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Maryland Voices: Volume XII

Maryland Voices, Vol. XII

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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.

Table of Contents

- v Acknowledgements
vii Letter from the Editors-in-Chief

1 Maryland Voices Top 3 Award

- 2 *How to Survive With the World Not Believing You*
Paige Barr
7 *Lessons*
Ezran Meinelschmidt
10 *Mt. Masada*
Sarah Twaddell

13 High Merit

- 14 *Walk of Shame*
Joaquin Abarcar-Calugay
16 *Of Rocks and Sands*
Jessica Beck
19 *Colors Unnoticed*
Elinah Chung
22 *The Blink of an Eye*
Leah Coletti
25 *Imposter Syndrome*
Hazel Della
28 *Nonno*
Grace Ferbert
30 *Last Second*
Nathan Gong
33 *First Whistle*
Dennis Henderson
36 *Something Incredible*
Hannah (Haynie) Kim

- 39 *Who I Am***
Alec Kuliev
- 41 *That Ball in My Throat***
Alejandra Leon
- 44 *Unraveled***
Marie Menchata
- 47 *How To Say “I love you”***
Phung G Vuong
- 53 *Pop-pop***
Abigail Ward
- 56 *Upside Down***
Abigail Wilson
- 59 *Learning in the Competition***
Eric Xu

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Lastly, thank you to Mr. Rus VanWestervelt for sharing your support and love with Maryland Voices—our stories, our team and most importantly, our legacy. From September 11, 2001 all the way to 2022,

-MV-

you have seen Maryland Voices evolve but have never let it stray from its original purpose: to unite the experiences of Maryland high school students.

Letter from the Editors-in-Chief

Dear Reader,

At its core, the mission of Maryland Voices has always been to be a place for people across the state of Maryland to have their voices be heard. Whether a writer's intention is to share their story for themselves or for the purpose of impacting others, we hope to be the platform that can aid in amplifying whatever story they wish to tell. We sincerely thank every one of our authors for submitting to Maryland Voices and having the courage to share their stories.

For the first time, we were able to lead a team with three editors-in-chief and it has been a challenge and an honor to work with an incredible group of people as we put all of our best cards forward in order to produce a vibrant mosaic of voices from all across the state. Working on this publication with our phenomenal regional directors, marketing team and management team is so inspiring to us as we've seen their growth and commitment to our mission firsthand.

It has been a pleasure publishing this journal and a blessing to read all of the submissions we received. We hope that through reading all of these riveting stories, you are able to peek into the minds of the writers and to engage in some of the most defining moments of their lives.

**Truly,
Avery Powers, Michelle Bank & Isabel Choi
Maryland Voices Editors-in-Chief**

-MV-

Maryland Voices Top 3 Award



How to Survive With the World Not Believing You

By: Paige Barr

That day, in Algebra class. I had only known them for less than a month, when the nights were still lively, and it didn't get dark at six. When the twilight was still visible in my irises. Their eyes, filled with a sweet poison that masked itself as magnolia brown, with a piercing gaze that made me shudder to the core. The day that was just like the day before, without knowing that my future ahead will be filled with a type of dread that would make my soul ache. And sometimes, it still feels like I deserved that.

Once it happened, though, it was something that I never expected. I stood solid still. No movement. My eyes widened, while time around me stood still. I didn't think wearing a skirt would make me an open target to such a thing, since I was not prone to it in the past, but hey, I guess *all* girls have experienced

groping. I tried to move on with the rest of the day yet once two periods had passed, the tears had made their fall. They crashed all down at once, and when I stared into the bathroom mirror, the constant question nagged at the back of my mind: *How could they?*

I self-blamed, I tried everything in my power to deny it, to convince myself that it just didn't happen. To imagine it wasn't real, since the cold reality was too harsh to realize. The school made me fill out one of those green papers, which was a harassment claim. God, just saying "claim" makes me sound like they're innocent.

I thought it would be over. I thought that just moving forward was the better initiative to take. And while I sat there, outside the office, they tried to talk to me with a sweet tone. A sweet tone that was laced with false innocence. Yet, once they were taken into the office, the act dropped. By Monday, every person that I thought I could trust, I could talk to, had proven otherwise. Because, I didn't want it to spread like a wildfire, since I thought it was embarrassing enough. But I guess once news like that has hit the atmosphere, it can't help but be spread.

There's no way that they did that. She's being overdramatic, as usual. She's just doing it for attention, for the drama.

The words hit me like a crash of a wave. The compulsion of convincing myself they were right. That everyone else around me knew what happened, even if everyone else wasn't in algebra that day. Monday, and many Mondays in a row after have convinced me that the green paper didn't mean shit. There was a lack of evidence apparently. I guess the evidence was hidden, concealed, even though it was in the middle of a classroom. Not in a bathroom stall. Not in a corner with no surveillance. In a classroom where I'm supposed to be safe. But I

guess the threat that they sent to their friend still wasn't convincing either, to beat the shit out of me. It was never convincing.

And I felt it, really felt it. I screamed at every soul that has perceived me as this overdramatic persona, since I felt like that title was being held above my head like a waiver signing my soul off to the devil. And when my mom wanted to advance it, take it to the courts, I declined. Since I thought it would just make things worse, like an earthquake erupting. I knew it was bad then, but I *knew* it could get worse.

