

MARYLAND AND VOICES.



Volume XI

2021

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Maryland Voices, Vol. XI

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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 or email us at 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. You are a true champion for sitting down, putting your thoughts to paper or to your computer, and amplifying your voice in such a challenging year.

I congratulate the individuals who were chosen for publication. In fall 2021, all Marylanders in grades 9-12 are encouraged to submit their stories for consideration in Volume XII.

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: Mr. Edward Brown, Ms. Nicole Brown, Mr. David Britton, Ms. Sarah Dunlap, Mr. Richard Gray, Mr. David Hong, Mr. John Lancaster, Mr. Julian Lazarus, Ms. Ahna Lewis, Ms. Kelli McDonough, Ms. Kristen McManus, Mr. Corey O'Brien, Ms. Amanda Orndorf, Ms. Cynthia Ours, Ms. Holly Pasciullo, and Ms. Sarah Yoder. Thank you for supporting our mission in a year when you needed to teach in a virtual environment, support your students, take care of your health and personal life, and so much more. We truly appreciate your dedication and hope you will continue to encourage your students to submit.

Thank you to the entire Maryland Voices team: the management, marketing, and regional director teams. An asterisk * denotes a graduating senior: best of luck in all of your endeavors. I hope you continue to dedicate time to writing and publishing. Sasha Allen*, Michelle Bank, Stefan Cehan*, Isabel Choi, Tomas Germanas*, Harshitha Jeyakumar, Thomas Lee, Sarah Paz*, Avery Powers, Sona Prabudinakaran, Neha Rehman*, Flynn Shea, Alexandra Valerio*, Luis Valerio

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Thank you to the designers: Joesia Bangura and Kristin Daugherty. Together, they took the literary works of art to another level and created them into works of visual art as well. You are an integral part of making Maryland Voices come to life.

Thank you to Mr. Rus VanWestervelt for giving me this invaluable opportunity.



*"You are a true champion for...
amplifying your voice in such a
challenging year."*



Letter From the Editor-in-Chief

Dear Reader,

Since 2002, the mission of Maryland Voices has been to make the voices of Marylanders heard. The past two years have demonstrated just how important it is for individuals to use their voice to empower themselves and their communities. I sincerely thank our authors for submitting to Maryland Voices and amplifying their stories.

The past two years brought unprecedented academic, emotional, physical, and mental challenges for the entire world. One of the biggest things I've learned during the COVID-19 global pandemic, to date, is the importance of perseverance. In the face of it all, we must continue to rise, we must continue to brush the dust off ourselves, and, applying what the hardships taught us, we must continue to move forward.

When I first accepted the role of editor-in-chief of Maryland Voices, I couldn't have imagined the sheer breadth and magnitude of what I was to learn. I also couldn't have imagined how it would end because, honestly, I didn't think about that. I immersed myself in every moment working on Maryland Voices, from putting together the team, to getting the regional directors excited about sending another 200 emails, to reading our submissions and listening to the voices of the authors come alive from the page, to deliberating the final publication decisions, to analyzing every detail of the design, and even those day-to-day things like responding to inquiries, holding our meetings, and cheering everyone to the finish line. The finish line... and just like that, my time as Editor-in-Chief is coming to a close.

It has been an honor serving you for the past two years. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to revive Maryland Voices after over a decade of dormancy. I hope that the foundation I built will be a springboard for the new management teams. I have full faith that they will take Maryland Voices to new heights and develop our legacy as the definite home for the best high school creative nonfiction in the state of Maryland.

Sincerely,
Mary Samokhvalova
Editor-in-Chief



Letter From the Advisor

Rus Van Westervelt

The mission of Maryland Voices has always been to provide a space for high school writers to share their true stories and document the timely events in their lives for the world to know, today and tomorrow. When we were a print journal back in the beginning of the 21st century, the challenge was great to release our call for submissions, select the best 50 manuscripts, work with authors in the editing process, and then place the polished pieces into a finished design before sending the completed document to the presses for printing, publication, and distribution.

To accomplish all of this in the middle of a pandemic – two years in a row, is much more than a mere challenge; it is a feat that tests the very will and determination of a team that is already overwhelmed with an upside-down world as they do their best to navigate a “normal” path through the academic year.

This team, however, has done just that, and thanks to Mary and the entire editorial group here at Maryland Voices, we have been able to provide that space so that the world will always know how Maryland teens got through these most trying times.

When I first started this journal in 2002, following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, I had hoped that we would never have to worry about such horrors in our lifetime. In every devastating way imaginable, though, this pandemic has proven to be so disruptive and deadly that it would be unconscionable for us to not make every effort to open the literary doors to teens across the state to share their stories.

This was no easy feat; our team had to launch a call for submissions that had to reach beyond the virtual challenges of both teachers and students. We offered a mid-year creative nonfiction conference, and our team pushed hard to provide resources to encourage not only the writing of such true stories, but to polish them and submit them for publication.

What you are reading now is the successful result of those efforts. These are the works of teens who have taken great efforts to share their stories with all of you.

But what is just as incredible is how this team worked through the challenges to ensure this opportunity would not be another casualty of the pandemic. Volume XI serves as a testament to this team’s perseverance, and to the promise of future teams to carry on this legacy to ensure student writers throughout Maryland will always have a place to tell their story.

We hope you enjoy the efforts, and the words, here in Volume XI.

***Rus VanWestervelt, Founder and Advisor
Maryland Voices***



The Maryland Voices

Top 3 Award

I (the Editor-in-Chief) would like to personally recognize three pieces that demonstrate exemplary mastery of creative nonfiction. Please join me with a standing ovation in congratulating the following three authors:

Emily Metheny from Allegany High School
Alicia Ribeiro from Oakland Mills High School
Riya Seth from River Hill High School

These voices speak for themselves. Emily, Alicia, and Riya: congratulations on your accomplishment! Thank you for the profound impact that you made.



Parkside Terror

Emily Metheny



Heart pounding, I stared in shock at the teacher. No. No! This couldn't be happening. These types of things only happen in movies. Movies, books, and the darkest corners of my mind; only in those places did something like this happen.

"Run! Emily, run!" I didn't want to think about what those words meant.

"Run! Go to your teacher!" I didn't want to run. Why couldn't I stay with this teacher?

"Go! You won't get in trouble!" My brain shutdown, refusing to think about what was happening. I ran to my classroom - Mrs. Tudor's room, fifth grade, end of the hall, left side.

In the years to follow, I would learn what to do in situations like this. I would learn about adrenaline - the magical hormone that saves lives. I have been asked many times by friends, teachers, and doctors how I felt that day. None of them ever seem to believe that I didn't feel scared. At least not after those first petrifying moments when I was told to run. Maybe it's because adrenaline kicked in. Maybe because I was in complete denial of my situation. I remember so many details of that fateful day so clearly. I never once acknowledged in my mind the truth; we were in a lockdown, and I was locked out of my classroom.

Perhaps I should back up. It was a nice day. A normal day. There was no ominous music playing in the background, no warning signs. We had a substitute teacher. She was a young blonde woman, nice enough, not overly strict. I was wearing a practically neon purple shirt with a bulldog on it and black jeans. We had just come in from recess. I was at an age when things started to change. Boys were suddenly cute, I was suddenly sweaty, and I suddenly cared about my flyaway hair. So, when the substitute called on my desk cluster to use the restroom, I went.

I was the only one at my cluster to get up. At the time, this didn't mean anything to me. I paid no attention to anything while I walked. I don't remember what I was thinking on the walk up; I can never forget what I thought in the time that followed. There was only one other girl in the restroom.

Silver flats with owls. I don't know why I remember this. I'm practically the opposite of a detail-oriented person. But I remember the other girl's silver flats with owls. I told her I liked them, and we shared a smile. She left the bathroom. I was going to follow but decided to stop and attempt to fix my hair. I wish now that I had simply left with her.



When I did leave, it was to find Mrs. Chester hanging halfway out of her classroom. The fourth-grade teacher had a panicked air about her and was frantically looking about. She called out to me. The words she said still haunt me.

Somehow I knew, even before I tried the doorknob, that it was locked. I tried anyway. I rattled it and shoved at the door. I kicked the bottom of it and banged it so hard my hands turned bright red. I screamed and begged for somebody, anybody, to take pity and let me in. Nobody did. I had never really paid much attention to the blue calendar covering the small window on the door. I knew from my mom that it was some new rule. Most teachers had their windows covered. I was terrified that something meant to protect me, would doom me.

Desperation and hopelessness like I'd never felt washed over. It crushed me like a million-ton wave. My breaths came out faster and faster. My heart pounded so loudly I was sure any shooter would hear me. I wondered what to do next. Go back to Mrs. Chester? Leave the school? Hide in the bathroom? The copy room? Mrs. Chester's door was now closed. I was terrified that if I ran back to her room, she too wouldn't let me in.

I spun around in a panicked circle, hoping that somehow, I would find a way out. My breathing suddenly sounded much too loud, and the school felt much too small. The walls and ceiling were closing in. I was convinced that any second a shooter would come around the corner to kill me.

That's when I spotted her. Mrs. Field. The other fifth grade teacher. One of the very few who didn't have something covering the door's window. She was wrapping up a cord or something. I didn't know. I didn't care. I ran across the hall to her room and started banging on her door. Her head snapped up immediately. For a couple of seconds as she stared at me, eyes wide and face pale, I thought she wasn't going to let me in. Dread filled me. If she didn't let me in, I didn't know what I was going to do. She continued to stare. Surely, she wouldn't just ignore me. My stomach coiled unpleasantly at the thought.

But, then, she hurried over and quickly ushered me in. As I rushed in, her class let out an almost synchronized gasp. They were all squeezed in a corner. I remember that Mrs. Fields asked two boys wearing neon sweatshirts to take them off. One did, but the other had an equally bright shirt underneath. She took off her army green jacket and told me and the other boy to huddle under it. I wasn't sure then, and I'm still unsure now, why she had us do that. Perhaps it was because she was afraid the shooter would somehow see the bright colors from the hallway. Perhaps it was because her blinds were broken, and she was afraid the shooter was outside and would be distracted by our bright clothes. No matter what the reasoning, the other boy and I complied without hesitation.





I don't remember much about what I said, but I know I must have asked a lot of questions. I remember at one point Mrs. Field telling me that I was 'such an inquisitive one,' though her words held no edge. I know Jackson, the class clown, kept attempting to make jokes. A couple of kids would shush him, but I remember that they helped me. If I could focus on the small things, like his horrible jokes, everything would be fine.

I'm not sure how long we were hiding in Mrs. Field's room before the announcement came. It was the guidance counselor. She told us to go about our regular business but to stay away from windows and keep the door locked. It did nothing to calm my nerves. I asked Mrs. Field what the announcement meant. She told me she didn't know, and that for now we would keep hiding. I think that was the first time I realized she was just as lost and confused as we were.

"My breathing suddenly sounded much too loud, and the school felt much too small. The walls and ceiling were closing in. I was convinced that any second a shooter would come around the corner to kill me."

It was a bit of time before the next announcement. This one came from our principal. I don't remember exactly what she said, but the gist of it was that the lockdown was over. I remember breathing a sigh of relief and thinking it was over. Mrs. Field certainly seemed to think it was. She walked me over to my classroom. I was thinking about how I was going to tell my parents what happened. I was wondering if my substitute was going to make us do work. Never once in the short walk did I think the door would still be locked. But it was. "Something's wrong." Two words. Two oh-so-simple words. Two words that sound like a cliché from a bad spy movie.



Two words Mrs. Field said before she grabbed my wrist; before I could blink, we were back in the classroom and the nightmare resumed. I still remember what she told us.

"The principal or whoever gives the announcement is supposed to say that the janitors are coming around to unlock the doors. I can't believe I forgot. That way we know if it's really over or if the shooter is just holding a gun to her head." At the time I was in shock at her words. Now, I'm in shock that she was so blunt. I knew the principal's twin daughters. I'd spent the night at her house. It was horrifying to me that she was so sure that the only situation was one where the principal had a gun to her head.

It wasn't much longer until the blessed announcement came; the janitors were coming around to unlock the doors. The lockdown was over. This time, Mrs. Field waited. When the janitors unlocked her door, she told us not to move; She went to talk to them. The door was opened a bit, so I could see her, but I couldn't hear what they were saying. I assume that she was asking about what was going on. I assume they told her. Nobody ever told me.

She came back to get me and walked me across to my room. The janitors had just unlocked the door. When she opened it, the first thing I saw was the sub. I remember that her blonde hair was now pulled into a ponytail. She was sitting on a stool and reading to the class from a big book of poems; it was the black and white one about a light in some attic. I had never read it. I don't remember what she said, but I remember the tail end of what Mrs. Fields said.

"And when I saw her standing in the hallway, I grabbed her and pulled her inside." Despite everything that had just happened, despite the fact that I was only ten, despite the fact that it didn't really matter, I felt prickles of annoyance at her way of describing what had happened. I wasn't some damsel in distress. I hadn't just curled up in a ball and accepted whatever my fate may be. I hadn't just stood there like some dumb child waiting to be killed. Sure, I was panicked, but I had actively searched for a way out of my situation.

Oddly, or maybe not too oddly, the number one thing people ask me is if I cried. I know my twin sister did. She had the luxury to, not thinking she was going to die if she didn't move. I know some boys made fun of her for it; they had the luxury of knowing their loved ones were safe. The best reasoning I can make for not crying is this; if someone tells you your house is on fire, you're not just going to sit down and cry. You're going to do everything in your power to get out of that situation.

That night I found out there was no shooter. There was no guy with a weapon. There was no guy in the building at all. I'm still not sure why we had a lockdown. I heard it was because someone was burglarizing the homes nearby. I also heard it was because someone was trying to break into the school. I don't think I'll ever know. Nobody ever bothered to tell us - not even the guidance counselor who came to talk to us the next day.



Victim blaming. The act of blaming the victim of an incident instead of or in addition to the perpetrator. A pretty self-explanatory phrase. A phrase that accurately describes, in my opinion at least, the guidance counselor's talk with us. The tone was condescending and the words directed clearly at me. For who else could be the 'unnamed student who got herself locked out of her classroom during an emergency situation.' The gist of the talk was that if this ever happened again, we should hide in the copy room by ourselves and not put anyone else in danger by running to classrooms. I don't know if she did this because my mom had complained to the school the night before. I don't know if it was simply my guilty mind playing tricks on me. But that is how she made me feel. Guilty.

By Monday this was old news. Nobody wanted to talk about it. Not the other kids at school. Not my parents. It wasn't in the local paper and certainly not on TV. Why should it be? There was no danger. Nobody was hurt. It wasn't a big deal, right? Thoughts like these drove me crazy. Because I couldn't stop thinking about it. I was the only one. So, I thought I was being crazy and never told anyone how I was feeling.

I wish I could give this a nice ending—a happily ever after, wrapped up in a nice bow, type of ending. I wish I could give you closure, but I can't give something I don't have.

A year later, the boy sitting behind me in math told me if I didn't stop annoying him, he would bring in his dad's gun and shoot my face off. I told my teacher I was uncomfortable near him; she told me that everyone was annoyed by him. That I should, in essence, suck it up. The next year I was sitting in art class. Everyone was talking and didn't stop when an announcement came on. The teacher made a bad joke about hoping we didn't miss the announcement for a lockdown. A few minutes later, I left for a band sectional and had a panic attack when the door was locked. Instead of being reassured, I was reprimanded. Another year passes and students all across the country are protesting. My mom forbids me from walking out. Nothing changes.

"There was no danger. Nobody was hurt. It wasn't a big deal, right?"

I go to high school. Instead of change, I am treated to teen boys throwing their books off the stairwell walls at the end of the day and screaming about school shootings. More people die. Even today, sitting in my tenth-grade class, everyone is in a frenzy. Rumors swirl of a girl who threatened to shoot up the school and her boyfriend who provided the gun. Kids are crying and going home. None of it turns out to be true; are shootings just a game to them?





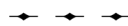
It's been five years. Five whole years since the lockdown. School shootings haven't stopped. If anything, they are becoming more prominent. They are becoming normal. In light of this, I find my thoughts wondering, once more, am I crazy? Do I deserve to be traumatized? Do I have any right to hear people talk on TV about the fear of thinking you're going to die and think 'I know how that feels'? Was my fear and refusal to leave class until three years after the lockdown validated or crazy? After all, nothing really happened, right?

I guess that's up to you to decide.





"Am I crazy? Do I deserve to be traumatized? Do I have any right to hear people talk on TV about the fear of thinking you're going to die and think 'I know how that feels'? Was my fear and refusal to leave class until three years after the lockdown validated or crazy? After all, nothing really happened, right?"



Allegany High School, Allegany County



Carrying Umma

Alicia Ribeiro



A list of things that are not hard: It's not hard to list the deaths of others like the temperature in the morning. 50,000 died today. There'll be a high of 55 degrees. It's not hard for me to live in circles, to think that I'm lonely, that I'm hungry, that I've exercised and now I'm good, that I'll work hard, that I'm angry and I throw something, crack my phone, that I'm sad, oh so unbearably sad, that I want to curl up into a ball on the floor and cry. And I'm lonely.

A list of things that are hard: It's hard to stop wishing for another time, another place. A past of traveling to North Carolina to visit Great Grandma, being up in the mountains where just breathing makes you feel fresh and alive, makes you hungrier, makes your sleep deeper. I beg Umma constantly to travel down to North Carolina, but it's not safe, and she has her classes, and Great Grandma is older and therefore at risk. Umma finally calls her and when she gets off the phone, she says, "Great Grandma is sick with pneumonia and in the hospital. It isn't good when older people get sick with pneumonia." I begin to worry, really quite selfishly because I'm greedy for experiences. I want to go up there one last time. I want to sit down and hear stories about Umma. I want to write a biography about her life, and now I'm worried that the stories will be lost.

Great Grandma is still too weak to call on the phone so I start the interviews with Umma. We sit after dinner and I ask her questions about her life. How did you feel about being adopted? Wasn't it hard to not have your parents around? Didn't it hurt when they divorced? What was your relationship with your brother like? My mother is not a sentimental person. Things are what they are. If they screamed and took she didn't like it, if it played and tumbled she did. There is no room for sentimentality when you are always on the run. There are only the breathless moments to love. If you can love the present, whatever that may be, you can survive. Holding on too much to a brother, mother, father—that was something she learned to stop doing early on. Ever since she hid from the woman she called mom, perhaps before that, she knew that she would have to create her own life. Cling to nothing. Because when you move, things get broken and things get lost. If you tie yourself to them you'll get broken and lost too.

She says she was more of a survivor than an achiever but I think she was both. She saw life as a series of challenges that she had to complete. If she could achieve them, then she was the winner. And I sensed that hint of smothering that is characteristic of those who survive. The smothering of the heart, because if it spoke up and showed itself, it could too easily be destroyed. So she kept her heart buried down and grinned.



MV

*"There is no room for sentimentality
when you are always on the run.
There are only the breathless
moments to love. If you can love the
present, whatever that may be, you
can survive"*

From her stories, the people are what stick out. They are the ones who guide her life. Friends only through. Friends are equals. Older people have to do things for you and you have to do things for them. Never lovers. Because you have to share with a lover--give up part of your life. She had to work too hard to survive to willingly give up any part of herself like that. Her life was for herself; herself alone. Family, of course, took some life. There is an obligation to family because it originally gave life and she was willing to submit to that sort of love.

I begin to think increasingly in terms of my mother's life and I think I may have to start writing. She shows up in my characters. Her settings are my settings. I am subconsciously following her in reverse. Maryland. New York, Chicago. Korea. I would like to physically go to all of these places with her. I'm lucky. There's a large photo album in the basement with pictures from every part of her life, there are even letters. I have recordings of her voice. The only thing that's left is to call up her relatives and friends and find out the sides of herself that she is less willing to show.

