who had watched me testify. Everyone was supportive and I rode on this high of endorphins for the rest of the day. People had seen me! I was heard! Unfortunately, the fight was not over. The Board continued headstrong to pass the plan, claiming it to be essential for equity to be achieved.

The final decision was planned for November 21st. The weeks between were intense with talk of moving and newly released modifications to the plan. The testimony had some effect because numerous polygons were taken out, but it came down to two final plans. My family would be moved on one and not on the other. This constant editing and uncertainty bred a hysteria in so many families still affected - including mine.



My mom began looking into houses for sale, preparing for the worst. She drives over an hour to work and an hour back every day so that her kids can go to River Hill and maintain their community. With the thought of that gone, she no longer saw the commute and struggles worth it, rightfully so might I add.

Once again, I looked to the cherished stories of my great grandfather to help me disentangle and make sense of my feelings. People spent hours building the impossible Saturday puzzles that my great grandfather would carefully solve; similarly, the families of Howard County have spent years building their community. All of the trust and relationships built were being disregarded and cut up. It's about the rules of the game. Paul Daniels was able to carefully cut apart each puzzle and solve it because he could use his intelligence to follow the defined rules, create a picture of the mosaic board in his mind, and then work tirelessly to find the correct answers. Howard County families, in contrast, were watching helplessly as the rules and reasoning behind redistricting changed with every meeting. Where was the justice in rewriting the rules while playing the game?

This is the point where I was going to write in the solution - the School Board's ultimate decision about each Polygon. But I soon realized while writing this essay, that whether I have to move or not is no longer the point I want to make. The final outcome isn't what I want readers to take away from this narrative. It's the fact that the puzzle was destroyed when Dr. Martirano began the process of redistricting. The pieces threatening to be moved shook the core foundations for so many of my classmates and neighbors. Trust was breached, and now the outcome no longer mattered. The community was already fractured, and my family had already put in an offer for a house an hour away.

This two dimensional crossword thinking no longer applies in today's modern world. Like the recently developed virtual reality games, we have to think beyond the flat ideas of demographics, F.A.R.M. and future Section 8 housing subsidies when making such impactful decisions like where kids go to school. If my great grandfather could consider all sides and negotiate an entire article treaty with some of our most difficult political opponents, why can't we do the same with school districts?

It appears that the Board, with good intentions no doubt, has tried to squeeze "redistricting" - their first guess at the question the entire world is still stuck on

Across

19 - solution to inequity

- into the small squares of the Howard County crossword, but the testimonies and tears have shown that it simply does not fit.

- - -

River Hill High School, Howard County





“

*People spent hours building the impossible Saturday puzzles that my great grandfather would carefully solve; similarly, the families of Howard County have spent years building their community.*

”



My



# Life Of A Young Foreigner

Daniel Yi

\*\*\*

The aircraft door opened and the distinct air rushed onto my face. The continuous whistling of the fresh air hugged me as I left my old life behind. This was the place where my father had fought through the struggles of being a foreigner. The never-ending battle of scavenging for a profound life could not simply be won without scars of the previous generations. My father's contribution was significant in this vast land, but my father told me that people did not truly understand the sacrifice of soldiers. During the time of departure, I could not understand that it was my turn to persevere through the difficulties of starting a new life. This was a country recognized for freedom and the melting pot of culture. Everyone here had their own unique story of life.

An unfamiliar car strolled into the entrance, and my father greeted his brother. The ride consisted of basic conversations, and the house welcomed us with a distinct scent. Everyone settled in, and we slept as the darkness fell over the light. My parents fell asleep in a matter of minutes, but all I could think about was searching for a genuine purpose. "Why are we here?" I thought to myself. I knew my dad had lived in this country as a first-generation immigrant. I knew he faced hardship and racism in the U.S. Army but I still could not figure out why I was here.

My nine years of experience in this world could not help me decipher this situation. Weeks passed by, and I did not know. Years passed by, and I still did not know. Our new beginnings became our everyday life and our worries became reality. My parents worked day and night for years. I still could not understand the purpose of their struggles. Duty. My parents had to support their children. It was their responsibility. My dad always valued an individual's responsibility. No money. No reputation. No establishments, but they had to do it. Even if it meant getting underpaid and unappreciated. Their unconditional love raised me, even through unbearable times. I wish I realized sooner. I wish I realized sooner why my dad fought for this nation's flag. Why my mother worked so hard every day. Why they prayed every day and never gave up despite all the treatments from this cruel world. I wish I realized sooner that it was all for me.

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Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County





“

*Their unconditional love raised me,  
even through unbearable times. I  
wish I realized sooner. I wish I  
realized sooner why my dad fought  
for this nation's flag. Why my moth-  
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that it was all for me.*

”



# *High Merit*

Each of the following pieces demonstrates the beauty of creative nonfiction and High Merit craftsmanship. Relax in your favorite place with a cup of tea and let yourself be taken on a journey. These are the voices of Maryland high school students, determined to make an impact.



“

*These are the voices  
of Maryland high  
school students,  
determined to make  
an impact.*

”



# *Denouement*

## *Diego Abarcar-Calugay*

— — —

Feverish. Excited. Chaotic. Yet with solemnity that comes with the idea of growing up and moving on. This is how I would describe the crowd I was standing in at this very moment. Familiar faces ran up to warmly embrace each other. Groups of peers formed and said their final goodbyes to the building and to each other like a nuke was going to destroy it all. Some people grew hysterical, sobbing loudly and choking on their tears. I stood still, laden with a box of items for academics, observing silently as the exhilaration escalated. For me, and the rest of the people in the room, June 21, 2019 marked a crucial epoch, the start of a new era, and the denouement of another. In around two months, I would be in what I would consider a new world, with new faces, new challenges, and a whole new journey; however, as I continued to look around the densely packed room, I felt something grow within me. It was some sort of dissatisfaction. As it grew, I realized what this dissatisfaction indicated. Something was missing. Something was not complete. And now, I was out of time to find this missing piece.

“

*Something was missing.  
Something was not complete.*

”

*No, I cannot be missing something,* interrupted a conflicting thought. Everything that wanted to be done has been done. Everything is accomplished. *Accomplished. Accomplished. Was everything accomplished?*



My brain proceeded to process this question. Multiple times, in fact. I recalled as many events as I could from the past three years. I earned good grades, met new people, learned many new things, and even made new friends. Yet, I still felt as if something was not finished. And there was no more time to finish this thing.

Dissatisfied, I dedicated the last few minutes of this era to ponder this question as the celebration continued with no sign of halting. I pondered this question as I sat down on the empty bleachers, for everyone was standing up. I pondered this question in silence as I tuned out the sounds of merry laughing and hysterical crying. I pondered this question, motionless, as bright, kinetic colors, presumably from the other's clothes, entered and exited through my peripheral vision. Then it hit me.

“  
*Maybe I am the source of  
my dissatisfaction.*  
”

Maybe I am the source of my dissatisfaction. I looked up at the crowd of peers in front of me. A crowd that filled the entire room that was the gym. A crowd of people I never got to know or sympathize with because I rarely made the effort to. I thought of my friends, and how I barely made time for them, as I was engrossed in my own activities. These thoughts dug an abyss in my mind. An abyss I thought I was impossible to evade.

However, a realization pushed its way through these negative thoughts. A remembrance of the new era I would be in, only two months away, was fresh in my mind. I refused to be confined to the abyss, for I saw an opportunity. A new journey, a fresh start. Maybe, in this fresh start, I can alter myself. Maybe I can fill up the abyss. Maybe I can locate this missing piece and finally have a satisfying denouement.

— — —

Howard High School, Howard County



# *The Final Split*

*Nimrit Ahuja*



The baton stuck out, waiting to be transferred to its next victim - me. Its bright blue hue distinguished itself from the dreary grey track. Like an automaton, my legs started one foot after another, my hand stretching back to grasp the baton's embrace. The smooth gloss of a new baton fit perfectly into my clenched fists. They started to pump up and down. My hair whipped my face as I faced the track in front, eyeing the first and second place runners. The voice of my coach rang in my ears screaming at me. *Make a move around the bend. You're doing great. You can catch them.* My spikes pushed against the asphalt, clawing at the small cracks in the ground. The baton whistling in the air soothed the piercing screams and the constant pain in my legs.

The space between me and the next girl grew closer.

“

*The baton whistling in  
the air soothed the pierc-  
ing screams and the constant  
pain in my legs.*

”

I passed Atholton's forest green jersey, hearing a whimper in her breaths. The finish line drew near and the next set of jerseys ran out to their spots. Scanning the line for my team member, my arm stiffly raised itself and the baton with it. I felt it slip out of my sweaty hand and in the next victim's clutch. She headed off as the last leg of the race.



My eyes fluttered, clinging to stay open as I was finally able to stop and breathe. As runners passed, their wind blew my fly away into my face and woke up my weary haze. My legs used the last of their strength to carry me over to the rest of my team. We followed our last runner with our eyes, stride for stride. She flew by us three times, and each time our shouts of encouragement deafened the sounds around us. *One more lap to go and we're in second. Not too bad for my first relay.* I turned away, thinking that was the end, my attention now focused on my screaming throat, anxious for water. Abruptly, my previous sensations came flooding back - my legs collapsed with exhaustion, taking my body with it, and from the ground, my heavy breaths illuminated as I watched my chest rise up and down. I almost forgot about the rest of the race until the loudspeakers boomed the voice of the announcer. "Only 200 meters left to go and Howard astonishingly takes the lead in the 4x800 meter relay". The announcement was greeted with hollers from our teammates. There wasn't much time left in the race. I picked myself up, slipped through the sweaty bodies of other finishers, and sprinted to the side to cheer her on.

“  
*Jumping up and down, my  
nails carved dents into my fists.  
I could feel the hot breath of  
weariness waft on my face.*”

The space between Howard and second place grew larger.

A final 50 meters to go and I had never screamed louder. My throat felt as if it had been strangled, but all of my attention was on the race. To beat the meet record, she had to be under 9:53. Jumping up and down, my nails carved dents into my fists. I could feel the hot breath of weariness waft on my face. 9:50. 9:51. 9:52. 9:53. The clock stopped indicating that she had crossed the line. My eyes scanned for the final official split:

9:52.05

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Howard High School, Howard County



# Doubtful

Anika Amin

\*\*\*

The final scrimmage. I couldn't take her on offense; defense has always been my strong suit. She passes it across the floor, unknowing of how far I can jump. I leap into the air, connecting with the spiraling orange ball flying through the humid gym. I sprint across the court to the other side, alone at the basket, making a perfect lay-up. Finishing off the last worrisome day, the last day of feeling anxious over the results, waiting for the bad news. From those around me jogging to the sidelines, to the bench full of disheartened girls wanting to go home - a place I know too well - everyone had an anxious look around their face.

I slide down against the matted wall, craving fresh water, frantically searching for my filled bottle. Texts stream down my phone, a never ending list of "Did you make it? How did it go?" My hunt for an icy-cold drink is interrupted by a strong, fierce voice uttering, "Please stand up if your last name begins with an A". My weak knees somehow manage to lift myself up, my throat aching. I can feel the other sixteen pairs of eyes staring at my glistening face. I envy their luck, being able to watch others go before them, having time to settle and prepare themselves. Around me, I only see a few familiar faces, the rest are my competition. My long legs carry me out into the cool air, dreading the news. *Forgetting my water bottle at home was a mistake. Why did I have to be first?* The voice inside my head echoes. *You aren't going to make it, did you see how good they were?* A constant reminder.

As the man spoke to me, I could only hear the loud beat of my own chest, drowning out the voice of the man in front of me. My ears continued to ring as I followed the stranger ahead. He points to the classroom around the corner, where I was only a few hours before, reading *Teen Lifetime and Health* alongside my fellow classmates. I think to myself, will I see this classroom tomorrow and weep as I remember the news he is about to tell me?

Trudging along, I slide into the cool chair, two grave-faced coaches in front of me. They both hold clipboards full of scratches, the marks of my failures. The one flickering light holds my attention; tiny bugs trapped inside, desiring to escape, the same feeling I experience. I could hear the desk between us rattle, my bruised leg hitting it like a hammer against a piece of wood. I skim my hands over my sticky legs, trying to calm down.





“

*They both hold  
clipboards full of  
scratches, the marks  
of my failures.*

”

He opened his mouth and I heard the words, the ones I didn't think I would hear. I could feel my dry lips form a smile, unable to contain the joy. Being doubtful of my potential held me back from ever believing I could accomplish this goal, but as he shakes my clammy hands, mirroring the grin on my face, I knew I was wrong all along. Beaming, I almost sprint out the door, thinking about the season ahead and forgetting about the dry throat I still have.

As I wait in the icy winter frost, just outside the door of the school I walk into every day, I hear murmurs coming from behind me. The cool breeze rolls upon my bare skin, the air pushing the sweat off my face. I turn to meet a girl I thought of as my competition just moments before, now praising her performance. Girls begin to pour out into the frigid space, congratulating each other, our cracked mouths now shining bright. I can't help but notice the many despondent faces around me. As many winners there are, there are losers, consoling each other for their effort. I know how they feel. Being uncertain going in and losing even more hope coming out. The feeling of losing confidence, your goal shattering. I stride over to a girl leaning against a bike rack, her hands gripping the phone that won't stop buzzing, my phone doing the same, both knowing they are for opposite



reasons. She looks up, her bright red face trying to hold back the tears. I let my mouth form a small, reassuring grin, hoping to comfort her. She nods back, and as I walk away, I take in a deep breath of open air, relieved.

+ + +

Howard High School, Howard County

“

*As he shakes my  
clammy hands, mir-  
roring the grin on  
my face, I knew I  
was wrong all along.*

”



# ACL Tear Experience

## AJ Angarita

\*\*\*

Sitting in the passenger's seat, nervousness kept me on edge knowing something bad had happened. The anticipation was probably the worst part of the entire trip. I kept looking around and thinking. *What would happen next? Would my leg be okay, or would it be broken, or worse, unrepairable?* These thoughts cluttered and clouded my mind. My mom noticed my nervousness and asked what was bothering me. I sighed and told her what I was thinking. I had been told that my leg might have just popped out of its place; it would hurt for a day, then go back to normal. Instead, it felt the same and it scared me to think that something of a worse magnitude had happened. I didn't want my leg to be hurt. I wanted it to be fine, a simple dysfunction. My mom was quiet for a bit. She seemed to try to think of a way to cheer me up, but she was not sure how to go about it. After a brief silence, she said that we really would just have to wait. There's no guarantee that my leg was damaged beyond repair. It could've been much worse in terms of pain, but I knew that something wasn't sitting right in my mind. I knew my mom had been a nurse in the past, so I asked her what she thought it could be. Another pause flooded the car. Her expression seemed to tense up just a bit.

"It could be an ACL tear at the worst," she said, "... it still could be a hyperextension, though."

"What's the difference between the two? How are they fixed?"

"A hyperextension is just going to need some time." She paused a bit before finishing her thought, "an ACL requires surgery to be completely fixed. Then there is rehab after that."

My mind went into overdrive; thousands of possible situations and diagnoses coming into my head. I asked her if it was torn, how it would be fixed. I already knew the answer; I just wanted someone else to say it for me. Surgery. My heart dropped, leaving an immense feeling of anxiety in its place. I dreaded the thought of going under the needle and then doing rehab for months. My mom quickly jumped in and told me that it's not that bad, in fact, it was just made to strengthen me back up, not to kill me.



We arrived at the doctor's office. I waited in anticipation, hoping that I'd be fine. The nurse called my name. I looked at my mom. She smiled as I walked away, and I felt a bit reassured. After I got my X- ray, the doctor called me and my mom back. He welcomed us, and we sat down. There was a brief pause before he began to speak. He pointed at my knee and said there was a part that bothered him, and requested we stay and get an MRI. He told us this would help him better see what was really wrong, down to the ligaments and muscles.

*“Sitting in the passenger’s seat, nervousness kept me on edge knowing something bad had happened.”*

So the process repeated, and I got an MRI. I sat back down, even more nervous than before. I stayed silent, listening for the nurse to call my name again. Ten minutes passed and I heard my name. The doctor walked us to his room and had the MRI pulled up on his computer. I recognised my leg, but I couldn't tell if there was anything wrong or right. The air felt thinner, and I could tell there was something bad about to happen. The doctor seemed to be hesitant at first, then sighed and began to talk. He pointed at the MRI. He asked if we knew what the ACL was, and what function it served in the leg and knee.

My heart dropped. I knew the second he said ACL, what news would follow. I felt my chest tighten, and I thought about what this meant to me physically. *Could I still run? Could I ever play sports again? Was I going to be limited forever by this torn ligament?* I tried to calm down and listen to the doctor. He said my knee would need surgery.

He would be taking hamstrings to use as an artificial ACL, but it would be stronger than before. But the one word I dreaded had been said. Surgery, something that can either go right most of the time, or go extremely wrong and harm people permanently. After this, we just asked about what the process would look like, and what I needed to do and not do before surgery. We rode home in silence, myself still trying to wrap my head around the situation at hand.



Six months later, I was doing prehab, a process to strengthen my leg before surgery. In a day, I would go under the needle and get this repaired. I was nervous. I had never had surgery before, and I heard many rumors of people's knee surgery being one of the hardest to recover from. Should I just back out now and deal with a torn ACL for the rest of my life? I shook my head at this idea. All this hard work was to get me ready for this day, so I could get back to doing what I love without any limitations. I fell asleep that night without problems, ready for what came next.

The next day, I woke at 6 AM and went to Johns Hopkins Hospital. My dad checked in, and I was quickly taken back to change into a hospital gown. Shortly after that, I was put in a hospital chair and had an IV needle put in my arm. That was where the anesthesia would enter my body and put me to sleep. The surgeon came to get me. I had seen him many times beforehand, and he was a really nice person who knew what he was talking about.

"Are you ready for the procedure?" the surgeon asked.

I laughed a bit. "I've come this far, so I guess I am."

I was wheeled into the surgery room, a huge open area with about eight doctors and my surgeon. They put the tube into my arm, and I was asked if I was ready again. I didn't pause this time. I had no regrets. I was ready to get back to normal. The anesthesia flowed into my arm, and I was out in three seconds flat.

Six hours passed - it felt like two seconds to me - and I woke up being wheeled back to my dad's car. I could barely process what was going on, but my leg was wrapped up with a brace from my quad to ankle. I was on crutches for three weeks and then regained enough strength to walk on my own again, but most movements were still off limits. Another three months passed. I got my brace off. Another three months - six since surgery - and I was cleared to run again. I felt free to run around with my friends and family. I was still not allowed to do much jumping or directional changes and had a ways to go before I was able to play sports again. At the nine month post-surgery mark, my physical therapist smiled at me, and said today was my final test of rehab. I was excited. I had put a huge amount of time and work into getting back to one hundred percent. I started with sprints and had no problems with those. Single leg jumps. No problems jumping or landing. Then came directional changes. I was told to run, change directions on the cones in front of me, then come back and repeat until told to stop. I did this about four times, and then was told I was completely cleared. I was unbelievably happy and excited.



It had been nearly a year since I tore my ACL and all this effort and work got me back to full capacity, if not better. The whole team at the rehab place began to clap; it had been a long year, through all sorts of turmoil and pain to get here. So much had happened from the day I first came unable to bend and move my leg, to being able to run

“

*She was so  
happy to see that  
I had finally  
made it back to  
where I began.*

”

and jump freely again. It was the best feeling. My mom was crying. She was so happy to see that I had finally made it back to where I began. It had been a long time since I felt this happy.