I regret that. Every. Single. Day. I regret not attempting to find closure, since it would haunt me yet again. Those early months of my freshman year that were supposed to be memorable, but they didn't fill me with pride and joy. More like regret and wondering if I did the right thing, that it was okay for me to react the way I did. My mom said it was. I'm human. I'm allowed to have feelings. I had to tell myself that. *Constantly.*

And little by little, conversation by conversation, the topic of me accusing them of something unspeakable, subsided. Mostly. I still got the drama starter title here now and again, but it didn't feel as heavy. For I realized that when the times of grief were hitting me the worst, there was at least someone. At least someone to ask me if I'm alright, making somewhat of the load on my shoulders a little better to carry. But I only thought this way in a good mindset. In a bad mindset, I'd done many things that I regret. Ranging from smaller things, such as cutting my hair too short, because I was tired of seeing the same reflection staring back at me, needing to change on the outside, so that nobody knows I'm *not* changing on the inside. But I don't think that's as extreme as apologizing to the person who violated me.

Maybe you were too emotional about it. Maybe they thought it was harmless.

Looking back, I wondered what went through my mind when I decided to send that text. The text that probably gave them satisfaction, so that they didn't have to own up to it. But finally, I was wrong. They actually came up to me after I sent this. Maybe the first time, the only time they confronted me. Or, if you consider confrontation over Instagram DM's, then maybe. But when they walked up to me that day, I knew there was something wrong. Just by the way they walked, by the way they looked at me, like the original predatory gaze they had was gone. But it's just hiding underneath their pupils. They hugged me. They said they saw my text, and accepted my apology, by apologizing themselves.

I laugh in pity now. I laugh because the exact apology that they gave me was replaced with denial once people started to ask around. I knew it was unfair. I knew that I didn't deserve the feeling of a blade plunging deeper and deeper into my chest once the next thing happened. Yet I wondered, what else could happen? Well, I'll be the first one to say that the world is cruel. The mindset that everyone "always believes the victim" is bullshit. Since a big, scary man isn't always the perpetrator of such acts. It isn't the ones who have criminal charges; it's the ones who can take your vulnerability in just a second, and convince everyone, and I mean, everyone, that they couldn't have done anything. That they were innocent, doe-eyed innocent. And the world will just accept that. The world is hypocritical. The world will make it so hard for you to get by, day by day until you question yourself, *will it ever be worth it?*

I still don't know how to answer that. I still continue to search for the answer in textbooks, on the internet, yet to fall short every time. To fall into a pattern of inspirational quotes, telling me that everything is going to be alright. I wonder who wrote those things, wondering if anyone has experienced what

it's like for your trauma to be invalidated. Feeling like even now, in February, that I won't find the peace that I've been striving for since it happened in October.

I might not know all the answers, as speculation still seems to cloud my mind, but something I do know is this: It doesn't matter if the world doesn't believe you. It doesn't matter if I'm the hot topic that seems to be discussed since what happened was just stupid school drama, *right*? You don't have to have the world as a whole be convinced, when smaller populations don't have to be. To question how true this was. I have people. I have a life. What *I* know happened, is all that matters. To not let what they did to me consume my life, until all I see is black. Feeling like half the time, it isn't even me in my own body.

Stop holding onto that dreadful day. For the world is still rotating. In its correct orbit.



Lessons

By: Ezran Meinelschmidt

You are nine when you start to feel *wrong*. Your chest burns and your throat aches as if a knife has plunged into your ribs, puncturing the soft tissue of your lungs. Your teacher tells you that you're making it up. *You just want attention*. She's smart so she must be right, but something in the back of your mind says otherwise. You go to your teacher after recess, it still hurts and you *don't* like it. She gives in and sends you to the nurse who only makes you gargle saltwater and sends you back. The nurse is smarter than you, if she isn't worried then you shouldn't be either.

It gets worse by the end of the day, like your lungs are on fire and you feel so *tired*. Your mother takes you to the doctor; she's worried. You get forced into a pale-yellow room with an itchy paper-covered table you have to sit on. You don't like the paper or the sickly clean smell of the room. You try your best not to wiggle and fidget while the doctor takes the tests. You are used to these tests as you are often sick. The doctor says it's strep throat and you know deep down in your heart that it's not. You know what strep throat feels like *and this is not it*.

You are nine when you learn not to argue.

The doctor gives your mother a pink bottle of foul-tasting medicine. You decide you don't like pink because of it. It's almost funny how mundane things can easily change your perspective.

The medicine is finished yet you still feel sick, maybe more than you had before. It feels like you are being strangled from the inside out. Like breathing in smoke while your grandmother gives you the tightest hug you have ever been given. You hate having to gasp for a breath that you simply do not have. Your mother takes you to urgent care. You watch the TV in the waiting room for an hour before you are called back with your mother. The nurse takes you to a purple room with butterfly stickers decorating the walls. She takes your vitals, explaining everything before she does it. You like that; it gives you time to prepare.

The doctor comes in ten minutes after the nurse leaves. She starts to poke and prod without asking. You want to ask her to stop yet you sit silently until she stops. The doctor tells your mother that she needs to take more tests. She needs x-ray scans. You decide you want to tell your friends about the x-ray the next day, even if it isn't *that* cool. The room is frankly much more boring than you thought it would be; it's just a plain room with an x-ray in the middle of it. Your friends would be jealous that you got to see one when they didn't. You are forced to wear a heavy, itchy blue vest. You have to stand with your arms spread and your back against the machine. It's tiring even if it isn't that big of a movement. The doctor doesn't give you any sympathy.