At the end of the call with Aunt Kelli, she tells me, "I love seeing the close relationship that you guys have with her and how much positive influence she's had on you guys. It's been a blessing to me just to see that. I'm amazed at your mom, just amazed. It's just her character, and the kind of mom she is to you guys. It's hard to mother well when you haven't been mothered well. Consistently. Particularly in the beginning of her life. She didn't have that."

I'm sitting on the ground in front of the laptop, talking to Grandma through zoom.

"She never asked for anything. It wasn't that she didn't know what she wanted, she always knew exactly what she wanted. But her answer for everything was 'it's okay'. 'Do you want to eat fruit or ice cream?' 'It's okay'."



"When I first met her and Stone I could sense that they were bossed around a lot and it made me feel bad. I thought I could help them. You know when a woman gets married to a man who has kids and she loves the man and thinks she can get along with the kids? It was never like that for me. For me, it was, 'I love these kids, so maybe I can do something with this man.'"

"Your dad, he was very knowledgeable, a little awkward, didn't quite know what to do all the time. But your mom saw him, and she wanted to have kids and thought she could create a family with him. She was like that, she decided on Bronx high school like that, she decided on Wheaton like that. With your dad it was the same way."

"Loving your children, that's a natural thing," she says. "But what your mom does is different; I think it's almost a little too much sometimes."

I'm in the car with Umma, in the parking lot of the grocery store. I ask her about how she made snap decisions about Bronx Science, Wheaton, and Daddy.

"It's not that I make decisions quickly like that. I'm watching the whole time, calculating. By the time I make the decision I'm completely sure."

I used to think that love was about not choosing--that you can't help who you fall in love with and once you do, can't help all the things you do for love. Now, I think the power of love comes in choosing, again and again, and again. She didn't mind being adopted because it's the saving factor of her life. It is the relief of being chosen, of being loved. That's why she watches, calculating for so long, quietly. When she chooses, she gets it. She doesn't choose much because she doesn't take choosing lightly. She put up with the craziness of her parents, this righteous man and ambitious woman, because ultimately, it took their insanity, but they chose her.

I feel adopted. Not because I feel a lack of relation but because I feel so chosen. I feel as though my being with Umma is as intentional as if I had been adopted.

Umma, as a teacher, is in the second group to get the vaccines. She comes back from getting the vaccine feeling happy and relaxed.

"I think the whole Covid thing kind of stressed me out," she says. I laugh. "Kind of stressed you out? That's an understatement. It was the only thing on your mind for months." The next day, after teaching, she comes up the stairs looking exhausted. She lays down on the couch and closes her eyes.

"They say you're going to feel some flu-like side effects," she says.

I sit on the couch beside Umma. The fire is flickering in the stove. The radio's on and Daddy is listening to a podcast.

I look at the packet they gave her from when she got the vaccine and scan the lines. I help her set up the patient portal to report her symptoms, although I know it's not going to help her immediately or physically. I ask her if she's itchy or feeling nauseous. I bring her a glass of water. I get a damp washcloth to place on her forehead. Something tells me not to leave her side.

Umma sits up, her hands stick out at her sides, flexed, and her mouth is pinched and pursed.

"Uh, can you get me a tissue?" I bring her the box.

"Are you having trouble breathing?" I ask as she blows her nose.



"I used to think that love was about not choosing--that you can't help who you fall in love with and once you do, can't help all the things you do for love. Now, I think the power of love comes in choosing, again and again, and again."

"Yeah. That guy on the podcast is really cool." The podcast. I remember she couldn't handle electronic sounds back when she first had the concussion. She tips her head back and closes her eyes.

"Are the lights bothering you?"

"Yeah." I rush around the room, turning out all the lights. Daddy turns off the radio, and everything is hushed and dim.

"I think I need to go somewhere," she says.

I help Umma over to the door, grab her jacket, put on her shoes. Daddy is still trying to take her blood oxygen levels.

"Let's do that at the hospital," I say. I help Umma to the Prius, the car DeeDee and I had cleared off earlier that afternoon.

"That's the wrong car!" Daddy shouts from the house.

"We don't have time to clear off the other car!" I shout back.

"No, that's not our car!"

I realize that this Prius is grey and the objects inside it, although ordinary, are unfamiliar.

"Oh." I help Umma into our car, the right one this time.



I clear off the car, scraping snow with a shovel as quickly as I can, my arms pulse, faster, faster. Daddy gets out the ice scraper and goes over my work and I am instantly reminded of how Umma showed up thirty minutes late to a friend's house because Daddy insisted on scraping off every single snowflake. I shout, "Okay we're good, we don't have time for this!" I don't want Umma to suffocate in the car while Daddy scrapes her container. He looks at me, indignant. I can't imagine how cleaning the tiny window he's focused on will help him better get to the hospital.

I get in the car and buckle Umma in. Now that we are going my voice becomes soft. She motions for water and I give her the water bottle and steady her shaking hands. Once the cap is screwed securely on, I lean my head against the smooth blackness of her tied back hair for a moment. When she tells Daddy to turn the heat down, I unzip her jacket. The entire time my mind is screaming, "breath, breath, breath, breath." Her breaths are loud and heavy. There is a sort of hyper awareness of Umma that comes over me, where everything else ceases to exist. Her sensations are the only thing that matters.

We arrive at the hospital and I run in, grab a wheelchair, and run out. I help Umma and she leans on me. I feel her whole weight. Daddy tells me to park the car. Then they are gone and I'm alone in this slippery, black night. I park the car and suddenly the single minded focus is gone. The thoughts flood in steadily as I stare straight ahead.

I glance over at the car next to me. I see his face, all beige and gently folded with worry, like clean laundry. That face looking through two car windows and a cold darkness. I wonder what he's doing here, who he's waiting for inside and why. Is he here for someone who can't breathe, too? Someone who has coronavirus for real? Part of me imagines rolling down the window and talking to him as we wait together. I leave both of us in the privacy of our fear. Not that I am afraid of him, but that I know to roll down the window would be unsafe.

Daddy returns.

"She's feeling a lot better; she was able to breathe again by the time I took her in there."

"Did they tell you anything?"

"They wouldn't let me stay," he says indignantly.

"Did they tell you anything?"

"They said to wait 45 minutes either here or at home, then call."

On the car ride back as we sloped down the hill, death didn't seem at all like it had before.

I was suddenly very conscious and grateful for the breath in my lungs, going in and out easily. Death isn't like the weather, like a number, like a spectacle. There is something very real about death. Perhaps it is our lack of ability to cope with it that keeps us from facing it, the risk of it, wholeheartedly.

Dads always die in movies. Dads, not moms. It makes me wonder why everything always happens to Umma and never to Daddy. I think it has to do with the extent to and way in which she lives. Perhaps those who live a lot die a lot too. Daddy lives in a line, slow and steady. I live my life in circles. She lives her life in a blur. A thrilling, breathless blur of smiles, costumes, challenges, cold, shoving food into the mouth, climbing trees, sprinting mountains, and people.



I don't know what I would do without her, but I know I would have to do and do and do. There's nothing for me to do now so I set a timer for forty five minutes. I go down to the basement where Daddy was watching TV when the timer goes off. He's already on the phone when I arrive. I sit down in the oversized bean bag. When he's finished talking he says, "I'm having difficulty contacting the nurse, so I'm going to call the front desk."

"Perhaps those who live a lot die a lot too. Daddy lives in a line, slow and steady. I live my life in circles. She lives her life in a blur. A thrilling, breathless blur of smiles, costumes, challenges, cold, shoving food into the mouth, climbing trees, sprinting mountains, and people."

I watch TV for a bit with my dad in a sort of solidarity. I can't really say I was watching, it was more like staring decidedly not at the tv while being in the same room as it. I was under the impression that I would wait and be there when he got the call. Although now I am getting ever so thirsty and ever so tired. I go upstairs to the kitchen. The clock on the stove tells me it's nearing 1 AM. I boil some water, make some tea, read a book. Daddy comes up the stairs. "She's okay, so I'm going to go pick her up now. You can go to sleep, you have school tomorrow." I did not go to sleep.

I hear them before I see them. Umma comes back stumbling through the door. I rush forward to catch her. I help her up the stairs, bring her clothes.



She sits on her bed and tells me, “The nurse brought me this hospital gown, but you needed to button up the sleeves. I held it up, and I’m sitting there, half naked, so confused because it didn’t have sleeves. I told the nurse, ‘I think I’m a little too out of it for this tonight’ and she came over and buttoned it up really quick, like I was a little kid. Haha.”

“They really shouldn’t have those types of gowns for delirious patients,” I say.

“I want to take a shower, you know, because I was at the hospital.” I help her to the bathroom, then wait outside laying on her side of the bed. The water stops and I hear two thuds.

“Umma, do you need help?” I call out. I go into the bathroom and she is supporting herself with both hands on the counter.

“Can you brush my hair? I’m having trouble balancing.” I brush the wet, fuzzy clumps carefully, from bottom to top. It goes quickly - her hair is short and really quite soft.

“You sure you don’t want to go into the medical field? You’re good in an emergency.”

“Oh, but I hate science. Maybe I’d do something like first response.”

She leans on me heavily as I carry her back to the bed. I turn out the light and leave her. I know she’s safe with her husband now and I’ve already done everything he can’t do.

The next morning, I explain it to DeeDee this way. “I was the one who made sure we got to the hospital, Daddy was the one who made sure we didn’t get in a car accident. I was so frantic and he was so calm. It takes two of us to make one of you.” DeeDee had single handedly called an ambulance when she was left alone with Umma a few months ago. The hospital trips weren’t infrequent at one time.

I sit curled up on my couch late at night studying korean flashcards. Two words keep coming up back to back, blending in my tired mind. To love, to carry, to love, to carry.



Oakland Mills High School, Howard County



Taking a Stand

Riya Seth

— — —

I could feel his hand twisting underneath my shirt. We were an hour into practice, and I could feel his sweat dripping onto me but couldn't comprehend what was going on. Looking around our crowded wrestling room, nobody seemed to notice us. After all, I was lucky enough to find a practice partner. Typically my gender—I was a girl in the oh-so-masculine sport of wrestling—was enough to scare away boys. Still, I decided to take action. I tugged his arm out from inside my shirt and moved it away. As the coach blew his whistle, we began wrestling again. But my partner was angry — instead of using our rehearsed moves, he picked me up and slammed me into the ground head first. I felt like I was experiencing whiplash from the hit. As I got up, my hands were shaking and I felt jittery and anxious, wanting to leave. Soon, practice was over and I ran into my dad's car. I was completely silent during the ride home, but internally, I kept questioning myself. I couldn't help thinking that I had imagined the entire event.

But when I came home and began unpacking my wrestling gear, a bubble burst inside of me. I began crying and was overtaken by my emotions. I opened up to my parents, but I still felt a whirlwind of hurt, shame, and anger. Later in the evening, I realized that I had chipped two of my teeth from the head-first hit. Luckily, I wasn't injured in any other way, but I felt angry about what I had experienced. So in an attempt to find some form of justice, I shared my experiences with several of my coaches. I trusted and respected these men, as they had mentored me and encouraged me to grow in the sport. I trusted that they would protect me and so I opened up meeting after meeting. But I kept hearing the same half-apologies, telling me they were sorry while simultaneously refusing to help me. I was told the boy would have to grope me again for any action to be taken. The process itself was dehumanizing, I felt like I was screaming out loud about my experiences but still wasn't being heard.

The worry remained with me, even as I started high school and switched to the new team. I was so committed to wrestling and wanted to be respected on my team, so I looked past many subtler issues. As I already felt isolated because of my gender, the idea of complaining did not appeal to me. I had built my identity around the sport, and doing anything that could possibly jeopardize my imagined future was not conceivable. However, some of the subtler issues that were present - things like coed changing and all types of "locker room talk," were actually pervasive and very serious. But I still stuck with the sport, holding onto hope that my experience in the sport would eventually improve.

Over time, that bright hope faded because I continued having negative experiences. One time, I was sent an inappropriate picture over social media by a fellow wrestler. I immediately reported the incident and the other wrestler even admitted to sending it. Surprisingly, I was



"I was told the boy would have to grope me again for any action to be taken."

stopped from going to tournaments where we were both supposed to attend, while he was allowed. I felt a deep sense of disappointment; my own team, the people who were supposed to be my family, just couldn't protect me.

Soon, the season ended and I felt a sense of relief; it was as though I could finally breathe. Over the break, I worked on my own personal development and processed some of the events that had happened to me. This gave me a lot of clarity on my role in these situations, and I was able to view these issues at a deeper level. I was in contact with other female wrestlers and I realized that my story, sadly, wasn't unique. At the same time, the world around me was evolving. I kept hearing brave women speak up about the harassment they had faced and I related so much to the stories of women like Christine Blasey Ford, who were repeatedly questioned for why they didn't speak up earlier. Similarly, I was so scared of facing further difficulties on my team and I truly felt conflicted about speaking up.

But once again, I decided to take action. I wrote up an email to send to my county Title 9 officer, who investigated sexual harassment claims. For two months, that email sat in my drafts folder. After weeks of debating with my family, I eventually decided to send it. This was one of the hardest decisions I had ever made, and I took the leap because I really wanted to fix the issues I saw. I didn't want any other girl to have to go through what I did. So I worked with the Title 9 investigator and I helped implement concrete changes at my school. I felt so empowered and it was like I had taken control of my story again.

By this time, I had realized that my experiences as a female in wrestling weren't uncommon. I wanted to understand how deep the issues of discrimination and harassment ran and so I methodically reached out to other high school female wrestlers. Girls that I had never met before opened up about their painful experiences with me. Many stories I heard were far worse than my own and I had to take time to process them. In doing so, I realized that these issues were so much larger than I had expected. Hearing the stories of other girls became the catalyst for me to work towards fixing the problems in wrestling; I knew that change needed to happen.

Although problems of harassment and discrimination are layered, simple changes on coed teams can help protect young athletes. Things like unlocking both genders' bathrooms/locker rooms, mandating sexual harassment training, setting clear guidelines for appropriate behavior with athletes, and having appropriate support staff (female coaches/ nurses to weigh in girls) are highly beneficial. Even "good" coaches and adults need structure to create a safe environment for all. So, I have been reaching out to leaders in wrestling associations, high schools, and county administration to establish these changes. This process will continue for months and years to come.



Realistically, I still worry about the ramifications of speaking up—I worry about college recommendations or being alienated in my own school. But I am very grateful for the teachers and mentors who have helped me find my voice. Above all, I am grateful to be able to help bring change in wrestling and other coed sports.



River Hill High School, Howard County



*Honorable Mention:
The Maryland Voices
Top 3 Award*

In Volume XI, I would like to personally recognize another beautifully crafted creative nonfiction piece. As such, I would like to award the Honorable Mention to the Maryland Voices Top 3 Award to

Jasmine Kwok from Centennial High School

Jasmine: congratulations on your accomplishment!



Walking Through Paint

Jasmine Kwok

— — —

Time was precious. Just within a few moments, magic was going to be captured. I couldn't miss it. Each night held a unique, once-in-a-lifetime spectacle. Missing one would leave an unrepairable hole in my delicate blanket of stars.

I sprinted out the front door, my feet a rapid blur of neon colors, clashing with the ever darkening sky. Golden hour was underway. The sun's warm embrace glinted through a web of intricate branches that were ornamentations alongside cotton candy clouds. The once gray, bleak coldness of the winter season had a new tint of amber that glimmered amidst the snow—an affectionate touch of a homely colorant.

Arriving at my destination, I was weary but content. This was an odd little place, fooling bypassers with its barren trees and abandoned benches. Anyone that came by this seemingly insignificant section of dead shrubs would carry on with their day without so much of a second thought. No one gave it the chance. I didn't either, once upon a time.

However, tonight was different. It didn't take a wild imagination to catch the shifting shades of the Earth's ceiling. Electrifying, almost blinding, crimsons and fuschias bled away subdued cerulean blues. Fiery streaks glided over the still water, reaching out to the land. Patches of dirt and tangled heaps became victim to the sun's everlasting glow, adding that final touch that pieced together a mosaic of nature's artistry. I never knew the sky was capable of such wonders. I was out of place, witnessing something far too beautiful for my eyes.

There was something strikingly recognizable. It reminded me of a painting, one with rather large strokes of bright colors with little control.

I suppose that's exactly what it was.

"Just pour it all on. Don't worry about mistakes. There's no way to mess up." My uncle Bo-Bee encouraged me. His basement had been transformed into a craft studio, with plastic wrap settled on the floor and long white tables propping up containers of brushes and popsicle sticks. Boxes of stuffed animals and trophies were tucked away in the corners so that they wouldn't become potential tripping hazards: definitely a precaution my family needed.

With trembling hands, I cautiously spilled a bit of orange. Nonetheless, it gushed out rapidly, pushing the shimmering gold off the edge of the canvas. I groaned. I guess I found the one way to mess up.

"It's okay. You have a lot of paint left over. Take your time!" Bo-Bee assured.

My canvas was chaotic. Colors began morphing together, not enough to make brown, but enough to form designs and ombre patterns, covering the blank, coarse slate with eager paint that appeared to be rushing towards a destination.



As I tilted the heavily coated square, the paint ran down freely, creating waterfalls on each side. What a waste, I thought, taking mercy on the poor paint that just couldn't stay on top but rather settled in sad puddles around the canvas. I needed to take an even slower approach. My tilting became so subtle, the originally excited paint moved at snail's pace, sluggishly filling in the spaces.

Bo-Bee laughed at my overly timid approach, "Don't overthink it. Just let it flow. It's already coming together."

I suppose it was, in the most obscure and abstract manner feasible. It was almost impossible to distinguish a pattern with all the colorful swirls and designs. I closed my eyes and tried envisioning a moment that I wanted to replicate - somehow, someday. Yet, I was met with a bleak and sorrowful image from these past months alone.

"Wait, let me get something for you." Bo-Bee hurried upstairs.

He came back down with an already vibrant and saturated canvas, "Take this painting home as well. I made it a couple weeks ago." Upon closer examination, I saw how the background transitioned from a jet black, to a deep blue, then to a flaming pink. A cherry blossom tree rested upon a steep cliff, overlooking the vast night sky. In the center, brilliant and clear, was a full moon. Or maybe it was the sun going down to sleep. Either way, I gazed at the small wonderland in awe. Why would he want to give something so precious away?

Reading my mind, Bo-Bee explained, "I don't have anywhere to put this. I knew how much you'd love it. It would be a great addition to your room." He set it down by the couch.

I crouched down to get an even closer look. I noticed there was a stray blue spot sticking out of the smooth black background. The wheels in my brain started turning. What was the meaning? It obviously had to be intentional.

"Why so intense?" My uncle asked.

"What is this blue dot?" I pointed at the small but very visible speck. Every aspect of art has a purpose, even the most miniscule of details.

He took off his glasses, squinting with all his might, "What the- what dot?"

"That one! Right there!" That little speck was longing for attention, seeming to grow more animated with each passing second.

"Oh." Bo-Bee guffawed, "Yeah, my hand was a little shaky there. It's okay though! It adds character." He slowly got up, his bones cracking with each movement. "I'm old."

I could hear my mother wheezing in the background from laughing so hard, "How..." she gasped for air, "do you keep ruining these?" Tears were streaming down her face at this point, "First, you blow dry all the paint off my canvas, and now this." It was safe to say my uncle had an endearing habit of adding his own unique touch on everyone's paintings.

"Hey," Bo-Bee chuckled, "I call it perfect imperfections."