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Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County



# Breathe

Emily Armero

\*\*\*

I sit with my friends enjoying the relaxation of lunch. Someone says “Quiz” or “La-crosse” or “College” and it’s enough to start the snowball effect. A single thought flashes across my mind causing me to bite down on my tongue. A movie I know all too well, my throat constricts. I inhale deeply but my body only feels an eerie air brushing against my skin. My lungs refuse to cooperate. The air hides from me in my chest. My friends didn’t seem to notice the panic in my dark eyes. I know the people around me talk to one another and not to me, but it feels like their lungs laugh and mock me because I’m not capable of taking a breath.

“

*My lungs refuse to co-  
operate. The air hides  
from me in my chest.*

”

I count to three inside my head to relieve the increasing pain that arose in my chest. I visualize filling a balloon with air in hopes that my lungs would fill up fast to release the tension. Except it feels like a sumo wrestler is sitting on my chest, not allowing me to take a breath.

I desperately reach for my bottle and gulped down a swig of rushing cold water. I cling onto the feeling of the pressure releasing from my chest. For a second, I feel relief from what seemed to be a horror movie playing inside of my body. My chest screams at me to breath like *Annabelle* screams at the innocent victims.





At first glance, I'm a regular teenage girl who lives a normal life with her Mom and Dad. I'm a senior in high school and play on three different championship teams. I like to spend time with my boyfriend and all of my friends. I'm heading to the school of my dreams next year and I can't wait for the next chapter of my life to begin.

People tend to believe me because most people see what they want to see. It's easier for me to hide behind the facade that I am normal. To them, my life seems utterly simple, but to me, my rapidly beating heart and my endlessly racing mind tells me something different. I am about to leave for the Naval Academy. I recently lost my Mom. Every aspect of my life overwhelms me.

“

*It's easier for me  
to hide behind the  
facade that I am  
normal.*

”

Everyone gets nervous and feel like they have butterflies in their stomach, but for some people, it's much more than that. Usually when I would feel the tightening in my chest, I make a list in my head about what is making me nervous or everything that could go wrong (for example, not getting into college) and then I list everything I can do to find a solution or what I can do to make the situation better (talking to my college counselor, considering other schools, applying to prep schools). I've used this method to calm my fears about everyday worries for as long as I can remember.



However, recently I've been experiencing feelings that I can't control. I find myself lost in thought for hours at a time. My mind and body feel like they've been thrown overboard and are lost at sea. If I'm at home, sometimes I like to take a shower and let the hot water pellet my bare skin. I stand under the continuous stream of steaming water thinking about nothing, but everything at the same time.

When I have these "episodes" at school or in public, my mind feels like it's being chained down to the floor of a cell. The thought of not being able to control the fire that is being set off inside of me is unbearable to even think about. I have tried therapy in the past, but I could never depend on other people because of the massive burden I feel that I would be placing on them.

However, some of my worst days have also been some of my best. The people I have learned to trust and the things I have discovered about myself are unimaginable. Every "episode" of my show, *The Secret Life of an Anxious Teenager*, ends with me overcoming the impossible. I find comfort in enjoying my little victories. I know that the villain in my story won't win.

I have struggled and continue to struggle, but I know there will always be a light shining at the end of my tunnel.

\*\*\*

McDonogh School, Baltimore County



“

*However, some  
of my worst days  
have also been  
some of my best.*

”



# *The Smell of String*

*Leyla Aydin*



The blood didn't gush in a constant current, but instead in time with the thrashing beat of her heart. It left the artery thick, strong, and mostly voluminous, racing rapidly right through the clasped fingers onto the ripped flesh. She noticed the drainage of blood trickling down the slender spiral staircase flowing to the very last step of the five-story building.

The uncle held her in a dream of unconscious thoughts. It wasn't hard to carry the one hundred-pound girl. In fact, he ran her to the hospital.

Every presence of metal made the dehydrated pores on her fingers smell like moldy dentures grinding on wood. Her half-closed, perfunctorily eyes were too focused on the vibrant butterfly stickers on the saggy wall to even comprehend the medical equipment observing her body.

The rapid rhythm between the jaded joints wasn't like the sweet song the blissful birds would sing as a princess would wake up from her long-lasting nap. Rather, she served as the fabric birds would string tenacious threads through. Not to be made into a dress, but instead, to patch up the hole in her leg.

She could feel every piercing through every story of skin touch the deeper subcutaneous tissue of her leg. The smell of blood she didn't mind, the smell of metal was refined by the texture of string, slipping through blood and skin. The splitting pain was like mildewed frost in the morning when your body temperature is hotter than the outside

“ *The only thing left to hear was  
the swelling beat of her heart,  
hammering rhythms onto her ribs.* ”



air and your nose starts to pinch.

The absence of her mother, who was in another country, made it even harder to trust the outside environment. The tightening of the throat and the gripping of the heart begging her lungs to move felt like suffocation in water, pressing out all the pleasant music in the world. The only thing left to hear was the swelling beat of her heart, hammering rhythms onto her ribs.

*“ Sometimes negative thoughts are not what we should be afraid of, but instead the capacity of those thoughts. ”*

A portal of colors, a dissimilar gateway to a dimension where the little girl could finally see her mom. The computer hummed as it pushed itself to power on. Each pixel moving, working to find its appropriate location... and the computer, On.

I was not told for two months that I swung a knife into my leg. I didn't even comprehend that I got stitches while I was in the hospital. It all pieced together after she told me, but I didn't mind lacking the information for the time given. Sometimes negative thoughts are not what we should be afraid of, but instead the capacity of those thoughts.

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Howard High School, Howard County



# *The Cheese Grater*

*Matthew Bach*

— — —

The sounds of the white-water rapids filled the air. I look around the raft to see smiling faces of my friends and their fathers, all enjoying our time on the water. Little did I know, I was about to witness a near-death experience.

The instructor sitting on the back of our raft turned to us while rapidly paddling and said, “We are coming up to the infamous rock formation of this river. Fall in the water now, and you won’t come out in one piece. That’s why we call it the Cheese Grater.” I turned to my buddy Danny sitting across from me with a nervous face. The instructor said it so effortlessly, like he had been through it a million times, and he probably had been. We were on a group, father-son trip in West Virginia. In the previous days we hiked and went caving. That day, though, was the white-water rafting day. It was my favorite day by far. It was filled with fun and unusual experiences, like how I jumped into the water without seeing the water snake slithering across it; that was a close one. It took a very interesting turn towards the end of the river.

“ *The instructor said it so effortlessly,  
like he had been through it a million  
times, and he probably had been.* ”

We approached what the rafting company called the “Cheese Grater”. It was a 40-foot-tall rock formation sitting on top of a small waterfall. The river split into two ways down the fall, one going left to safety and the rest of the river, and one forking right into a plethora of jagged rocks sharp enough to behead a man. We made our way into the rapid section before the fall, taking ourselves left to avoid the danger. Just before the split though, we ran over a shallow section in the middle of the river. A rock hit the



bottom of our thin raft and knocked a member of our group off of it. This member was my childhood friend Danny, who I had known my whole life. At that very moment, I was witnessing my life-long friend drift towards almost certain death without myself being about to do anything. Still being in the rapid section of the water, our raft quickly went to the left and down the fall. Our instructor immediately beached us to look for the overboard person. The look on his face was grim, like he had just seen something he thought would never happen. The funny and intimidating warning had suddenly come true.

“ *One forking right into a plethora of jagged rocks sharp enough to behead a man* ”

After dismounting the raft and walking about 50 yards up the bank, we find Danny standing there, unharmed, without a scratch on his body. He was laughing so hard we thought he went insane. It turned out that he grasped a branch just before the waterfall and followed the trunk over to the bank and on to the shore. We walked him back to our raft in good spirits, knowing that our buddy was still alive. The instructor was amazed but allowed us to continue down the river like nothing ever happened.

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Loyola Blakefield, Baltimore County



# *Years of Wear*

## *Dean Baghdadi*



Running down the stairs, backpack bouncing on my spine, full of happiness and vigor, I had nothing to think about except whether I needed anything else from my dad's and if we had any homework for the weekend. My ecstatic expression, constantly unphased by whatever my family would put me through, would soon be ruined by his ruthless words.

"Dean, sit down." Looking to my left, my father sat on the couch, a blank expression on his face, which I could read. I always could. Something was coming, something that I didn't think I'd like. I quickly scanned my memories for anything bad that happened between us recently, which had been a lot, considering it was my father. The most recent had been the fight over allowing me to go to public school next year, which he rudely denied.

The next few words, while short and only lasting a few seconds in time, would impact me for the next years to come, our relationship never the same.

"You need to choose at whose house you're going to stay permanently. I can't continue to do this anymore, one week you're here, one week you're there." He didn't move a muscle as he said this, no tears, no guilt, simply him sitting back on the black leather couch, arm resting on the armrest, staring me dead in the eyes. Sitting there, dumbfounded, my thoughts going so fast that I couldn't comprehend what was happening, messing with the tacky old black leather couch, picking away at its peeling pieces from years of wear.

I couldn't believe that my own father had decided that he couldn't make the effort to let me see both of my parents. Tears began to well up in my eyes as I moved my hand from the couch to my necklace, which had forever been on my neck after my parents gave it to me before their divorce. My cheeks became covered in moisture. I stammered, trying to compose my thoughts to make a response. My father showed no sympathy, as always. I heard my mother's car pull into the driveway, honking once to notify me that she's arrived. She's here.

"Well?" my father asked, not acknowledging the obvious struggle for me to think of what to say.

"Well, I'm sorry but I can't make a decision." I began waiting for a response,





something, anything. For him to tell me that he realized he made a mistake and he wants me to continue seeing him and my mother. To say that it was some sort of cruel joke and he wanted to see if I would believe it. Something. Anything that would provide me with a sense of relief. To end this awful torture that he was putting me through. Nothing.

“  
*To say that it was some sort  
of cruel joke and he wanted to  
see if I would believe it.*  
”

Five years of this endless torture. Day by day. Night by night. He put me through all of this yet couldn't make a simple effort. The person who was meant to unconditionally love you, the one who you had spent your entire life idolizing and loving, through good and bad times. Someone who you were taught would never walk out of your life. Thinking that there wouldn't be a response, I opened my mouth to say something but stopped by the sound of my father's harsh, debilitating words.

“Then don't bother coming back.”

He stood up from the couch, slowly walked towards the front door, revealing a cloudy fall day, with the street I had grown up on and the street that held a special place in my heart, Caledon Court. My surroundings turned blurry, glassy. I moved my glasses and took my sleeve to wipe away the tears that were coming down my face by the millisecond. Looking to my left, seeing my mother's navy blue car, to my right, the children in the neighborhood playing outside before it got too cold. Taking in these familiar surroundings one last time until I'd see them again, which felt like a lifetime. Attempting to compose myself to make sure my mother wouldn't know what had happened, putting on a straight face, something to make sure no one could tell how I was feeling, something my father taught me. Wiping away my tears, it felt like hours had passed, yet only seconds.

I stepped on the porch, looked back at my father to see any sense of guilt or remorse for what he's done. Searching every single part of his face to look for any emotion that he might actually care. But he didn't, and when did he ever? While I didn't say it out loud, I pleaded with my eyes, now gushing with tears again. He didn't show any signs of



having a conscience that could be telling him what he's doing is wrong. Please. Please don't do it. I couldn't believe I was pleading for this man to stay in my life. The one that had made it into a living hell, from the start of this divorce to the end of our relationship, yet here I was. Wishing and hoping for something to change, I saw his hand move to the handle, the door make a loud creak, and a loud slam of the heavy door in my face.

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Howard High School, Howard County



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*Wiping away  
my tears, it felt  
like hours had  
passed, yet only  
seconds.*

”



# *The Ritual of the Movie*

*Olivia Barry*



Movies are the rituals of teenage girls clad in plaid skirts and coffee-stained blouses who are seeking just a two hour reprieve from their own lives.

We worship silver screen matinee showings with reverence, allotting two hours every month to watch something new. Afterwards, we log and review the movie - I write in detail on how the movie made me feel, made me think, and you write one-line jokes. Every month, a new movie arrives, and we view it like clockwork, our bodies settled into the routine.

“ *Golden light leaks through the windows of my car, the tail ends of September spilling out of the exhaust pipe of my Honda.* ”

I.  
Golden light leaks through the windows of my car, the tail ends of September spilling out of the exhaust pipe of my Honda. It's only a five minute trek from school to the Senator, but we fill the time well; you yell, ranting on about life, friends, schoolwork, whatever your problem of the day is, and I allow my sage nods to punctuate your tirade.

We buy crepes before the movie - I choose apple cinnamon, and you choose crepe suzette - and we shove them into crumpled paper bags, hidden in the depths of my



backpack as to avoid getting chastised by the man taking our tickets.

An arid expanse of red velvet seats awaits us, seating no one except the two of us. We giggle, peeling out of our school uniforms and shimmying into our street clothes in the middle of the empty theatre. Our laughter crowds the theater and spills into the decadent lobby, shaking the chandelier, rebounding off of the high ceilings. The bored college student at the concessions stand can hear us, I'm sure of it, but neither of us can will ourselves the dam the giggles that spill out.

As the trailer begins rolling, a trail of white-haired book club members march in, nestling themselves into the row in front of us. Our secret world, previously occupied only by our laughter and the ancient seats, has been breached, but neither of us care too much.

When the movie begins, a tedious affair that makes no sense, we whisper snide comments to each other as crepe filling drips down our wrists, and I know that our secret world is still present, just hidden. For now.

“ *I know that our secret world  
is still present, just hidden.  
For now.* ”

II.  
Dark clouds slosh about above our heads, as both of us struggle to shake the sleep from our eyes. It is the day after homecoming, and our eye bags carry the weight of the past night. Alas, The Tradition of The Movies stops for no tired soul and we drive on, sipping on coffee and praying that we won't fall asleep.

We do not sneak any food in this time, opting to eat our breakfast in the car, the concrete parking structure shielding up as the rain finally spills over from the sky. Once our avocado and egg sandwiches are finished, we head in, stomachs sated with



brunch food.

Another field of red leather seats awaits us, except this time we aren't alone - hoards of men clad in threadbare comic book shirts occupy what was once barren. We curl up in our seats, reclining them until their backs scrape against the wall, and snicker at the men marching into the theater.

There is no secret world for us this time, but we do what we can to craft our own; we laugh a little too loudly during scenes that are supposed to be serious, whispering one-line reviews under our breath, and ignore the glares sent to us by the people sitting around us. No one can break our little bubble, furnished with reclining red seats and fallen popcorn.

III.

November's chill has finally caught up to us, permeating the layers we're wearing to protect ourselves. My Honda is safely nestled next to a wall covered in street art; the wall's pinks and greens pop underneath a streetlight despite the dark that shrouds the rest of the block. We take a minute to really look at the art, our necks stretched to the sky. After a minute, I ask if you can take my picture, and you oblige.

As you snap my picture, my yellow jacket flapping in the wind, I throw my head back and laugh, giving my joy as an offering to the streetlight.

“ *I throw my head back and  
laugh, giving my joy as an of-  
fering to the streetlight.* ”

Once again, our food is stuffed into a bulging paper bag, and once we've settled into our seats - (this time they're a dull blue, and I pick at the fabric for the whole movie) - we scramble to unwrap our vegetable sandwiches and I do the honors of cutting our



miniature pumpkin pie into quarters, two slices for the both of us. The theater is almost sold out but no one bats an eye as we chow down.

There's scant time for us to find our bubble today - both of us are too caught up in the movie to even speak - but once the screen has gone dark and we've both filed into my car, we immediately begin yelling, our shouts harmonizing with the crooning Christmas carols that play through my radio.

"That was transcendent," you yell.

"Probably the best movie I've ever seen," I agree, nodding frantically as I shift my car into reverse.

We leave the street art and the light behind, but I hope that they heard us and are worshipping movies now, too.

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Mercy High School, Baltimore City



# *Marigolds or Daisies*

*Elaria Boutros*

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Wind splintered away from her as she whipped down the road wildly on her bike. The world held its breath and still marigolds were inseparable from daisies. Free falling through time in an array of the magical wonders, one could only admire if they'd take the risk of slowing down. Icy fire streamed shamelessly through her blood, glaciating her fingers, then incinerated each one till they shifted uncomfortably on the lumpy rubber handlebar. Slipping through fresh blurs of nature, she tasted salty ice fractals crystallizing across her tingling skin. Her stubby fingers trembled against the brake lever in fascinated terror knowing that if she tightened her grip too fast, she'd go soaring. Every part of her body was alive and she felt her toes curl in their socks. Her hair sat flat on her head, waiting patiently for this ride to end to resume its wild and curly position. The roar of the plastic water bottle she recently stuffed between the wheels of her blue bike shamed any of the big, fancy cars you could spot on racetracks. She cherished the moment as if it were a thin piece of ice, frosted to a flower that could shatter if she dared to let a finger caress its precious petals. If only the moment could last forever and this thrill could never fade. Her thoughts replayed the day, reminding her that once she went home, she was likely to return to a gray, mindless loop of school and home. Screams of a hybrid emotion caught in her branched throat, and she quickly helped untangle the queer bird. Why can't I make every day as fun as today?

“ *If only the moment could last  
forever and this thrill could  
never fade.* ”

In the afternoon sun, days like these reminded me of a sunborne childhood that





slipped through my aged fingers. Each precious moment is like a ray of sunlight. Always sure there would be another and never gracious for the warmth gifted. I took a long sip of the pomegranate tea I gently poured from my century old set and let its sweet warmth sweep through me. Sitting on my porch collecting the last emanation of daylight, I could hear a soft hum. Amplifying momentarily, it peaked at a monstrous roar and the source became known. Three young girls not possibly surpassing the age of twelve zipped by riding their two-wheeled contraptions. The loud cacophony bled from plastic water bottles they had attached to the second wheel. It was beautiful discombobulation that reminded me of the young boys I would enviously watch doing similar things. As they melted to the horizon in a blend of budding trees and rose freckled bushes, the sunlight followed. It was not to be seen until the next morning.

“ *As they melted to the horizon in a blend of budding trees and rose freckled bushes, the sunlight followed.* ”

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Howard High School, Howard County



# *When Guinea Pigs are Served for Dinner*

*Kristina Buchanan*

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As we neared the end of the long, stuffy customs line, I was bombarded with the type of hug given to only a long lost friend. My first interaction with the Ecuadorian natives included the cousins, aunts, and uncles of my best friend. This became the first obvious cultural difference I noticed between Ecuador and America and I made a mental note in my head - hug every family member, every family friend, and even the family dog if you feel so inclined.

On a drive filled with beautiful green trees, poorly paved roads, and absolutely no attention to road signs, we made our way to the capital. Our days in Quito were filled with many family parties. The first party began at 7 PM, but I watched the time tick by on my watch until it displayed 7:15, then 7:30, until finally we departed at 7:45, arriving almost an hour late. From all my previous experiences at family parties, this seemed like a rude thing to do, but I soon learned that the traditional, polite thing to do is to arrive an hour behind schedule in Ecuador. Each party began with what felt like 100 hugs, and Kunegra, a card game which made it very obvious I did not come from Ecuador. Soon, I became so competitive that I had to hold back the warm tears from dripping down my face if I lost a game or made a wrong move, becoming the joke of the night. The cuisine, rich with flavor, has a few surprises, such as the giant serving of guinea pig which sat on each table, staring at me with its charcoal black grilled eyes. Again, I made another mental note to suppress my tears - it's just a different culture, no one will do this to Smores, your petite, tan and white, carrot-loving pet guinea pig back home.