She brings you back to the purple butterfly room where your mother has been waiting patiently. The doctor leaves for twenty minutes. Your mother lets you watch videos on her

phone, the familiar intro brings you calm. The doctor re-enters the room abruptly, a solemn look on her face and a clipboard in her hand. She doesn't look at you, she looks at your mother. She tells her that *eight out of thirteen children don't survive*. She explains that your lungs are slowly filling up with fluid, but she isn't talking to you. You don't have an input. The doctor prescribes a new medication, you don't know what it is.

You are nine when you learn not to ask questions.

Your mother cries on the drive home. You don't see your friends the next day. You don't get to tell them about the x-ray. You don't get to see your friends for the next month.

Thanksgiving dinner is eaten alone. An empty brown table with a lonely child. You get used to hellos at arms-

length, not minding the distance. You do, however, become scared to fall asleep, not knowing if you're going to wake the next morning, all because of that *stupid statistic*. You learn to work on liminal sleep. Bothering people is *not* an option. You panic every time you feel pain in your chest, fearing that it's back. Terrified that it has come to claim you once and for all. Your mother notices. She asks *what happened? What changed?* You don't answer her because those aren't the questions she's *really* asking. She doesn't need to know.

You are nine when you learn how to lie.



Mt. Masada

By: Sarah Twaddell

This would be a bad time to lose my balance.

I turned my head from side to side, taking in the view. It was gorgeous, for sure. Rocks and ridges and houses making tiny dots down below. Nice to look at, but if I fell right now, I doubted it would feel good. How tall was it? A thousand feet? The roaring winds did nothing to reassure me that I would stay upright. Stomach flipping, I tried to divert my thoughts away from this imagined pain and instead focused on the way my calves threatened to turn to jello. Why, exactly, had I thought this was a good idea? When we were at the foot of Mt. Masada, our Israel Bar Mitzvah Tour guide, had asked who wanted to ride up and who wanted to hike. I should have taken the ride with my mom and little sister. I should have taken the easy way out. But I wanted to know if I could. If I didn't try, I would fly back to the United States and I would live the rest of my life wondering whether it had been possible. I knew it would be a challenge, and I was too stubborn to back down from a challenge.

So, I decided to climb. A decision I now thoroughly regretted. *Great job, past self, really smart choice you made there.* After taking a gulp of water from the bottle in my sweaty

hands, I groaned and continued to drag my feet, every step agonizing.

Another kid from my tour group, probably my age at twelve or thirteen but an inch or so taller, looked over at me. What was his name, again? Was it Josh? I couldn't remember, but my shoulders relaxed slightly with the knowledge that I had company on this endless mountain. "This sucks, huh?" he said.

"Yeah," I agreed, panting slightly.

"At least we're close."

I glanced up ahead. *Were* we close? How long had I even been climbing? At first, it wasn't too bad, and I cheerfully chattered with my father. Then breathing grew harder, and the mountain grew steeper, and my father pulled ahead of me. Then I just wanted it to be over. And now, it looked like it wouldn't be long before I could stop. At the same time, it would be an eternity. I dragged myself forward again and again, but the end looked just as far off as it had before. A part of me just wanted to collapse into a heap, but I kept moving. *This is pointless. This is where it ends. I will die on this mountain.* I half rolled my eyes at my melodramatic inner monologue, now even more determined to move forward.

And then somehow, inexplicably, I was on the platform at the top of the mountain, back with the cheering crowd and on flat ground. I made it? With a groan, I slumped against the wall. I made it. Wind swept at my hair as I tilted my head back and sipped from my water bottle. I was *so* tired.

But I did it. I did it. I wouldn't fly back home wondering if I could. "What if I'd tried?" wouldn't float around my head for the rest of my life, because now I knew I could do it; I had. And if I could do this? Taking on the rest of the world would be easy. Not right now, of course. I could not take on the world right now, when all I really wanted was a nap. But as I looked at the

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mountain *I* had *climbed*, I felt sure that once I woke up from that nap I needed, I could do anything I tried.

High Merit



Walk of Shame

By: Joaquin Abarcar-Calugay

“Can Joaquin Abarcar-Calugay please come to the principal’s office?”, the staticky voice echoed throughout the classroom. All movement in the cramped portable ceased. I could feel the piercing glares of my classmates bore into my stiffened body. I rose out of my seat, my legs trembling as they adjusted to the extra weight placed upon my shoulders. My eyes shot to my shoes, avoiding the judging eyes of my peers. Whispers cut through the heavy atmosphere, aggravating my roaring nerves. A sharp inhale entered my mouth as I tried my best to build a barricade that blocked out the faint voices. Despite my efforts, one whisper bulldozed right through my imaginary wall and latched onto the back of my brain. “*Why would someone like me? be going to the office?*” I wished I had the luxury to ask that question too, but buried deep under all of my denial, I knew the answer. “Good luck,” a voice teased. I was going to need it.

I always found it unnerving to wander the halls during class. The vast corridors, built to fit the hustling-and-bustling of hundreds of students, sat empty and desolate. The hallway seemed endless, twisting and turning whenever it pleased. I wasn’t even halfway through the normally two-minute journey,

but my body felt void of the energy it previously had. My fingers stretched and folded, unable to find a comfortable position. I gnawed on the inside of my cheek in an attempt to halt the quaking of my legs. My head felt as if someone wrapped thousands of rubber bands around it, squeezing it of all its blood and leaving my face a sickly pale.

I tried my best to delay the inevitable, but eventually the disappointed looks of my parents and teachers crept into my mind and poked every corner of my brain. Imagine what they would say once they found out about this incident. Just the thought of it was enough to get a visceral reaction out of me. In my 7 years of being in school, I always avoided trouble. But ever since my name exited the strained speakers of the portable, I felt like an insect running right into a humming lightbulb. Piercing air shot down my lungs with every breath, worsening the bubbling frustration and guilt within my chest.