"Don't worry, Bo-Bee; this is stunning. The blue dot is my favorite part." I patted his arm, trying to contain my laughter.



That one work of art was enough to inspire me to finish my own, especially with its accidental freckle. I, purposely, added a tint of sad blue, along with jubilant yellow, watching as they mixed and dispersed. I was missing something. I took another glance at the hot pink crackling at the bottom of Bo-Bee's painting.

I fearlessly poured a huge glob of the almost glowing pink in the center, allowing it to collide with the now seemingly muted colors. The pink sent shock and electricity through the entire canvas and slowly but surely, my painting came to life. The colors suddenly grew more animated and lively. They were moving on their own, yet I was still in complete control. I lost myself to the art, using creative emotion to guide me. I took a step back, examining the beautiful mess I made. Perfect. Even the puddles on the sides formed intricate designs of their own as paint continued dripping down on the plastic wrap.

"Wow. That is something." Bo-Bee said in awe. "What was the inspiration?"

"I have no idea." There was something almost recognizable about my creation. I could almost make out an image. I was probably hallucinating—with a painting so abstract, it was pointless to perceive any cohesive picture.

The darkened sky looming outside reminded me that the hour to return home was near. I would have to leave my precious painting here to dry for the weekend. I felt an emotional string attaching me to my sloppy but eccentric masterpiece. I didn't want to leave without it. My hands were marked with hints of whites and greens and my shirt had a splotch of orange splattered on the center. I had art plastered onto my skin, as if my painting was trying to cling to me in any shape or form.

We made it outside just in time to catch a last glimpse of the sunset. The lavender purples had become tainted with indigo ink. It was pretty, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I held Bo-Bee's painting tightly to my chest, securing some mysterious secret I couldn't afford to spill. Even the gentle beauty of the sun's journey to slumber wasn't comparable. The wind was picking up and I found myself wanting to protect it even more. The sunset's impermanent beauty couldn't take it away from me.

The car ride home was long and draining. Nostalgic music played softly through my earbuds and I leaned my head against the window, wistfully envisioning happier, brighter days. I gazed at Bo-Bee's painting next to me, absorbing every inch. I could see the different brush strokes and textures - all these individual touches that merged together to create an artwork of hopeful dreams. Especially underneath the dim car light, it looked particularly serene.

After an hour-long trip, my parents and I trudged up the steps to our somber house. When I entered my room, it felt unsettlingly daunting. I frantically turned on my light only to find everything as I had left it. Yet, the colors seemed washed out and faded. My teal walls were pale and my usually rich, indigo mural was dim. Bo-Bee's painting appeared to exist in a realm of its own, contrasting dramatically with my room's lifeless, dreary taints. I hid it away from my view, trying to recapture the lost vividness that the room held before. It was a vain attempt. Joy was draining right in front of me. Even my safeplace betrayed me. I realized that I had created an illusion of brilliancy for all these months.



*"I had art plastered onto my skin,
as if my painting was trying to cling
to me in any shape or form."*

The following days morphed into gloomy and lethargic blobs. I can't really recall what exactly occupied my days—probably a mixture of school, sleep, and silence. Colors were continuing to fade. Even the warm tint of my skin was on an escapade. My parents noticed how pale I had become.

"Go walk outside. You need some fresh air." My mother advised.

"Take it easy." My father chimed in.

My strolls around the neighborhood were therapeutic but slowly losing their spark. I passed by the same houses, same trees, same streetlights, and same people. My days were on endless repeat. I needed something, anything, to free me from this loop.

There was a lake nestled behind my house, quite a pretty one at that. I went there occasionally to run but even that felt redundant. There were only two different routes you could take and they both eventually brought you back to the same spot.

However, I never once went during the evening in fears it would become too dark to find my way back. There was a secluded area I had to pass before I returned to the main trail. Darkness and seclusion were not exactly my ideal cup of tea.

Fortunately, my lust for some sort of abnormality egged me on.

I never noticed how depending on the time of day, the lake's colors completely transformed. The sky shifted from innocent blues to mysterious magentas, the grass a washed out green to an alluring emerald. It was almost unrecognizable. Tones contrasted one another whilst others mixed to form new shades that didn't exist elsewhere. The setting sun's glow brought warmth back to my face and I was basking under its golden spell. Soon enough, however, the gold was pushed away with vivacious orange tints.

I figured that after going down to the lake during nightfall multiple times, the magic would eventually fade away. Yet every time I took that small detour that led me through the isolated forest, I was met with a new, wondrous sight and left as starstruck and breathless as the first time. It took a while before I finally realized just how alike this fantasy was to something else I held closely to my heart.

I made my way down the gravel path, my silhouette travelling along with me. My bright sweatshirt clashed with the towering trees. They were staring at me menacingly, luring me into the night with an eerie silence that pierced through the air. There was something peculiar about tonight. The atmosphere was tense, as if something were about to burst in a rage. A towering



shade appeared to encompass me in a bubble and I felt I was part of a precious secret away from the common eye. It was strikingly akin to my obsessive protection over Bo-Bee's painting. Only this time, I was the secret being guarded.

There was an outlet of land that appeared to be glimmering, like a tiny world away from the forest trail. There was no one there. Not that the trail itself was empty of people. It was actually quite crowded. Families walked hastily by, runners wheezed heavily as they rounded their second lap, and children zoomed past on their bikes. Yet, that small plot remained untouched. I hesitated for a moment. There was a serene, mystical aura of peace that lingered around the yellowed grass and murky shoreline, one I did not wish to disturb. However, a sentimental echo was calling towards me, drawing me in. I stumbled down the narrow dirt path, almost tripping over branches and rocks. Slowly, my gaze shifted upwards.

My eyes became overwhelmed with absolute magic.

The lake was on fire. The wispy clouds reflected so perfectly in the water that it was as if there was no water at all, only smoky streaks that appeared to rush over your head and below your feet. If this entire scene was flipped upside down, it would look identical. At the very center of the treeline was the most brilliant coral I've ever seen, irradiating the entire sky. It shot out thin rays of ember, just enough to accent the silver blue with fiery passion. Most of the fire stayed in the core, collecting heat and vibrancy, exuding dynamic and energetic shades that made everything alive.

"The wispy clouds reflected so perfectly in the water that it was as if there was no water at all, only smoky streaks that appeared to rush over your head and below your feet."



I was so disconnected from reality, I almost felt dreary. My steps going towards the lake were heavy and the air became thick.

I was walking through paint.

What lay in front of me was simply art, a combination of the world's most whimsical colors to illuminate an everyday occurrence while narrowing it down to the perspective of one girl. I was merely a sliver of the painting that was the sky and lake. Although the leaves had fallen from the trees, leaving behind a desolate landscape, I couldn't help but feel that was all part of the masterpiece. The setting sun cast a vibrant hue upon even the duller foliage, bringing to life what was once thought to be dead.

I sat down on the cold and wet ground to be as close to the water as possible. The reflection caught my eye. The water's wavering nature interlaced the radiant tinge from the sun and clouds.

There was something oddly familiar about all of this... My thoughts traveled back to my first painting—the chaos of the colors, the splash of pink, the swirling liveliness. That's when it hit me.

My art was all right here. This was the moment I wanted to capture. It just hadn't existed until now.

My heart skipped a beat and my eyes flickered towards the heap of tangled branches. I began noticing their textures and different shades. I remembered the puddles of paint that dripped down from the sides of the canvas. Here they were in real form—the fallen trees and sticks that we ignore but without them, the sunset wouldn't be half as fascinating.

I turned back towards the lake, wanting to soak in every last second of the sunset. Far out in the distance, I saw a blue heron resting on top of a thick branch that reached over the water. It was standing almost completely still, as if it were part of a picture. Even Bo-Bee's accidental blue dot found its place here. I smiled fondly at the slightly dysfunctional but stunning bird. It was the perfect final touch to a magical moment. As quickly as I saw it, the heron spread its wings and flew over the lake, brushing the water as it soared by.

The fire slowly faded, leaving ashy coral streaks behind. Tonight's allurements were coming to a close. It already felt like a hazy memory, a nostalgic capture of beauty that seemed to simply be a dream.

I walked back home in a euphoric cloud knowing I had multiple sunsets awaiting me every night. One was practically right in my backyard, hidden away behind the forests, coloring the sky with its majestic touch. As for the other ones, well, all I had to do was open my bedroom door and there they were, ethereal as ever.

My spirits were soaring and I was glowing inside. My bubbly happiness made me oblivious to the freezing cold which was made blatantly obvious when I arrived at my front door.

I skipped in with my rosy cheeks and bright eyes. My parents were sitting on the couch, watching the news.

"How was it?"

A smile spread over my face, "Magical."

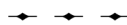


"Far out in the distance, I saw a blue heron resting on top of a thick branch that reached over the water. It was standing almost completely still, as if it were part of a picture. Even Bo-Bee's accidental blue dot found its place here."

Immediately afterwards, I ventured to my room. I took Bo-Bee's painting out from behind my bookshelf. Its colors were more radiant than ever but this time, my room wasn't so gloomy in comparison. In fact, I was surrounded by flamboyant colors wherever I looked, accented with my blanket of stars that hung fondly above. For the first time in forever, I went to bed eager for tomorrow.

Over time, my walls were decorated with more imaginative, blindingly colorful paintings. Whenever I felt lonely, they would flood rainbows into my mind, guarding me in their little secret. The lake still awaits me, preparing a new scintillating beauty to witness. They promise me that youthful hope will remain no matter how much life changes for the worst. Like the everlasting spell of flux adding a different shade to each sundown, my paintings express unique parts of myself that words can't explain.

I wonder what new memories—new senses, new colors, new emotions—my next one will bear. Most of all, I couldn't wait to see the sunsets bring them to life.



Centennial High School, Howard County



High Merit

Each of the following pieces demonstrates the beauty of creative nonfiction and High Merit craft, which is a high honor that calls for celebration. Relax in your favorite place and let yourself be taken on a journey by the voices of Maryland high school students.



Urdu or Urdu don't

Lamia Ayaz



"Assalamualaikum, auntie!" I called, sitting on a neighbor's front porch. I had just seen an elderly Pakistani acquaintance, dressed in shalwar kameez, hobbling up the street on her Walker.

"Walaikumassalam," she croaked before asking me a question.

In our culture, saying hello to others is required. I was just expecting a quick response, but she asked me something in Urdu, our shared tongue. Flustered at the prospect of this sudden conversation, I paused and strained more closely to her unintelligible speech.

She continued to speak gravelly, and again I flushed and leaned in, willing myself to pick up on a few words. No use.

I tried to explain what we were doing in broken Urdu: "Hummay wifi nehe cam kersektihay [We wifi isn't working]."

When she persisted in questioning me, apparently energized by my attempt, I defeatedly admitted that I spoke very little Urdu.

To my relief, she turned away and continued on her walk. I couldn't decipher the expression on her etched face, but she must have either understood me or simply gave up. My craning stiffness dissolved and I reflected on the brief interaction, face still warm and breathing rapid.

That was so embarrassing; I wish I spoke Urdu. What kind of Pakistani-American girl doesn't even know her own language?

I worry. A LOT. I try to be a good daughter, sister, student, friend, and human. I always strive to do my best. I aim to get 100% on EVERYTHING. But this moment was a clear, unwelcome reminder of my imperfections.

Bitterly, I remembered what my mother always told me when I complained about my poor Urdu skills: "Religion comes first; being Pakistani and speaking Urdu comes second. As long as you have religion, you can never lose your identity."

I sighed and refocused on my laptop screen, the English words glaring back at me, taunting me. With everything I could muster, I willed myself to believe what she has always encouraged me to believe: being unable to speak my native language fluently doesn't define me.



*"With everything I could muster,
I willed myself to believe
what she has always
encouraged me to believe: being
unable to speak my native
language fluently doesn't
define me."*



Howard High School, Howard County



Help?

Michelle Bank

— — —

"If anyone is interested in joining Mr. Kranz's jazz band, the sign up sheet is right on the door." Cool! I took my pencil and scrawled my name. No other drummers had signed up. Good, I didn't have any competition. Audition time? A week away. No problem! I had plenty of experience from middle and elementary school jazz bands and even though I didn't have a drum set, I was confident that I could learn it by the time auditions rolled around. I heaved open the band room door and scampered off to my next class, excited to have the chance to be back on the drum throne, sticks in my hands, clanging away on the ride cymbal.

Three days passed in a blur. With school assignments, cross country practices, club meetings, and hanging out with friends, I hadn't even had time to print out the audition music! I clicked the PDF link and the music started loading... wait a second. The music didn't have any notes! It gave the placement accents and fills, but other than that, there was nothing. All it said was "Quarter Note = 220, 2 Feel/Brushes." What the heck did that mean?

I went to Youtube for answers and looked up a drum cover of the song. The drummer in the video started to tap and brush the snare drum with a pair of metal wire fan shaped brushes to the beat of the song. Okay... I was definitely going to need some practice.

Soon enough, the weekend was over. Auditions were fast approaching and I didn't know what to do. I asked my band teacher, Mr. Matchim if I could stay after school to practice on the drum set, and he agreed. Okay, I was all set. I watched the video a couple more times and felt better. I could do this! It was fine. Things were fine! There was nothing to be worried about! I never needed help on band assignments. Heck, I never even had to practice! I was a great drummer and I didn't need anything to help me get into some high school jazz band.

I heaved open the door to the band room. There it was. The drum set. I sat down on the throne. This was where I belonged. Mr. Matchim was talking to a student over by the podium at the center of the room. Oh no. I started to get nervous. What if he started judging me? I didn't know what I was doing! I just had some stupid Youtube video and useless sheet music! I closed my eyes. No crying. Not today, no sir I was going to figure this out! I got out my phone, put in one earbud and pulled up the video.

I fumbled with the brushes, trying to mimic the movements of the dude in the video: flick of the wrist, constant movement with the right hand, accent on the cymbal. I would ignore the kick drum for now; one thing at a time. Ugh! It sounded laughably bad. I stopped. What was I doing? I paused the video, rewinded, and replayed. Nope, still didn't get it. Pause, rewind, replay. I had to keep trying. Pause, rewind, replay, pause, rewind, replay, pause-



"Do you need help?" I looked up. Mr. Matchim was looking at me.

"What?" I took out my earbud.

"Do you. Need help?" I sat there. Dumbfounded. No one had ever said that seriously to me, but I knew that Mr. Matchim was anything but joking as he stared at me from across the band room. I held back tears. It seemed like he had heard my thoughts that were screaming for someone, anyone to help me, even when I was too afraid to admit that I was in desperate need of assistance.

"Yeah." I hung my head. "I don't really know what I'm doing."

"Okay, I'm a little busy right now, but Mr. Kranz knows a lot about drum set. Here, I'll go get him for you." He walked into his office and came out with another man. "This is Mr. Kranz, he's going to be in charge of the jazz band you're auditioning for."

I nodded, holding in a sob. I managed to keep it together while Mr. Kranz instructed me through the piece, showing me how to play the part and explaining that it wasn't as hard as I was making it out to be. I don't know what he must have thought of me; I was obviously holding back tears. After a few minutes I told him I had to go to cross country practice and he assured me that I would do fine in auditions tomorrow.

I shoved through the heavy door and started walking to the locker room. No one else was in the hall. My walk turned to a run and I slammed open the two sets of double doors and sank to the maroon tiled floor. The locker room was abandoned. I put my face in my hands and started to sob. Why couldn't I have just asked for help? I could have gotten through this whole ordeal without making a fool of myself in front of Mr. Matchim and Mr. Kranz. I vowed to myself that I would never do it again, that next time I would not be afraid to ask for help. I wiped my face with my sleeve, got off of the floor, and went on with my day. Twenty-four hours later, I nailed the audition.

I ended up breaking that promise I made to myself. There would be many times when I was afraid to seek help, but I always did and was never ashamed. I will always be thankful to my band teachers. They did more than teach me music. Within the first couple of weeks of knowing them, they taught me that needing assistance is nothing to be ashamed of. Asking for help doesn't prove that you are substandard or stupid, it shows that you are willing to learn, grow, and become the best that you can be.

"I vowed to myself that I would never do it again, that next time I would not be afraid to ask for help."



"Asking for help doesn't prove that you are substandard or stupid, it shows that you are willing to learn, grow, and become the best that you can be."



Centennial High School, Howard County



People Aren't Time Capsules

Isabel Choi

— — —

Sometimes, in the afternoon, when the sun peeks behind my sheer curtains, and I can hear the faint sounds of the breeze laugh in between tree branches, I light my lavender-scented candle for the full effect. It was the scent my little aunt, my dad's sister, used to spray around my childhood home. It was the scent of the “노리방,” [no-ri-baang] (translated to “playroom” in English)--the playroom that used to be my safe haven, my castle, and everything in between.

On days when I feel a little too alone in the world, I like to revisit the warmth of the memories I have playing in the no-ri-baang, because my heart feels full when I'm brought back to my bossy seven-year-old self.

Until the first grade, I lived with my parents, uncle, aunts, and grandmother at a red brick house--the one with Christmas lights strung year-round and the little cherry tree in the backyard. It was the house where my little brother Michael and cousin Yulia were born--only four days apart from each other. Growing up, they were always treated like twins, and I was given the responsibility to take care of them. But really, they were my daily playmates.

Each morning, we'd wake up and wonder what we would become that day. An agency of super-secret spies? Doctors performing a challenging surgery? Potion-brewing witches? When we entered the playroom, options were only limited by our childish imaginations. We'd make up fantastical backstories and fight gruesome monsters, and at the end of the day, when our family came back from a long day at work, we'd tell them of our great adventures. It was our favorite part.

But everything changed when my parents decided they wanted to move out of the home I had grown such a fondness for. It wasn't until the actual moving date that I realized what exactly I was leaving behind. I was seven years old, but I still understood the feeling of emptiness--perhaps a little too well. I remember that day, after I had taken a warm shower in the new apartment, I cried for home. I hated the blank plaster walls and I felt like a foreigner in my own room. It was so strange knowing that tomorrow I wouldn't wake up to see Yulia lying next to me in our shared or hear the morning bustle of my aunts getting ready to leave for work at 6AM.

And yet, that tomorrow became today, and then the next day, and the next. With each tomorrow that passed, I found myself adapting to my new climate and making new friends. I found more subjects to study and more hobbies to try, because at some point, my heart decided



that there was simply no space left for feelings of emptiness anymore. And soon, those seemingly insignificant tomorrows surmounted to a gargantuan ten years.

"I found more subjects to study and more hobbies to try, because at some point, my heart decided that there was simply no space left for feelings of emptiness anymore."

In those ten years, so many things have changed: bodies, minds, motives. It all became apparent when I stepped into the playroom of my childhood home for the first time in about a year. The white walls were now a shade of pastel purple with posters of boy bands, and the collection of stuffed animals that used to sit on the shelf was replaced by various textbooks and canvases. There was a wooden desk that expanded on an entire side wall with a computer, and redyelloworangeblue pens sprawled everywhere on top. The green, watercolor-stained carpet that I remembered too vividly was nowhere to be seen. The only thing that remained the same were the flowery sheer curtains that hung on the window, and subsequently, the thin layer of dust that covered the windowsill. It was funny how a single room could evoke the sentiments of nostalgia that I held in the crevices of my heart for so long.

The playroom wasn't a place to play anymore. It was a studio of study and expression. I understood that while I had changed over the years, my little cousin Yulia did too--for the playroom was a reflection of her growth. She was growing up and it seemed like I never even noticed. I recalled brief moments that I had with her from the past ten years. Each time she reached her hand out to me, I pushed her away. I told her I didn't want to play the board game, or that I already had plans with friends, so I didn't have time to go shopping with her. It was my fault. I realized that it was just my stubborn mindset that refused to believe that she was changing just as fast as I was. I didn't want to accept that my little baby cousin was becoming more mature, and it was selfish of me to assume that she would always be my blissful reminder of childhood. But people aren't time capsules, and I should have known better.