After five days in the city, we neared the most exciting part of all: an Ecuadorian vacation! The roads slowly turned to brown dirt and gravel as we drove up the green, flowery mountain and finally made it into the resort, located at such a high altitude my ears began to painfully pop. Unlike any of the "tropical" vacations I had been on before where we traveled down a man-made lazy river in a resort, now I traveled down rapids



in an old rubber tube. Instead of zip-lining with absolutely every other tourist in the country, we found a small, family-owned company and ziplined across the beautiful waterfalls with their dogs (yes, dogs) balanced across our shoulders. Without any other people touring the vast canopy of the Amazon, we made meaningful connections with our guides. We learned about their dreams for the future, some of which were to stay behind in the rainforest to build up the family business or travel to the states to earn a degree. We were not visiting Hershey Park to see the inside of the factory where their chocolate came from, we now visited the cocoa farms, smelling the fresh beans and learning the authentic chocolate making process. Unlike any resort vacations, we were meeting the natives of the Amazon rainforest. As a middle schooler, I had not realized how much more important these experiences are. Ultimately, it is one thing to be able to visit another part of the world, but getting the chance to vastly explore and become familiar with another country's dialect, cuisine, and culture can shape one's life.

*“ I am eager to discover the aspects of countries that cannot be seen from inside the high, gated walls of a resort. ”*

Embarking on a new journey in a country I previously had no idea held a place on the map of South America served as a catalyst for my love of travel. Each trip, I am eager to discover the certain aspects of different countries which cannot be seen from inside the high, gated walls of a resort. The vivid imagery of the rural rain forest roads, and, sadly, guinea pig being served on a platter, will forever stick out in my mind, unlike the cement pool or lazy river from a resort in Mexico. Ten days in Ecuador showed me the most authentic aspects of the country, leaving me mesmerized by the cultural differences. This trip changed how I view the opportunity to travel not only to get away and relax, but to experience a culture so different from my own. Ultimately, this trip sparked my curiosity into the world outside of the United States, leaving me always yearning for my next adventure.

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McDonogh School, Baltimore County



# Unknown Depths

Lucy Burnham

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The waters of the ocean spread across the globe in one large blanket of salt and sea breezes. The sleeping giant churns the tides and caresses toes waiting shyly at its edges. It rumbles and clashes in an age-old battle with itself, striking fear into the stomachs of many onlookers. It's an untamable beast of brine whose waves crack and pound at Earth's crust in patterned chaos. A provider, it gives just as it takes. Food, entertainment, fear, an escape, so many things enchant and persuade us into endlessly returning to the shore.

“ *Food, entertainment, fear, an escape, so many things enchant and persuade us into endlessly returning to the shore.* ”

The ocean is a familiar place to me. I know the taste of the misty wind on my chapped lips. My eyes sun-dried and stinging from sunscreen and salt. Grains of sand clinging to my legs and scraping between my toes. The sounds of seagulls swooping down to snatch some poor creature from the water. Memories of laughter mixed with fear and awe. My family's presence surrounding me. My sister making mermaid tails in the sand, my brother beside her digging as deep as he could while my mother and eldest sister dove beneath the waves. Me, standing in the foam of waves already broken and gone. Never daring to push further in fear of those powerful tides that eagerly wait to curl around my feet and swallow my small form.



Tides are ever changing and ever constant forces. A push and pull. Always giving and always taking. Rushing out to the farthest end of the beach before receding back, tucked away into the depths. They are dangerous and quick. Rising in power and multitude throughout the day, reaching out and raking their claws through the sand. Tension grows high with the level of the sea, expanding evermore, until the time passes and the waters grow calm, docile. The sea shrinks back into its den, allowing people to greet it and once more dance in its currents.

“ *The reason my family loves the ocean so much is because we are one and the same.* ”

The reason my family loves the ocean so much is because we are one and the same. Forces full of internal battles. Chaotic, yet consistent. We rise and fall with the help of each other, each person has a role, a purpose. Individually we are not necessarily remarkable, but together we are insurmountable. The ocean clashes with itself. Its eddies and currents push and pull, always moving, always changing, twisting, veering one way or another. The waves all follow the same patterns, but no wave is the same as any other. Some are loud and boisterous on impact, shaking the feet of those nearby. Others form slowly, rolling out from within themselves in swift, graceful motions. Unlike the ocean, however, you never know when the calming low tide will cascade into the turbulence of high tide.

My memories of the beach are clear, yet muddled. Between my unfocused, sleepy thoughts and the glare of the sun in my eyes, the images I have of my beach days are foggy at best. The clearest pictures I have are the printed ones in the drawers of the CD cabinet in my living room. These glossy slips of paper do not add much to the feeling of being at the beach itself, but they do provide a much better image of what was happening.



happen. Throwing us off, keeping us behind, are the things the ocean thrives on. The greatest enigma we shall ever know surrounds us and sustains us. For, truly, what can we know about the hand that feeds?

+ + +

Mercy High School, Baltimore City



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*Beaches and  
oceans are  
meant to be  
mysteries.*

”



# *The Bully I'm Thankful For*

## *Alexander Burstrem*



Everyone has to face a bully at some point in their life, each person experiencing this adversity in their own way. My bully in life is my depression - this demon inside my head that turns seemingly everything I do into a mistake or a horrible disaster, or every bad thing that happens become ten times worse in my mind. Loneliness sets in, as does sadness, along with unbelievable amounts of despair and hopelessness. Nothing seems right in the world, and everything seems wrong with it at the same time.

My biological father was an abuser of drugs at the time I was conceived and was very young, possibly a cause of my ailment today. The lack of a father figure my entire life certainly isn't helping either. This, combined with depression, makes you feel as if you are not loved, or that you aren't worth the time of day to take care of to begin with. No matter how many people tell you they love you or even show you they love you, the depression beats all of that down. The lonely feeling of no love consumes me all the time, even as I am surrounded by people who love me and want me to be happy. Imagine a time when you felt most lonely in your life. Now, think about how it would be like to feel that loneliness every hour of every day.

Seems horrible, right? Well, that is only the tip of the iceberg. Depression tears down your self-esteem, makes you feel like nothing, extending that feeling of no love - even to your own self. No love for yourself translates to a belief that you are a failure. Then, a terrible cycle ensues, as a lack of motivation results from your belief that you are incompetent, and nothing gets done. As one of my depression episodes goes on, this effect gets worse and worse, less and less gets done, the beliefs in my head are manifested in my daily life, and guilt haunts me for what I haven't accomplished. This is the vicious cycle depression puts me through, and it happens every single day. It haunts me in every way - even if my grades are almost all A's, my mind finds the worst grade to latch onto and that is all I can notice. Even if I am almost done with my Eagle Scout rank requirements, I see myself not as the kid who is almost there and just needs one last push to finish it before turning eighteen and unable to do it, but as the lazy slacker who has been "almost there" for about two years now and yet hasn't bothered to finish the job or just get it done.

Those are only some of the mental effects. Sometimes, the physical effects





depression has on me are just as trying, if not more so, than the mental effects. Depression makes me exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally. The only escapes appear to be either death or sleep, which is the closest thing living humans have to death itself. So, when an episode hits me, I sleep. A lot. This takes away all or most of my time to get things done and further contributes to the vicious cycle I wrote about in the previous paragraph. I wake up tired still, as I slept too much, and then can't accomplish anything even in the few hours when I am actually awake. The tolls my illness takes on me are extremely costly and daunting when one thinks about it all together, as I am as I write this.

“

*There is no cure, no real way  
out, nothing.*

”

Truth be told, there is no solution for depression. There is no cure, no real way out, nothing. I get told to wake up and take my medication every morning as if it actually helps. I get told to stop having such a negative outlook on life in general as if I can help the fact that I see the world in a negative light. I get told to lose the bad attitude. I get told that I'm exaggerating, that it can't possibly be as bad as I claim it is, that I just want attention, and that I'm a liar. All this is thrown at me because I try my best to put a fake smile on my face, so nobody else has to endure the daily pain and hardships I go through due to depression. Accusations like these ones make me feel like all of this is my fault, despite the fact that I know I cannot help it. I don't want to burden other people any more than I already do, as that's what this illness does to its victims. It makes us believe we are nothing but a burden to everyone else, and that we will never be anything more than that.

You want to know what I say to that? Forget it. All of it. Forget it. I decided it was time for me to stop letting depression bully me, and it was time for me to become the bully. I decided that it was time for me to take charge of my own life, not continue to let it be run by an illness. I turned my one or two point GPA into honor roll grades. I turned my disaster of a room into a clean and organized haven. I started working on my Eagle Scout requirements again, and I am currently on track to earn that rank of honor well before I age out of Boy Scouts.



At the end of the day, I realize how thankful I need to be for my depression. Sounds crazy, right? However, I now see that this illness has granted me strength that I never would have had otherwise. It granted me empathy and the ability to help and relate to others who may be going through the same illness as me or those who are just having a rough patch in their life. Ironically, making something good out of depression, which seems like something no good can come out of, gave me confidence and faith in myself that I can be successful in this life.

“  
*It makes us believe we are nothing but a burden to everyone else, and that we will never be anything more than that.*  
”

So, thank you, to my would-be lifelong bully, depression. I'm sorry to tell you this, but the tables have turned, and I will continue to fight to keep you down. This is my life, and I'm done letting you ruin it for me.

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Howard High School, Howard County

“

*This is my  
life, and I'm  
done letting you  
ruin it for me.*

”



# Sleeveless Tee Shirts

Geri Cabunoc



Finally. The long and lingering wait is over. My first time going to the outreach. Mom and Dad have told me stories about the kids that live here and what their life is like: scavenging through trash for items to sell for money, missing school to help the family out just to stay on their feet.

“ *The water dried to their skin,  
leaving a gray dirt patch on  
their skinny and frail bodies.* ”

We drove past what seemed to be houses smaller than my bedroom, composed of old wooden boards and metal roofs, surrounded by tattered trash bags and mounds of dirt. “That’s toxic waste in there, Geri” my uncle explains from the front of the car - he points his finger towards the group of small boys in sleeveless tee shirts and shorts too big for them, walking, running, and jumping around in puddles of gray, murky waters. The water dried to their skin, leaving a gray dirt patch on their skinny and frail bodies. I look around to find myself in a city of waste. Trash bags and waste piled into mountains higher than some buildings. I felt lost and out of place, but most of all my stomach churned at the remains of the higher class’s waste that have now become a means of survival for the people of Inayawan. I felt a sharp pain in my chest as we kept driving through the landfill. Blown away. I couldn’t believe places like this really existed.

We pull into the warehouse to kids staring at the car, staring at me. What were they thinking? What seemed so different about me? The general idea of this place I had gauged from the stories Mom and Dad told me did not measure up to the extent of poverty that actually existed here.



“Welcome to Pro. Vision! It’s so nice to finally meet you guys in person! Thank you so much for all of your donations and fundraising that you’ve done for us.” a lady said to us. As my parents talked to the lady in charge, I looked around to find kids running around, smiling, laughing. How are they able to find joy and happiness living in the landfills of the Philippines? I was surely happy to finally be able to meet the people my family and I have been helping for years, but I wondered in awe of how, despite the circumstances, they were able to be optimistic. They lived in a situation I couldn’t fathom. I stood there, questioning everything I’ve ever taken for granted.

“ *I stood there, questioning everything I’ve ever taken for granted.* ”

The lady brought two girls to meet me, both just a little older than me. Their English was limited but they had ample skills to maintain a conversation. “Geri, this is Gagay and Kristina.” The two beautiful girls smiled in their worn-out clothes and flip flops. They were incredibly radiant. I wondered what their life is like - was it as bad as I heard? They seemed to be too happy to have such a terrible life. But I was wrong.

Later that afternoon, after the warehouse had cleared out, the girls and a few of their friends were playing outside the administrator’s office. Jacks. They laughed and cringed with nervousness wondering if they could pick up enough jacks before the ball hit the ground again. I played a few rounds before Dad called me into another room. Mrs. Nancy, the lady who runs the organization, and Teacher Jane, one of the kindergarten teachers, were sitting in the room. They asked me to sit and they began to tell me Kristina’s story - everything about it; her parents being divorced so she gets passed around because both sides don’t want her, how she’s supposed to be in fourth grade like me but is second because she has to stay home to watch her younger brother as her parents go scavenging in the trash for items to sell, and even how her family didn’t want her so she packed up all of her belongings into one small grocery bag and left home one night to be found by Teacher Jane, sleeping on the floor of the Pro. Vision warehouse at six a.m. the next morning.



My legs were shaking. My heart ached. My chest felt heavy. Tears began to roll down my face as my dad sighed and looked down at the ground shaking his head. I looked outside again to see Gagay and Kristina playing. They had smiles running from ear to ear and contagious laughs that lit up a room. I couldn't believe how they were able to be happy even though their life isn't as blessed and privileged as mine. I thought about my life back home, where I complained about trivial things like the flavor of my juice box and missing my favorite Disney Channel show at night. I realized how much I take for granted when I looked at the kids in the worn-out, sleeveless tee shirts playing with each other, having a good time.

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Howard High School, Howard County

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*They had smiles  
running from ear  
to ear and conta-  
gious laughs that  
lit up a room.*

”



# *The Worst Tennis Match*

*Presley Caroland*



12 years. I had known this man for the majority of my lifetime; he was practically an uncle to me. He was my mother's best friend and his daughter's mine. He was the one who taught me how to play tennis, leading to my successful career as a tennis player at just eight years old.

No matter who you were, he would approach you with a source of support and kindness, providing a constant light in your life. Yet, as I sat atop of their too familiar brown, tarnished couch, a sense of dread fell over me. I no longer wished to see the man who I had grown up with. Sauntering towards me, he appeared in the doorway. My whole body froze instantaneously. I could no longer recognize him. His pale flesh seemed translucent, outlining every curve in his bones. His smile became crooked, no longer providing warmth to those who viewed it. Staring at the floor, I couldn't force myself to engage eye contact with the stranger glaring at me. Cancer. Cancer claimed his body, refusing to return it. Despite once being viewed as strong and empowering, I could now only see the feeble stranger that stood before me.

He looked toward me and sensed the amount of dread that had started to build. As he stood quietly, hovering above me shakily, I envisioned the countless tennis lessons in which I used to participate alongside his guidance.

"Any good player of tennis can win a match, but it is the great players who win when they are playing at their worst." He mentioned these lines to me on the court and I was trying to discern how this statement related to the situation that was now facing him. I sat there thinking of a time when he coached me through a match, a match that I was sure to lose not because of my opponents superior level of play, but rather my inability to believe that my strokes were prepared for the match ahead.

I was standing on the court with all of the tools to play, yet they seemed to be failing me. It was as if I had never touched a racquet and had forgotten to bring along any match strategy that my coach taught me. The frustration was becoming overwhelming, consuming my optimism. At this moment, my trusted coach shared the mentality of good players versus great players. With that, I was able to turn that match around. It was with this mentality that my coach and I were going to use to face cancer. If he was going to maintain hope, so was I. My coach shared that he was going to have to stop coaching





for a short period of time while he battled Stage 4 cancer, assuring me that he was going to coach me again. With the cards stacked against him, his determination for success never once deteriorated.

As he distanced himself from the courts, I watched as my mom would travel between our house and his to aid him and his family as they prepared for the worst match of his life. There were times when I overheard my mom and dad talking in shallow whispers. The concern in my mom's eyes was harder for her to hide. It was at this point that I began to succumb to the realization that cancer had taken an ever stronger hold of him. Later that spring, my coach showed up back on the court, fulfilling his promise of coaching me again. No longer was he the spritely man who would run for every ball I mishit, or dodge the ball that I sent directly towards him, but rather he utilized the one tool cancer had yet to steal, his voice, standing on the side with a soft smile and quiet nod.

*“ We are all good players at life, but great players continue to win when tchallenges are high. ”*

He only made it to a few sideline matches to watch and support, but it was during those times that I realized he had given me all the tools that I would need to face challenges both on and off the court. I learned through him that we are all good players at life, but great players continue to play and win when the challenges are high. Winning no longer meant the basic win or loss that is determined by a set of points, but rather facing challenges with hope and not buying into the idea that there is no way that one can succeed without all the perfect tools and plans in place.

My coach passed away and I stood in the funeral home, realizing that he had won. He shared his love with me and all those that he considered family. His love continues to guide me as I step onto the court, knowing I have this additional asset that ensures I remain a great player regardless of the basic score both on and off the court. How can I fail when I witnessed a strong man slowly parish yet pass on his passion and courage for sport and life to me? I stand proud and one of his great players today, holding the same mentality he passed on, for that I will win no matter the challenge.

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Howard High School, Howard County



# Reaching the Stars

Sarah Churchill



Oboe in hand, shuffling outside of the auditorium to my case in the band room, I couldn't hide my big smile. Man, that was a good first spring concert. I wonder what'll happen next year now that I'll be in the Wind Ensemble. The crowd of people made it nearly impossible to get to the exit. I carefully put my reed in my mouth, shielding it from everyone's shoulders. If it broke, I would need a fifth reed. 52 dollars, wasted on broken tips, thread, and metal. But still, that exhilarating feeling of taking that first breath to play is my favorite part of playing. Today, that joy was multiplied because I have two of the best people in my section. Although one of the seats in the section will be empty at the start of 7th grade, I will still have one of my oldest school friends sitting by my side every day. My stomach knotted every time I thought of wanting to leave her to play oboe alone. But the sound of the low winds always fascinated me and I was given the opportunity to play such an instrument. It instantly captured my attention with its deep, rich tone. If only my parents would let me.

Through the sea of heads, I watched my mom approach Mr. Humphrey. She's gonna ask him about what I told her.

"Hey, Mr. Humphrey, I wanted to ask about something. Sarah told me that you wanted her to-"

"Play the bassoon, right? Yes, definitely."

Whoa... He literally finished her sentence.

"We need one next year."

My heart warmed at that memory. From those days of hard work since I first picked up the bassoon, I finally sat in the first chair at a Maryland Youth Symphony Orchestra concert. I had to play. No one else was going to.

Heart pounding, hands sweating, I took the first breath. As the eerie theme soared through the room, my mind did everything in its power to keep my mouth from smiling. As my last note released, the conductor motioned for me to stand up. Cheers echoed through the entire space as relief and happiness filled my body.

I finally did it...



Howard High School, Howard County

“

*But the sound of  
the low winds always  
fascinated me and I  
was given the oppor-  
tunity to play such  
an instrument.*

”



# Pastime

Jake Cizek



Sparks of snow sliced through the frozen air and burned my face. As my brother slingshotted past me, my springing boot was inches away from a collision. But it didn't feel that way; I felt like a flint struck by steel, bounds of excited energy unleashed from within me. My iced boots exploded and violently broke the trap of the thick snowy ground. One boot after another I forcefully staggered up the slope. My excitement had not faded but the ground gradually sucked me down.

Beginning to feel like an insect on a fly roller, I stopped and turned to look down the precipitous hill. My brother was now minuscule in the distance, overshadowed by the towering pine trees paralleling the path to the right. But my brother was only in the foreground. Behind him laid a pure frosted forested landscape without a trace of human existence. But as I refocused my eagerness resparked. My boots bolted forward. I had almost reached the skeletal and barren peach tree guarding the top of the hill. My eagerness multiplied and spiked with every step.

“ *I was there. It was time. I was ready.* ”

I was there. It was time. I was ready.

Excitement erased all grievances of the cold. Five steps back. Sled in front. Charge forward. Dive head first. I slammed against the snowy path. I entered a blizzard. Over arching branches could no longer be seen, only what lay directly in front. The air batted my face, chilling my ears to numbness. Protruding sticks and uprooted leaves flung past my left and right. Each went by faster and faster. Fortified oak trees sneered at me with thick faces, each plotting to bring a violent end to my joy. Faster. Snow spiked up from the sled and melted my face. Faster. Crisp crackling crescendoed, stampeding the memory of the calming wind. My heart drummed against the bed of the sled. The hill began to



level. the calming wind. My heart drummed against the bed of the sled. The hill began to level. The end was near. Pines to my right waved their farewells with swaying branches. Open sky greeted me with freeing arms. I was in a new space.