I continued my walk of shame before indistinct chatter cut through my echoing footsteps. I turned a corner and located the source of the noise. Two students roamed the halls, probably skipping class, giggling and teasing each other without a care in the world. My eyebrows scrunched up in envy as I passed them. The office drew closer and my breaths became shorter. The dull colors of the school blurred together as my eyes landed upon the vice principal who was perched outside of her office, waiting with an expression which held nothing but disappointment. Crescent shaped indents formed on my palms under the pressure of my fingernails. Every fiber of my being yelled at me to turn around; I should head back to class and resume the conversations with my friends. But deep down, I knew I had brought this upon myself. As I gripped the cold door knob of the front office, the pit of regret at the bottom of my stomach swelled.



Of Rocks and Sands

By: Jessica Beck

The memory of that moment has lived in my mind for years; a snippet of the most peace I had ever experienced shelved away in the coves of my recollections. If I close my eyes, think just hard enough, and take a deep breath, I am suddenly there again. Not a detail of the memory has been lost. It is as pristine and crystal-clear as the moment itself, as if preserved by the hands of a master mental curator, and sometimes it seems to sparkle a bit with a gleam that seems to be the manner in which my mind's eye records happiness. Just a touch of light dances across the edge of the memory in choreographed swirls, in an inexplicably magical fashion reminiscent of the way that the sunlight performed a ballet upon the open ocean waters that morning in Avalon, New Jersey.

I had arisen early that day and, leaving a note upon the counter, I left the small rental beach house where my aunt, cousin, grandparents, and family were still sleeping. My goal was simple: to find seashells. I ran a business painting seashells, so they were always something I was on the lookout for, and the morning is the best time to find them. The sand of the beach was still cool beneath my feet, not yet heated by the rays of the rising sun. In one hand, I held a bag for the shells and in the other, my

quickly thrown-together breakfast. The beach was practically empty. The morning was serene, quiet, and a stark contrast to about everything in my life.

I walked a few blocks of beach north and reached the Townsend Inlet, the end of the Avalon beach. The Inlet was home to a long bridge which connected Avalon to the next New Jersey seaside peninsula. Between myself and the waters of the Inlet stood the stone jetty; a manmade sea-wall to prevent beach erosion. It was upon the rocks of the jetty that I sat to rest that morning.

Perched on the cool rocks, I could see streaks of color begin to illuminate the morning sky. The horizon boasted coral hues which seamlessly blended into a pale blue. The clouds were coral too, kissed with tones of dusty purple and grey. From where I sat, the beach that I had just traversed appeared to go on forever, as did the ocean that stretched right over the curvature of the Earth, making you understand why ancient peoples believed that to cross it would lead you to the world's edge.

It was then that I unpacked my breakfast: a salami and cheese sandwich and a bottle of lemonade. Really, it didn't make any sense to pack lunch meat for breakfast, but the last bagel that we had bought for our rental house vacation was eaten the day prior. The lemonade was a sweet, tangy nectar on my tongue as it washed down the salami that was salty enough to rival the sea air. It was just me, my breakfast, and the eternal beach.

That is my favorite moment; one which I still relive in my mind whenever I require the peace which it brings. For a moment too brief it was just me and Forever sitting side by side on Avalon's jetty. For a moment too short, nothing mattered except the world in front of me. For a moment too quickly gone, I was merely another grain of sand upon the beach's shore. As I reminisce on this particular memory, I recall the overwhelming

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tranquility, the simple finality of the moment. It was a moment in which I had temporarily accepted the fact that I was just another piece in the puzzle and a spectator to the grandeur of everything larger than myself. It was then that I realized no matter how small you feel, even if you are just a single grain of minuscule, weak, and volatile sand, the rocks of the jetty will always be there standing strong when you yourself cannot.



Colors Unnoticed

By: Elinah Chung

I dragged my pink Skechers shoes across the pavement, clutching my yellow snack bag as I held my mother's pale peach hand, my father behind us. It was night, the sky was dark, and we were exhausted from a long day of walking. The colorful store lights on the side of the road blaringly contrasted with the gloomy dark. We stopped at the crosswalk. And we waited. And waited. Until the traffic light was red, illuminating the asphalt pavement. The little green man in the small box blinked in and out, and we walked.

White, black, white, black, white. Then a cold, black hunk of metal flashed past in front of my eyes, the cold breeze brushing against me, like a ghost caressing my face. The hairs on my arms rose.

I froze in shock. My mother froze in shock. My father froze in shock.

I forgot how to breathe; I was hyper-aware yet confusion struck.

What just happened? Were we really at the face of death? Were we really about to get hit by that car a few milliseconds ago? Here? Now? Perpendicular paths which

should have never crossed paths, yet almost did by a few inches.
Really?

White, black, white, black, life, death, life, death. One step faster and I would have been on the black line. One step slower and I was on the white line. I lived, my father lived, my mother lived. The little man was red, unblinking. The traffic light was green.

Then time seemed to accelerate. Anger welled up in my father, shock in my mother. I was still just confused. There is only so much a snack-addicted, oblivious second grader like me could comprehend.

What I did know was that I'd almost died.

As my father chased the car all the way to the next traffic light, my hand in my mother's as we chased my father in front of us, the car was there, stopped to take the next right turn. My father aggressively knocked on the car window. Nothing. Again, my father knocked, more aggressively than before. The window rolled down halfway.