That weekend I spent at my grandmother's house was one of the best I had with my family. We started a 2000 piece puzzle together and laughed over dinner, like I was just seven years old again. Before I left, I handed Yulia a letter, because I wasn't brave enough to say aloud all the things that I bottled up in the years we spent apart. I said, "Don't open it yet. Read it after I leave." I was afraid it was too late for forgiveness, but I wanted to tell her that I was sorry anyway.

A few months later, I came back to my grandmother's house to celebrate the new year. I walked into the "playroom" and saw the card I had written and decorated displayed on Yulia's bulletin board. My letter was the single thing that was pinned on it. That's when I knew. It's never too late. Forgiveness is always enough.

"I realized that it was just my stubborn mindset that refused to believe that she was changing just as fast as I was."



Centennial High School, Howard County



Dissolving Borders

June Dodson



*But I knew you, Dancin' in your Levi's, drunk under a streetlight, I-
Take exit 21B for Clarksville.*

My GPS interrupted Taylor Swift's song Cardigan to give me directions for Centennial High School, where my brother had club lacrosse practice. The exit spit my 2000 Volkswagen Beetle into a foggy rural landscape.

Picking up K.J. half an hour away from our house was totally not how I wanted to spend one of my last evenings of the summer, but my dad forced me because he had an "Old Man" lacrosse game of his own and my mom was out of town.

Dread started pooling in my stomach as I neared the school's athletic facility. K.J. and I had never been close. Our rooms may be next to each other, but they are different countries with fortified borders dividing them. We were natural recluses in our annexes, so we rarely ventured onto common ground besides the bathroom we shared. Our lives were so separated that I didn't know a single friend of his, a video game he played, or even what general classes he took. At the time, I couldn't remember the last time we had been in the same vicinity of each other alone. But alas, that evening was the night our borders would fall.

I pulled into Centennial High School's parking lot and waited for K.J. to arrive from the field. Peering out the driver's side window, I saw that the sky was turning into a sunset ombre of orange and purple while the ground was blanketed in fog, giving off an eerie foreshadowing of the night about to occur. Lost in the dread of my chore, I jumped in my seat when I heard an abrupt knock on my window. It was K.J., visibly exhausted from practice and dripping with sweat. When the passenger door opened, my nostrils were immediately offended by a concentrated teenage boy funk that made one's eyes water.

Rolling down the window, I asked tentatively, "How was practice?"

With eyes transfixed to his phone, he replied, "Fine. Let's go to 7-Eleven. I need more water," while folding his six-foot frame into the tiny passenger seat.

"Do you know the way, or should I plug it into Google Maps?"

"Do you know the way, or should I plug it into Google Maps?"

"Uhh yeah. It's to the right."

K.J. was not right about that direction, or any one after that. After multiple questionable turns down barely-paved streets, we found ourselves on a bumpy road where on the right, there was pasture and broken wooden fences and the left was lined with old brown houses. Pickup trucks lined the streets, mocking my poor Beetle.



"Our rooms may be next to each other, but they are different countries with fortified borders dividing them."

Turning my head slightly to look at K.J., I said, "I thought you knew where you were going," with a drop of acid in my voice.

"Well then plug it into the GPS," he said, still looking at his phone.

"I'm driving. You do it," I told him.

After a minute or so of K.J. tapping my phone screen and then his own, he told me it wasn't not working.

"What's not working? Are there no 7-Elevens nearby?"

"The GPS can't find our location and nothing is loading in. If you didn't have a boomer phone we wouldn't be lost," he replied. The word "boomer" is K.J.'s favorite insulting term.

"Excuse me? You were supposed to give me directions! All you've done is get us lost and make my car reek with BO." Annoyance was already bubbling inside me from K.J.'s navigational incompetence; I thought about what thirty minutes in the car with him would do to me. This was why we never talked; it usually ended in fighting.

We retraced our way back to Centennial High School. Once again in the parking lot, we tried again and got a faint signal. We agreed to pick up dinner at the only restaurant we agreed on: Five Guys. K.J. set up the GPS and we were on our way. However, the GPS stopped giving us directions half a mile out. K.J. figured that we lost signal again, so the GPS couldn't track our location. Panicking on how we were going to get home, I pulled over and messed with our phones until I came to the same conclusion. We called our parents, but the calls didn't go through. The sun had only a few orange lines left in its horizon. The fog had become dense and rain began to fall. I looked at my dashboard and realized that my engine light was on and my gas light would turn on dangerously soon.

We were lost.

We were alone.

We had little gas.

We were in the dark.

We were far from home.

"What the hell are we supposed to do? I don't remember how to get back on I-95," I said with panic creeping up my throat. I was trying to blink back tears but failing.



"Well, the blue line on Google Maps is still here. It'll lead us to Five Guys if we use it like a map. June, chill out." K.J. zoomed in on the blue line on Google Maps and looked for the road name that matched the sign ahead of us.

We traced the blue line, street name by street name, until we made our way out of the rural territory and found ourselves on a main road. This was exactly what my grandparents were talking about when they said that technology can be a crutch. Google Maps supported my navigation in every car ride I've taken besides the ones to my boyfriend's house. Now that it's application was as useful as a foldout map, I was hobbling along the roads trying not to fall. My frustration gradually accumulated from the dire situation and K.J.'s lack of map reading skills. My knuckles were white from gripping the wheel with an aggravated fervor. After several misread signs and possibly illegal U turns, we made it to the string of exits we could take; one of them would take us home while the others would spin us into further lostness.

"Which exit K.J.? I need to know now," I demanded impatiently.

"I don't know. Google Maps doesn't list the name of the exit. Judging by relative distance to the last road we took, it's either the one coming up or the one after that."

Between the sheets of rain cascading down and my insufficient windshield wipers, it was difficult to make out the names on the huge green exit signs. While trying to read them, I missed both of the candidates entirely and had to circle back around at the next traffic light.

K.J. and I looked at each other in the red glow of the traffic light. I realized that it wasn't frustration mounting inside me, but fear. On his face, I saw something rarely casted on me: pity and determination. On my own, I shed my irritable expression and showed him my vulnerable one.

"K.J., I'm scared. What if we take the wrong exit?" Tears were brimming my eyes again.

My brother put his sweaty hand on my shoulder and said, "Calm down. It's all okay. If we take the wrong exit, then we will figure it out. I read mini-maps for video games all the time, so I got this. Let's just get Five Guys okay?"

Taking in a deep, shaky breath, I said, "Okay. Let's do this."

We were able to decipher the exit names the second time around. One of the exits said Columbia Pike, which was the only one that sounded familiar, so we took it and prayed for the best. It was raining so hard that we could only go thirty miles an hour on the highway, but I was too shaken to go faster anyhow. The fear inside me dripped like acid along the sides of my stomach, emulating the rain running down my car windows.

While I was contemplating the likelihood of getting into a car accident, K.J. suddenly exclaimed, "June! There's a sign for Laurel!" pointing to a sign claiming that Laurel was a number of miles away. This sign gave us the relief of knowing we were truly on our way home. At this revelation, the fog seemed to dissipate slightly and the raindrops looked to be dancing across the window at our success instead of menacingly pounding against our melancholy.

Elated at being on the right track, we were finally able to laugh at the circumstances in which we found ourselves that night. These were the circumstances God put us into to finally begin talking. Inching our way across the dark highway in pouring rain, K.J. and I started talking



" The fear inside me dripped like acid along the sides of my stomach, emulating the rain running down my car windows. "

about how he wished he could go to St. Vincent Pallotti High School instead of Mount Saint Joseph because my school had girls. He also confessed that he didn't want to go into the military despite our dad's hopes and plans. I got to give him sisterly advice about not needing a girlfriend to be happy and how dad pushed the same goals on me as well until I started to ignore his pleas. We bonded over shared annoyances between our parents and told each other funny stories about friends. My tears from laughing washed away my terror-concentrated ones from before. For the first time, I felt like I knew the person I'd grown up next to nearly my entire life.

When my gas light turned on, I saw an exit for Silver Spring and eagerly took it. We were finally on familiar roads and saw common landmarks such as the local car dealerships, Target, and mostly importantly, a Shell gas station. At long last, after a two-hour car ride that was supposed to be thirty minutes, we reached the heavenly destination of Five Guys, where we landed a parking spot right in front. Those were the best tasting burgers K.J. and I have ever tasted.

Months later, K.J. and I breach each other's rooms every day to talk and play video games. We go on long walks and get into heated discussions about anything from which Marvel movie is better to the effects of moral relativism versus objective morality in society. We often go on drives together to get out of the house; however, we don't go too far without assurance of a phone signal. That rainy summer night dissolved the boundaries between K.J. and I. Being forced to work together under alarming conditions allowed us to reach out across the chasm between us, and we recognized that we didn't want to let go even after the danger was over. The roads we traveled on helped us build a bridge to each other's worlds we hadn't known existed before, which is now often trodden upon and deeply cherished.



*" My tears from laughing
washed away my terror-
concentrated ones from before.
For the first time, I felt like I
knew the person I'd grown up
next to nearly my entire life. "*



St. Vincent Pallotti High School, Prince George's County



More Than Taste

Taylor Donoldson



The hypnotic rays of the sunset peeked through my window blinds, casting an orange glow - almost like an angel was present. The light shone onto my eyes, disturbing my slumber. I had been asleep for most of the morning, catching up on the sleep I had lost the night before. I sat up to stretch, then I spotted a brown plastic bag laying on my desk. Legs still weak from napping, I stood up and sluggishly walked towards the bag to inspect it. Aha! I realized my suspicions were correct as I hastily removed the container from the bag. I removed the lid and realized I struck gold! In front of me were eight pieces of delicately crafted sushi. The warm glow in the room gave the sushi a halo effect as it reflected off the shiny seaweed.

I got a sense of nostalgia as I marveled at the dish in front of me. The attention to detail reminded me of when my great grandmother Yuri Hata would spend hours folding origami cranes, each one a work of art. My memories of her were quite fuzzy. I had previously asked my dad what she was like because a part of me wanted to know. I had no explanation for this feeling - I just knew that I had to learn more after I had been gifted some of her masterful paper cranes. I felt a connection to her because I was so interested in Japanese culture. We were similar in that way! At least that's what my impression was of her at the time.

The biggest shock was what my dad told me about her.

"She was in an internment camp?!?" I unexpectedly shouted, not fully believing it. My dad nodded slowly, clearly stunned by my sudden outburst. I put my hand over my mouth, not sure why I had that reaction. I had read a memoir about internment camps before, but I never once considered that someone so close to me could go through that experience. In 'Farewell to Manzanar' I had read how being in that camp tore the girl's family apart and made her lose her culture in the process. How could Yuri have had such a different experience? She seemed so in touch with her identity. That's when my dad dropped the next bomb.

"She didn't teach her children any Japanese."

My eyes widened again in pure shock. I felt like I was back at square one. It was almost like I didn't know anything about her. I asked my dad to elaborate. What he said back to me was eerily similar to the girl's experience in that memoir. Yuri was the same age I am now when she was in the internment camps. She also tried distancing herself from her culture after that experience. She spoke English as often as she could and decided to not teach her kids Japanese. I tried to respond, but could feel my dry throat tense up. I stared at the floor silently. I had nothing to say.



I wasted no time picking the sushi up, careful to not unravel the delicate roll. I grabbed a soy sauce packet and ignored the wasabi and ginger. I tore it open, letting its contents spill into the container. I dipped the sushi into the soy sauce, making sure to apply just the right amount. I took a bite and the fresh fish melted in my mouth, while the seaweed and rice complimented it splendidly. As I savored it everything was right for just a moment. It's funny because no one would expect me to like sushi. I am famous for having a very particular palate. I smiled to myself as I took another bite, and I thought about why I loved sushi so much. It kind of reminded me of my great grandmother in a way. I felt her spirit and love with each bite. After I finished, I compared myself to her. I reflected on what my dad had told me, and I came to a realization. It was clear as day that my great grandmother attempted to run from her culture. Interestingly enough, I was trying to find it.

*"The hypnotic rays of the sunset
peeked through my window blinds,
casting an orange
glow - almost like an angel was
present."*



*"It was clear as day that my
great grandmother attempted
to run from her culture.
Interestingly enough,
I was trying to find it."*



Wilde Lake High School, Howard County



Bypassing the Visible

Rayven Francillon



A distinct voice cut across the voice audio of *The Great Gatsby*.

"This character, Tom Buchanan. What are some of his character traits?" the voice said. His shoes clicked until he finally made it to the front of the room. Turning to face us, his legs bent until he was comfortably perched on a stool. He widened his eyes, urging us to answer.

"He is obnoxious," a girl from the front row said.

"Very good. What else?"

The room was so silent that I could hear the subtle raindrops falling outside. I knew exactly what answer he was looking for, but being one of the two black students in class, I couldn't bring myself to say it. It would draw too much attention to the difference that alienated me from everybody else. He finally gave up, pulled one of the books off the front desk, opened it, and scanned the page.

Finding the quote he was looking for, he read aloud from the book, "'Have you read 'The Rise of the Colored Empires' by this man Goddard?... Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be — will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved.'"

Closing the book, he looked up at our class, awaiting an answer. He looked directly at me. His eyes communicated that I clearly knew the answer. Though possibly unintentional, I still felt the pressure. My heart raced inside of my chest. I was almost sure people could hear it beat. Faces turned to stare at me and Savannah. Their eyes pried into my deepest memories. My cheeks began to burn before I had to end the embarrassment.

"He's racist," I tried to say as calmly as I could.

His face lit up. This was exactly the answer he was searching for.

"Right. He's racist," he said.

I sank down in my seat feeling humiliated. His mouth continued to elaborate on the topic further.

But I heard nothing. My thoughts consumed me fully.

Almost every student in the room had racially discriminated against me before. Most of them had a lack of experience and education, which explains the countless n-word encounters (all starting in the second grade). Making me feel uncomfortable was their passion. They made sure to remind me that I was different, every opportunity they had. I was alienated from them all. They were so clueless of the anxiety I faced just from being in this classroom. My reality was so



different from theirs. It was my teacher that chose to connect the two worlds, yet I was the one who was obligated to answer the question.

"I knew exactly what answer he was looking for, but being one of the two black students in class, I couldn't bring myself to say it."

* * *

"Is this all your real hair?" a girl asked me while stroking my freshly straightened ponytail. I squinted at her. The bubbly tone of her question changed nothing. What made her comfortable enough to ask me this question? Was it impossible for me to have long hair as a black woman? Having to justify the hair on my head just because it's longer, is exhausting. Whether intentional or not, high school girls found a love in making me feel unworthy of my beauty.

High school boys also loved making me feel self-conscious. The entire varsity boys basketball team called me "Larry Fitzgerald" for two years. Having brown skin and box braids was enough for them to conclude that I looked identical to the Falcons football player. Every time I walked in the hallway, exercised in gym class, played in volleyball games, or attended sporting events, I was reminded of my "doppelganger."

"Lar-ry! Lar-ry! Lar-ry! Lar-ry!" chanted the entire senior class at a pep rally.

I genuinely felt like disappearing at that moment. Several of my classmates tried not to look at me as they grew more and more uncomfortable by the situation. It was truly the definition of those awkward movie scenes that give you second embarrassment.

Situations like this arise frequently, but this type of discrimination is my reality. As humans, it is an instinct to search for similarities among us. This is one of our many tactics in comforting ourselves. Due to the incessant amount of uncomfortable situations I am put in, I have longed for someone who is comparable to me. Not only that, but someone who understands me. Someone who sees me. Someone who appreciates my qualities immediately. My character seemed to be constantly overlooked. I moved in silence. My genuine personality and actions never seemed to be enough for people to like me right away, and because of this, I searched for the reassurance I have never gotten.



I have been turned away by every positive influence that entered my life. Searching for a safe place, I faced countless rejection from friends, coaches, a step parent, and teachers. At first, I couldn't tell if it was my fault or theirs. I tried to convince people I was worth it. No matter what, nobody saw me. After years of blaming myself, I finally came to terms with the facts. I had been wishing I had someone like me, when all along, I am me. I am powerful. I am influential. I am seen. Why couldn't I be the person I needed for myself?

"I had been wishing I had someone like me, when all along, I am me."



Southern High School, Garrett County



You Don't Need to Be Good at Something to Love It

Christina Hviid

— — —

This is it: the moment I've been training for for the past four years. I haven't made it to the Maryland State Meet since 2016; no matter how much time I've shaved off, it's always been just out of reach. I bombed the meet last December—my knee hadn't fully recovered from the injury—but since then, I've trained harder than ever. Strength training, resistance work, pace work, drills, sprints. I'm at the top of my game, even better than I was before I got injured. Now it's February. This is my last chance to make the cut before the state meet next month, my last chance this season to prove to myself that all my hard work hasn't gone to waste. The event in question is the 200 breaststroke. It's my best event.

2:40.39.

Two minutes, forty point thirty-nine seconds.

Two forty thirty-nine.

That is the time I need to beat to make it to States. My current time? 2:41.46. Dropping a second is more than feasible. I have never felt more prepared for a race in my life.

My coach, who is also my Dad, finishes talking to me about my strategy. Start off strong, then crescendo as the race goes on. During the last half of the race, give it all you got. "Have heart," he says. "You can do this." I have to make it to States. I have to.

And if I don't? Have heart, my father said. I've made it this far. This isn't the time to be considering failure.

"Alright, Coach Papa," I say. "Let's do this."



" This is my last chance to make the cut before the state meet next month, my last chance this season to prove to myself that all my hard work hasn't gone to waste. "

Sometimes I think my very soul is bound to the water. It's in my family history. My Farfar - my father's father - was a Danish sailor and shipbuilder. My father was a swimming prodigy, an Olympian, a World Champion. I am none of those things. The only thing I have in common with those two men is my love of the water.

There's just something about it - some intangible quality that non-swimmers can't understand. It's the piercing chill of the water when you first jump in, the wired feeling when you wake up to go to a 5 a.m. practice, the tremors from adrenaline leaving your body after you finish a race, the screaming ache in your lungs when you're pushed to your limit. It's the stench of chlorine that never quite leaves your skin, the cacophony of voices that echo around the pool deck. It's the moment just before the buzzer sounds when eight swimmers are tensed like nocked bows on the starting blocks, the world holding its breath in anticipation. It's the slide of the water against your body after you push off the wall when the only sound is the gurgling rush of water in your ears. If my soul is an empty glass, I fill it every time I jump into a pool.

Some of my earliest memories are at a pool; I have been swimming for as long as I can remember, and I will likely swim until the day I die. From my very first swim lesson, I was hooked. I had fallen in love.



"If my soul is an empty glass, I fill it every time I jump into a pool."

Suddenly, I'm behind the starting blocks adjusting my cap and goggles for the final time. Emily and Avery, my best friends and the other two breaststrokes in our swim group, are halfway through their race. I don't dare look at the clock behind me, afraid that I'll psych myself out by looking at their times. Electricity shocks its way through my nerves as I complete my pre-race stretches.

Breathe, just breathe. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Fear is good. The adrenaline will make me faster, stronger, more attentive. Emily reaches the wall, Avery hot on her trail. Just breathe.

The short whistle blows, ringing in my ears. The previous heat climbs out of the water, rivulets sluicing down the girls' bodies, their chests heaving with labored breaths. Avery passes me with a whispered, "Good luck." I nod in return.

The long whistle shrieks. Up I go.