A meadow havened by mountainous woods. Tensing speed calmed to a therapeutic glide. Snow crunched into pavement and steadied all pressures. I slowed. I stopped. Still. The serene zephyr was reborn and cleansed my lungs. The world was still. Me and my brother became the only people in the world. But it was time to go again.

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Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County



# *The Chronicles of Table 9*

*Mary Dean*



Table 9, where as friends, we sat.

I think that in the truest sense, we only came to be called that because of me. I sat at a table, turned to the map on the pillar behind me, and mistook some scribbled chair for a number.

“Table 9”, it was decreed, and there we sat. The tight group of freshmen, just sitting there for lunch.

A bore was never to be had at Table 9.

Even when there were seats empty, or when we needed a few more, there was always a subject to talk about.

And when there wasn't, cannibalism was always a good start!

And truly, strangely, it was. Bringing us from anywhere to Tumblr posts, to Shel Silverstein poems, to even our most recent biology assignment.

And then when Christmas rolled around, the season of Secret Santas, we decided to host one among ourselves. With a price limit of twenty dollars, we threw our names into Ana's lunchbox, shook it up, and drew.

In those last days of school before break, we exchanged our gifts with great jubilee, laughing and admiring our presents. We also huffed at the barren hot chocolate stand, as by the time most of us had gotten there, many of the toppings had been taken. Only I was able to smugly gain a diabetes-inducing cup of cocoa, much to the dismay of the others.

All throughout the winter break we didn't see much of each other. But somehow we still managed to video call, watching some Christmas movie on YouTube together, using a streaming service now dead to the world.

Many more stories can be told without date, like the many times a piece of cheese was pulled out of my pocket, each time acting as a common surprise. The rare times when I did not have a slice created genuine surprise among my friends.

On the rare days where conversation ran stale, or when we needed something to do while conversing, we would snatch Haley's water bottle and flip it, causing a cascade of chaos as we tried to land it and with Haley successfully landing it nearly every time. We often had silly games like this, like when Ana brought in her dice for midterms, springing



an impromptu horror story set similarly to Dungeons and Dragons, or when there was table wide rock-paper-scissors.

We would have a weird competition to tell jokes that would embarrass Sarah the most. And also from that sprung a plethora of sayings which I shall not dare to repeat.

General spontaneity is how we ran, that and the occasional cookie that Kathryn or Ana prepared for us all. That rainy spring day, where we had planned a potluck to eat outside, but the ground had been too damp to eat on, so we fared well inside, eating the noodles made by Ana and avoiding Courtney's pasta salad that we all said we'd enjoy (sorry).

For some spontaneous act, I'd like to think that I was the center of the pranks. There was a day when I took everyone's glasses and put them on before running out of the lunchroom with Victoria and Kathryn. They quickly took a photo of me with all of the glasses on before we all ran back in to finish our lunches.

And then the finger hand finger puppets, the pinnacle of our year, brought in after a humorous mistake in French class.

"J'ai dix mains!" I proudly proclaimed in front of the class, and with them, two middle school visitors. After a moment, I realized what I had said and sat back down, embarrassed. That was until the next day, when I brought in my hands and increased my hand count to twelve.

Let us not forget the unholyest of days, where we created food crimes of many degrees, pouring ketchup onto my already referenced pieces of cheese, or dipping grapes into hummus. Oh, and the pound of almonds that I kept around by me when track season came around, and the small amount still held captive in a mint tic tac container kept in my bag.

Now that it's sophomore year, we have less moments together, and the table has changed. Instead of our lively table near the pillar, we've shifted over to the table beside it. Either way, it is still Table 9, but often I'll look at the old table, chock full of freshmen, and reminisce on the fun and chaotic times with my friends. Kathryn, with whom I had oh so many classes with, is now barely in one. We are separated from each other by the rows of other students in the class. There have been some other changes too. Most of us have a different lunch period at least once a week, meaning that our moments together are even more limited. But still, there are even more people who have joined us at our table. Alexa, Morgan, occasionally Mariellyn, and the two freshmen that we've picked up.

We've still had our fun. Still stealing food, still making jokes, still doing fun and momentous activities, one of which is the jello brain that we, or rather Morgan and Nicole ate, created by Courtney for her presentation on epilepsy. More of the fun with that was its shape and the strange looks from the people around us, mostly freshmen not used to our chaos.





“

*We've still had our fun.  
Still stealing food, still making  
jokes, still doing fun and  
momentous activities.*

”

I can recall one last story, a true relic, starting from one of the first days we met, when our friend group was first beginning. I'd like to think it started by me, but even though I may be more of a leader now, Kathryn was the first one who sought me out. And after that, we all met through orientation, playing a game of BS, or as our teacher liked to call it, NT, during lunch, and then just collecting more people to join us as we went on in the year. Kathryn was always there, but others took more to draw them in. Discovering a shared love for the same band or anime with Victoria and Ana respectively, the instant, unexplainable connection with Nicole, who was in only my biology class, or the group of Morgan, Katy, Rishika and Sarah that came over to join us when we met JD on that third day of orientation. And certainly there are more I could, I should name, who are also included into our table, our home. But they have no stories yet. No momentous occasions yet. Which is why we continue to thrive, to create more memories of our fun, our joy, at our favorite Table 9.

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Mercy High School, Baltimore City





“

*But they have no  
stories yet. No mo-  
mentous occasions  
yet. Which is why  
we continue to thrive.*

”



# Number Three

Kylie Farrell



At the time it had all felt like one huge joke. I was thinking that it wasn't real, it was merely a movie playing out inside my head. Reality mixed with my worst nightmares.

I rushed to the house phone in my kitchen, snagging it from its position on the wall. I stared down at it for a moment in hesitation, unsure of what to do with this foreign object that I recalled using back in elementary school to phone my friends. We used to talk for hours on it, playing Club Penguin and discussing our favorite band, One Direction. Then there I was, over four years later, about to use it to call 9-1-1 to report my best friend's death wish.

“ *He knew that I would sacrifice my body and soul just to keep him alive.* ”

Another friend of mine had texted me just moments previous to that, informing me that our other friend had texted her saying his goodbyes before he would commit the unthinkable. Suicide. He did not send a goodbye to me. My messages remained empty. He knew that I would sacrifice my body and soul just to keep him alive. I hated how smart he was. I was merely an obstacle.

Hesitation crept over me, crawling over the part of me that did not want to believe that my friend had done this. My head was foggy, filled with a thick mist that robbed my entire body of senses. But the adrenaline cruised along the highway of my veins and arteries and I pressed the three digits and pulled my shuddering hand up to my ear. It rang once, then twice, then the tranquil voice of a woman answered, asking me the location



of my emergency. To make matters worse, I didn't remember his address. I scolded myself silently. It was then that I realized that time was slim. Anything could happen in just a few seconds. I told her the street number along with his last name, grateful that it took her only a few moments to find his house. She asked what the emergency was and I told her immediately. I couldn't forget it at that moment. It was in bold letters ahead of me, pounding away at my skull.

"My best friend is going to kill himself."

That time hadn't been the first. It was the third time in a span of one year. The first had been one year from that moment, which marked the beginning of the long and stressful journey of what was known as my friend's depression. The second had only been two months prior to my horrific 9-1-1 call. It had all stemmed from a terrible concoction of recreational drugs and prescribed medication, resulting in a toxic chemical that absorbed into his brain, overriding and destroying everything that made my best friend who he was.

The woman then calmly asked me how he was going to kill himself. I shuddered at the thought. I knew him too well and knew exactly what his preferred method of death was.

"Overdose."

“*Time was slim. Anything could happen in just a few seconds.*”

She then asked if he would be violent towards authority. I wanted to scold her for even asking me such a stupid question. Violent? Him? He's anything but. I had informed her no, that he definitely wouldn't. He was the kindest person I would ever meet. He was compassionate, selfless, funny, strange in every good way, vibrant, talkative, accepting; I still had trouble accepting that he viewed himself as the complete opposite. In his mind he was disgusting. He viewed himself as the lowest of low, the scum of the earth. But in my eyes, he was superior than most people. He was strong. He put himself aside just for the comfort of others. He was the superhero in disguise. But in his own eyes, he was just the villain that destroyed and ruined everything and everyone he touched.

When I put the phone back in its holster after telling the woman my name, I stood



in my kitchen, then comprehended everything that had just happened. It became too much. My body couldn't process it all. I began to shut down, eventually collapsing onto my cold kitchen floor, burying my eyes and nose into my shaking, sweaty palms.



Howard High School, Howard County

“

*But in his own  
eyes, he was just the  
villain that destroyed  
and ruined every-  
thing and everyone  
he touched.*

”



# *My Meditation Journey*

*Emily Fitz-Patrick*



The peaceful cover on the CD that my therapist, Amy, had given me at just twelve years old, was the start of a spiritual journey I didn't know I was on. I walked out of the bright room, faking a smile as I twisted the knob on the door, thanking her for the CD. The next night, after a day of church youth group, a family dinner, and a dread for the Monday morning that was to follow, I decided to try something new. I grabbed an ancient CD player and some headphones and began listening. "What do you hear?" asked the man. The cars on the street, the last minute Sunday night rushing around downstairs, and the white noise fan I've had all these years to drown all of the sounds out. Those were the sounds I heard. Like the layers of a cake, I separated them into individual pieces and took a bite out of each one. I fell asleep effortlessly, and woke up happy for the first time in awhile.

“*While the other girls sat and played cards, I was learning how to fight off negative energy by being mindful, grounding myself like a tree, paying attention to time, praying for world peace, and protecting myself. I felt like a warrior.*”

I couldn't remember why I stopped meditating. Maybe it was because I simply forgot. Or maybe because I just got busy. Either way, the CD player was shoved into the deepest part of my desk, only to make its reappearance several years later when my family sent me to boarding school to re-route the direction of my mental health.

This time, I had found myself in a deeper darkness than ever before, that only continuous meditation could bring me out of. As I wept under the covers, a lady, whose



name was also Amy, gave me my CD. Hearing the soundtrack was like hearing an old favorite song. It brought me back to the very first time I meditated, and how good it felt. Within an hour, my crying subsided and I felt safer and calmer.

Meditation soon became a hobby. My parents sent me a new CD, which quickly became my favorite. Each night before bed, I laid my legs up against the wall and I let myself be swept up in my meditation. While the other girls sat and played cards, I was learning how to fight off negative energy by being mindful, grounding myself like a tree, paying attention to time, praying for world peace, and protecting myself. I felt like a warrior.

*“ Meditation is about letting go and giving up control, which I quickly learned is a very hard thing to do. ”*

When I came home, the adjustment was difficult. I spent much time meditating, even when it was difficult and I felt like crawling out of my skin. There were plenty of moments when instead of peace, I found darkness and little comfort. Meditation is about letting go and giving up control, which I quickly learned is a very hard thing to do.

Some days I forget to meditate. Some days, I don't like what I find. Other days, I'm on a cloud, floating in a beautiful blue sky. After all of my experiences, though, I have concluded that the Spirit is good, there is always good news, and you can only access intuition when you're calm. My journey has helped me realize that all of this happens when you let go.

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Mercy High School, Baltimore City



# *The Greatest Game*

*Avery Bloyd*



The energy built inside my body all day long. The butterflies poured into my stomach. I was getting that feeling again. My heart was pounding inside my chest, and my body had been shaking almost all day. When our team got on the field, I felt like I was ready to burst. All I could think about was getting to that moment at the end, knowing that I was about to be living out one of the best days of my life. I made sure to sleep in extra that Saturday morning, knowing I would need all the energy I could get. It had been my brothers' and my dream to be playing games this late into May. It was finally going to come true. This was our first time playing on the same team, and it was a great feeling. The only way to make it better was to end our season with a win.

On the bus ride over, I thought, something extraordinary is going to happen on this day, and I am going to be a part of it. We entered the locker room and sat down together as a team; there was silence. Nothing needed to be said, and everyone on the team knew that. We knew our individual jobs and knew that this day could only end with one outcome. Finally, someone said something. From one of our senior captains, "Get hyped boys, this is the moment every high school lacrosse player lives for." We cheered, stood up, and started to get our gear on. The unsettling feeling of my nerves was just starting to go away, but it came back as we walked onto the field. I looked up into the completely filled stands and knew our school community had our back. It was that moment, warm-ups, and then the game would start. By half time, the score was four to three, and we were winning. This relieved some of my stomach pain but not enough of it. We headed back into the locker room and immediately started to discuss the first half. By the fourth quarter the score was 8 to 6 and we were still winning and just had to hold on a little longer. The clock had 15 seconds on it and we were almost there. The sideline inched onto the field as every second passed by. The clock hit zero, and the energy inside my body was finally released. It was the best feeling I had ever felt. My soul filled with happiness and joy. Our season long goal was finally complete. Our high school men's lacrosse team had just won the Maryland State Championship. Our crusade was finally over.



Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County





“

*Nothing needed  
to be said, and  
everyone on the  
team knew that.*

”



# *Outlook through an Illness*

*Sarah Goodman*



20/20 vision isn't something that I'm familiar with. Neither is going through high school without an invisible burden encumbering me. Surely the numerous pairs of glasses indicate the acute impairment that is my eyesight. Contraptions made of high tech plastic provide a crystalline frame for me to view the world through. Dark blue frames like the ocean, they set sail upon the bridge of my nose, adjusting my view as I drift off into the sea of melancholy ahead of me. My invisible burden comes with a different pair of spectacles. Unlike any other pair of glasses I've owned, the irony within this pair is that they don't improve my vision for the better. Instead of making things clearer, they drain the color and life out of everything I look at, giving things a distorted appearance. These lenses aren't tangible.

“ *Dark blue frames like the ocean, they set sail upon the bridge of my nose, adjusting my view as I drift off into the sea of melancholy ahead of me.* ”

When my reflection in the mirror looked back at me with such a loathing and unsure sense of self, I was utterly confused. Where did this girl come from? She resembled a girl I once knew, but with a dreary twist. Her smile no longer filled up the surface of her face. Her head no longer held itself high in alignment with her spine. Her shoulders slumped inward as if the pain in her chest is her center of gravity. The sadness seemed to smother all the cells in her body and constrict them until they suffocated. She looked drenched in a shower of sorrow. I watched her through the lenses. I couldn't comprehend



the feelings of disdain that came like a cool breeze, sending chills from my brain to my toes.

“ *She looked drenched in a shower of sorrow.* ”

The lenses possess superpowers that granted me a cloak of invisibility. Sounds amazing, right? The feeling of loneliness setting in when you are surrounded by the people you love really captivates the extent of this ability. Whenever I felt unseen, I analyzed every interaction I had with people, convincing myself each conversation was out of pity. The outgoing personality that used to define me curled up in a ball in the corner of my brain, pretending it didn't exist. Can other people tell what's different about me? Do they fear the negative energy that leaks off my body and fills the space around me? Through the lenses, everyone looks better off without me.

At this age, I never imagined that these spectacles could cause me so much despair. You see, they impeded my vision so much that I thought they were indestructible. I just could not shake the negative view that engulfed me.

It wasn't until I sought assistance that this view began to change, and with this change came growth. I know what it is like to feel vulnerable and not being able to control your emotions no matter how hard you try. With a newfound level of compassion for others also came empathy. I am no longer quick to judge people based on their physical appearance or struggle. I recognize that something is off and that maybe the problem lies underneath the surface. The lenses help me know when to support someone. They provide me with skills that make me a better person. Now when I look in the mirror, I see a resilient, strong female who still stumbles through life with her dark blue frames. Her new outlook on life is accompanied by lessons learned through hardship, but she wouldn't change a thing.

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Howard High School, Howard County



# *¿Dónde?\**

*Jonelle Griffin*

\*\*\*

The air, sweet with the smell of fresh dirt just after a storm, brushed gently against the tall swaying Mexican palm tree. Dark had fallen, adding to the increasingly petrifying atmosphere surrounding the small, once full home. What was initially a soothing breeze now morphed into piercing cold that began to penetrate my chest. All he had to do was slow down. He never even noticed the life slip from beneath those immense BKT tires. He never stopped.

“  
*What was initially a soothing breeze  
now morphed into piercing cold that  
began to penetrate my chest.*  
”

One step into the once full house, a weight found comfort upon the shoulders of young and old - death never discriminates. Shortly after, the sharp pain stabbing at my chest replaced the previous cold with newfound anger and fear. It was easy to sense the misery looming above the room just by looking up from three feet off of the ground into the soulful eyes of such familiar grown-ups. Even without the exception of my grandmother, who sat defeated on the ground. Her continuous sobbing brought me to a point where I could feel every inch of her pain, forcing me to rely on the hand of my mother for support. My mother. The woman who fixed boo-boo's, and set me straight, the woman whom I feared yet loved all six years of my life. Her eyes, like serene waterfalls, released pools of tears which occasionally fell onto my expression. Even the indestructible had succumbed to death.

Two aching steps to the miniature casket. Only the profound cries of a former



mother enveloped everyone bordering his corpse. The foreign language that filled the rest of the room left me confused and uninformed, let alone terrified. One blank glance down at the familiar, once jubilant face of a young boy, uprooting the recent memories of interminable laughter. This was no longer my cousin. ¿Pero dónde fuiste primo?\*

“ *A weight found comfort upon  
the shoulders of young and old  
- death never discriminates* ”

I followed my hysteric 16-year-old brother running alongside the hearse, down the same street my cousin was murdered on trying to keep up before being restrained by my mother. Jonathon. Solely knowing this name as the bully of the household barely crossing paths with one another, I was oblivious to the fact that he too shared endless memories with our cousin. His long track legs took him the entire way down that unlit street, side by side with the hearse until they could no longer push on.

Never again did I see my brother as a disjointed presence, unintroduced to my day by day, but as my hero sent to protect me. Never again have I seen him shed another tear.

\*Donde - where

\*¿Pero dónde fuiste primo? - But where did you go, cousin?

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Howard High School, Howard County



# Thinking

Caden Heiser-Cerrato



After taking out the trash, I sanitize my hands repeatedly, as if I am on a hazmat team in constant contact with deadly toxins and chemicals. I wash them until they are raw. Minutes later, I compulsively wash them again. I go outside to play soccer, the cold air catching my hands. They crinkle like paper-mache, dots of red paint covering the white. Hands bleeding, I go inside and clean them. Thoughts race through my mind: What if during the time my hands were bleeding, some disease on the soccer ball came into my body through my cut? What if I just contracted a disease? What if I haven't contracted one yet, but still have the possibility? I can't keep up with the endless thoughts. There are too many, and they come too fast. I wash my hands again, building a temporary dam in front of the torrent of thoughts.

“ *I wash my hands again,  
building a temporary dam in  
front of the torrent of thoughts.* ”

The internet defines OCD as “excessive thoughts (obsessions) that lead to repetitive behaviors (compulsions).” I first experienced it when I was in second grade. My parents would go out to a restaurant every couple of weekends, leaving me with a babysitter. My brother and I would hang out for a couple of hours and eat pizza (Papa John's delivered quickly and was our favorite). After some time, we would go to sleep. Or, my brother would go to sleep. Four years younger, he would fall asleep quickly. His Pre-K mind was free of worry - preschool ignorance is truly bliss. I would stay awake in my bed, thinking. Mulling over tragic scenarios, I would obsess over the possibility of my parents dying in



a car accident. Orphaned, where would my brother and I go? Would our extended family take us? When I hugged and kissed my parents goodbye, was that the last time I would ever see them alive? What if I wake up and they're just gone? My heart would beat like a drum within my chest, each pound loosening my grip on reality, the screws of my mind coming loose, allowing more thoughts to pour in. Car accident statistics and news reports, coupled with my own OCD, caused me to go down rabbit holes of thinking. I never wound up in Wonderland; I wound up trapped in my own mind.