"Yes?" a lazy voice replied.

My father shouted at the man, "Do you know what almost happened? You almost hit my wife and child! What is wrong with you! You didn't stop at the red light, and you almost hit them! Do you understand the severity of the situation?"

The man replied, "Oh, yeah. Sorry, sorry" and proceeded to slowly close the window. I watched with my innocent eyes the scene that unfolded in front of me. I looked at the man in the car, the shadow cast by the hood of the car covered the man, hiding his features, but I clearly remember his expression: disinterest.

He almost killed my mother and me, and he didn't even care. It was still night; the sky was still dark. The colorful store lights still showed through the still gloomy dark. People walked by us, cars passed us, and then the man, like so many other

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moments in my life, passed too. I couldn't help watching the car until it disappeared into the dark, and sitting here part of me is still looking into the darkness wondering why, when it was over and we were alone, there was not one glance spared for us.



The Blink of an Eye

By: Leah Coletti

The day I got my license was the happiest day of my life. My new freedom began the moment the MVA employee snapped a picture of me. No longer must my parents drive me to and from club lacrosse practice or to my friend's house. I am able to drive mostly wherever, whenever. A teenager receiving a license is seen as a positive step in their lives, but this event also comes with anxiety and fears. Unfortunately, a person doesn't realize how dangerous driving is until something bad happens. The realization came to me during one of the most exciting school events of my senior year.

It was December 4th, 2021, my high school football team had made it to the championship. The excitement that my friends and I had was through the roof. If it being the championship wasn't already exciting enough, having a championship game during our senior year raised our expectations. The final year of high school can be the most memorable time of a person's life. We were exhilarated. My friends and I prepared to leave earlier than all of our other friends because we wanted to make sure we had plenty of time to get there. Everyone that we knew was headed to this game, the amount of support for the football team and school was

extraordinary. It all seemed to be perfect until *BAM*... we had just been into a minor car accident and I was the one behind the wheel. As soon as I saw the car in front of me coming to a complete stop, I knew it had hit the car in front of them. Since the accident occurred in the middle of a highway, it surprised me. I had seen the car stop and slammed on my brakes. At that moment all I could do was pray I didn't collide with the stopped car. As the tires screeched, everything around me moved in slow motion. I could hear myself breathing and just saw the still car in front of me become closer and closer. Then finally, we stopped...right into the rear end of the car. I sat still, it was quiet, although cars were driving by and honking. I felt as if I was alone in the dark with flashing lights surrounding me. Suddenly, I saw a girl come out of the car to look at what had happened. Instantly, my mind came back to reality and fight or flight set in.

I slowly stepped out of the vehicle to examine what had happened. Everything was a blur. My mind was in a million places but I was trying to focus on one thing at a time. Loud horns were honking and looking around in the middle of the highway, I saw only headlights in a space of darkness. I then walked back to my car, pulled out my phone and called my parents. Unfortunately, my parents were away so I had to figure everything out on the phone. My dad began to go through the steps in an emergency. "Are you or anyone hurt?" he said in a cool manner.

"No, no one is hurt," I said in a shaking voice.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm not injured so I'm okay." He began to ask me what the car in front of me looks like along with my car.

"The car in front of me is dented, my car is dented and is leaking fluid." I opened the door and started to explain where specifically the car was leaking. At this point, the car in front of

me had already called the local police station for assistance with the accident. Soon enough, the police showed up in order to lend a hand. The police officers began to take control of the incident with full efficiency. Leading and guiding us teenagers through a difficult situation, a sense of security began to come to light. Our feeling of helplessness and aloneness gradually began to fade.

When all passengers, drivers, and the vehicle were checked out, we had the go-ahead to continue our travels to the game.

Although, the accident was considered a minor incident with no injuries. My thoughts lingered on the incident. Many people don't think about or talk about car accidents unless they experience one or a loved one suffering too. For a 17-year-old girl like me, it was a developmental moment. Every day, we are given so many tools to simplify our life, but they can also make it extremely complicated. I learned that being on the road is not just a privilege, it is also a responsibility that I should not take for granted. A tragic accident can take away many of the small pleasures in life, just like the little things in life are such a privilege. Life itself is a precious gift to the world but can disappear in the blink of an eye. Not knowing when a situation like mine will happen can create an overwhelming sense of anxiety, but knowing that in order to learn we must experience situations hands-on. We learn life lessons through experiences that twist and turn throughout our lives. It would be impossible to grow or develop into the person we are today without them. Everything that happens in life is for a reason.



Imposter Syndrome

By: Hazel Della

Being tied to the sport of taekwondo for almost half of my life had brought a varying level of expectations. When I first started competing in sparring it was no use wondering why I lost every single match. I grew to hate the feeling of losing. I couldn't fathom the disappointment of looking over to where the scoreboard rested, only to see that my opponent's score was higher than mine at the end of the match.

It's enough to just earn a medal, I would tell myself with tears dribbling down my face as I choked on snot. Those words, with intention to placate myself, were never enough to stop the helpless feeling of incapability and regret. I had coped with the disappointment by lowering my expectations; by not expecting anything grand, I wouldn't be swept off my feet by the rug that reality liked to snatch.

When I began to start winning championships I wouldn't have even dreamed of, I still held the same mindset. Wearing the gold medal never felt right, it felt like a piece of metal gifted to me by luck. It just wasn't something I could look at and feel proud of. Parading around with it hanging from my neck didn't

bring me as much joy as the people around me. I couldn't think of myself any higher than before, or even find it in myself to be gracious for the lucky draw. I was never trying to be humble, I just genuinely thought I would get my ass kicked.