I steady myself on the block, the gritty surface scratching the soles of my feet. Shaking my arms out, I lean down and take one final deep breath.

"Take your mark..."

A lifetime of training, all of it leading me to this moment. My vision narrows. To my right, seven other girls are tensed like nocked bows on the starting blocks. In that brief moment of quiet before the buzzer sends us on our way, you could hear a pin drop into the water. The world holds its breath in anticipation.

The buzzer sounds, I dive in, and for a moment, all I hear is the gurgling water rushing past my ears.

There is always fear in my heart, and even after over a decade in the water, I still haven't quite gotten used to it. From my very first lesson, swimming has always been an exercise in fear. At first, I was afraid to put my head under the water, fearing the chlorinated liquid would flood into my body and sting my sinuses, choking me. Later I was afraid to dive off the blocks; I was petrified of the dizzying vertigo that comes with being so high up, and the terrifying lurch in your stomach when you realize you miscalculated your trajectory. Once I mastered the mechanics of swimming and began racing seriously, it turned into a mental battle. I was anxious that my



of swimming and began racing seriously, it turned into a mental battle. I was anxious that my goggles would fill up with water when I dove in, or that my cap would snap in the middle of a race.

And now?

I'm afraid all the time - afraid that I'm not fast enough, not worthy enough, not good enough. I'm afraid that I'll have a relapse and mess up my knees so badly I'll never be able to swim breaststroke again. I'm afraid that all of my friends will surpass me, leaving me behind in the dust. Most of all, I'm afraid that the best I've been is the best I'll ever be. That is what drives me: a desire to improve, to be a better swimmer - a better person - than I was before. If I plateau, stagnate... what then?

"Most of all, I'm afraid that the best I've been is the best I'll ever be."

As my hands slam into the wall, I know that I gave it my all. There exists not one more ounce of power within me. The race is over.

Gasping for breath, I turn my head to the clock. There are too many people. I scramble madly at the wall, craning my neck, desperately trying to catch a glimpse of those five red digits that will tell me my time. The fact that I won the race barely registers; all I hear is the rasping sound of my breath and the pounding of blood in my ears. My stomach drops as I register my time.

2:40.89.

Two minutes, forty point eighty-nine seconds.

Two forty eighty-nine.

I am exactly half a second too slow.

Sometimes I think my body was not meant for swimming, despite how much my mind and soul long for it. I'm asthmatic. I'm not tall enough. I'm too skinny and small to be as powerful as the other girls. I've inherited my father's knee problems, even though I am supposed to be a breastroker. Beyond that, I am chronically exhausted, both mentally and physically. I have given



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In spite of that, I continue on. I know I'll never be an Olympian like my father. I know that I'll never make it to Jr. Nationals or Sectionals. I'm seventeen - at this rate, I may not even make it to States. Why do I do this?

I do this because I love it. I love it, wholly and unconditionally, with every fiber of my being. I just wish it loved me in return.

I am so exhausted that I have to literally drag myself out of the pool. My legs tremble and burn beneath me, feeling as though they're going to give out. My face is on fire, my lungs feel as though they could burst out of my ribcage. As I brace myself on the cheap plastic chair behind the blocks, all I can do is stare blankly at the clock.

Half a second.

Where on Earth did I go wrong?

The next heat dives in and the clock resets, but those red numbers are seared into my irises. 2:40.89. Can I have another chance? Please, just give me one more chance.

What's done is done.

There's a unique kind of camaraderie that forms between teammates. When you spend fifteen hours a week with a select group of people, you're bound to grow close together. That bond is only strengthened by the trials you go through together: the grueling practices, the lectures from your coach, the intense mental battles, and every terrible, failed race. My friends have seen me through my lowest and highest points, and I have seen them through theirs. Above all else, I am grateful to swimming for the friends it has given me. I know that it doesn't matter how fast or how slow I swim. They will always have my back.



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Dazed, I stumble over to where Papa and the girls are waiting. Emily and Avery try to console me, Emily with her humor and brazenness, and Avery with her gentleness and understanding. I know they can read me like a book, but I try to be positive for them. It hurts, but I have to keep moving forward. What's done is done; I can't turn back time. Although I'm still grieving that lost chance, I vow to myself that I will crush that state cut next season.

Papa draws me into a hug, not caring that I'm soaking his shirt. "That was amazing!"

"But I didn't make it," I say, my voice muffled by his shirt. "I was too slow."

"No, but you still dropped time. That was a perfect race. You had everything working against you - you came back from an injury and you still managed to pull that off. You work so hard, and I know, I know that you're going to make it next year."

My eyes sting.

"I am so proud of you."

As I stand there, shaking, exhausted, and devastated, I know that even if I fail ten, a hundred, a thousand times, I'll have my friends and family to support me. Even if I fail a million times, I'll still keep trying, because it isn't about making it to States. It's about doing what I love with the people I care about. I may not be the best swimmer in the world—I may not be the best swimmer on the team—but that's okay.

You don't need to be good at something to love it.

— — —

Urbana High School, Frederick County



'57
Tony Liberatore
— ♦ — ♦ — ♦ —

My friend's grandfather died yesterday. He said it was his time; whatever that's supposed to mean. My friend wasn't very sad; he said his grandfather died in surgery. I still have my grandfather, and he has surgery tomorrow. Some days I think about my luck and his good health; other days, I fear the worst for him. Every step, crack, car ride, shower, meal, or breath could call "time" on his life. My grandfather and I never really connected emotionally; he's the old-fashioned type. However, we do spend lots of time together. Everyone has Sunday football, but my grandfather has Sunday lawn cutting. I spend an hour laboring over his prized lawn, and he slides a crisp twenty into my pasty palms. He reverently watches me sweat in the sun and audits my services. He contributes so long as his arthritic knees will support him. The left one has already been surgically replaced. He's getting the right replaced tomorrow. For the last three months he's been hobbling more than ever. Usually, he takes pride in walking to the mailbox to bravely retrieve the one thing that frightens him—the many bills that squeeze the life out of his wallet. But lately, he has been asking me to walk the extra ten yards down the driveway. His lone fear is the purse, yet, he still continues to pay me every weekend, even though he knows I'd cut his grass for free. He's not a poor man, just a simple one. I admire his simplicity, and I wish I only had to worry about where to spend my pocket change.

Yesterday, I made the forty-five-minute haul to Harford county like usual, but I didn't cut the lawn. The garage door remained closed, the smell of fresh gasoline, absent from the country air. Instead of donning his infamous rose-shearing cap, cotton t-shirt, and jeans, he was dressed as if we were to attend St. Margaret's Church down the street. I was shocked by the sharp khakis and plaid button-down that he sported. I wondered what was wrong. I knew something had to be. He told me it was bonus day. I stood before him, baffled and without pasture green stains on my Nike socks. He sat very gingerly with me on the cushioned porch chairs, and we talked for hours about something other than the faulty Weed Whacker battery that he had me replace three weeks ago. For the first time, my grandfather talked enthusiastically about something other than the evenness of the rows of grass or the lack of leaves that floated beyond his backyard fence.

Loyola Blakefield High School Class of 1957. He played flag football and basketball just like me. He hated most of his teachers, never did homework on time. He hitchhiked, rode in the back of trucks, took trips to Memorial Stadium with his softball team, pulled pranks, fell in love with my grandmother. The stories fulfilled my longing to really learn about my grandfather's life, and not just about his preferred blade height on the electric mower. The spark in his eyes and his yearning to share with me was enough of a bonus, but he had one more trick up his sleeve, or really, on his finger. Glinting gold and royal blue: "Loyola Blakefield High School Class of 1957."



His ring. He was officially passing the torch. Caught up in the moment, I excitedly accepted his final token from high school, but didn't realize what it meant. After more stories, I trekked home in my Tacoma to shirk my duties at home, like grandpop used to.

"For the first time, my grandfather talked enthusiastically about something other than the evenness of the rows of grass or the lack of leaves that floated beyond his backyard fence."

On the long open farm roads, I began to realize what my grandfather had really done by giving me the ring. I realized that we shared the same fear, and it wasn't about the bank. It was the one thing I fretted every day, and I realized that it scared him too. At eighty-one, he figured the batteries in his clock were beginning to fade, and tomorrow might be the day. While the arthritis won't do him in, the replacement might. You can replace a knee, but not a soul. Even if I don the ring, even if I sport the cap, even if I maintain the lawn, even if I share his stories, it won't be him. But it will never be "his time." For this adorned loop of gold curves around my finger in a perfect circle. Trace his engraved name or the blazing sapphire stone, and you will feel his spirit. Follow the ring 'round and 'round, and it continues forever. Even death can't break the loop that is legacy, the mark of memory.

As soon as I slip on my cherished bonus, the "Class of 1957" is infinite.



*"You can replace a knee,
but not a soul."*



Loyola Blakefield High School, Baltimore County



Wonderful

Marina Maglente

— ♦ — ♦ — ♦ —

“Wait, where did you grow up?” Millie asked, her eyebrows scrunching together. This was in response to my inquiry about the wild ponies on Assateague Beach, which I had read about in an article called, “Maryland Facts.” I had read this article (among many) in preparation for my move to Maryland from Texas. I’d done the same in preparation for my move to Texas from Saudi Arabia, and if I hadn’t been five years old, I’m sure I would have also done so in preparation for my move to Saudi Arabia from the Philippines.

Having relocated nine times in sixteen years, I was not sure how to answer Millie’s question. I had a few countries and states to choose from, but I felt compelled to answer with the country I’d lived in for the longest time. A country that I knew would warrant raised eyebrows and further questions.

“I grew up in Saudi Arabia.” I braced myself.

“What?”

The onslaught of questions crashed into me like a wave. I welcomed them with patience and warmth. I was flattered they cared about me so much as they wanted to know more about my childhood, but deep down, I knew that it was purely their fascination with the Middle East that fueled their questions. I didn’t care, however, for I was in desperate need of friends at this new school.

“Oh, it must have been so dull there,” another girl piped in. “So you’re telling me that you didn’t learn how to ride a bike, or swim, or become part of a soccer team? Did you even have a childhood?”

Laughter ensued, and I joined in. But secretly, I was taken aback. No one had ever mocked my childhood. Sure, there had been a few bewildered looks and snide remarks, but there was never an outright degradation of how I grew up. This led me to think, was my childhood fake? Have I missed out on a real experience growing up? Is there something wrong with me? These questions followed me around like a stormcloud, looming over my head and angrily thundering. I started to look back on my experiences and transported myself back into that rosegold city of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to see for myself if my life there was worthwhile.

Immediately, I thought of our two-bedroom apartment. There were cream walls and tile floors, the tile always cold on my feet. I remembered my mom’s old phone and the hundreds of videos I’d filmed on it of my toys and my siblings. On that phone were stories, movies, and talent shows that I would organize for my family. Being the eldest, I took it upon myself to provide the entertainment every night, my toddler siblings waddling after me and doing everything I said in front of the camera. Then, I thought of my school: the International Philippine School in Jeddah. I



"I was flattered they cared about me so much as they wanted to know more about my childhood, but deep down, I knew that it was purely their fascination with the Middle East that fueled their questions."

remembered the steaming hot asphalt under the blazing Arabian sun. There was never a cloud in the sky. I remembered my hair sticking to the sweat on my forehead and my dirty, scraped knees as we would play cops and robbers all over campus after school. But most vividly, I remembered the nights. When in the morning the sun would shine brightly, at night, the streets would shine even brighter. Buildings and stores would light up splendidly until late at night. I remembered the cool, salty breeze coming from the red sea. To this day, I have never beheld a sight as breathtaking as the one in Corniche: silver stars speckled across the black sky, winking and twinkling, reflecting onto the indigo depths of the sea. A crescent moon stoically hovered over everything, watching and guiding the rolling waves.

I remembered the copious number of books that I'd read, comics drawn, and stories written. I remembered joking around with my friends in English, Tagalog, and Arabic. I remembered not being allowed to go outside by myself. I remembered our neighbor pounding on our door and telling us about the tanks he'd seen in the street. I remembered the face masks we had to wear in school because of the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) outbreak, and I remembered the opaque blue plastic used to board up the gates of our school. I remembered the news of the Arab Spring worsening, and I remembered my parents deciding to take all of us and leave the country for good.

Suddenly, I was back in that suburban Maryland high school, surrounded by people who didn't know my life the same way I didn't know theirs. I suddenly realized that my childhood was not ordinary, not usual, not normal, but it was wonderful nonetheless. There, I sang and danced and laughed. There, I ate the best and most uniquely spiced food in the world. There, I learned the value of family and creativity. The Western idea of growing up was not the only valid



experience. It didn't take soccer teams or swim meets to develop a child—an environment that fostered creativity did. It took me years to come to terms with this fact. My childhood was not dull or lacking at all; it was filled with brilliant, kaleidoscopic colors. I wouldn't have changed it for anything.

"Yes," I whispered to myself and smiled. "I did have a childhood... and it was wonderful."

"It didn't take soccer teams or swim meets to develop a child—an environment that fostered creativity did."



Urbana High School, Frederick County



Frisbee and Tag

Sophia Moroney



"They're all going to make fun of me. Who shows up to a sleepover with a pill box?" I complained on the car ride to my friend's house. The pills needed to go on weight watchers as my bag was about to rip open. Their snarly attitude and Mom's comforting attitude did not cross each other out. Instead, it felt like fluid in an IV pumping through my veins as every plausible situation crossed my mind. What if they tell the whole school about the medicine? What if they make fun of me? There are not enough red lights. We're going too fast. I should not have said I can go. My homework is piling up. I have basketball tomorrow. I shouldn't go.

"Sophia, come on." I heard the nurse say while leading me to the claustrophobic room. The fluorescent lights were giving me a headache as the oversized cuff velcroed on my arm. "162/80" she said aloud after the cuff was giving me a hug. The fear in the room caused my mood to go down and the doctor's and my mom's fear to skyrocket. The cuff squeezed my arm again. "Are you nervous? Anxious? Did something happen? Any medical problems?" The doctor bombarded the room with questions. She's supposed to do this, she's a doctor. It's her job. I'm the healthy one in the family. Got all the good looks and genes.

Mom's laser eyes had to be staring me down; she wanted the pain to leave, but I wouldn't look back. The mural of kids playing started to overtake the stale white room with fluorescent lights. How badly I wanted to hop in on the game of tag. They get to throw the frisbee and don't have to get hugged by a monster or have their butt hurt from sitting down for a bajillion hours. By the look of it, I'm going to be dead by tomorrow. Maybe I should hop into the mural-- see what it feels like to not die.

The pills carried unnecessary weight as my worst unknown fear was coming alive. Every step up the porch had a new panic come with it while I got farther and farther away from Mom. At the top of the mountain, I tried to muscle up the nerve so I could be like the kids in the mural. Go, don't let the mean hugging monster stop you. Go play frisbee and tag.

"Ding dong."



*" They get to throw the frisbee
and don't have to get hugged by
a monster"*



Howard High School, Howard County



Happy Days to Come

Gracie Owens

— ♦ — ♦ — ♦ —

Everything was going fine, until the unexpected happened. It was all good until the third month of 2020. I was becoming more mature, I finally made the friends I wanted, and I was becoming outgoing and learning to fight anxiety. And with the snap of fingers, it was all taken from me.

My freshman year at high school did not go according to plan. The first semester was pretty bumpy, but turned out to be better than expected. Then next semester rolled along and just a few weeks into it, us students were pushed to online school. This was caused by a global pandemic. As of the time I am writing this, we have a virus that has basically taken over the world with a big scare. This virus is known as 'coronavirus' or 'COVID-19.' I lost what felt like everything at the time, thanks to this virus.

At first, I found it nice to be home all the time, but soon life felt like it was repeating itself. I would often stress over the amount of schoolwork or housework I had. I would be nervous thinking I missed something or did a whole worksheet wrong because I had no one to explain anything to me. Soon I started to care less and less about what I was doing and cared more for turning work in on time. I couldn't wait for the last day of school to come around.

The days became stretched out and boring. I felt so alone with no one to talk to and nothing to do. I barely got to see the few friends I had, thanks to the coronavirus. I was slowly eaten away by depression and anxiety that this would never end. I had no reason to get out of bed or to take care of myself. I lacked all motivation to do even the simplest of things like getting up and getting dressed. I just stayed in my room all day. I wanted a distraction. Sure, playing my video games, drawing or reading was fun, but I just felt so alone. I wanted it to change.

One morning my parents were outside working on our front yard. I was out on my swingset, blasting music in my ears and daydreaming of how things used to be. My mom was waving at me, trying so hard to get my attention. I finally noticed her and slowed myself down enough to jump off my swing. I just figured my parents wanted my help or had a question for me. Even from a great distance away, I could see that my mom had a soft smile upon her face. This was unusual because she seemed to be in a happy mood instead of a working mood. As I got closer I realized there was something she was holding. I couldn't quite make out the small figure from where I was. She told me to hurry up so I picked up the pace with some excitement. My mom would always show me frogs, toads, or even little lizards she found in the yard. But this was beyond my imagination—something I had been longing for since I was a little girl.



"At first, I found it nice to be home all the time, but soon life felt like it was repeating itself."

To my surprise, when I reached my mom she held out in her hands the cutest little baby bunny. My eyes teared up and I quickly, but gently, took the bunny in my arms. I couldn't believe it. My mind couldn't comprehend that I had a precious bunny in my presence. Confused, I asked my mom how she found it. Turns out my dad stumbled across a herd of these babies whilst mowing the lawn. He was afraid of hurting them since they blend so perfectly with the ground. They were pretty close to the road too, and he didn't want to see something unfortunate happen.

I went inside with my new found love, running a list of possible names through my head. I needed the perfect name for him. He was a beautiful bunny with soft, silky fur. He was the color of my dirty blonde hair, just a shade darker. He was a shy and calm little fellow. My mom and I had settled on the name, Wildy. Wildy ended up spending the whole day with me playing video games as he sat upon my shoulder.

I grew very attached. Which is no surprise, I get attached to just about any creature that crosses my path. But this was different. I have always wanted a bunny. Not one day would pass by where I wouldn't beg my parents for a bunny. I always hoped to one day have one to be able to call mine. This was one of those days. However, it didn't last for long.

My brother and his girlfriend came over that night for dinner. I introduced them to my new friend. They found him to be quite cute. At the time they were leaving, my dad suggested that I release Wildy back to his mommy. I completely agreed, but I was heartbroken. I only had him for a day, but I still fell in love with him. This was all I ever wanted. I felt so blessed to have gotten to experience a day like this. I doubt many people can say they just found a baby bunny and took it in for the day.

My heart started to hurt and tears burned down my cheeks as I said goodbye to Wildy. My dad walked me out to where he found him. I sat him down upon a soft patch of grass. We then walked back inside but kept an eye out on him.

I had a rough sleep that night. I knew in my heart I did the right thing and that Wildy was happy to have his mommy back. I was still torn by letting him go. It was the same feeling a child would feel when they drop their ice cream. They didn't have it for long but it still hurt to lose it. You should never take things for granted.

A few months crawl by and I'm still thinking of Wildy. I wanted so badly to turn back time and relive that day. It was different from all the other days. I didn't dread waking up, I had something to care for and dedicate my time to. I knew I would've loved waking up to take care



"I was out on my swingset, blasting music in my ears and daydreaming of how things used to be."

of him everyday and playing with him. But I had to accept it. I had to go back to my lonesome self. But it was okay because I knew Wildy was happy to have his mother back, so I shouldn't be selfish. I was still fortunate enough to watch Wildy and his family grow up in my backyard every morning. I threw out some lettuce and carrots to them every chance I could.