“ *I never wound up in Wonderland; I wound up trapped in my own mind.* ”

This thinking would worsen as I got older. When I reached middle school, I worried extensively about cursing and saying dirty jokes. Hearing admonishments and criticisms from adults, I found myself guilty of saying sinful things or acting despicably. Forging the own weight that would burden my chest, I forced myself to confess to my parents that I had acted wrongly. Every curse, every misdeed, I would compulsively tell my father to atone for my perceived sins. I didn't want to be a bad person, so I obsessed about my actions and confessed those that I deemed immoral. Even simple things, like saying the word damn or hell, I would relate to him. Even hearing a dirty joke would be convoluted into something atrocious, something I would need to report.

OCD is cycles of thinking within cycles of thinking, thus when I grew out of one phase, I entered another. Time periods of my life would be characterized by an obsession. Sure, I had achievements at every age, but they stood on a level playing ground with my obsessions. First Honors in middle school touched shoulders with my goody-two shoes obsession. It was freshman year of high school when I reached a new phase of obsession and had one of the worst experiences of my life. I was on my way to soccer practice when I was thinking about the nature of existence. I couldn't fathom how everything and everyone just existed simultaneously. Thinking about our world simply made no sense. I started developing theories: one theory I developed held that every person is just the





same person living a different life. This meant that I would inhabit my own body but would have lived the lives of others at some point in the space-time continuum. Living the lives of everyone around me already, I would be simply seeing different versions of myself. Curious to see if there were any similar theories, I looked up my theory online. While I couldn't find an exact match, I found an existential theory that would torment me for months and absorb my free time and happiness: solipsism.

Solipsism is a belief that holds a person can only know that they exist. Therefore, nothing can be determined outside of one's own cognizance. The universe can be a mere creation of the cognizant mind. Knowing myself cognizant, and not knowing if other people were merely the creation of my own mind, I thought myself into circles. Solipsism isn't refutable, as one can never know if he is merely living in his own creation, his own dream world. Trapped in my mind, I thought repetitively, trying to find a way to determine that this world is real and not simply a figment of my imagination.

Knowing that solipsism was improbable, my OCD took control. The uncertainty was a breeding ground for obsessive thoughts and circular thinking. I spent my time trying to distract myself from the thought that there was a chance that everything around me was fake. Without absolute certainty, I couldn't defeat the theory. Every moment I wasn't doing something - brief moments of nothing between classes, the car ride home, the odd hours of the morning - I would think about how the entire world could be a figment of my own imagination. Looking back now, it seems insane. It sounds like I was going crazy, and I think I was. I couldn't get it out of my head for the longest time. I fought hard to prevent myself from depersonalization (feeling that everything one sees isn't real). I began to experience symptoms of depersonalization and feared losing my mind. I started seeing a therapist and with weeks of therapy, I began to feel more comfortable with the uncertainty. I was given strategies that helped me cope with my OCD, and with the notion of solipsism. Luckily, with professional help, I managed to overpower solipsism and learned how to better combat OCD.

I still deal with OCD. I can manage it on my own, and I have stopped feeding thinking cycles. I identify obsessive thoughts and stop any compulsions where they begin. I have realized many things through dealing with this disorder. The most important being the value of trusting other people. If I hadn't trusted my parents enough to tell them what I was going through, if I hadn't trusted my therapist, if I hadn't trusted myself, I would still be trapped in an endless circle of thinking.

Learning from my own experience and struggle, it is my hope that we can become much more open as a culture about mental disorders and mental illness. There is such a stigma surrounding mental afflictions, and it discourages teenagers (especially) from getting help. They are afraid of vulnerability, of taking the first step. As a society, we need





to come together and support those who are suffering in the shadows. We need to encourage all people who are suffering from OCD, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and/or any other disorders to get the help they need, because no one should be trapped in their mind alone.

“ *No one should be trapped in  
their mind alone.*

”

— — —

Loyola Blakefield, Baltimore County



# *Bonding without Words*

*Megan Hessler*



A friendly sparring match is a conversation. Two participants face each other. They greet each other with a bow and tap together the tips of their gloves as they assume their fighting stances. One person initiates the conversation with a sidekick, a question to the other participant. She responds with a low block, followed by a quick jab to the stomach. The first person then punches back, and so it continues. The two fighters match power, because the time's not always right for a serious conversation. When one of them has been talking too much, they slow down and hop back a bit to allow the one who's been lagging behind to try their hand at a few punches. The time runs out and both fighters freeze, say goodbye with a bow, perhaps a hug, and then go their separate ways. A silent conversation as acquaintances, then peers, then friends. The two fighters challenge each other to be better each time, growing together. Sparring comes easily to me, so why is it so hard when I take off the gloves to try to talk to people?

I started karate when I was twelve years old. All of the other white belts were younger than ten. All of the yellow stripes were younger than ten. All of the yellow belts were younger than ten. There were two blue stripes who were about my age, but while they stood in the back, I had to stand up front, so it was just me and the eight-year-olds. But that's okay, I wasn't planning on talking to anyone anyways. I started karate in order to strengthen myself, not to make friends. I'll come here twice a week, train, go home; there's nothing more to it, I thought.

It was all just an excuse. I wanted friends in my life. In modern human society, the way people get close to each other is through conversations, but whenever I tried to talk to someone back then it always ended up as an awkward conversation. The second they responded my face would turn red and I would immediately regret ever attempting human contact, killing the conversation as quickly as possible out of fear of embarrassing myself. Not the best way to form meaningful relationships.

Karate is different. It takes two people for a fight, so almost everything is done with a partner, chosen primarily by height. Being so much older and taller than everyone else in the class, I ended up being partners with the same few people time after time. For years.

Constantly hitting and kicking and throwing each other on the ground seems like a foundation for animosity, but the opposite occurs. We don't fight because we hate each



other, and we feel the need to show that there are no hard feelings. It would feel wrong to just walk away like nothing happened afterward, so we smile and wave goodbye after class. After so many fights we begin to learn each other's tendencies, and trade advice on how we can improve. When so much of your brain space is dedicated to one specific person, you begin to feel very emotionally close to them. That shared, unspoken closeness allowed me to finally come out of my shell and bond with my dojo mates.

I started karate to learn self defense and to become stronger. But I ended up learning so much more than that. I believe that it doesn't take words to become close to a person, as I believe the bonds that form through shared experience can be more powerful than any friendship.

“ *I believe that it doesn't take words to become close to a person, as I believe the bonds that form through shared experience can be more powerful than any friendship.* ”

— — —

Atholton High School, Howard County



# *Moving*

## *Srishti Kalepu*

— — —

Airplanes flying overhead, people rushing to get to the right flight, speakers going off with announcements, yet I stand there amidst the chaos, completely lost. I am moving to a new land known for its opportunities, but I am moving away from my home, my family, my friends, away from my safe haven. Tears roll down my cheeks. I cannot feel my feet or my hands. I float away into a secure space, back to my home, and find myself hoping this is all just a dream.

“Come on, we have a flight to catch,” yells my mom over all the chaos. Her face is swollen red. She tries to wipe away tears that are determined not to stop. After all, she is leaving her parents. She is as afraid as I am but puts on a brave facade, so I follow her lead.

Maybe this is the beginning of an adventure that long awaits me. With hope for a better tomorrow, we drag our luggage across the airport. A few more steps and I will be the one who takes off to a new place. A few more steps and I will be closer to one of my favorite people. A few more steps.

“  
*I gaze at the buildings touch-  
ing these pure white clouds as  
if the sky was truly the limit.*  
”

“We are now flying above New York,” announces the air hostess. Groggy from a distorted sleep, I wake up to find myself among the whitest of clouds. I gaze at the buildings touching these pure white clouds as if the sky was truly the limit. I feel a knot beginning to form in the pit of my stomach. I see the opportunities that lie ahead. I can make new friends and my family will be complete again. I see the green lady standing with the torch of gold. Warmth fills me as I feel welcomed into this new country. I can have a happy life



in this land that I now call home.

Carrying our luggage across the airport, I see hundreds of new, different faces. Among them, I try to find the loved one that I have not seen in a few months. My eyes wander to find the warm eyes that have grown to be so familiar. I find them. He is here; his eyes searching for his greatest comfort, fingers twiddling, and feet tapping. My feet move quickly towards my guide, my friend, and my inspiration. My dad stands there with tears in his eyes and the brightest smile anyone could muster. It was all worth it.

“  
*My eyes wander to find the  
warm eyes that have grown to  
be so familiar.*  
”

— — —  
Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County



# *The HPL Card*

*Meagan Kennedy*



At just 18 years old, I still use the same library card from kindergarten. The rim is glazed with lollipop and cough drop residue left over from its years in the back pocket of my uniform shorts. It has a scratch across the front from the time I thought it would be smart to “redesign” it with a Ticonderoga pencil and some scented markers. The cover is beginning to peel off. The numbers on the back are starting to blend into a blob. Clad with a holographic farm in the background of the logo, the entire appearance of the card is the exact definition of putrid.

“

*The entire appearance  
of the card is the exact  
definition of putrid.*

”

Right now, it’s snug alongside my school ID and my “rockin’ member” rewards card for my town’s crystals store, which I’ve recently made a part of the weekend regular routine: the coffee shop, art store, and crystal store, followed by the library. These cards sleep softly in my blue and white striped wallet, which I’ve had for almost as long.



I’ve been wrapping my library card in my receipts so I won’t lose them either (strictly because of environmental concerns) and they’ve been this way since the sixth grade. I unwrap the receipts, shake my horrible brown bag until a pen floats out Mary Poppins style, then scribble the author and title across the back of the receipt. I take it everywhere, even outside of my districted library zone because I may find a book in another county, city, or state that I want. I always have some ridiculously long CVS receipt for sunscreen and a



Snapple prepared for my chicken scratch. Then, once they've been completely filled or torn, I use them as bookmarks. It started off as a way to prevent the receipts from wistfully blowing along the street as litter, but it grew into much more.

When I lost my card a few years back, it was disastrous. I unraveled each receipt in my bag, pulling receipt after gum wrapper after blue pen and found nothing. I tore through my bedroom and the kitchen. I thought it was the end of everything; I would only ever be able to buy books, never again able to venture into the library because I knew I would never be able to bring myself to get a new card. I ran my fingers along the back too many times and tucked it behind the cover of some of my favorite books. It smelled like my favorite books. It collected marks and grains of sand between the raised lines in the bar code. I stood at the top of my stairs, drowning in rolls of receipts, and declared some melodramatic statement about the death of my literary expedition, until about a week later, while sorting laundry, my dad tugged a newly-washed library card out of the back pocket of a pair of my jeans.

“  
*Declared some melodramatic  
statement about the death of my  
literary expedition*  
”

Once, when my mom came to a bookstore with me and saw me kneeling by the fantasy section vigorously writing the description of a series and all their titles along my crumpled receipts. She stopped dead in her tracks, hands dropping to her hips as she giggled out, “whatcha doing there pal?” I turned around like Gollum and whipped a receipt in her direction as if it had been the most obvious of explanations and went back to my scrawlings. She thought it was the funniest thing she had seen. She told me, “why don’t you write that in a notebook or on your phone?”

Why had this never occurred to me? Was it smarter? Of course. Was it faster? Most certainly. Was I gonna do it? Absolutely not. Why would I do that when I had perfectly good receipts and a broken pen? Who was I without the peeling library card that always made the librarian’s eyebrows raise? It had become like a shirt in the back of your closet you can’t get rid of, no matter the stains it collects.



This library card made it through all my awkward phases, questionable reading choices, and traveled nation-wide with me. In odd bookstores in Maine, I had my receipts; in the huge library by my grandparent's house, I had my receipts. You could see my reading choices change alongside my irrational shopping choices.



Over time, the words bleed together and I can't distinguish "George Orwell: 1984" from "Bottle of Advil \$10.19." Once they reach this point, they then sort themselves in the top drawer of my dresser alongside old Easter cards and local menus: a hollow graveyard of forgotten legends. Maybe one day I'll hang these receipts along a cork board in my home office and honor them like ribbons from a race alongside all of the books I won as trophies. Even after paper books die and the army of e-readers consume us, I'll hold onto a few in memory of the stories that once felt like mine. One Sunday afternoon, my kids will stumble in, rummaging through the receipts and mumbling about the coffee stains while scavenging for the ones that date back the furthest.



Mercy High School, Baltimore City



“

*Maybe one day I'll  
hang these receipts  
along a cork board in  
my home office and  
honor them like ribbons  
from a race alongside  
all of the books I won  
as trophies.*

”



# *Crystal Love*

*Claire R. Krisanda*



*“I just gotta say—“*

Ink rolls off the folds of my hands. Each loop and whirl indented on the pads creates a line of murk on my cheeks. My arms are dusted with pastel oils. Acrylics dot my freckled face. My eyes glimmer, shining like stars. I just came through with an idea. My blueprints are so disfigured. My hands shake as they search for more ink. I work my globby-gloved hands down the spine of the shimmering surface. My little fingers weave the gloves into patterns. When it is all ready, I gently work it into the flaming furnace. A pipe holds the mess on, spinning the now spindly surface into a blobby puddle of burning. My feet press on the small pedals of the furnace. Cold air courses through the ducts underneath the small fire. My own crystal heart burns into view.

The feeling is unavoidable. As they say that it “conquers all,” it truly does.

Rainbow streaks haze on my cheeks. My voice screams. What have you done? Why? How could you even begin with that?! I wanted to hold you close. Make you see me. Walk away for ages with you. Hear you laugh and talk. Share the warmth with me. Make me feel special. All this for my hands to become festering ink infects?! The glass plates were crystallizing. For you. So I could mold them. Mold them into masteries of craft. I opened my eyes just for you. Just for you to smash them into pieces. You made me feel so welcomed and known. You made me feel as if the purpose in my life was to be yours. Now my hands will forever be cut. The ink is already coursing through me. You fool. You fool around with my heart. Now it has been smashed like the drunken fool’s glass.

When one really understands, it's amazing how much we have. That is, until you lose it all.



“

*You made me feel so  
welcomed and known.*

*You made me feel as  
if the purpose in my  
life was to be yours.*

*Now my hands will  
forever be cut.*

”



I hand over my pages. My hair is matted with murk and my hands glisten with paints. A cheeky smile rests open. She takes one look. She has a smile on her face. Her eyes glimmer. She understands. She finally understands. I am giddy with joy. Rummaging through to hold her hands. Words flow out of my mouth. She corrects my mismatched phrases. I will make you the greatest sculptures of crystal the world will ever know. I take her hand in mine. She does not jerk away. I want to hold her. To sneak away with her. To see her smile. To see her be happy. I could give her everything. Everything that she desired. I tell her that I may not be able to do much, but I am a master of the arts of glass and crystals. I want us to be complete.

It is bold too. It has this brashness that cannot be comprehended.

I run into her. My various sketchbooks tumble from my hands. My lips stumble on words. She smiles. We start talking, losing track of time. If it weren't for the ringing bell I would have been stuck in an endless cycle. But I'm caught on her. She is glass being washed under soft lights. I am beaten back when someone says "you blush on your neck - what's up with that?" I didn't know what this feeling was - this heartbreaking throbbing bursting for joy - was it even real? My hands tremble with the course of where my mind was headed. I could not hinder myself anymore. I just - oh my brain can't even say it - but it goes along the lines of -

So for some it is the sun. It bakes those it touches into warm puddles of glass. But when the sun sets, the glass cools rapidly and can break.

*"—I love you."*

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Mercy High School, Baltimore City



“

*I didn't know what  
this feeling was - this  
heartbreaking throbbing  
bursting for joy - was  
it even real?*

”



# *Jump!*

## *Heady Lally*

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Cold sharp rocks beneath my feet push the nervous feeling upward to my legs. My body feels weak looking down at the water so far below me, but I am also at peace. The sun is beating down on my body, calming me down while warming me up at the same time. The water looks refreshing and somewhat inviting, but no more inviting than stepping right back off that rock and allowing my heart rate to go back to normal.

“

*We could see the light dancing  
across the water surrounded by  
thick, beautiful green trees.*

”

My friends surround me, which adds a new pressure to this situation. We hiked a half mile, in the thick of a warm July day, with the intention of leaping into a beautiful reservoir. No one could stop us. When we got to the opening in the forest, we could see the light dancing across the water surrounded by thick, beautiful green trees. The smell of the earth and the dirt around us was so potent we could almost taste it. I could not wait to get up on that rock and I decided I had to be the first to touch the rippling, fresh water I saw beneath me. I volunteered to be the first to jump!



The issue with that was as soon as I moved toward the rock, I began to hesitate whether or not I wanted to make the jump. My friends were not happy with me for wasting ten minutes of their afternoon questioning my ability. I could not have been more sure of myself when I stepped up onto the rock, but as soon as I saw the gaping distance between me and the surface of the water, I began to question my grand idea. I questioned what ran through my head when I volunteered myself, what made me so excited to hurl myself off this cliff? Nevertheless, I stood tall on that rock and there were two options. Face that empty, tight feeling in my stomach and just let it go by stepping off gracefully or follow my brain and not jump off of the 30 foot cliff that my friends deemed “safe.” I weighed these options for as long as I could until my friends had enough.

“

*I had made a choice for myself, by myself, and I got to experience the outcome of that choice.*

”

“You’ll regret it if you don’t,” shouted my friend from behind me. This rang through my ears in unison with the sound of the tiny waves beneath me. I thought about it and I knew she was right. I would regret it if I did not experience the jump, so I leapt right off of that cliff like I had done it a million times.

It felt like slow-motion. I had to have been in the air for a whole minute, at least that is what it felt like. I experienced complete weightlessness, I had not a care in the world, adrenaline rushing through every tiny vein in my body.



I hit the water with force. It didn't hurt. I am underwater and now everything is completely quiet. I went from a warm, loud, intense environment to feeling completely serene and alone in the cold water around me. In that silence, it became clear to me that I had finally completed a huge goal of mine. I had made a choice for myself, by myself, and I got to experience the outcome of that choice. I rose to the top of the water and saw my friends staring back down at me ready to jump off the rock just as I did, but I was completely alone in the water. I floated around for a long time by myself, thinking about how I had just taken control of my life with a single jump. I am excited for my friends to

“

*You have to be so uncomfortable in a situation that you would do anything to be in the comfort and warmth of your bed, but then you have to face it all by yourself.*

”

experience the shock in their surroundings just as I had. I start cheering them on just like they did for me a couple minutes ago when I got the courage to jump. I assure them that the water feels amazing and the jump didn't hurt in the slightest. One by one they leap off, each person with different feelings as they hit the water. Some of my friends cannot wait to do it again while others say that would be the last time they ever leapt off of a cliff.





I finally got to experience what it felt like to be a leader. I do not volunteer to be the lab rat for situations like this very often, but I felt proud to lead the pack for once. Sure I had to face the feeling of absolute terror. On top of that, my parents would have been very disappointed in me for jumping into a private reservoir, especially a murky, green reservoir with a 30 foot cliff as the entry-way, but I finally felt like I controlled my own life! In this situation, I learned that I have complete control over myself and no one else can unless I give them that ability. I realized you have to break some rules in order to learn new things about yourself. I am not advocating that everyone should break rules every day and pay no attention to authority, but I am advocating that every once in a while you have to push yourself. You have to be so uncomfortable in a situation that you would do anything to be in the comfort and warmth of your bed, but then you have to face it all by yourself. I can now promise that when you do this, you will find complete peace.