Until I was on the top of the pedestal for too long. I grew too used to the same, satisfactory outcome. After competing so much, I wasn't even willing to work as hard to actually stay there. Somewhere in the back of my mind I had started believing that winning would always be the outcome of my tournaments. I became not confident, but cocky. And I got my ass kicked.

I relied on my talent only, believing it was the only thing I needed to keep me seated at the top of my division, no matter how much work I put in. It had gotten me as far as it has; I didn't see anything that needed to change. It was because of that conceited mindset I was so foolish enough to keep that it shouldn't have been a surprise when my half-assed performance had been outdone. I underestimated the drive and will of my competitor which, amazingly, surpassed any amount of talent I could ever possess.

And I had been too slow to understand, slow enough to let it happen again while competing for a spot on the national team.

The first time, I blamed it on everything but myself. The faulty gear, the crappy referees, anything that would feed my ego and convince myself I was still as great as everyone *now* expected me to be. I ran away from the responsibility I had to my performance and atoned only when I was stupid enough to let it happen again. This time, with nothing to blame but my own incompetence, my own weaknesses.

It was evident when I lost; they both *wanted* it. They wanted it enough to study me to the point where nothing I would

do could work on them. And I underestimated that, because I had no drive myself.

I was lazy— when it seemed like I would lose, I gave up. I lost the thrill of winning because I already knew how empty and insignificant it felt. I didn't care if I lost because I was under the impression I didn't deserve to win. I didn't have a reason to compete besides being told that I was good enough to.

But then for the first time, I felt it. The strong urge to win not because it was expected of me, but because I myself had that ambition. I was never able to both fully and honestly say that I wanted to win. I never knew what it felt like to want victory so desperately, to have such an aching hunger, that you would do everything in your goddamn power to seize it. To be able to proudly wear that gold medal around your neck.

After failing to do anything about the gap in the scores, the fire which sparked my lust for fighting had been brutally extinguished. My mind had already decided the final result of the match, and I slacked off because I wasn't the one who would be cheering in the end. In one blurring moment, I landed five points to my name on that scoreboard. Five pride-filling points that were as effective as a slap to the face. It snapped me back to the reason why I was there, competing, and it was to have my name on that team.

I wanted to win.

Unfortunately, I realized it all too late and still lost the match. Not without putting in my absolute all in those last seconds, though. When it all ended, I didn't feel like the usual crap I did after losing a match. I could smile. I could wear my silver medal proudly. I could think about my match without crying. The only regret I had was assuming I would improve without doing anything differently.

It was okay, though, because next time I wasn't going to lose.



Nonno

By: Grace Ferbert

Grief coursed through my little body, overpowering every emotion. The church bells pierced my ears. The color black surrounded me, making everything appear so lifeless. The world seemed blurry. Too blurry to even find my seat. Tears streamed down my small chubby cheeks. My uncles lugged the dark, wooden coffin down the aisle. They stood like strong pillars, holding up what now felt like a broken world. A world without Nonno. I clung to my dad, not knowing what else to do. My little hand felt warm in his, but that warmth could only be felt on the outside; heartbreak and sadness filled my insides. I choked back tears as the coffin reached the front of the room. I wanted to stand strong like those big adults around me, but death Himself pulled me to the ground.

My eyes darted toward my mom. Her feelings were incomprehensible to my tiny brain. Going through life without a dad from this point forward. To me, that sounded like the most challenging thing someone would ever go through. I tightened the knot of my little arms around Dad, hoping he would never let go. I unclasped for only a moment, and at that moment he let go. He left me to read a bible verse. I fell apart once again. *Focus on*

the memories of Nonno and Dad, I thought to myself, in an attempt to feel just an ounce of happiness. The sunny mornings on the balcony, eating apples with Nonno. Eating eggs with Dad for breakfast. Watching Nonno cook at La Riserva. Sitting outside while my dad grills. Learning how to count to 10 in Italian. I thought to myself *uno, due, tre*. I can't remember what four is.

"Oh no," I gasped aloud.

Another piece of his memory is gone. The tears came streaming down faster than a downpour of rain.



Last Second

By: Nathan Gong

When I was in fourth grade, I had an iPad that I was absolutely glued to; there were just so many things to keep a kid entertained on the internet. I also had a habit of being on my iPad at night under my sheets, resulting in me getting less sleep every night and falling asleep in class.

My mom comes home at midnight on weekdays because of her work in Washington D.C. and one of the first things she does after coming home from work is to check on me while I'm sleeping. Since I would stay awake on my iPad for as long as I could every night, I could hear the garage door open, signaling that my mom was home, and would put away my iPad in a hiding spot to fake being asleep as my mom entered my sleeping area.

This cycle of putting my iPad away and fake sleeping when my mom was in my room was effective for a while until I decided I should maximize the time I was on my iPad every single night. As a result, I would use this bright tablet until my mom reached the top of the stairs. The time difference between putting away my iPad and my mom entering my room gradually decreased every day. This was extremely risky because if my

mother caught me using the iPad, I would have gotten into trouble and had my iPad taken away from me.