Summer was now coming to an end meaning the school year was about to start. I was going through my before school anxiety. I needed my distraction to calm me down. I was thinking of how much I needed Wildy. My motivation was lacking again. Wildy didn't show up that much anymore. I felt just as lonely as before.

It's now a week before school starts, also the day of my 16th birthday. I was having a small family gathering plus my boyfriend. The day went by seemingly fast. We finished my dinner and cake, so now we were on to my presents. I opened up the presents everyone gave me and I had this overwhelming feeling of happiness. My brother and his girlfriend turned their eyes to me and said they hadn't got me anything. I was honestly fine with that because I was just happy they came. However, they told me they were kidding and that they needed to go grab what they got me.

My boyfriend took me into the kitchen where my mom had asked me to go. I was feeling pretty anxious but soon calmed down. A few minutes had passed and my mom asked us to come back in. I had my eyes covered, but opened them when I reached my destination. My heart melted and I could feel myself become increasingly happier every second. What awaited me was this giant cage filled with fluffy, baby blue bedding. I looked around the room expecting there to be a creature of some sort waiting for me. I was wrong. Instead, I noticed my brother's girlfriend had disappeared. My mom eyed me and spoke, "She'll be right back. She just needed to grab some things. But here you go, you can finally get your bunny. We're sorry we didn't get one first. We looked everywhere but couldn't find one." I'm assuming this was my brother's girlfriend's cue because she came out from the hallway holding what is now my bunny. I immediately burst into tears, the happy kind. She slowly approached me and handed him to me.



The void in my heart felt instantly refilled. He was perfect. He had such perfect white and black colored fur. His big, black ears curled over his head as he laid with me. He twitched his pretty pink nose and that's when I knew he was truly my bunny. I decided that night his name would be Georgio.

A few months have passed and it's been a pretty wild ride. Georgio has helped me through so many tough days even if all he does is sprawl out beside me as I talk to myself. He gives me a reason to wake up in the mornings; he motivates me to do well. I know that I have to get up to take care of him, feed him and clean his cage. It's one of the greatest things to wake up to and to start my day. During my online classes, Geo will just sit himself right upon my shoulder to comfort me as I struggle through the day. Of course he has his moments when he'll tick me off or chew on something important but that's all because he's a living creature. Most people view bunnies as they would a hamster and that truly breaks my heart. A bunny needs so much love and attention. They don't deserve to stay in a little cage all day with nothing to look forward to. I've dedicated the past few months to my bunny. I've made sure he has everything he needs and has fun living as my own. I don't know where I would've ended up without him.

"He gives me a reason to wake up in the mornings; he motivates me to do well."

Lots of days will come by where I dread losing Geo. You never really know when anything will be taken from you. Anything could happen at any moment. Just the other day, from the time of writing this, my grandad had passed away. We never knew anything was wrong. Things can happen at any second so you shouldn't take things for granted. You never realize how much you need something until you can't have it. Thanks to my baby boy Georgio, he's helped me through this struggle. There will always be someone or something there for you, even if it doesn't feel like it.



MP

*" There will always be someone
or something there for you, even
if it doesn't feel like it. "*



Southern High School, Garrett County



By Chance

Kaitlyn Park



As I am writing this, we are fifteen days away from his birthday. I still remember and look back because before he died, I never lived a day without him. He was born two months before I was born, and although shy, he was always my favorite. As a child, I couldn't understand why I thought he was special, but I would soon realize how right I was.

Parkhaven Regal Champion, better known as Champ, was one of the only male dogs born brown and white and not black and white. Out of all the pups in the litter, he was the only one to stay. I grew up with him. He helped me when I was sad and he protected the farm, even when old and frail. I remember we would play in the snow and he always had the most heartwarming smile. It is still a struggle to recall those memories, but there's one I will never refrain from thinking back on...

The cool air brushed my skin as goosebumps shivered down my spine. I decided I would sit outside and talk with him. He never left my side as I shed my tears, explaining to him how I would miss him once he was gone. He was getting old, and I knew it. Part of me believes he did too, and he knew I wasn't ready to be alone.

Days passed by as his tired eyes grew grey and crystalized with tears and my heart continued to grow heavier. The taste of a warm grilled cheese sandwich on a summer day lifted my spirit. We assumed that morning that Champ would be trucking along his paths, checking on the farm and the animals as he did daily. Until my father burst into the room.

"Champ has a cat!" he said.

"Is the cat okay?!" My mother's eyes grew wide with concern. Champ and my older cat, Sam, didn't always play well together.

"It's not Sam, it's a small orange cat," my dad reassured her. The three of us went to find this cat thinking it may have run off, but to our surprise, Champ sat outside, and with him, a tan and white cat, sickened and in need. I watched as the cat moved about, taking its turn rubbing smoothly against our legs. He was skin and bones, and with his eyes full with tears from the sickness in his body, one may confuse the peaceful smell of cut grass in the warm summer air that day for something more morbid.



*" Days passed by as his tired eyes
grew grey and crystalized with tears
and my heart continued to grow
heavier. "*

In a quick decision, we decided to rescue the cat. We walked up to the porch, hoping the cat would follow, but he was too frail to keep up. Champ remained close to guide the cat to safety as he watched us call the cat inside. Though still a mystery today, Champ walked with the cat to the door and placed one paw, then the other, onto the doorframe. He refrained from going inside, but instead stepped back, watching the cat limp inwards. It was as if Champ was showing him it was safe and that he would be okay.

A few weeks afterward, Champ was no longer with us, but he must have smiled in his last breath, knowing that he could move on now that his duties were complete and I would be okay. As for the cat, I decided that I wouldn't get close to him yet because I didn't think that I could take another heartbreak, another death of a friend.

During the cat's recovery, many mysteries were left to our imagination. What was his last family like? Why was he not with them? I gradually let down a wall that swarmed over my mind like the darkest of storm clouds. This cat and I, at last, became friends.

We named him Moses and I am so lucky to have him. We sleep together, we cuddle, and we gained each other's trust. I will sometimes place a gentle kiss on top of his head which sends a sensation through my body one could only describe as love. Sometimes he will even kiss me back, nibbling on my nose or licking my cheek softly. We play games and listen to music even though he gets annoyed when I start singing too loudly. He loves when we slow dance and his favorite food is chicken, just like mine. When I cry he will always sit and listen, just as Champ used to do all those years ago.

Somehow, by chance, I am happy again. I owe my everything to Champ. I have learned that there's nothing you can do to stop the grief from hitting you, hard, and knocking you down. I have learned that in life, someone will always be there to pick you back up again. If you don't let your walls fall and allow yourself to love once more, you'll never know what will be on the other side.



*"...someone will always be there
to pick you back up again."*

— — —
Southern High School, Garrett County



Appreciate the Present

Brooke Pitt



Loud laughter rang out from the large oval table. The sweet smell of brisket and the salty smell of mashed potatoes tingled my nose. Across from me, with an ear-to-ear grin, was my older sister Lindsay. She tucked her thick dark brown hair, which had just been made shoulder length the day prior, behind her ear in anticipation of the forkful of soft juicy brisket she was about to put in her mouth.

"Mmm," she murmured. A pleased grin appeared on my mom's face causing her eyes to wrinkle slightly and her beautiful cheekbones to pop. I wish I had her cheekbones, mine are much less noticeable on my round face.

"I'm glad you like it, Lindsay," my mom said. She had prepared this meal especially for Lindsay, since it's her favorite and she is leaving for college the following day.

"Are you excited for tomorrow?" my mom asked her. Lindsay's large light brown eyes and her long dark eyelashes that come from my dad widened as she looked up from where she had been devouring her food.

Her fair skin flushed as she exclaimed, "Yes, I can't wait!" Classic Lindsay for you. Lindsay had never been one to let nerves get in her way. She is the oldest sibling and carries the same qualities common amongst many oldest siblings. Lindsay is very responsible, independent, creative, and has always been good around adults. Although not unathletic, she has always been the more brainy one between her and my second sister Ashley. Lindsay loves to learn and is very bright. Tomorrow, she will attend her dream school, Dartmouth College. The thought hit me that this would be our last family dinner for a while. Heck! This is the last day my family would all live together full time, how weird.

The next day, we drove all of her stuff to New Hampshire. It was a long car ride, and I was anxious to see the campus since this would be my first time seeing it in person. When we finally arrived, I could tell why Lindsay loved it. There were large trees towering above us, the grass was a brilliant green, and yellow, pink, and blue flowers blossomed everywhere. It was stunning. Once Lindsay was unpacked and situated, it came time to do our goodbyes. I was first.

I gave her a big hug goodbye and then motioned for her to lean down so I could whisper, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!" Eleven-year-old me giggled and she laughed right back. Ashley, my mom, and my dad proceeded with their own goodbyes, each one embracing her thin body even tighter. As we walked away, I glanced back to get one last look and was completely thrown off. She waved at us with a tint of fear paling her complexion and eyes just slightly watering, yet wore the same big smile across her face. We reached my mom's silver SUV that we parked in front of the brick building with green ivy running down the side, where Lindsay would now live.



Pulling open the heavy car door, I climbed in. Large tears started to run down my mom's face. Uh oh, I thought; I reached for the blue and purple tissue pouch I brought and handed her several tissues. My dad reached his long arms, that he claims are all muscle, across the suede console and around my mom. Up to this point, I had been pretty excited about Lindsay going away. I would get more TV time and I had plans to turn her room into my closet. Seeing my mom like this made me a bit sad, but I glanced across at Ashley in reassurance. I still had her, for she was two years younger than Lindsay. Ashley's long brown pin-straight hair shook as she nodded her rather small head at me. Her dark brown eyes meeting my own bright blue, she reached out and squeezed my hand; we were in this together.

Weeks went by and although it wasn't quite the same without Lindsay, I adjusted. The bond between Ashley and I grew. Since she had always been the sportier of the two, we would practice soccer together. I soon realized it wasn't my sport, but I would still play with her. As the second child, Ashley was a bit more laid back. She worked hard on things she was interested in, but also liked to have a good time with her friends. Ashley was a bit shy around adults. Before Lindsay had left for school, she was the one who would chat with all the adults at my mom's work events or family gatherings while Ashley and I would normally chat with each other and Lindsay. Ashley was goofy and fun and would always be the one bursting out laughing at the dinner table.

Time continued to fly by and soon enough, I heard my mom say, "Ashley, are you excited for tomorrow?" There I was again, in an all too familiar situation, except this time there was juicy chicken with roasted peppers on it, some buttery angel hair pasta, and a caesar salad—Ashley's favorite dinner—placed on top of our wooden dinner table. Somehow, two years had managed to go by, and it was now Ashley's turn to leave for college.

Her olive complexion paled as she admitted, "I'm a bit nervous."

"Oh sweetie, I'm sure it will be amazing," my mom reassured. Tomorrow, Ashley will head off to the University of South Carolina. After we all ate our food and cleaned our dishes, we got in our pajamas and snuggled up under a soft blanket on the sofa to watch a movie. Soon, it was time to go to sleep, since we would have to get up dreadfully early the next morning.

I wasn't looking forward to the 7-hour car ride ahead of us, so I brought my pillow and my favorite fuzzy blanket with us, then laid down on Ashley's muscular legs.

"Brooke, Brooke, Brooke, wake up, it's time to put your shoes on! We are here!" I groggily opened my eyes and sat up, slowly letting out a yawn. Sure enough, we are sitting right in front of a huge white building. Students scurried inside, scrambling to carry all their things. I reached down and grabbed my blue flip flops from where they had slid underneath the seat. The car doors opened, and a young guy greeted us with directions that my half-asleep brain couldn't focus on. After being thrown a bunch of things to carry, I followed the others inside. We found her room and unpacked her things. As it came time to say our goodbyes, another memory washed over me from the first time I had to do this. We walked back out to the front of the large white building where our car was parked. I wrapped my arms around Ashley's muscular body in a tight embrace as I said my goodbye, my mom and dad following suit. We got in the car as Ashley waved goodbye. This time I had no sibling to glance at. We stopped at a cute little yellow ice cream shop with a crooked open sign on the window to cheer us up.



As we got back in the car my dad goes, "You're an only child now." I licked my creamy chocolate ice cream, finally being able to put my legs up on the seat since nobody else was now sitting in the back. I thought about all the clothes Ashley left behind that I will be taking. How bad could this be?

Soon, my first year of high school was starting, cheer tryouts were coming up soon. As I practiced the routines over and over, I got excited to show Ashley like I normally did. I ran to her room, but as I opened the door, I disappointedly remembered that she was at college. I started to sulk back to my room when my brain rushed with excitement.

"I thought about all the clothes Ashley left behind that I will be taking. How bad could this be?"

"OMG I can just Facetime her!" I exclaimed. I sprinted back to my room, feeling even more excited that I had found a solution to this problem. I picked up my phone and tapped her name. *RING* I smiled. *RING* I set my phone up waiting for her to answer. *RING* my smile started to fade. *RING* she didn't answer. My smile completely faded. *DING* a text from her. "YAY!" I exclaimed.

I opened my messages to see the text, "I'm sorry I'm busy." Busy, I reread sadly. She hasn't called me since she's been there. Before she went to college, she always used to make time to watch me practice. A single tear rolled down my face, but I briskly wiped it away. I walked downstairs and decided that I'll just show my parents instead.

A few weeks later, high school started, and I came home eager to talk about my day. I opened the big wooden door and said "Hello" but nobody responded. I realized that both of my parents were at work as usual. I walked into the family room expecting to hear the TV on like it used to always be when I got home from school, but it wasn't. It was dead silent. Nobody was home. I called Ashley to tell her about my first day of high school, but she didn't answer. She stopped texting apologies as to why she couldn't answer and now just declined. I call Lindsay, and she declines too. Feeling sad, I called my parents, but got no answer. Trying not to cry, I pulled out my homework. It's math and it's hard. Too many things to remember. I slowly started to remember how Lindsay used to always help me with my homework, in fact, Lindsay helped me with it a lot. All the memories of what she used to do came rushing back to me. Now, I didn't have Ashley here to distract me. It hit me how much I missed them both. That night at dinner, there was no laughter. My mom and dad asked how my day was.



I shortly replied "Good." This was when Lindsay used to tell us all something interesting, or Ashley would make us all laugh. I looked down at my food as we ate in silence, doing everything I could to keep the tears from streaming down.

" All these things I never even realized how lucky I was to have until I no longer had them. All these things I didn't even think twice about. All these things I took for granted. "

As I laid in bed that night, I thought about all the things my sisters gave me that I had never even realized. I had two built-in best friends who I could talk to whenever, I had help for school-work whenever I needed it, and most of all, I had company. All these things I never even realized how lucky I was to have until I no longer had them. All these things I didn't even think twice about. All these things I took for granted. Since then, I've tried harder each day to appreciate all the things I have, especially things I often took for granted like my loving parents, food in the fridge, friends, and so much more. I realized how truly lucky I am to have the people and things that I do in my life, and how important it is to appreciate them before it's too late.



Thomas Wootton High School, Montgomery County



Ruining an Anniversary 101

Riley Randolph



After being married for seventeen years, they deserve at least one day. One day to go out to a fancy waterside restaurant and enjoy varieties of seafood and wines. My parents did not get that one day thanks to a running bathtub and an oblivious kid. Hey, I'm that kid!

My brother and I had finally reached the age to stay home alone. I usually sat downstairs with a hairbrush next to me in case anyone dared to enter the house unexpectedly. Of course I wasn't scared! I had just turned thirteen and could watch Jaws without nightmares the following night! This day was different though. This day, I stood in my room and watched my mom's silver Jeep Grand Cherokee pull out of the garage. As I watched the two year old piece of metal stroll down the driveway and off into the distance, the bathtub filling up with water across the hall never popped up in my mind. However, the Youtube video on my phone did!

I will remember to stop the bath faucet. I will remember to stop the bath faucet.

The glowing screen of my Youtube app allured me and ten minutes had passed. I swear it felt like five minutes! The door opened in a flash and suddenly my alarmed brother appeared in my room. My first thought was to shut the door back in his face because, "Hello! It's my room!." But then, the worst feeling in the world rose upon me. All my senses and thoughts began to race back like a storm. I could hear the bath water overflowing. I could smell the rose bubble bath I got for my thirteenth birthday. And worst of all... I could see the mini pool created in my bathroom as I bolted out my room.

I will remember to stop the bath faucet. I will remember to stop the bath faucet.

I did NOT stop the bath faucet! My body temperature began to rise and my stomach dropped as if I was on a roller coaster. As I was frantically running around collecting towels to slow the flow of water, all I could think was "My parents are going to kill me. I CANNOT die in seventh grade. I have a social life to maintain, places to be, people to see!" My brother of course was completely content in knowing that I was about to get a lifetime of grounding.



The trash can was brought out as the new water catching source. I could not help but count how many new cracks were emerging in the ceiling. Each crack was another day that I was going to be grounded.

I did not stop the bath faucet! I did not stop the bath faucet!

The living room ceiling was beginning to drip more rapidly by the minute. As more and more cracks began to emerge, I became more and more anxious. Buckets, buckets, and more buckets began to consume the carpet of our living room. Staring at the soggy and peeling ceiling, all I could think about was "How can I explain this to my parents to make this seem less bad?" The roller coaster feeling in my stomach had now turned into an empty pit of guilt, fear, and ultimate doom.

I did not stop the bath faucet! I did not stop the bath faucet!

"Who did it." Those words rang in my head like Christmas bells during the holidays. My words were mostly an array of: "The bath flooded! It just started overflowing. The ceiling is pouring down rain!" Not because I was only thirteen and the words I wanted to express my feelings with would get me in even more trouble, but because I really did not want to use the words, "I did it." The combination of my parents' alarmed faces and fancy clothes just didn't scream "comforting!" to me. When I finally admitted that it was me, I felt pieces of my dignity stripped away. My parents gave us instructions on how to slow the water flow, but there was no use, as my brother and I had already tried everything humanly possible. We also used every container, bucket, and can within the house! I presented a brief run through of how I started the flood, making sure to monitor my parent's facial expressions throughout the story. Raised eyebrows meant "Oh my God how did we raise such an irresponsible child." A blank expression just meant that there were too many expressions to pick from. Lastly, the angry eyebrows tilted down, crinkly forehead, and shriveled mouth face meant "You are lucky that we aren't home right now because I can't use the words I want to at this fancy restaurant."

I did not stop the bath faucet! I did not stop the bath faucet!

After days of beige paint, plaster, and fans, the incident was resolved. As for me... I didn't see my electronics for a month after that. That night I laid in my bed, phoneless and numb thinking about all the people who could be texting me about important things. But then I realized how comedic the situation really was. A young kid floods her ceiling because she was consumed by technology.

During this device-less time, I must say I learned to appreciate the little things in life. The hangers in my closet turned into ukuleles, live radio stations became my go-to, and I found a love for the outdoors. Today, in ninth grade, I can still see the bulky part of the ceiling where the flood occurred. It serves as a reminder to NEVER take a bath when my parents aren't home.



*"The hangers in my closet
turned into ukuleles, live radio
stations became my go-to,
and I found a love for the
outdoors."*



Howard High School, Howard County



My Time in New York

Isidro Fouche Rivera



To start my story, I'd like to ask the reader a question: have you ever wished that you could go back in time? I'm assuming you said yes, because every human on earth has this uncontrollable infatuation with the concept of regret. This concept, or ideology, controls many humans lives, as it has likely controlled yours at some point as well. The reason why this is relevant to my story and why I started with this is because I want people to understand that I frittered away the time I had left, and I regret it everyday of my life, but I don't let these feelings of sadness and regret inhibit my everyday life, or even my aspirations and dreams.