— + + + —

McDonogh School, Baltimore County



# Fear

Lilah Lichtman



I'm lying in my bed, barely awake, when my brain registers a creak outside my bedroom door. I open my eyes as my mind races through all of the possibilities of what could have made the sound. I see a shadow floating just beyond the door. Could it be from a backpack? A cat? Misplaced shoes? Or maybe... it's from an axe-wielding man like Jack Torrance in *The Shining!*

If a man *has* broken into my house in the middle of the night, he would want the murder to be quick and neat. He would be wielding a gun. Maybe he got in through an open window, or maybe he guessed the code to our security system. But it doesn't matter how he got there. All that matters is that there is a shadow outside my bedroom door at three in the morning and I don't know what it is. I can already picture the *Dateline: Don't Watch Alone* episode they will write about me.

“

*I can already picture the  
Dateline: Don't Watch  
Alone episode they will write  
about me.*

”

This is fear. My brain at three in the morning has trouble telling the difference between shadows and life-threatening intruders, and it is for this reason that fear exists in my life. Fear seems like an evolutionary leftover, kicking my brain into a fight or flight response when I least need it. In my daily life, I don't have any use for fear at all.



Horror movies seem to create a different kind of fear. I don't dread this fear, I seek it out. I somehow enjoy the heart-pounding rush of adrenaline that horror movies give me much more than the almost identical physical experience that comes from seeing mysterious shadows in my bedroom.

But maybe I only enjoy this type of fear because of what comes afterward: the relief. Maybe fear isn't an emotion by itself, but an absence of something else, of calm. Maybe that's why we only enjoy fear once it's gone.

“

*Maybe fear isn't an emotion  
by itself, but an absence of  
something else, of calm.*

”

Fear is a physiological response to a perceived threat. Getting my grades doesn't have any effect on my physical well-being, yet for weeks until I get them back, I have the same pit in my stomach that I did when I was up at three A.M. All I want is to make the terrible, sinking feeling go away. All I want is calm.

But a strange thing happens after I get my grades back. The relief sets in and the weight is lifted off my shoulders. And then I feel empty. I want the fear again.

The moment before the jump scare is the worst part of a horror movie and somehow at the same time the best. When the protagonist is in their basement fumbling for a light switch in the pitch-black darkness, I know something is about to happen, I just don't know when, and I wish the movie would scare me already so I can feel safe again... and then BAM, the monster jumps out from behind them. I jump out of my seat and scream, but I'm relieved it's over. And then I clean up all of the popcorn I spilled and wait for the next jump scare.



The people in horror movies are never thrilled to be terrorized by the supernatural, but we are to watch them go through it. We get the same rush of adrenaline without the risk of danger. This is the same type of fear, it's just blended with moments of calm. What was once too strong was distilled to make it palatable, and even craved - almost like coffee. The best movies balance calm and fear well: In *Jaws*, the shot of the fin slicing through the water is just as important as the blood and gore. We crave fear just as much as calm, in fact, we thrive on it. Fear threatens our life, which is exactly why it makes us feel so alive.



The Park School of Baltimore, Baltimore County



“

*Fear threatens  
our life, which  
is exactly why  
it makes us  
feel so alive.*

”



# *Tornado Warning*

*Jack Lincoln*

— — —

That night is mostly a blur when I try to recall it. Probably because these events were witnessed through tearing eyes in the dark, but more likely because of the terror I felt without him - my Dad.

Let's go back to the beginning. My Dad and I had just arrived at my first Wee-boo's Aree advent in Broad Creek, Maryland. We were directed to park past our camping grounds at the bottom of the hill. The walk back was probably around fifteen minutes, but I only made the trip once in the sun. We took out our gear needed for the chilly November weather and walked toward where we would be sleeping.

The campsite was moderate size and could fit around fifteen tents with a big fire pit in the middle. I set up the boys' and my tent on the opposite side from the entrance. I would soon regret this decision. After I tossed my stuff into the tent, I ran to the campfire to greet the scouts that had just arrived. We decided on a game of 3 Flies, a football game where one person would throw the ball up and the rest would attempt to catch it. The game was intense as always and ended after four rounds full of pushing and laughter. This tone would soon dissipate as the sky turned from sunny and clear to ominous dark clouds.

“

*I would soon regret this decision.*

”

I don't remember what dinner was that night, but I remember sleeping well for the time I did. I woke up to the familiar voice of my father explaining he was heading down to the car to retrieve some gear that had been left behind. I noticed the winds had picked up since I had fallen asleep and now were battering against the tent flap, softening his words. I was still able to understand his words through my groggy state and knew he would be back in twenty minutes.



I woke up the second time when everything became frightening. The sound of a ghostly alarm echoing over the campsites entered my eardrums as I got up from my sleeping bag. I looked around to see empty sleeping bags where fellow scouts once were, sending me into a panic. The once stable tent began to violently shake. Drops of rain dripping down the tent distorted the flashlights from the rushing scouts outside. I got up and unzipped the tent, leaving behind my own flashlight and tripping over the lip of the tent in the process. I shouted for my dad with no returning call while being hit on the shoulders by the passing scouts. My mind flooded with thoughts as tears began to glide down my unresponsive cheeks. The rain began to soak through my clothes and the cold shock began to progressively get worse with each second I stood there.

“

*My mind flooded with  
thoughts as tears began to glide  
down my unresponsive cheeks.*

”

Time felt as if it flowed at a different pace when I recall this moment. However, though this moment felt long, my dad soon returned to the empty campsite. The once formless environment quickly sharpened into focus with his arrival. He explained to me that there was a hurricane warning and we needed to head down to the cars for safety. We both made the trek down the path of muddy puddles and this time the journey felt instantaneous. We reached the car and got in. We would spend the night there and regroup with my patrol in the morning. The rest of that week was not as memorable as the first night as I don't recall much of it. While terrifying, this whole experience left me grateful for my dad and made me cherish him more.

— — —

Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County



# Zinnia

## Ximing Luo



The zinnia, a beautiful flower, full of color and life. A symbol of remembrance, a flower of memories; the zinnia holds the story of you.

“

*A symbol of remembrance, a flower of memories; the zinnia holds the story of you.*

”

When I was first brought into this world, I peered into my mother's eyes, and there you were next to her, *grandmother*. You looked so youthful and joyous. The wrinkles on your face were light and your hair was not yet white. Your eyes were bright and a galaxy lay within in which the stars always shone and the universe inside swirled. You picked me up into your arms, gazed at me, and told me that you loved me. You took care of me throughout my childhood. When my mother was hard at work, you taught me things about this world I couldn't learn by myself. You taught me how to smile. You taught me how to laugh.





One day you received a call that grandfather was in a car accident and passed. A tragic day, a day to mourn, a day of loss. We decided to start a new life in America and you came with us. We thought it was for the best, since we could care for you, and life will go on as it would normally.

And it did.

But gradually, I started to notice that you seemed different. Perhaps it was the death of Grandfather. That was understandable, but a year already passed, and you should've moved on by now, but the old you never returned. It's like she strolled into the woods near the river, but lost her way back home. It started with small signs, but it was evident that you were losing yourself.

“

*Your eyes were bright and  
a galaxy lay within in which  
the stars always shone and the  
universe inside swirled.*

”

The doctors said it was Alzheimer's.

A true curse.

It was a thief; a robber. It stalks its prey and kills them by taking little by little until there's nothing left. The difference was negligible at first, but with more and more missing, you were becoming a fraction of the person you were before. Your soul was beautiful. A charming personality, kind to everyone. Perhaps Alzheimer's, that thief wanted your beauty, so it stole from you. You lost your memories, the very essence of what makes you, you. But it was a slow process, which hurt even more. We never cherished the moments we shared while you still recalled them. But when we tried, you'd already forgotten.



At first the things you lost were only objects, but then you started to lose yourself. You had trouble speaking and making words and it hurt me to know you were suffering. You smiled through it all, for you were the one who taught me to smile.

You were constantly confused, you didn't know where you were and you couldn't find yourself. Simple tasks became difficult and our help was only limited.

“

*It's like she strolled  
into the woods near the  
river, but lost her way  
back home.*

”

We left little notes around the house, determined that if you couldn't remember, perhaps we can do it for you. Simple tasks and reminders left around the house. The sticky notes covered the house. It was a garden of colors. A large array, a large variety, the different shapes, the different sizes. We did anything that could help you remember.

We made photo albums and we composed journals of memories. You would flip through it whenever you could. You looked peaceful and you smiled, but your eyes displayed hints of sadness and confusion.



We took turns telling stories and memories of the past. It was nostalgic for us, but you seemed to have forgotten all of them. We never lost hope.

We planted zinnias, the flower of remembrance. Together, we would plant one a day. If you lost your memories, maybe these flowers will bring new memories to replace the old. Maybe then your memory will return. It was wistful thinking, but one can hope.

But hope wasn't enough.

Your movements slowed and it looked as if your eyes were hazy. I came home and you couldn't recognize me.

“Who are you?” It took three words for the tears to fall.

You typically stopped talking, you made small noises occasionally, but that was all. But one day I heard you say to the air, “Who am I?”

97 zinnias, they were all we were able to plant. Then, you were gone. You were led away by the angels. The doctors claimed you had years left, but you don't even have 100 days left to spend.

It was supposed to be a normal day, we prepared breakfast for you but you never woke up. You were rushed to the hospital, where they checked for any signs of life, any at all, but they were gone. Your pulse was paused, your face was slack and your blood - cold. It was a peaceful death, an easy way to let go; death in your sleep, but I wish you held on a little longer. I had so many more stories to tell you, so many more zinnias to plant. I never said goodbye... none of us did. We stood around your bed in silence and shared some tears. Death is inevitable, but it's tragic that a good hearted soul has fled off this earth.

It has been two years since your death and I will never forget you, grandmother. It feels like just yesterday I was eating breakfast with you and telling you about my day at school. You left too soon and I never told my last goodbyes. I wish we had a bit longer time with you, but it is here that I will say my final farewells.



*My*



Grandmother,

I miss you and I always will.  
You looked peaceful  
When the angels took you away  
To a place better than here.

May we meet in another life;  
In a field of zinnias,  
With the sun high,  
And the sky bright.

I will always remember you,  
I will never forget.

In the meadow of zinnias,  
I will see you again.

*End.*

— — —

Centennial High School, Howard County



“

*May we meet  
in another life;  
In a field of  
zinnias*

”



# *The Other Side*

*Katie Macejick*



As trees and a telephone blurred into a stream of brown and black, I strummed my fingers on my cool, grey steering wheel, vibrating slightly from the mix of rap and alternative blasting from the stereo. My quiet humming was outshined by my car's loud growling. The only light illuminating the empty street before me were my headlights that barely reached through the first row of thick brush that concealed the rest of the forest I was passing through. Like usual, I started my long journey home as the darkness of night slowly engulfed my world. The black seemed even more immense as I entered

“

*I can still clearly remember the  
terror that consumed the fox's small  
amber eyes, unaware of the horror  
I felt as well.*

”

the stretch of Marriottsville Road that pierced the state park. My head, tilted back on the cushion headrest, was muddled with the thoughts of upcoming tests and pieces of my lines I had to memorize for *Laramie*, the school play. Each curve of the road gave me the momentum to reach the next. The slight jump of the car's response to the accelerator restored my lost energy from the long day of school, riding, and rehearsal. I strained my heavy eyes at the yellow and white lines before me, but still, I couldn't see everything.



The steel grey of the road guards flashed and shimmered underneath the light from my car as I took the same turn I've taken maybe even a hundred times at the same hurtling speed that should be saved for highways. A fox, with a pelt as orange as a sunset in a clear sky and paws as white and soft as untouched snow, cowered as my metallic blue beast roared past its delicate body, quivering, flat against the dirt ground. I swear for a split second I made eye contact with the creature through my car's front right window. I can still clearly remember the terror that consumed the fox's small amber eyes, unaware of the horror I felt as well. I'd rather not think of the possibility of the fox fleeing to the other side, in front of the power of humans, incapable of fighting the rubber wheels tearing over the earth. I can only imagine the choking scent of fuel and the thunder of the engine that the innocent fox experienced as death barreled past it only mere inches from its silky black snout. The road had become a warzone.

“

*Why do I have the right to  
own a killing machine?*

”

I'm not sure if my music stopped or if everything just seemed quieter, but the rest of the ride home was filled with the ugly sinking feeling in my gut. Horrific memories of the multiple carcasses with glazed, dead eyes arranged along the roadsides that I pass almost daily continued to creep into my thoughts. Every bump of a pothole or crack in the rough pavement that had probably not been redone in years brought fears of crushing helpless creatures which stung my heart and caused my breath to shallow. The sense of self-loathing for my negligence and the awareness of the terrible ability to rip away life in seconds followed me like the stream of exhaust from the back of my car. As my car's beams bent through the trunks of trees and scattered over the brambles of bushes, I kept seeing the fox and its orange fur, now a traffic cone in my mind, forcing me to adapt to the forest instead of racing through it. Why should animals be forced to risk their lives to cross the asphalt hell that humans forced into their homes? Why do I have the right to own a killing machine? Why does nothing change after we see what harm we can do?

— — —

McDonogh School, Baltimore County



# *The State Championship*

*Kaitlyn McDonald*



“Taking the floor next from Marriotts Ridge, The Mustangs!” When I heard this, my heart started to thump, and my hands started to sweat. I felt the rush of adrenaline through me while my team and I ran onto the mat to perform one last time. We all knew this was our chance to win the state championship for the first time in the school’s history. I felt the crowd’s eyes on me as I got into my spot. I put my head down and told myself, *I can do this*. When I lifted my hands to hit my first motion, excitement rushed

“

*When I lifted my hands  
to hit my first motion,  
excitement rushed through  
my spine.*

”

through my spine. I was so eager to show my friends and family the routine my team and I were about to perform. In the midst of all this excitement, I also felt anxious about all my stunts and tumbling. Despite this, I tried my absolute best to dismiss those unpleasant feelings because I knew my team and I were fully capable of hitting a perfect routine. With that in mind, I was determined to make sure that none of my stunts fell.





Glancing to my right shoulder I saw my coach with a look of amazement on her face. Immediately I looked away, so I would not get distracted and put my full attention to the routine. When we got to the end of the routine we all knew we did it. I ran to my teammate and said, “Everything hit!” We were so proud and knew that all of the hard work paid off, or so I thought. Moments after getting off the mat my teammates informed me that a girl on our team tripped and fell. When you touch the floor in any way in a cheer routine, it is considered deduction. I was furious. I could not believe that my team could have lost out on a State Championship title because a girl tripped with only 30 seconds remaining in the routine. Now, all we could do was wait until the award ceremony.

“

*As it came time for  
awards, my team sat in  
a circle and held hands.  
My heart began to beat  
out of my chest.*

”

As it came time for awards, my team sat in a circle and held hands. My heart began to beat out of my chest. The announcer started to call the placements of the teams. I heard, “In second place, the Kent Island Buccaneers,” and I immediately knew that we just won the State Championship.

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Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County



# Someone

Max Mills

— — — —

10/29/2019 – 11:40 AM

She twirls around her room like leaves in a twister. She has done it before and knows what to do, but she never does the same thing, ever-changing. Her limbs swing, supported by one another, followed by a laugh.

A laugh, something so small yet so filling, chills followed by warmth. Like vibrations of the heart, it fills the body.

Her teeth, they show through her movement. A pearl shine, not of clouds but of honesty. Like a spotlight, it consumes one.

Never have I seen one more independent but attached. Wanting to be one but okay with being apart. Despite future separation, she skips along with one in her arms.

A long and skinny body but appears small. Something to hold in one's arms, engulfed and pleased.

Pure and open, she craves titillation of the heart without care of the body. Enticing but cannot touch; doesn't need to touch. Contact brings content.

“

*An encyclopedia, lips move  
and ears ring, the heart listens.*

”

An encyclopedia, lips move and ears ring, the heart listens. Words bring about happiness, confusion or not, best is made of both. Not wanting to end, but knowing limits bring appreciation.

Staring at one, physical and essence. Sees one, looking in and reflecting. Sparks within her eyes, wanting but serious.



I struggle with telling people how I feel (I'll get into that another time). These journals are my conversations of self. Explain and show as I might, my mind pushes and lungs expand. My actions, both symbolic and literal, are the manifestation of how my brain works. I explain and describe events with the full spectrum, bringing about new insight. Overwhelming but lovely is self-talk.

Above, a girl I cannot imagine but given to me.

“

*These journals are my conversations of self.*

”

I try as I might to describe her but my words are endless and undecided. I do not know where to start and what to say. I want to say it all. I want to start with how I know her and what caused me to meet her. I want to explore her involvement with my neighbors, my friends since childhood. I want to describe how I have met her in my youth but never engaged and therefore do not remember seeing her. After the grocery list, I want to describe her and what she means to me, but it is hard. I want to maneuver my words in a non-literal way like my poem, but I get nowhere.

I cannot find the perfect description of who she is and what she means to me.

I feel the need to find a sense of what she is with direct, glaring words, but 'unable to literally illustrate' is part of who she is and what she means to me.

I spend millennia finding word and word to piece into a manifestation of her being.

If I were to sit down for weeks, possibly months, describing my poem, I would not be finished. I would never reach a point of satisfaction.

As I read over my words, her image courses through every organ in my body.

Never-ending, I find more to say. Fluttered emotion comes about from the concentration of her.



My shoulders feel the magnitude of boulders, submerged under water. Eyes, flowing,  
lack interest in the world. Mind taken, I operate in sleep.

I almost do not want to describe her. She just is who she is. I fail to describe in actuality  
who she is, but that is what I appreciate about her. I do not feel the need to describe her;  
it rids the need of wanting to describe her. To me she is both perfect and imperfect.

Both a supermodel and not, she excites my vision.

She tends to my needs.

Wanting but not needy, understanding but not a therapist, kind but not sorrowful, her  
mannerisms fill pieces of my vacant puzzle.

Wanting her but not afraid to lose her.

Though I write expressing the literacies and abstractions of what I mean, I struggle to find  
words.

Her expression, a feeling not an equation. Erratic emotions gush, not flowing sequences  
of thought.

I want to fill my page both to complete my goal for English class and to flex my creative  
and logical thinking skills, but I cannot comprehend her nor what she means to me.

God, a being of complexity is describable. She, a being of simplicity, is indescribable.

Max, I do and do not care if this journal is not early nor lengthy. For now, you have done  
enough, and enough is okay. Nothing is perfect, so do not force yourself to follow a path  
of perfection. Perfection does nothing without direction. The quality of what I say about  
Greta, matters more than the quantity. I want to talk more with you, Max but, we need  
to get up early tomorrow. Get some sleep. Go drift.

My dreams, we will meet, flowing into the next morning.

— — —

Loyola Blakefield, Baltimore County

“

*As I read over  
my words, her  
image courses  
through every or-  
gan in my body.*

”



# *The Chaos She Creates*

*Yvonne Nguyen*

\*\*\*

A Wreck. The drawers? Open. Mattresses? Misplaced. Everything? Gone. Everything. My hands turn blue and grey, and then start shaking. A shiver goes from my head to my toes as I peer towards the large crack in the window. I cover my pale lips, holding back a cry from my throat. My feet make their way toward the couch, where I sit and stare at the wall in front of me. I look back at the window again to see a stranger in a blue and black uniform, holding a pad of paper, writing down notes as he looks around, my dad talking to him, and the officer just nodding. Everything starts to finally click as the information trails alongside the flow of my subconsciousness. I clasp my lips together, holding back tears, and calmly move up the stairs, straight to my bathroom. I pull my head downward, to the sink, splash cold water on my burning face, and take a glance at my reflection above the sink. I can't help but release the tears I've tried hard to hold back. My back meets the wall behind me and slides down until I could wrap my cold-blooded hands around my shaking, bent knees. I sob in that position. Mourning the safety of my home, now having been invaded. Taken by someone I never knew. *Or worse, what if it was someone we did know?*

“ *Taken by someone I never knew. Or worse, what if it was someone we did know?* ”

No. No, that couldn't be a possibility. Not until I can confirm it for a fact. Yes. See? Look how I'm handling this.