One night, I was feeling confident that I was able to put the iPad away fast enough and that my acting skills were good enough to fool the tyrant of the house. However, this confidence would have consequences. One night, the sound of the garage door resonated through my body, and I did nothing. Three minutes later, the repeating beats heard could be compared to those footsteps of a monster in a horror movie; I did nothing as the monster entered her room. One minute later, the door of her room creeps open; I did nothing as the repeating sounds of creaking floorboards got louder and the shadow of a pair of slippers could be seen under the only thing safeguarding me from the monster outside. It was at this moment I realized that I waited too long before putting my iPad away and that I needed to hide the iPad and pretend to sleep before my mom opened the door immediately. The drum in my chest started pounding on my ribcage as the pores all around my body started to open.

It all happened in a flash. I slid my iPad under the bed and threw the covers onto my body right before light shone into the dark expanse of my room with a shadow of a figure on the ground. The monster was in the room and all I had to do was to act completely dead, though there was one fatal mistake of the exchange made earlier. The sound of the tablet sliding across the carpet would be covered up by the sound of the door opening, however, I had accidentally slammed the plastic case on my wooden bed frame creating a sound comparable to a drum. The sound of the tablet impacting the hollow bed frame and the rustling of the blanket must have been an instant giveaway to my mom that I was still awake.

The figure starts to take strides towards me; the metronome in my chest grows faster with each step until her face

is mere inches away from me. My mother's jacket and scarf that had been absorbing the cold outside now start to present a cold chill in my face. Adrenaline rushes through my body as my fight or flight kicks in; there is no use of it, however, as the most logical decision was to stay in the position I was in and to pray for the best. The worst outcome had then presented itself: a deathly whisper echoed out upon the dimly lit room, reaching the depths of my ears. The soft whisper resonated within me: "I know you're awake."

Out of nowhere, a smirk forms on my face; there was nothing I could do at this point but to confess to my crimes. Surprisingly, my mother wasn't angry or surprised at all, as if she had already known I was doing this. Of course, the exposure of my crimes led to my iPad being confiscated for a few days and being able to get the best nights of sleep I had gotten in a while. The feeling of staying up with an iPad to entertain myself could never compare to getting a full night of rest: there was absolutely no reason to ever stay up during the night.

The idea of putting the tablet away at night would also apply to other things in life: before thinking of instant gratification, think about how to reward yourself after doing all your responsibilities. Instead of procrastinating on homework and playing games, finishing the work and then playing games would be the better idea; the feeling of gratification would feel so much better than the former.



First Whistle

By: Dennis Henderson

My alarm blared and rudely woke me. It felt like waking up for school, but it was Saturday. So frustrating. My stomach twisted in dreadful anticipation of my first day of refereeing. At the same time, a feeling of excitement electrified me because it was an exciting day I had been looking forward to! Still, my twisting stomach and jittery movements continued. I stared into the bathroom mirror, not really thinking much of anything, and letting time slide into my reflection.

My dad's voice pierced the tangible cloud of worry hovering around me. "We're gonna be *late!*"

Realizing the time, I rushed as fast as I could to get ready (Why is this uniform such a bright yellow?), gathering my things (Watch, whistle, pen, coin-- ah, let me count again...), and scarfing down a less-than-substantial breakfast. The frantic rush distracted me from myself for a little bit. While riding in the car, during those moments of silence, the clouds of worries and excitement consumed me again.

And then before I even had time to comprehend the drive, we were there. I was pushed towards the side of the car as it made a sharp left turn onto the road leading to the soccer field.

“Hurry, get out!” my dad told me intensely, halting in the middle of the road. He noticed my hesitant reaction and saw me biting down on my thumb, stiff in my seat. “You’re gonna be fine, Den.”

“It’s my first time, I’m just worried,” I responded.

“That’s normal. You’ll be fine, though. You know everything you need to know to be a good ref. Now get out and *run* up to that field! You’re going to be late!”

I collected my things and slid out of the car and walked at a brisk pace, not nearly fast enough to match my dad’s expectation. I could almost feel him sighing to himself in my head. My heartbeat raced up into my ears as I tried to remember all the obscure rules I would probably never need to remember. I realized I wasn’t wearing my mask before remembering that I didn’t need one. A pandemic makes that stuff happen to you, I chuckled to myself. But what if I forgot? What if I had to make a call and I just froze? What if I messed up? What if I missed something? What if...? Every single possible thought, worry, fear, and question flew through my head like an annoyingly loud advertisement.

This was my first job, and I wanted to do a good job with it. And not just so that I would get paid. I could feel the attention the parents at the field gave to the walking yellow sun on the field as I put my bag down. Even if it wasn’t actually there, I knew I could feel their judgment in my head; every call, every action. It was on plain display for all of them to see. I frantically reassured myself that there would be no issues. This was, after all, a pretty insignificant soccer game for kids to just run around and have a good time. Still, my movements were weak, like I was stumbling around in the dark. I made it onto the field after what felt like an eternity, surrounded by the murmur of people conflicting with the shouting inside my head.

I narrowly dodged a soccer ball from a careless kid. I put my worries on hold to search for the source of the projectile. I looked around and saw them running around like there wasn't a problem in the world. Their biggest issue with the game was figuring out how to get their cleats on. They were just running around with no care for my problems. They were screaming and laughing. A grin forced itself onto my face as they messed around with each other. Kids are cool... sometimes.

Unfortunately, no amount of kids and grins could resolve the concerns in my head. After stalling as long as possible, I finally forced myself to stand up and move to the center circle of the field. I frantically checked my pockets to ensure I hadn't forgotten anything. In my head, I went through a checklist of things I had to do before the game started at least eight times. It was ironic, I realized, that I was now sweating perhaps more than I would have been if I had been playing soccer. My feet were in place as I made sure both teams were in their proper positions. My dad was on the sidelines now, ready to support me. I sneaked a quick glance towards him before meticulously raising my whistle to my lips. My stomach was still clenching as I blew my first-ever starting whistle.