Now that you understand that concept, we can go back to March 21st, 2020. I was located in upstate New York; this was the day that my clock started. The day started off like any other day; I got out of bed, ate my breakfast, and just smiled at the fact it was a Saturday morning, meaning no school. Briefly after I finished my breakfast, my other family members awoke. Things started going downhill from there. The screeching sound of children screaming consumed the house within minutes. My thoughts of anxiety came almost instantaneously - different scenarios where one of my infant siblings could hurt themselves clouded my mind.

Eventually I got to the point where my mother visibly saw the anxious behaviors and commented, "Relax, they are just kids. They're having fun. You need to chill."

This wasn't the first time I heard this quote from my mother. My anxious tendencies were a relatively common occurrence; her attempting to calm me down wasn't abnormal.

Hours after this stressful Saturday morning, I decided to text my best friend Beckett to ask if he wanted to hang out. Within minutes I felt the vibration from my phone, but I was conversing with my mother, so out of consideration for her I decided to wait until she was done talking. Shortly after the first vibration, two more followed. As they did, the thoughts of ending the conversation with my mother became increasingly more appealing. It was almost 2:30, or somewhere close to that, so I assumed he was texting me to hurry up. With that in mind, I cut off my mother mid-speech about plans for the following week in hopes of being able to respond to Beckett. I would see later that day what she was moments away from saying.

I glanced at my phone and saw three text messages, all from Beckett asking when I wanted to hang out. After calling him and formulating a plan, I biked over to his house, around ten houses down from me, and we started the short venture to our favorite pizza place. My other friend Raine arrived shortly after us. We were all extra excited to see each other because we had been unable to meet up for a couple of weeks.



Everything was going perfectly. We sat down to enjoy the slices that we just bought, but that's when, for the second time that day, I felt a vibration from my pocket. I reached in my pocket and grabbed my phone only to see the caller was my mom.

I didn't think anything of it, but when I answered after two or three rings, she said, "Check your texts."

I expressed confusion, and a little fear in my voice as I hesitantly said, "Okay." She heard the fear in my voice, I assumed, because she said the classic line, "Don't worry, you're not in trouble."

This relieved me slightly, but I was still visibly confused, which led to my friends questioning me. Beckett asked, "Are you in trouble?" and Raine, "Do you have to go home?"

I responded with a quick "no" and they just shrugged it off. I quickly checked my texts. As I clicked on my mom's name, the text said the few words I had been dreading ever since I heard the idea of it being possible: "Your dad got the job in Maryland...we'll be gone by the end of June." Just one sentence had the weight of two tons on my chest.

I immediately turned to my friends and said I had to go home. I heard no rebuttal, so I got on my bike. I started biking faster than I'd ever biked, acting as if gravity wasn't affecting me, completely ignoring the burning pain in my legs. Then I got to a point in my bike ride where I asked myself, What am I doing? What am I even going to say to oppose a thing such as a job relocation?

Then all at once, the hope left my mind, and the inevitable reality of the whole situation dawned on me. I realized at this moment in my life that I genuinely couldn't do anything. I was so engulfed in my thoughts that I didn't even realize I was two streets away from my house, and as I thought about talking to my mom, resentment and anger started to surface. By the time I got to my driveway my emotions boiled over. As soon as I walked inside, I said to my mom, "I can't talk right now," clearly expressing anger in my footsteps.

I needed some time, I thought. I went to my backyard and sat on top of my garage roof. I just sat there and thought, which really helped me rationalize the whole situation, building a broader outlook. All those feelings of resentment left, and the only emotion that remained was sadness. I thought for hours about everything I was losing: all my friends who were basically brothers, my favorite pizza place, my teachers, my coaches, and in general, the community and area. There was just so much I was losing, yet somehow I felt numb. It was as if I was overloaded with emotions, and instead of boiling over, they were just suppressed deep inside. Honestly, it wasn't a pleasant feeling; I felt almost robotic.

I thought to myself, I'm losing everything that makes me happy, and yet I don't feel much at all. What scared me even more was my drastic change in desire. I lost almost complete desire in spending time with the same people I considered family just a few days prior.

I was trying to ensure as little pain as possible was felt, and the way I did that was by pushing people away. I kept that same mentality for almost a whole month, and the only reason I went back out with my friends was because both my mom and dad both constantly pushed me that whole month to go out. They kept saying, "Make the best of the time you have left." After a while, they convinced me.



On April 17th, I went out with my friends again for the first time in weeks. This time my friend James came as well, so Beckett, Raine, James, and I all walked through the forested path. After a short time, we were met by two large metal structures shaped like cups. These structures were referred to as the Abandoned Water Towers. We sat down and talked for hours about how our lives were going, and honestly random subjects as well.

Then my friend James asked me, "When exactly are you leaving for Maryland?"

I answered truthfully, saying, "I'm not sure."

I thought to myself, That's actually a good question. I was amazed that I hadn't asked my mother or father about it yet. The last I heard about it my parents said late June, but I wasn't sure if that had changed or not. I kept that question in mind, and when sundown hit, and we all went to our respective houses, I ran up to my mom's room right away to question her about our moving date. When I asked, she gave an uncertain, "Like late June to early July."

I was skeptical due to her uncertain tone of voice, but I still took the answer with no follow-up questions. I started to exit her room when she stopped me and said the other words I had been dreading to hear for months: "You have to pack up your room." She handed me three bins, and I rushed out of her room in hopes of preventing her from asking me to do any other tasks.

While packing up my stuff, though, I felt genuinely sad, like I actually should in this situation. With every picture, I packed a different memory; and shortly after always followed a reload of nostalgia. These newfound feelings created a moment of realization for me: I wasn't ever going to get this time I was wasting back. I had a lifetime to feel bad for myself but that time with my friends I was never going to be able to use ever again. I completely changed my view on spending time with my friends. I actively attempted to see them as much time as possible, and in turn, created stronger bonds with everyone and memories that would last forever. Sadly, it took me until late May to have this epiphany, so there wasn't much time left on my ticking clock. I had only a few measly weeks to make a lifetime of memories. I wished more than anything at that moment that I could travel back in time and get that time I wasted back, but I couldn't. Instead, I talked to all my friends and we made a plan to ensure optimal time management. That night we put the plan in effect. I stayed at my friend James's house with another one of my friends, Mason. That night we stayed up watching *Inception*, playing *Madden* and ping-pong. But honestly all I could think about was what I was going to leave behind when I moved.

The fact of the matter was, I couldn't escape the inevitability of the end of my chapter in New York. No matter what I did, I couldn't prevent my family from moving, so even in the final days of being in New York, and all the memories I made in that time, it all wouldn't account for the years I missed out on with those friends. Even while writing this story, reminiscing about the good times I had, and even thinking about all the things I regret; even with all the sadness in this story, I honestly wouldn't change anything about the events that transpired. This period in my life was hard. Currently, it's still hard, but the life lessons this hardship has taught me, like how precious time is, are priceless. And that, I wouldn't trade for anything.



Boonsboro High School, Washington County



The Two Girls

Lilia Shahal



I watch my grandmother silently from the kitchen counter; a soft smile creasing her unconditionally welcoming face. Her deft and nimble fingers glide over the flour-slathered dough as she crafts my favorite Lebanese meal: *sambousek*. There is a timeless elegance that overtakes her actions, love and warmth gushing out of her as she repeats the same steps: roll, wet, fill, fold. My fascinated gaze fixes on the way she so effortlessly mends the dough to her liking as I ponder how the dough would remain a lifeless lump if it weren't for her flawless touch. I envy her for that. For the ability to manipulate *nothing* into *something*. My mother's insistent voice echoes in the deep chambers of my mind. *Let the world know you, the real Lilia. The one that not only your family knows.*

"At the time, I would have rolled my eyes thinking that the world is such a large and bustling and infinite place – that there is no way a shy young girl like me can carve a mark."

At the time, I would have rolled my eyes thinking that the world is such a large and bustling and infinite place – that there is no way a shy young girl like me can carve a mark. But my mother still reminded me of the girl I was before; she shows me the video of my 9-year-old self skipping and singing to her own made-up song on the lively streets of DC, her long wind-swept hair whipping her youthful face as she continues dancing without a care in the world. She is a speck in a sea of humans, but she does not need the satisfaction of others to be happy.



I wonder what this little girl would think of me now. She would probably frown as she saw her older self walk down those same DC streets, except now her head is bowed down as she meticulously counts the eroded tiles just to avoid looking at passersby. If the little girl saw her older self in a Socratic seminar for English class, she would probably wince in pity as she saw her older self silently shaking in her seat, cheeks tinged red and words caught in her throat. The little girl would cheer enthusiastically, *Come on, you love talking about books! English is your favorite class!* But only the little girl noticed the invisible monsters that invaded the older girl's head, taunting and telling her that she is not worthy of her own voice. However, the little girl still managed to seek out the pockets of light in these dark corners. She would see her older self passionately singing the lyrics to High School Musical with her best friend and she would hear her ringing laughter when her father made a terrible joke.

Now, sitting here with my memories prodding at me, I wish I could be the girl that I used to be. Then came my 16th birthday. Due to the pandemic, I did not believe that anything special was going to take place. But oh how I was wrong. It was like any other chilly Sunday afternoon and I was just expecting to watch a movie outside with my best friend. I was greeted with a resounding "Surprise!" that seemed to come from behind a bush: the sound of my friends. Tears threatened to break through as I saw the crinkle around their eyes, indicating that they were smiling below their face masks. I took in the sight of the beautiful decorations covering the balcony, twinkling in acknowledgement of another year that has passed. I was so grateful for my friends because they continued to show their support for me even amidst the chaos that was 2020.

That day was one that I will remember for a long time. I did not feel like I had to act a certain way or that I was being judged by everyone around me. I felt like I could just be myself, my *real* self, while celebrating my birthday with the people I cared about. More importantly, I felt tired of trying to put up a shield – only showing the quiet girl that so many people knew me as – after experiencing how freeing it is to show my loud and opinionated side. At that moment, when I was just singing and dancing with my friends, I was not over analyzing my facial expression or my singing voice. I just let the little girl shine through from all those years ago, the one who danced to her own beat and was true to herself. I thought back to my grandma molding the dough – she made the final product through several steps and she was always controlling her actions. I realized then that I could do that for myself. Sure, there will be a lot of progress and missteps to feeling confident about myself again but the self-esteem I felt on that day was unparalleled to any other. So I continue to actively take steps to mold myself into the person I want to become, the person who can freely express herself without caring about anyone else's opinion. After all, as Amanda Gorman said, "There is always light, if only we are brave enough to see it – if only we're brave enough to be it." I hope to continually seek out this light as I discard my insecurities and step back into the little girl who believed in this light.



"At that moment, when I was just singing and dancing with my friends, I was not over analyzing my facial expression or my singing voice. I just let the little girl shine through from all those years ago, the one who danced to her own beat and was true to herself."



Howard High School, Howard County



Spinning Words

Isabella Slyman



Round and round and round. A magnificent glossy circle, catching light between lines and producing a stationary line. A brilliant radius.

A thrum continues behind the muffled sound coming out of the speakers. A little pin moves along the edge, not minding the thrum, doing its own part in the machine that creates sound on the other side. Words—sound captured and frozen in time and turned into this spinning disc—resonate through the speakers.

People say there's no point in having the elegant stack of box, record, pin, and propped-up glass decorating the room when an iPhone can do the same function for cheaper. Yet, there's such an unspoken richness that only those in the same room as that needle gliding on black ice can hear. An attractiveness that can leave you watching for hours. A feeling—shock? Excitement? Thrill?—that comes from actually hearing a song burst from those clothed, ripped speakers. It feels to me like that moment before a new movie starts, where quiet consumes the theatre. Or perhaps standing in line to enter Disney, standing on your toes to see if you can glimpse Expedition Everest. Or that beautiful flutter of crossing emotions as a Broadway theatre dims the lights and the overture starts, ringing through the room and enchanting every soul. There's a certain way the volume swells and dips on its own, untamed by a dial, that grounds me in a time before I was even born. There's a sophistication to having the back of your laptop rest on the front of that box, watching it go about its day as you go about yours, the owl-shaped lamp flickering softly beside you. It makes you feel like reading, or writing, or thinking, or analyzing, or wielding poetry, or creating sprawling, complex philosophies that perhaps no one but you will understand.

I quite enjoy telling people to tip-toe across the room so as to not disturb the needle in its busywork. It feels real. It feels like life—yet sounds like a fantasy of chronology. Right here—in front of my thrifted record player, spinning *Songs in the Key of Life* and *Tapestry*, blasting “Dear Prudence” and “Telephone Line”—was where I wrote my debut novel, *Darker Wishes*.

Two years ago, I ran *Abbey Road* under that needle while I constructed my infamous “mammoth spreadsheet”, which my friends—and eventually my workshop mates and TikTok community—grew to know quite well. Water stains sullied my wooden draft desk from countless teacups and late nights steeping jasmine blends and oolong bags and green tea concoctions.



Soon enough, “mammoth spreadsheet” turned into “mammoth four-hundred-something page manuscript.” I distinctly remember those milestones that will stay with me forever—watching the word counter strike one-hundred thousand (then deleting some words so that I could get a picture of the clean number for keepsakes), hitting the last chapter, and punching in the last word. When every last piece of dialogue had wrapped up, every last introspective section of prose ended, every life lived and death done, I remember hitting “page break” and titling it “Acknowledgements.” Just for fun. I’d change it once it fed through betas.

*"There's a certain way the
volume swells and dips on its
own, untamed by a dial, that
grounds me in a time before I
was even born."*

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I crisply remember dropping the needle on a *Beethoven's Greatest* album as I read the manuscript through for the first time, all one-hundred-thirty thousand words, taking my phone to small coffee shops and Walmart and online classes to finish it. Draft two clacked itself away as Crosby, Stills, and Nash harmonized off the wooden floors. Draft three came and went as surely as the fiftieth replay of my Chopin album did. Critique group suggestions came back, and it was time to start on draft four as Rebecca Luker's heavenly voice in *The Secret Garden* (the musical) resonated around my desk.

I wonder what will play when I get my beta critiques back. Whatever it is, I hope it soars just as sweetly through those tall speakers as all of its predecessors.



Urbana High School, Frederick County



MV

“Second Grader for Hire”

Shelby Smith



When I was in the second grade, I got punched in the face. Slugged, licked, socked, stucked, roshambo-ed, if you will. Other than that really great Dr. Suess book title, doesn't it just sound like the perfect superhero origin story? I mean, sure, I'm no Batman, I can't even talk in that raspy Batman voice either. But by the time I had learned about the lifecycle of a butterfly, I had also felt a tiny hand force-feed me a tiny knuckle sandwich.

We were in a museum with the classic beige and beige-er color scheme that really entices small children to want to punch other children in the face, I would soon find out- not from a brochure I can assure you. My group consisted of me and two boys from my class: Nimaye and Tin. I imagine Nimaye and Tin began to troubleshoot how to kill time there. After vetoing an armpit fart contest or solving world hunger, they agreed "WrestleMania" was the way to go. Nimaye was in hot pursuit of Tin, and as one thing turned into another, a very tiny, but surprisingly very shiny WWE championship belt lowered from the ceiling and they were no longer two second grade boys: they were two pocket-sized Hulk Hogans.

Tin was running out of options, how else would he make it out of this museum alive? It's not like he could I-feel-statement his way out of this pickle; we wouldn't learn conflict resolution until the 8th grade! In a shocking but not so shocking plot twist, Tin ducks behind me and Nimaye clocked me. Knowing that there was no actual WWE championship belt, and knowing he would never be able to try on that bedazzled little belt, the punch couldn't have been that bad.

Thankfully I was such a gracious, kind, Oprah Winfrey tier second grader that I looked deep within my heart... and forgot that ever happened until just now. But I've had other classes with Nimaye, and he's a nice guy, so it's water under the bridge that we both forgot existed.

So if Nimaye ever applies to college, and college is reading this, I'd like to say "Dear college, I can slip you a crisp three dollars and an arcade token from Ocean City, Maryland if you just avert your eyes," because I feel like this could be lawsuit material and I'm not really in love with getting sued; for this at least, I want something a little more "Law and Order chic." And if the WWE is reading this, I'd like to say "Dear WWE, please consider hiring Nimaye."



*"Slugged,
licked, socked,
sticked,
roshambo-ed, if
you will."*

— — —
Howard High School, Howard County



Puppy Love

Jaryn Teets



"They're here! They're here! Finally they are here!" I run down the hill faster than I have ever run before, feet pounding against the hard ground. I had waited years and finally they have arrived. *I wonder how many there are. Are there five like I had guessed? What color are they?* I am beside myself with excitement. "Calm down," I think, and take a deep breath, inhaling the crisp morning air. Slowly walking up to my grandmother's house, I open the door.

My grandmother's face greets me, crinkling into a smile. "In there."

I try to walk slowly, but it is practically impossible. "Almost there," I whisper under my breath. Mystique comes to greet me.

Three more steps. Two more steps. One more step. I drop down on my knees. There, on the dark green blanket, are five small, squirming Australian Shepherd puppies. Mystique lays down beside them and they try to nestle closer to her. Her blue eyes stare into mine as if saying "Look at them, aren't they adorable?"

"Do you know you're the only one she has come out of that cage to see?" My grandfather chuckles while relaxing in his recliner. "She growled at me." All I can do is smile at him and go back to staring at the soft little balls of fur.

"What are their names?" My grandmother's voice brings me out of my stupor. One of my grandmother's dogs has had a litter of puppies almost every year for the past seven years and I always give them names and get way too attached. The dog having puppies this year is Mystique. She was born here and was more my dog than my grandmother's, and I have been waiting for her to become old enough to have puppies for years.

I crawl into the cage and slowly pick them up one by one to show my grandmother. The first one I pick is the firstborn. "Since she is the firstborn, her name is going to be Winona. Winona means first daughter and since she was Mystique's firstborn, I thought the name fit." The small puppy squirming in my hands has a base color of brownish red with dark brown spots, copper spots, and a thick white collar connected to a white stripe going all the way down to the tip of her nose. I run my finger down the white stripe on her nose. "I am so excited! She is a red merle!"

I pick up the only male. "I have dubbed him Lakota, which means friend." Lakota's markings are called blue merle, meaning he is a gray color with black and copper spots. He has a white collar, white stripes down the middle of his head stretching down his nose and the cutest black spot over his right shoulder.



"This black tri is going to be Mika, meaning rabbit." I set Mika down and pick up the other black tri. "This one is Mato. Her name means bear." Picking up the last puppy, I notice that she looks just like her mother. "This one is SaKari. SaKari means sweet." I set her down beside her siblings.

My grandmother kneels down right outside the kennel. "These are some of the cutest puppies I think we have ever had. Can you be here on Saturday for their appointment to get their tails docked?"

"Probably not. I'll be at my dad's house. Do you have any of them sold yet?"

"Yep, the three merles are sold, and guess what?"

"What?"

She points at the male. "That one gets to keep his tail."

"Really?" I ask incredulously. It will be the first time ever we will have a puppy with a tail. Normally they get docked three days after they are born. I look at the biggest puppy in the litter, trying to imagine what he will look like when he is older.

I return to the kennel Sunday evening as soon as I get back from my dad's house. There they are on a thick cream comforter in the small kennel. Except this time, instead of tails, all but little Lakota had tiny nubs. They are whinier than last time so I just lay there stroking Mystique's soft gray head.

I go down to see the puppies every day I possibly could. "Mamaw, look at how big they are! They used to fit into the palm of my hand and now I need two hands to hold them!" I pick up Lakota to emphasize my point. "Look how big he is compared to his sisters and look at his tail! How old are they now?"

"They are two weeks old now and they are getting big, especially that male. They should be opening their eyes any day now."