*Why would anyone feel the need to take something they truly didn't earn? Who deserves this? Because my parents and I certainly don't.*

*Shut up. It's going to be fine. Everything will go back to normal.*



*How dare they? Someone is actually this desperate, huh? Money doesn't buy you happiness, you bastards.*

*Please calm down.*

*Trust no one. Someone will always betray you.*

*"Please stay sane," I told myself out loud, grasping my head in my hands, trying to control the riffs of thoughts that swarmed my brain. Heal. Sane. Calm.*

*This is literally too funny to be real.*

*This is real. Accept it, and it will pass.*

*I'm so afraid. I'm so incredibly afraid. I can't stop shaking. I can't. I look down to see my hands moving like crazy. I could feel my heartbeat from my neck intensify and crawl up towards the back of my head, pounding with pain and filling me with weights of nauseating sensations.*

*The crash and burn of all things bad. You knew this was going to come. You sensed it.*

*I did know. I sensed it. After the success of my birthday and the happiness I haven't felt in a while, I knew something was about to destroy everything. And I didn't stop it from happening. Why didn't I do something? Why did I have to be so happy? So content? I put my parents, my neighbors, maybe even my friends, in trouble.*

*Somehow, at some point, I will crawl back into the crippled abyss that is my sanity, where I always end up. Forever in my own thoughts.*

*“ Nothing can ever truly stay  
still, Yvonne.*

*”*

*Nothing can ever truly stay still, Yvonne. You're weak for thinking so. Weak.*

*The lights start becoming just glinting glares, and all the cabinets in front of me start blurring. The cacophony of my thoughts gets louder. They point at me, laugh in hysteria. They pull out layers of hair and scream; they've gone mad. I blocked a silent shriek with my hand.*

*Dear Yvonne, I wish you never saw anything.*

— — —

Howard High School, Howard County



# *The Sad Truth*

*Kyle Parker*



I was playing with Legos, enjoying my Saturday morning, but it felt off. I'd never experienced a feeling like this. We had recently moved into a new house, and it was starting to feel like home. I could lay in my bed and feel all my worries and fears vanish from my mind; my dad making dinner on the grill, the aromas flowing through the house. But the highlight of my days weren't the tasty chicken and delicious hamburgers, it was being with my closest friend, Sasha. She was a siberian husky and one-of-a-kind. She barked and played like any other childhood companion, but she was different. I had her ever since I was born, so she was really part of the family, She was truly the best. As the days went on though, I was getting older, as was she.

Days went on and my mood increased, but something seemed off. *Why has Sasha been acting so weird?* She hadn't been eating and had nowhere close to as much energy as usual. I started to think to myself the worst case scenario, her ending up like my grandpa, buried beneath the earth, gone for all eternity. Then I thought, *no way! She'll be fine.* Maybe she's just trying to lose weight. I was naive. Dogs didn't know any better and definitely didn't manage their weight.

Then one day, my worst nightmare became reality. I woke up like any other Saturday morning, starting my morning routine with legos, and went to the kitchen, but it all felt off. The air was colder, and the morning calm. I opened the back door that looked over the yard, the sharp winds closing my pores. My eyes found the dog pen and saw something that I wish I'd never see. Sasha was lying still but she looked frozen. I ran outside into the pen while calling my dad and brothers to come with me. I looked at her and started to softly cry. She was lifeless.



Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County



“

*The highlight of my  
days weren't the tasty  
chicken and delicious  
hamburgers, it was  
being with my closest  
friend, Sasha*

”



# Untitled

Zach Rotter

— — —

I watch intently as the pitcher warms up. It seems just like any other game. I have no idea what is about to happen. I've always been a good hitter, but I haven't hit a home run in years. I gaze out at the very reachable fences, hoping today might be the day I finally put one out. It would be quite the birthday present to give myself, since I am spending the big day playing three baseball games. I focus back on the pitcher warming up. I am not going to let the fact that it was my birthday distract me from the game. The pitcher throws a little harder than average, but it still looks hittable. I bat third in the lineup, so once the pitcher throws his last warm up pitch I walk back into the dugout.

“

*My heart is racing, I only  
grow more eager to get up to  
the plate by seeing this.*

”

The game starts, and our leadoff hitter makes his way up to the batters' box. He sets the tone by immediately jumping on the first pitch and hitting a triple to the wall. My heart is racing, I only grow more eager to get up to the plate by seeing this. *I can hit this kid, I know it.* Our second hitter comes up to the plate now, he takes the first pitch for ball one. Then, on the second pitch, he smacks a double into right field, scoring a run. I am practically chomping at the bit to get up to the plate now. While I stroll to the batters' box, I high-five my teammate as he runs in after scoring.



“Take him deep,” he encourages, which essentially just means to hit a home run. I step in the box and get set. I’m locked in. People around me are talking and cheering, but I can’t even hear them. It’s just the pitcher and me. He winds up and throws the first pitch. My eyes light up. It’s perfect. I take a violent swing at it...and completely miss. I try to shake it off and focus on the rest of the at-bat, but I can’t help thinking I might not see a better pitch all day. The next pitch comes in way too high, and I take it for ball one. The count is back even at one ball and one strike. The pitcher deals, and it comes in low for ball two. Now I have the advantage, I know there’s a good pitch coming.

“ *Now I have the advantage, I know there’s a good pitch coming.* ”

For the fourth time, the pitcher begins his motion. The pitch leaves his hand. It’s a fastball, a little high, but still in the strike zone, so I take a crack at it. I take a smooth yet powerful swing at the ball and make perfect contact. The ball jumps off the bat, and immediately the center fielder turns and runs back toward the wall. I should be running the bases, but all I can do is jog up the first base line and watch. The center fielder runs out of room, but the ball keeps hurtling through the air. As the ball sails over the fence, it is apparent that I have just given myself the best birthday present I could have possibly asked for.

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Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County



# *Interview with a Time Traveler:* *Captain Sergei Sinelnik*

*Mary Samokhvalova*

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On a warm August evening in 2019, I stepped onto Baltimore's Inner Harbor for the second time in my life. Happy memories of my fourteenth birthday floated back as I gazed at the Cheesecake Factory where we unexpectedly met a family friend who lived in another state. This time, however, my parents and I could not ponder the meaning of time over a slice of sweet goodness. We had to make it to an interview with a time traveler.

I surveyed the area: the Chesapeake to my left, the dragon paddle boats floating in front of me, the USS Constellation to my right. Magnificent liners graced the docks, their pristine white reflecting the setting sun. Each of them conveyed a different sense of beauty, and I appreciated the melting pot of colors, backgrounds, and histories. Yet today I searched for a rare gem along the countless white yachts and liners in the distance: I looked for a 13 meter long, wooden replica of a 17th century lodya.

My shoes clicked on the brick sidewalk as I speed-walked with anticipation past the Visitor's Center and what seemed like countless more ships. Suddenly, I stopped and looked to my left. I saw a thin wooden pole stretching into the sky. I took one step closer and saw yellow lettering on wood: "**PILGRIM**". I knew that I found the gem.

As I approached the lodya, I noticed that the captain was standing on the deck. Immediately after, I imagined how terrifying it must be to sail on this size of a ship through large seas, I wondered how waves do not sink the boat, and I marveled at the courage the crew must have.

"Hello there!" called out the captain, Sergei Sinelnik. "Come on board, we can take some pictures for you!"

I did not hesitate at this opportunity and immediately hoisted myself onto the deck. It was now I realized how small the lodya truly was. I could only walk about eight steps either way.

We formally introduced ourselves to the captain. We already knew that he was



currently on a “Round the World Navigation” and had visited many countries in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Captain Sergei Sinelnik was in charge of his wife, two teenage sons, and anyone who wanted to join him on his travels. My dad immediately began asking questions about the concrete details of the lodya, what it was replicated after, how fast it could travel, the means of navigation...

In the meantime I stared out onto the Inner Harbor and imagined it filled with fighting waves, each one crueler than the next. I imagined how deeply the boat swung from side to side and up and down, because even on relatively still water I felt unstable. I glanced at the captain and realized he must not even notice the gentle swaying. I could not help but wonder what got this individual to travel the seas on a 17th century replica ship. What got this individual to become a time traveler?

Contrary to my belief, the captain proclaimed that he did not use his water purifier often because there was enough room on the boat to take along 800 liters of water. This lodya seemed to be full of surprises: though small, it could carry respectable amounts. Somewhere hidden on the lodya were solar panels that could be used to generate electricity.

Of course I had to ask, “Have you met real pirates?”

The answer surprised me, “Well, yes. Some are paid \$200 to take over a ship, and they do anything to achieve that. You try to throw water at them, fend them off, but they continue to fight...”

To me, this was already enough evidence of a time traveler. My ignorant self thought that pirates were a thing of the past and only something to be seen in the movies.

“And this is the steering wheel?”

“Yes, and at night I sleep right under there,” the captain motioned to a set of stairs down under the steering wheel.

His two teenage sons complete school online while learning the reality of surviving on the seas.

“When one of my sons steers at night and I hear that the sails aren’t positioned correctly, I yell out, ‘Don’t let the wind throw you off!’ He yells back, ‘What, can you somehow see from under there?’ but you just know.”

My mom and I immediately object at the same time, “You say it like it’s easy, HOW do you just know?! Well, it must be from experience.”

“Experience, well, maybe, but experience is all relative,” replied the captain modestly. I stared at him in wonder. I thought that history left people with this level of humility in the past.

“Can you travel against the wind?” my dad inquired.

“No ship, not even the most modern yacht can travel against the wind. You can only travel in a zig zag if you want to travel against the wind, and at most, we can travel



perpendicular to the wind. That is the maximum, or maybe even 80 degrees.”

As I continued to marvel at the wooden construction, I learned that the captain dreamed of traveling to Alaska, but could not due to time constraints. It would already be too cold that far up North. He also dreamed of sailing the Great Lakes. For both of them, he would need sponsors to drive his lodya across the continent to get to the West Coast or Chicago, respectively. This dream would need to be put off until the summer of 2020. Of course, at the time, no one knew how the coronavirus pandemic would devastate everyone’s plans.

The captain welcomed us to enter his living quarters to take more pictures and continue our conversation. I climbed down a short flight of stairs into the Captain’s cabin. My head almost brushed the ceiling as I looked at the twin-sized bed to my right, the wooden shelves to my left, and a collection of maps laid out on the table in front of me with a maritime compass positioned carefully in one corner. The only especially modern-style object I saw was a small laptop, closed and plugged in. It dawned on me that this picturesque, almost historical image in front of me was the everyday life of a time traveller.

After a short while, the Captain welcomed us into the main part of the ship. I walked up to the deck and down another set of steps, which creaked softly under my weight. I entered the kitchen and dining area, and the Captain promptly welcomed us to sit down at the table and make ourselves feel at home. I marvelled at his hospitality and immediately noticed the museum of ship replicas behind me.

At this moment, the Captain introduced us to his wife, Marina. Together, they brought out various foods for us to enjoy, as it was nearing 7 PM, dinnertime. We also took out the food we brought with us. The Captain immediately took an interest in the packaged rye bread we brought, opened it, and began to enjoy it with a spread. He urged us to do the same. I did not hesitate because I knew everything on the table was going to be delicious. We continued our interview by asking him about his and his wife’s life on board.

When we sail, “we need to put away everything. Everything flies from one side [of the lodya] to the other... Everything is fastened securely. A person flies and can get seriously hurt,” the Captain responded calmly.

After a brief moment of silence, I had to ask how they prevent themselves from literally flying. The captain, without a hint of sarcasm, responded, “Hold on like a monkey. Be like a monkey,” and then chuckled. “I always say to the inexperienced folk that come on board, ‘either you become monkey-acrobats or you, in the best case, break something, and in the worst case, die.’”

I zoned out for some time as I contemplated the magnitude of each day, hour, minute the Captain spent on board out on the wild, unpredictable waves. Naturally, we wanted to know why he became a sailor. Specifically, how does one become a sailor?



“To become a sailor, you need to go to sea” he responded with a chuckle. How? “Step by step, no rushing. First you start sailing on a raft, then on a small ship on a river with a team, then join someone else’s team sailing on a river, like the Volga for example, then you slowly grow to the Black Sea, with a team go to to Greece, for example, then you go further and further, then sail around Europe, then different races, then international crews in Finland and Iceland up north... working just as a sailor, I was so calm back then, you do your work and then go to sleep...” Now, he is personally responsible for his lodya, wife, two sons, and anyone else that joins him. Not everyone could handle such an immense level of responsibility, but the Captain handles it with eagerness and ease.

As our interview came to a close, I asked one final question, the most important one to me personally. Why did he decide to go on his worldwide expedition by lodya?

The first and foremost reason is to not only preserve the history of his 17th-century replica lodya but also to show it to as many people as possible in the world. Both the collection of wooden replicas on board and the Pilgrim herself serve as museums. Another important reason is to explore everything this world has to offer, because it is up to us as individuals to go out and see what the world is about. Sailing on the seas pulls the Captain away from the suffocating, stable routine of everyday life. Routine creates a false sense of security, which the Captain does not experience on the seas, in part because of the swaying and flying around of objects.

“ *I began to realize how my own everyday life gives me an illusion of security.* ”

When he put it that way, I began to realize how my own everyday life gives me an illusion of security. When I sit and do homework, I never expect my laptop to suddenly fly off of my table, unlike the Captain’s sons. I cannot imagine living knowing the fact that, at any given moment, my entire existence could crash into the seas. Yet even in the suburbs of Maryland, Mother Nature has the power to show us that humans alone cannot maintain 100% security. Take the tragic coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic, which shattered, for now an unknown period of time, the very foundations on which our daily routines were built on.





As I stepped off of the swaying ship onto the sturdy wooden dock on that warm August evening, I felt a way I could not have initially expected - longing. I turned back one last time to look at the small wooden craft, nested between two large white liners.

“Come back next time, I can teach you how to raise the sails” the Captain called out. “I’d love to”, I responded with a smile.

Through the solid wooden boards of the dock, the stretching skyscrapers of Downtown Baltimore, the zooming subway train, and the comfort of the walls of my home, one distinct quote of the Captain followed me.

“Those who walk and live on the land, look at their feet; those who sail on the seas, look at the sky”.

+ + +

Centennial High School, Howard County



“

*Those who walk  
and live on the  
land, look at their  
feet; those who sail  
on the seas, look  
at the sky*”



# *The State Championship*

## *Philip Schutty*



The bus is loud. Thirty-two hearts racing. For some, this would be the last time stepping onto the field for the rest of their lives. Anxieties run high among the team members as we get closer to Stevenson University, where we would soon be playing for the right to call ourselves the best in the state.

As we step off of the bus at the athletic complex, the view is like no other that I had ever seen. Parents, members of other teams in the county, and an insane number of Marriotts Ridge students all yelling from the huge student section. It is breathtaking. I have never seen so many kids from our school in one area. It surprises me that they all cared enough to watch us go from the first game of the season all the way up to the state championship game. Our opponent, the Hereford Bulls, pour out of their bus and head to their locker room as we do the same. I have never seen so many people in the stands. Never. It makes me wish I could play in this game season after season.

“ *Everyone is wearing their war paint, crisp jerseys, and a heart the size of Mount Everest.* ”

We come out of the locker room nervous but ready. Everyone is wearing their war paint, crisp jerseys, and a heart the size of Mount Everest. Fast forward to the end of warm ups. The referee's call for the starters and the crowd erupts after every Mustang is announced. What a time to be alive, I think to myself. Someone needs to pinch me, I also think.

It's game time. The crowd goes crazy. The moms in the stands shout like they've never shouted before. The clock starts, we win possession off of the opening faceoff. The sideline



shouts in excitement as coaches Incontrera and Minard have already blown their voices out from yelling the plays over all of the noise. Our offense moves the ball around as suddenly our attack finds a cutting Mustang for the score.

“MUSTANG GOALLLLLLL,” the announcer says into the microphone.

Everyone in favor of Marriotts Ridge goes berserk. Sideline does a celebration as our offense group hugs. The student section loses it, it was all coming together from the first goal, I could feel it...

No halftime has ever been so tense. Up by a single goal at the break, the coaches go over the game plan for the second half and tell us to keep playing tougher and smarter than the other team. Little did the other team know, we wouldn't ever stop fighting in that second half...

Tied up with four short minutes left to go in the match, we are tired. We are worn down. We are playing our hearts out just to be countered by our opponent. But we don't give up. This is our game, we're here to take what's ours - the championship trophy.

“*Time expires and we all rush  
the field in astonishment.*

”

Possession Mustangs. Two minutes on the clock. Goal from a streaking midfielder. This is it, I think, one more goal and the championship is ours. We do exactly that, we regain the ball and score another. That almost seals the game for us, but we still need to hold them. With ten seconds left in regulation, the score is eight to six in favor of the Howard County Mustangs. 10... 9... 8... 7... My heart begins to race like it had never before. 6... 5... 4... 3... We had done it. We had beaten them. We had won the game of a lifetime, I thought. 2... 1... Time expires and we all rush the field in astonishment. We dogpile our goalie and even shed a tear during the medal presentation, as does the crowd. I love this school, I think. What a family. What an unbreakable brotherhood.

Four of our athletes go on to retire from high school lacrosse and play division one collegiate lacrosse. They had put their all into this program, and look at what they accomplished. The state title will forever represent the hard work and extra hours put in by the team. It means the world to them to be involved in such an amazing season which ends with, indisputably, the best game of their lives. To a scrawny five foot nine, one



hundred and fifty pound freshman, it means the world too. It means the world to know that we will carry on the legacy left by the graduates until the day we leave this program.

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Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County

“

*What a  
family. What  
an unbreakable  
brotherhood.*

”



# *The World Against Me*

*Kelley Scott*

\*\*\*

The room is dark with the flashing light of a blinking computer, filling every crevice of the room for only a second at a time. Sadness has already set in. My eyes are puffed from tears. The dragging loss of what's closest to me irritates my backbone, forcing me to get up and frantically pace around an empty room.

I think to myself, "How can I be so happy in one moment but then everything in my world crumbles at my feet?"

My mind and body begin to sink into the rough carpeted floor that holds the past tears of my life. The mirror sits on the wall. It seems as if it is making a mockery of me, but I'm just being absurd. It's a mirror. It doesn't have the power to do such a thing.

Tears pierce my cheeks as they stream down my already mutilated skin. I continue to think.

"The world does not want me and I don't want the world. There's no point in this pain and there is no one to heal me of my scars," I ponder as I sit whimpering on the floor.

The evening drags on with the day turning to night and the sun turning to black. There is no light in my life anymore until the dreary morning sun peeks from the horizon. The forecaster calls for rain on the already depressing Monday. The dribbles of water on my forehead contribute to the dark doldrums of my mind. It will be another sad day I am forced to live in this life of mine.

“*The words said to me ring in my head like an air horn being blasted through both ears.*”

The words said to me ring in my head like an air horn being blasted through both



ears. I begin pacing around my room once again. I find that the computer light has stopped blinking and is now standing in a blinding shine.

All of the sudden, the ringing stops. The quiet persists and I am calm. A cascade of softness comes over me. Time is frozen.

I walk slowly to my mocking mirror to notice that the reflection is gone and another world seems to have opened up in front of me. A warm breeze flows onto my face coming from the mirror. I slip on my slick toed shoes and grab a coat.

I step through the mirror into a mystical wonderland.

The sky is blue and the sun is out. What was behind me disappeared into the warm air. Birds flutter around me, reminding of little children at preschool when they finally get to meet their parents once again at the end of the day. There is no angst or sadness or negative thoughts flowing through my head. All is well.