I rotate Lakota so that I can see his face and lo and behold, there are two blue eyes staring back at me. "Oh my gosh, Mamaw, look!" I show her the two half closed eyes. "Do you think that they are going to be blue?"

"You can't tell this early but he does look weird with a tail. The others should open their eyes over the next few days." She chuckles at my enthusiasm.

A few days later they start to tottle around. The first to walk is Lakota but I attribute his precociousness to the fact that he has a tail to help him balance, although the others learn very quickly. I sit in the kennel and observe them as they unsteadily waddle over to the newspaper and try to bite each other. I start figuring out their personalities. Winona loves to attack Lakota even though she is substantially smaller and he is much more balanced. SaKari likes to chew on my fingers and my shirt. Mika and Mato just curl up in my lap. Mato loves to lay on her back and if you take your finger and scratch around her full white collar she will take one of her back feet and scratch the air. Since Mika and Mato look so similar the way you can tell them apart is Mato has a full collar circling her chest that looks like an "O." She also has a thin strip of white going down her nose. Mika's collar looks like you have taken her sister Mato's white collar and folded it in half. She also has brown dots over her dark eyes.



As the days fly by, the puppies start to play more and sleep less. When I go into the cage, they swarm around me like a hive of angry bees. Trying to not squish little puppies, I sit in the corner of the kennel. I can feel twenty sets of claws climbing all over me, scratching my arms, legs, and neck while they try to reach my face. Five tongues cover my face in puppy slobber. My nose is full of the nostalgic smell of puppy breath. Stabs of pain shoot up my arm as incredibly sharp teeth chomp down on my fingers. I remove my fingers from SaKari's mouth and pet the soft fur on her head, wincing as Winona attacks my other hand until Lakota jumps on top of her. A cute puppy growl escapes her throat and although he is much larger, he scampers away. Mika attacks the winter socks hiding my toes. Mato sits and stares at me with her big brown eyes until I smile at her and she jumps up at my face, licking every part that she can reach. Lakota finds a very entertaining, unused pee pad and attacks it with vigor. As he drags it behind him, Winona spots him and trots off to go take it from him. SaKari's sharp claws start climbing up my chest until her brilliant blue eyes are even with mine. The black dots covering her eyes makes her blue eyes even more striking. She has the same thin strip of white connecting her nose to the thick white circling her chest as her mother. Her pink tongue covers me with a thin layer of puppy slobber until she decides she wants to sit on my head. Mika has found her new favorite thing to play with, my hair. She grabs a mouthful and pulls as hard as she can. Lakota, having had his new toy stolen by Winona, comes over to join Mika in yanking my hair out. I can't take this anymore so I remove the puppy from my head, stand up, and escape the kennel with a plan.

After getting my plan approved by my grandmother, I drag ten heavy black panels outside in a circle. I carry SaKari and Winona outside and place them inside the closed circle, jogging back to grab Mika and Mato and put them with the other two, and return to the kennel and carry Lakota to the circle. I open the circle and sit down, watching the puppies run around in the front yard. The bright, green grass feels soft and cool under my poor, abused fingers. The puppies stay very close to me. They still think I am a chew toy and chew on my gray sweatpants. Sakari finds the mesh pockets and has a blast tearing them to shreds. Even when I put the pocket back in the pants, she sticks her head in the pocket to grab the mesh lining out to mutilate it some more. But now they have other things to chew on besides me. Winona is playing in the grass chewing on hidden sticks until Lakota tackles her. When she glares at him, he takes off in the other direction and Winona tears after him. Mika is pulling on and untying my shoelaces and Mato is laying beside me chewing on a fallen red leaf. After about half an hour of running around, Winona plops down in my lap and stares at me with her intelligent green eyes and whines until I pet her just like she would do when she was younger. About five minutes later, when Winona falls asleep. Mika curls up on top of Winona, using her as a pillow. Then Lakota piles on and rests his head on my thigh and just closes his eyes when Mato snuggles in between Mika and Lakota. SaKari has no intention of slowing down and runs laps around the panels until she finally climbs on top of everyone and falls asleep. My five little puppies are all fast asleep in my lap. I just let them sleep, and occasionally, one stirs and I just run my hand down the soft fur on their head or back and they drift off again. I am so happy just sitting there with them. I feel like they trust me, as though they love me.



In this moment of peace, a gut-wrenching thought shoves its way to the surface. "Two more weeks and then they leave forever." The mere thought brings tears to my eyes.

"No," I tell myself. "Forget that, enjoy the fact that you have them now."

I try to push the thought of them leaving out of my mind, but there is a part of my brain that whispers, *Why are you doing this when they are just going to leave? Why don't you just stop getting them out and playing with them? It will make it easier when they leave.*

"No!" I say it so forcefully that SaKari stirs until I run my finger down the bridge of her nose and she falls back asleep. I push the thought deep into my brain, refusing to acknowledge the fact that my puppies will have to leave.

"In this moment of peace, a gut-wrenching thought shoves its way to the surface."

The next few weeks fly by and I go down to the puppies every day. I always take them outside or, if it is raining, I take them into my grandmother's house. When I take them inside, they have the run of the house. They have a blast! One puppy goes tearing into the living room and everyone else follows them as fast as they can go. They sound like a herd of elephants. Then one takes off for the kitchen and the rest follow. Back and forth they run until they get tired and start chewing on me.

"They are so bad!" my grandmother exclaims while Mato attacks her shoelaces like a lion attacking a gazelle on the Sarengeti. "Get off my shoe." She picks up Mato, holding her to her chest. Mato squirms until she can lick my grandmother's chin.

"They might be bad, but they are so sweet!" I tell my grandmother.

She chuckles. "They are sweet. Thank you for socializing them."

"You're welcome. I love spoiling them."

"You do spoil them," she laughs. "They do love their Jaryn."

I smile and go back to petting Mika who curls up in a ball in my lap. "This is going to be a hard litter to watch leave."

"Yeah, but they are going to great homes. They will be so happy."

I nod, trying to hold back tears. Although I want the time to freeze, the eight week mark keeps approaching. No matter how hard I try to push the thought down, it still manages to float to the surface. Every time I think about it, my stomach fills with writhing snakes, tears spring to my eyes, and I feel as though something is squeezing my heart.



Despite my constant effort to ignore it, my mental countdown is still ticking. An annoying little voice keeps whispering in my ear, "Three more weeks. Two more weeks. This is the last week." I visit the puppies every day, cherishing every moment I spent with those little balls of joy. The world is falling apart and all I can think about is five little Australian Shepherds. I will miss them so much. I will miss Lakota and the thump thump of that little tail against my leg, SaKari's bright blue eyes staring back at me, Mika's dark eyes, brown eyebrows and disappearing white, Mato's big bounce to try to reach my face, and the way Winona whined until I held her. They are all scheduled to leave on Saturday. Today is only Tuesday and I am planning to see all of them leave and meet all of their new families... New families that will replace me. No, they won't replace me, they will always remember me.

The next morning, as I was getting ready to go down to my grandmother's, my mother looks at me and asks, "Are you going down because one of them is leaving today?"

"What? No! Did Mamaw tell you one was leaving today?"

"She texted me and told me she was going to tell you."

*"I have so much I want to say,
but all I manage to do is nod
and smile."*

I grab my coat, slip on my boots, and sprunt out of the house. "No, no, no they can't leave yet! It's not Saturday yet." It felt as if the world was collapsing. I run as hard as I can to get there, but it seems the longest it has ever taken me to get to the kennel. When I get there the first thing I do is count. "One, two, three, four—where is Mika? Oh there she is behind Lakota." I plop down in the corner with a sigh of relief. Then I scold myself for reacting so strongly. "They are all leaving eventually. Get a grip on yourself."

My grandmother pops her head in the mini barn. "I thought I saw you run in here," she sighs. "I have bad news. One of them is leaving today."

"Which one?" She points to Mato and leaves me alone. I pick up the one leaving me. Silent tears roll down my cheeks. I spend hours with the puppies waiting for Mato's family to arrive, and when they do, I hand her over to the people who will love her forever. I have so much I want to say, but all I manage to do is nod and smile. Then I watch them pull out of the driveway with my sweet little Mato. Just like that, she is gone.

"One down, four to go," I tell my grandmother struggling to keep my voice steady.



"Are you okay?" All I can do is nod. The next day is very similar except this time my ornery little SaKari is leaving. When her family arrives a girl with dark brown hair runs over to me, so excited to see her new puppy. I hand her over. Soon they were driving away.

Saturday, when I get to my grandmother's, Mika is already gone, but I don't have any time to think about it because almost at the same time Lakota and Winona's families arrive. More smiling and nodding and then, they were gone too. I can't even look at the empty kennel fearing that I will burst into tears. All of my puppies are gone. I feel so empty, but I also feel so broken. Why did I do this to myself? It has never been this hard before. My heart is shattered into five different pieces and taken to different places. But I know I would do it again in a heartbeat. If I had guarded my heart and not grown to love them I would have regretted it. Those five sweet little puppies taught me, in the great words of Tennyson, that "it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."



Southern High School, Garrett County



Embracing Myself

Colin Wang



We've all heard the phrase before. "Finding yourself." Supposedly it means discovering what you're passionate about and becoming the person you're meant to be.

I'd heard the phrase before. So had everyone else in my Psychology class. It's a mantra that's been subtly drilled into our memory since childhood, a constant reminder of the internal test we apparently all meet at one point or another.

"From the corners of drowning darkness, I know a question sits, pondering. How? How does one go about 'finding themselves?'"

"In adolescence, we have Identity vs Confusion," my teacher says, explaining the fifth of Erik Erikson's nine stages of social development. "This is the stage where... you find yourself." Despite the slight pause, she says it with such rigor, such concise determination that it's hard to refute. I twiddle my thumbs casually, happy to go along with it as I have for my entire life. My clock, red and white with my name written in blue sharpie along the side, ticks quietly on the wall. I look at it for the tenth time and groan, also for the tenth time. How can there still be twenty minutes left in class?

But somewhere, in the back of my mind, holes and gaps in her words remain, silently demanding answers. From the corners of drowning darkness, I know a question sits, pondering. How? How does one go about "finding themselves?"



The phrase, from an empirical perspective, has a few flaws. It suggests that each of us has unconditional control over every aspect of our lives, and that it is entirely up to us to choose our own path. Further, it implies that our journeys through personal conquest and discovery are already mapped-out, and that every action we take in the present merely brings us one step closer to the self we are planned to be. In reality, much more often than not, things happen as a result of chance and the actions of those around you, rather than by your own rational choice. Second, there are endless seas of possibility in who we are going to become, each sharing the similar origins of the person you are today, but all fundamentally different. Galaxies, stretching from millenium to millennium, could not contain the boundless nature of the future.

Both of these flaws can be cleared up through a revision of the initial phrase. Growing up and developing passions, then, refers more to stumbling upon things and letting them change you rather than seizing the reins of our metaphorical horse and taking charge. Neither do we have total control over the situations we encounter nor do we lead set, predetermined lives.

Of course, these thoughts are still confined to the back of my mind, while I lounge in my chair during the class and daydream about summer. As of then, I'm yet to untangle them and truly understand their meaning. Here's a little more backstory.

If you asked me one year ago who I thought I'd be today, I probably would not have said an avid Frozen lover and writer. But, pride to my name, that's who I am.

Rewind to April 2020. I'm sitting at home, confused about all the chaos in the world, and looking for something to do. I watch a movie, Frozen 2. It's good. I like it. Over the next few months, I start listening to the soundtrack. A lot. Every day. I'm quite literally reciting the words to "Lost in the Woods" on my morning run. Imagine that. Me, panting, forcing myself to increase my pace as I'm coming over the steep hill next to the tennis court, and singing Frozen 2. The sun bears its invisible lasers of heat into my back as I jog, threatening to make me collapse, but the words come without fail. Finally, I reach the top of the incline and stumble on, too engrossed in mental song to dwell fully on my exhaustion.

May 2020. I visit a website, fanfiction.net. I read a few stories. I meet a few people. And I fall in love with it. This one dude, call him Zam, welcomes me to the world of fandoms and shows me around. I'm learning terminology, like what OC's and headcanons are. I'm discovering some popular tropes in writing. And I'm realizing just how massive online communities can be. And suddenly I've entered this whole new world, this universe of color and sound, all from the press of a play button on Spotify and the kindness of a stranger.



October 2020. On a whim, Zam introduces me to the land of Discord, a social media platform that focuses on connecting people and forming communities. Here, over the span of a few months, I meet other Frozen fans and join groups. It's amazing to see just in how many others my interests and passions are echoed. Many of them are young writers, like me. Over time, I grow close to a particular friend, call her Lily. She's got a vibrant, very energetic personality, and she's always willing to lend a helping hand. We're very similar, and at any one time we're chatting and mutually procrastinating on assignments. I've found another friend right from the comfortable walls of my room and the screen of my laptop.

Now, embracing change is not restricted to random events that strike you from the sky. Just as importantly, you give back to your community what you put in. Your values, your character, mingle with that of those around you and influence your actions as well as theirs.

In November, I became a member of an official project on Discord. It's led by Frozen fans and aims to showcase the magic of the fandom in a documentary series coming later this year. Every day, I share ideas and feedback on different goals for the project, all while building relationships with other members and expanding on my love for the franchise. As a direct result of my interest in Frozen, the interest I'd been strengthening for the past six months, the interest Zam and Lily had encouraged and instilled in my heart, I'm contributing to the community and giving others the fuel to make their own fires of passion.

From there, your actions and experiences impact your values and morals, many times melding and sculpting your core beliefs to be different from their previous shape and layout. Your outtake on life can change, and this in turn renews the cycle.

Fast forward to February 2021. I join a writing contest within my friend group of authors. The prompt is quite loose, simply to add our own twist onto an existing book, one we've all read. The entries that come out? They blow me away. I'm shell-shocked, and for the next few hours all I'm able to muster the will to do is walk around the house in a dazed laugh and yell "What?!" at the top of my lungs. I think I stub my toe four times in that period of time. My mind has exploded, strewn across my room in bits and pieces like a destroyed LEGO set. Indeed, I'm blown away, not only by the sheer amount of raw talent bursting from each story, or fic, as we like to call it, but also by just how different each person's entry was. Everyone had interpreted the prompt and approached it in a different light, producing a rich, beautiful variety of writing styles and story structures. Eventually, after the LEGO set has more or less reassembled its main components, I sit down and bury my face in my hands. My hand feels dry as I run it through my short, black hair, looking for something to aimlessly do while my brain finishes reversing its implosion. I still can't form comprehensible speech.



It feels like a white blanket of static has fallen down over my eyes, limiting all contact with reality. But I can think. My breathing slows. And in that moment, I see the beauty in the contest. In the stories. In my friends. Each of us is different in our own enlightening, beautiful ways and the magic that occurs when we all combine our talent together is breathtaking. My actions have helped me reach this epiphany. My friends have helped me reach this epiphany. Chance has helped me reach this epiphany.

*"the magic that occurs when we
all combine our talent together is
breathtaking."*

In a sense, "finding oneself," as society loves to repeat, and "embracing change," as I've come to reflect on it, both embody complex, multitudinous webs of relationships. One's words, morals, experiences, thoughts, peers, and fate all work together to make us into the people we eventually become. It is not entirely under our control, nor is it totally above us. Chance and reason, covertly collaborating from the moment we're born, strike a careful, but sometimes uneven, balance and ultimately end up producing the people we become.

Even the tiny interactions, as small as flicking a bead of sweat off my forehead as I sing "Show Yourself" and jog through the fading shadows of the morning, can clearly carry momentous, radical weight. Granted though they are miniscule ripples of change compared to the vastness of the ocean that makes up me, in disrupting the surface of continuity and routine, in introducing new, brilliant light to old, dull water, and in inspiring an endless train of speckled reverberations for years to come, they make their voice heard. I think it's unwise to disregard them entirely.

I'm still changing. I'm still embracing myself. And I will continue to embrace myself until the day I die. This I know, and this I am proud of.

Some say that humans hate change. That we like consistency and routine. But perhaps it should be welcomed. Often, as I've found, and as I'm sure so many of my peers, teachers, ancestors, and future generations have found and will find, personal change is the most lasting and revolutionary... when we come to realize we don't have a choice.



*"Personal change
is the most lasting
and revolutionary...
when we come to
realize we don't have
a choice."*



Marriotts Ridge High School, Howard County



MV

Smile

Brian Won



"Get in! We have to get groceries for dinner!" my mom said. "I'm here!" I said, panting while trying to catch my breath. The day was gloomy, and the air felt sticky, kind of like the Play-Doh you played with when you were younger. Little droplets of rain started to fall from the sky. My mom told me that she had to get some groceries, so, being the amazing son that I am, I insisted on tagging along. After arriving at the grocery store, my mom quickly grabs her wallet and mask, "Come on! Let's get home before it starts raining on us. ***And don't forget your mask!***"

The sound of the wind whispered through my ears. The rain started to fall down harder and harder.

"Eggs, Milk, Water, Bread, Cereal. Brian, can yo-"

"Mom, can we get goldfish too please?" I asked my mom with pleading eyes.

She rolled her eyes in disbelief. "Yeah, just get them. You're just like when you were younger."

I pumped my fist in victory. "Let's go!"

We quickly got the rest of the groceries and went in line. After waiting in line, I took a look outside. It started to pour, thunder echoing throughout the sky.

"Dang, it's really starting to come down, isn't it?" I ask myself.

"Yeah, it is, now help me with these bags, huh?" She asks me with a sarcastic look.

We start to walk out. I stop her, "Wait right here, I'll go get us an umbrella." My mom nods with a smile, realizing that I cared about her this much. I quickly run to the car, I take off my mask while getting into the car to not get wet.

"Dang man, where's the umbrella?" I wonder.

"Ah! found it, let's go."

I ran quickly as I felt bad for keeping my mom waiting, until I realized I forgot my mask in the car. I quickly turn back to the car, but a woman appears in front of me, blocking me from going, and with a very annoyed look on her face.

"Sorry, I'll be out of your way now." I say walking to the side.

She sidestepped, blocking me from walking any further.

"Listen here young man." The lady said.

"You chinks are responsible for this, so you Chinese people should get some masks."

"Umm... Ma'am, that's um... an offensive term, and I'm not even Chinese... but I-"

"I don't care. You Asians should learn your place" she says, walking away as if she did something.



I stood there, dumbfounded, looking like a boy in the mall when he lost his mom, not knowing where to go. In this day and age, I was called a “chink.” I thought that would’ve stopped after middle school, but here I am. It made me remember the times growing up, when I was called it everyday, as if people thought I’ve never heard it before. I remembered those moments like it was yesterday.

“Hey! Look Brian I look like you now!” (proceeds to slant his eyes down)

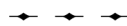
“Hey! I’m Brian, and I can’t see.” (walks around knocking stuff over with his eyes closed)

“Ching-Chong-Ling-Long! Look Brian I speak Chinese too!”

"I stood there, looking back at my mom who's under the roof of the grocery store. I meet her eyes and they're squished together, showing her signature eye smile."

“Hey! Brian? Hello?” My mom’s words knock me back into the real world.

I stood there, looking back at my mom who's under the roof of the grocery store. I meet her eyes and they're squished together, showing her signature eye smile. I look back, grab my mask, and **with a smile under my mask**, walk right back to my mom, bringing her to the car under the umbrella.



Wilde Lake High School, Howard County



In the face of an incredibly challenging year and a half, Maryland high school students stood up to share their stories and to amplify their voices. These pages are snapshots of joy and grief, determination and anguish, strength and sorrow, humor and content, laughter and hope.



These are the voices of Maryland high school students, leaving a mark and creating an impact.