I walk through the shining grass still recovering from its morning dew. I slip off my jacket because I am no longer surrounded by the cold of winter and sad thoughts. All is well.

The light, warm breeze caresses my skin and I feel free of my binding mind.

The first person I see is a little girl in the corner of my eye. She runs around aimlessly with no problems, negative notions. Nothing. Her mind is free. She reminds me of a little girl I used to know.

The next object I see is a blanket with a familiar smell and softness that I used to know. I sit on the coverlet and relax on it like a seal in the sun. But I feel time is against me.

I check my wristwatch and although it feels as if hours have flown by, the minute marker has yet to move since I wandered through the mystical mirror.

“Why am I here? How did I wander into this place?” I asked.

The wind stands still and clouds move in. All is silent.

A boy with brown flowing hair in the distance stands on a hill and stares at me.

The boy approaches me slowly and says nothing. He just stares at me like I’m an abstract piece of art that needs to be examined. He just stands. The boy then asks a quite bold question,

“If the world does not want you and you can’t stand its tendencies, then why are you here?”

I’m speechless. I had the same thought earlier in the day when my loss was still an aching wound. How did he now?

“I don’t want the life I’m in and so don’t the people around me but I don’t have enough control of my life to just leave. It would be selfish,” I explained.

“What’s selfish about doing something for your well-being? It’s your life, so own the things you do,” answered the boy.

He didn’t know who I was. This boy is just a figure of my imagination. He doesn’t



care. No one does.

He began staring again, then tilted his brown-haired head in curiosity of what to do with this new person. He continued on with his last words.

“

*You must hate life to see  
the things that truly mean  
something to you.*

”

“You must hate life to see the things that truly mean something to you. Even if these things are imaginary like the girl in the corner or the baby toddling around in the grass by the tree on that hill, these are the things you love and it took you to hate life to see it.”

The boy vanished and the land was grey. My mind was not full of sad or anxious or even happy thoughts. It was completely empty.

Suddenly, I'm back in my room on the rough carpet in darkness. The computer light is blinking again. Something is different, however. My mind is clear and I feel no anxiety. I am at peace with my loss and sadness. I can see the light of day rising over the horizon. I made it through the darkness of the night.

All is well.

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Mercy High School, Baltimore City



“

*I don't want the life  
I'm in and so don't  
the people around  
me but I don't have  
enough control of my  
life to just leave. It  
would be selfish.*

”



# *Unbroken Stream*

*Kendyl Smith*



I didn't want to answer. I didn't want to know. Four hundred and thirty miles away and goosebumps covered my body, as if I was there. Thoughts began to cloud my head. Why is this happening? Is she suffering? Will I ever see her again? Paralyzed and disheartened, I could feel my heartbeat radiate through my body. My fingers dripped with sweat as I strained to accept the FaceTime. The camera flipped and began to focus on a figure on the ground. It was Cocoa. Her labored breathing and panting consumed the screen. My mom rubbed her belly, trying her best to comfort her. Once that first tear was freed, the rest followed in an unbroken stream. My mother's choked up words could vaguely be heard.

"Her seizures are becoming more regular. She has a brain tumor and is deteriorating."

My parent's attempt to console me was imminent. I could see them talking, but their words meant nothing. Despite how hard I tried to stop it, my mind began to sink into a haze.

My knees buckled and I collapsed onto the couch. I was surrounded by the wrong family. My aunts and cousins did not know how to react, drowning me with blank stares and emotionless hugs. Their efforts of sympathy could do nothing to alleviate my dejection. Even my sisters could not understand. This feeling of seclusion has never left me. Cocoa was my first "sister". She arrived only a few months before me. I had never lived in a world without her. Once again my mind was muddied with thoughts, and with them small waves of grief. She did not seem this bad when we left. Does she know what is going on? How is Stuey going to live without her? The two of them were inseparable, ever since Cocoa's arrival. Sharing everything from toys to food to attention. Air began to leave my body faster than I could replace it. Gasping for air, I closed my eyes and deeply inhaled. Just as I began to collect myself, I was consumed by the largest wave of them all. I will never get the chance to say goodbye.



Howard High School, Howard County

“

*Their efforts of  
sympathy could  
do nothing to  
alleviate my  
dejection.*

”



# *Nothing and Normal*

*Kate Stembler*

— — —

I am suffocating. I am in a room without doors or windows. There is no escape. I am alone. I don't know how to escape, but I know I will eventually work it out, even though I don't know how to right now. I wait for myself to finally be able to take a solid deep breath.

The joyful Christmas tree was up and Christmas carols seemed to float in the air. Christmas cheer filled my family. The stockings were hung, the Christmas cookies were baked, and all seemed picture-perfect.

Then, when Christmas was only about an hour and a half away, I became extremely uncomfortable. I complained to my mom about tightness in my chest. She seemed frustratingly calm, her face still like a serene pond. She didn't seem to care that I felt like I was dying. Just for safe measure, she told me to come into her room and lay in her bed. The blankets were elephants and I felt like I had been suffocating in a hot tub for two hours.

"Try to sleep and maybe you'll feel better," my unsympathetic mom urged.

Sleeping was an ineffective treatment. Someone was jumping on my chest and my head was a hot air balloon floating off the rest of my body. It came in phases. The overweight jumping man would go away for a water break, giving me a glimpse of relief. Then, he would decide he liked jumping better and resume torturing me.

"Stop breathing like that. It'll make it worse," my parents declared. But I can't because that's the only thing that made me feel better. I try to hold my breath as long as I can to force myself to take a deep breath, one that doesn't feel like someone is pressing on my chest, but it just caused more pain.

"It's nothing," and "Everything looks normal," they said. An emergency room trip at one in the morning on Christmas Day. First, they administered an EKG and told me I have normal vitals. I laid in the pediatric emergency room, waiting; waiting for the happiness only a person dressed in scrubs will bring. I'm nervous about what they will say or what they won't say. I have the comfort of both of my parents, so tired they try to fall asleep in between nurses coming in, with a donated stuffed animal and a blanket. The animal and blanket bring a type of comfort; the knowledge that more than the people who live with me care about me. The stuffed was a snow-white, marshmallow lamb. The blanket was a blue and green patterned fleece blanket with a heartfelt letter on it.

“ *The animal and blanket bring a type of comfort; the knowledge that more than the people who live with me care about me.* ”

There was a collective sigh in the room once a nurse or doctor left. “More waiting,” we thought.

Then a man, maybe in his late 40’s, came into the room. He had a lavender-colored scrub with “GBMC Respiratory Specialist” embroidered on it. He stayed in the room for a few minutes before he brought an inhaler and a tool to measure my breathing. He treated my lungs as if I have some type of asthma, but I’m not asthmatic. I figured it couldn’t hurt. At this point, I wanted to do anything to feel better. We got the release forms we had been waiting for and left the never-sleeping hospital.

“ *There was an eerie sense of emptiness there. We waited days, which seemed to feel like years.* ”

Weeks after, nothing got better, so we went to the doctor to get an order for an x-ray of my heart and lungs. We went to a small building and sat in the waiting room. More waiting and stress flowing through my body like a wave. I nervously thought about what the x-ray would be like. Eventually, I went back with the nurse who really didn’t



want to be there. I stood near the x-ray machine wearing a scratchy hospital gown and my arms up above my head. The unenthusiastic nurse went into the other room and started screaming commands about when to hold my breath and went to breathe out. I was eager to leave. There was an eerie sense of emptiness there. We waited days, which seemed to feel like years.

“Doctor Simon called. They have the results of your x-ray,” my mom informed me. “They said that everything looks normal and they don't see anything wrong,” the cheeriness of her voice infuriated me.

No, I don't want something to be wrong with my heart or my lungs, but when there is, we need to do something about it. I would be willing to do anything, but there was nothing I could do. There was nothing they would tell me.

I went back to the doctor for the millionth time. He talked about more tests we could try to see if we could find something. He talked about how anxiety can have physical effects on some people. I put on an elated face and politely answered everything he asked. The appointment slowly came to an end. But my mother, who felt she had become a doctor in the past few months, decided to chime in and give her opinion.

“What about a blood test? Could that show something?” I glared at her. She didn't notice.

My doctor agreed with my mom and ordered a blood test. With my fear of needles, this wasn't the news I wanted to hear. I sat in a blue chair and had my left arm straight out for a nurse to poke me with needles and collect my blood. I looked far to the other side where my mom stood. I tuck my head into her puffy black coat, looking like a four-year-old. Once the blood test was over, I felt extremely lightheaded. The nurse asked my mom if she brought anything I could eat or drink so I wouldn't pass out. Luckily, she was prepared for her crazy daughter to almost pass out. She brought a watered-down, sugary juice from the car. I drank it fast to prevent passing out. Days later, we got the results: completely normal.

“For some people, anxiety can have physical impacts,” my doctor told me.

“I could be just another teenager with anxiety,” I thought to myself. “Is that what I've really become?” I was enraged. “No way,” I thought. “There is no way that this horrific feeling could be something as simple as anxiety.” That's when I thought back to when I felt these feelings. They occurred during a week during which I had no homework; so there was nothing to be stressed about. It just did not make sense to be diagnosed with anxiety.

“Well, I know she felt like this during a week that was very relaxed. Like when she didn't have homework because of standardized tests that don't impact grades.”

I felt a sigh of relief throughout my body.

“Yes, thank you, mom,” I thought to myself. Words like these seemed to feel better coming from an adult.



My doctor ordered an echocardiogram (ultrasound of heart and parts around the heart). I left school early to drive about an hour, which seemed to last forever, to one of the only hospitals that will let someone my age get an ultrasound. The nurse instructed me to lay on my side. She occasionally turned on the sound and I heard a static noise and the thudding-sound of my heartbeat. After several minutes, I changed out of the scratchy hospital gown and the nurse walked my mom and me out of the respiratory section of the hospital. The results come back a few days later, which, to my worst nightmare, were completely normal.

The last call for something to show up was my appointment with a respiratory therapist in July. She seemed to judge everything I said and it always looked like her eyes were getting caught in a magnet in the sky. The room was tense and I felt as though someone sucked the air out of it. I felt a wave of nervousness talking to her. She asked me an abundance of questions before handing me off to two other ladies, who were much more friendly. The room they took me to was lighter and happier. I felt safe and comfortable with them. They took me to another room and put me in a tube-like structure with a part built out making it a chair. It decked out with stickers, as it was a children's hospital.

"Okay, I need you to take a big, deep breath. Breathe out all the way until I tell you to stop," the nice lady said in a friendly voice. Numerous deep breaths until they got enough results. I felt like I was going to faint and drop dead to the floor. The overweight jumping man returned.

The judgy feeling seemed to be in the air as the respiratory therapist entered the room again. The nice ladies were gone. I felt like a four-year-old being left by my parents with an evil babysitter. She once again brushed it off as nothing. I was normal to her. Just like everyone else thought of me. I was back to where I began. No step forward.

There is a checklist of every major disease and illness and it seems like everything is being ruled out of it. Asthma? No, I'm not wheezing. Anemia? No, a blood test would have shown that. Blood clot? No, the x-ray and echocardiogram would have shown that. So, for now, everything remains "normal," whatever that may mean. I am normal; a sickening type of suffocating, trapped normal.

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Maryvale Preparatory School, Baltimore County





# *A Cycle of Stress*

*Vincentt Stevenson*

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A cycle. A repetition of similar events over and over again. A cycle.

Stress is something we all deal with, from the smallest child to the highest level executive. A feeling of torturous anxiety all over one specific event is something everyone faces. Including me.

When I was young, I was diagnosed with general anxiety disorder characterised as an, "excessive, exaggerated anxiety and worry about everyday life events with no obvious reasons for worry." This often becomes a problem when I'm attempting to do homework, a common scenario.

While this event that I'm about to tell you about has no specific date, I can say it happened during the school year and is quite common for me. Most have felt procrastination in their life.

"I'll finish it tomorrow."

"Not now, maybe later."

"This can wait, at least for now."

These are all phrases we have told ourselves before promptly forgetting about whatever we had promised to do. For me, procrastination often comes in the form of putting off homework.

I couldn't get started, at all. Time ticked by glibly, cruelly mocking me, slipping through my fingers like water. I was too stressed, I decided I needed to relax first. I went through all of the video games I had. Maybe a book would be better? Whatever. I settled on a subpar game that at least would be distracting. The cycle began. But while I made little pixelated figures dance across the screen, my mind wandered toward my homework, which sat a few feet away. Watching. Patient.

Stress began to bubble up again in my chest. I couldn't calm down. What was supposed to be a relaxing calming game became a countdown to when I went back to my homework. Soon my break time was over. Back to work, feeling no more relaxed than when I started. The end of the cycle was here.





I still couldn't get started, still was anxious, still needed to relax. So I went back to procrastination. "I'll just play a video to relax." I thought "But maybe a book would be better?"

“*Time ticked by glibly, cruelly  
mocking me, slipping through  
my fingers like water.*”

Whatever.

\*\*\*

Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County



# *Lost and Found*

*Gabby Tseytlin*



The seven-minute countdown began. I used my uneasy legs to propel myself to the podium. My mouth uttered words that my brain did not recognize. The letters on my fading, cream-colored, notecards vanished shortly thereafter. I scanned the room and found blank stares across everyone's faces. Their jaws dropped and they stared at me wide-eyed. There I stood, in a room full of well-educated adults, and I could not find the words to say anything. My vulnerability was easy to sense, and I was exposed as if everyone had a direct view of my thoughts and emotions. A shaking feeling traveled through my body, starting from my feet and making its way up to the very top of my head. I felt my stomach drop. I no longer embodied the calm state that I had some time ago. The words that I spent days, even weeks, engraving into my brain suddenly departed. Clusters of thoughts raced through my head but none contained the content that I needed the most.

"Is she going to speak?" This was the whispered question, one for which I had no answer. A rush of ideas channeled through my brain.

"T-t-he," I stuttered with a heavy load of uncertainty. Tick-tock, tick-tock. The clock inched toward the thirty second mark. What felt like an hour was actually eight brief seconds. My brain overflowed with anxiety when suddenly a bright light refocused my attention. I finished the dim cruise down the dark thoughtless tunnel and found the light I had been seeking all along.

"The!" I exclaimed as confidence surged through my body. It became apparent in my tone that I found the words that I thought were lost to me forever. My brain once again constructed a relationship with my mouth as the tape that felt so real lifted from my lips.

My voice paralysis faded as the words began to roll off my tongue. Ahhh, Eureka! I finally felt in my element once more!



Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County

“

*My vulnerability was  
easy to sense, and I  
was exposed as if ev-  
eryone had a direct  
view of my thoughts  
and emotions.*

”



# Degrees of Isolation

## Varsha Vijay

\*\*\*

“Mommy!” squealed the girl as she held the cool plastic of the landline. A voice greeted her, but with a lack of the same enthusiasm she possessed. They hadn’t talked the day before, so naturally, as she heard the therapeutic voice, a warm feeling of home engulfed her as the 8,000 miles between them shrunk to zero.

“Varsha?” her mom whispered with apprehension in her voice.

This tone was unfamiliar, and she could soon hear her heart drumming in her ears. She looked over to see her aloof father bent over, eyebrows knit, as she struggled to grasp her mother’s words. The landline began to feel slippery in her hand and her cheeks burned as if a flame was held over them. She felt something roll down her small face and tap her lip. One after the other they came down, the taste of salt drowning her. She heard a thud on the wood floors and looked to see the phone gone from her hands.

Her father wouldn’t look at her, but her intense eyes burned holes into him. *Look at me you coward*, she thought furiously, *you’re not the only one struggling right now*. What else could she expect from him? It wasn’t the first time he’d been useless at taking care of her. Her mind raced with thoughts of resentment as rage consumed her body. At that moment she missed the way her mom’s soothing voice would calm her when her temper flared up, but she was trapped in her cage of a home... Her savior in a different part of the world.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

The microwave sounded off in the distance filling the melancholic silence, but no one made a move to stop it. *Manisha!* She wanted to call out for her sister’s comfort, forgetting that she was missing too. *It was only supposed to be two weeks*, she thought, frustrated at her lack of knowledge regarding visas. She wanted to scream and cry and kick and shout and punch and hurt anything and everything. But she didn’t. She couldn’t. Her legs felt like 10,000 pounds and she stayed planted in her spot. Her vision clouded and her head throbbed. Her mother’s voice haunted her, the words echoing through her head...

*“I can’t come home.”*

\*\*\*

Howard High School, Howard County

“

*She wanted to scream  
and cry and kick and  
shout and punch and  
hurt anything and ev-  
erything. But she  
didn't. She couldn't.*

”



# El Se Fue \*

Nyssa Vilchis



The luminous sun looks down from the bright blue sky, welcoming me to the neighborhood. The bus leaves me at the bright building called home and I come in, beaming with excitement. Sebastian follows behind, mumbling along to his new music. Today was absolutely amazing. Nothing could possibly tear me down.

“We’re home mamá!”. Thump thump thump. My father stands at the bottom of the stairs. Serious face, tense jaw, sad eyes, thin lips: *what happened?*

“

*Serious face, tense jaw,  
sad eyes, thin lips:  
what happened?*

”

*Did I forget to do my chores? No, not possible. Shouldn't he be at work? Is it getting a little hot in here? Why am I so nervous?*

“Nyssa, Sebastian, se murio tu Tata\*. We leave for Mexico in a couple hours entonces prepara-”. NO NO NO NO. *He's not dead. He can't be.*

“It's a joke right? Don't joke about that, Papá. It's not funny.”

“Nyssa, I'm serious. He's gone.”. *No he's not. He is fine. Mamá spoke with him yesterday, he's fine. He is alive and well. This is all just one big, sick joke.*



The palm trees sway in the humid breeze of the San Luis Potosi desert. The sun smiles down brightly on the somber people ascending from their cars, all resembling the darker side of the color spectrum. All the mournful people enter the clear building, Funerales Hernandez. My black clothing takes in the heat of the sun as I briskly walk into the building. I follow my family; aunts, uncles, cousins - all the people who know Miguel Angel Tejada - into the room in which the velorio\* would take place. Beautiful flowers and messages from all of his friends and family from different corners of the world. The dark, cold furniture all around sent chills down my back as I slowly ambled over to the open casket in the far end of the room. *No tiene nada de malo estar triste\** Nyssa, *you don't have to see your abuelo si no quieres\**, *pero\** if you do, think of him as *dormido\**, my parents had said earlier. How could I not see him one last time? My damp hands tingled and vigorously shook. And my heart. It beat a million miles an hour. Could I do this? Could I see him like this, so cold and weak? Comforting hands wrap around me before I look in. My heart stops. He looks so peaceful lying there and that's when it truly hits me. He's gone. And he's not coming back.

“

*Could I do this? Could  
I see him like this, so  
cold and weak?*

”

\*El se fue - He is gone

\*Se murio tu Tata - Your Tata (grandpa) died

\*Velorio - the wake that occurs during a funeral

\*No tiene nada de malo estar triste - There is nothing wrong with being sad

\*Si no quieres - If you don't want to

\*Pero - But

\*Dormido - Asleep

— — —

Howard High School, Howard County



Comprehending the implications of a two-dimensional decision in a three-dimensional world. Munching on a miniature pumpkin pie in a crowded theater. Granting receipts new lives. Suffocating from being normal. Recalling the joys of a group of friends at a lunch table. Contemplating the meaning of fear. Screaming like never before to cheer on a teammate to victory. Picking at a black leather couch after hearing the unthinkable. Understanding the reasons behind the sacrifices of immigrant parents. Seeing a red door open for the very last time.

These, and many more, are the firsthand experiences of Maryland high school students. Each holds a deeper meaning, waiting to be uncovered. Let the voices speak for themselves. Let them impact the world. Let yourself be taken on a journey  
*by Maryland Voices.*