And the game was off!

I quickly realized that the game wouldn't leave any extra time for anxiety and worry. Back and forth, the ball was flung across the field with a crowd of kids following. Worry fell from me like wool sheared from a sheep as the speed of the game kept me going. I wasn't perfect--I could definitely be louder--but my dad was right; I was completely capable of doing this. Whistle after whistle, call after call, and so forth. The game was over before I knew it, and I wished that I could draw out the clock longer. It seemed that I had done it. Of course, I had always known I could do it, but now I actually did.



Something Incredible

By: Hannah Kim

I glance around the room as I hold my knees to my chest. I watch people chatter, laugh, and run. My palms are sweaty, my legs are shaking, and my vision is blurring. I've been sitting on this firm, blue mattress that covers the whole floor of the room. This place, the Taekwondo studio, is dreadful to me.

I look over at the equipment lying on the sides next to the glassless mirrors. I then spot the wooden boards stacked against the corner. The large number of people in the studio makes the air very humid, and the heat outside doesn't make it any better. As a result of the hot, stuffy air, everyone in class is drenched in sweat. I sigh and stare at the floor, sinking into my inner thoughts. *I'm a small 2nd grader who is good at nothing and will never be able to have a single talent.* My family never told me that, neither did my friends or my teachers. It was I who would drive these thoughts and nail them into my brain.

The first test in Taekwondo is to receive the white belt which I have passed. Yet today, I have a test for the yellow belt.

For most people this is nothing, but for me, it was horrendous. I simply need to do the axe kick by breaking the board with my heel. *I can't help but worry that if I can't break the board, I'll look dumb.*

My teacher calls my name and motions his hands, telling me to come over. The realization hits me that it's now my turn to do the test in front of everyone else. I slowly stand up and awkwardly walk toward him. Every step I take feels heavier and heavier, almost like attempting to run underwater. My teacher kneels and holds up the board, waiting for me to strike. I stare at the wooden board and feel sweat slowly dripping down on my face. The more I stare at the board, the less I can think properly. The strong sensation of eyes watching me makes me want to curl up in a ball and disappear. On an impulse act, I go into my proper stance to show I'm ready.

My teacher nods his head in approval and waits for me to hit the board. I shut my eyes, pretending no one else is in the room, and I hit the board with my heel.

I open my eyes and feel severe pain in my foot. I bite my lip to bear the pain and look down to see an unfazed, clean wooden board. *I failed. I didn't break the board.* I keep my head down and tears start to flow down my face. *I knew it was impossible for me, yet I still feel so disappointed.* I feel my face burn up which means that my face is bright red right now. *I don't know what to do next.*

"Do you want to try again?" asks my teacher. I tilt my head up slightly and nod slowly as doubts fill up my head again. *What am I thinking? I can't do this. How am I going to do this differently?*

I try to push the bad thoughts away as I take a deep breath, stabilizing my breathing. Suddenly, I feel great determination to succeed as if this is the last thing I would do in

my life. I double check my stance and raise my leg to hit the board as hard as I can once more.

There it was, the clear sound of a wooden board being broken in half. I looked at my teacher in relief and saw him smile. I gave him an awkward smile back as I wiped the tears that were dried on my face. I bowed my head and ran back to my seat on the mattress. For the rest of class, I remember feeling somewhat comforted as I watched everyone else take their test. Some kids got it right away, and some, like me, also failed at first. That made me realize it's okay to fail because you can always try again.

Despite the fact I succeeded on the second try, I was beaming with joy. At the end of class, all the students gathered in a crowd to take a group picture with our new trophies and belts. The room was filled with chatter and laughter again. Parents were congratulating their kids while their kids were jumping with joy. I ran to where my mom was seated and gave her a loving hug.

She patted my head and told me, “잘 했어! 잘 했어! 너는 최고야.” [Jal haess-eo! Jal haess-eo! Neoneun choegoya.] (Translated to “Good job! Good job! You are the best.”) She then took out her phone and waited for me to pose for the camera. I held my blue, marble trophy while giving my best crooked smile because I knew on that day I could do something incredible.



Who I Am

By: Alec Kuliev

Every Wednesday, a tradition, driving to the mosque, stretching my head in the car to see out the window like a giraffe. I step out of the car and let my grandfather put his weight on my arm as he slowly puts his feet on the floor, because I try to be a gentleman around him. We walk in the mosque, I take off my size 5 children's velcro sneakers and socks, and wash my hands and feet, the refreshing water feeling like **all the bad things washing off me.**

The carpet feels like an art piece smiling up at you as you walk across it. The feeling inside a building of this sort is a feeling like no other, like a looming being is watching me. As we finish, I step out of the mosque, feeling the exact opposite of said feeling as a man walks up to the mosque. He yells

“Go back to where you came from you Terrorists!”

My grandfather grips me tightly like how a mother grabs her child if they're about to walk off a cliff. My eyes feel like they are on fire, I hold back tears,

I don't show them weakness.

My grandfather shuffles me to the car and drives away as the man continues to yell nonsense, though I can't hear anything, it's

all muffled. Is he yelling what everyone thinks of me, of who I am? My lungs feel like they are about to explode every time I inhale. My grandpa exhales a huge sigh as we leave, he is starting to murmur to himself a prayer.

“What are you saying Baba?”

“I hope that man will someday figure out his mistake, may Allah guide him to the right path.” “I’m so mad!” I yelled angrily.

“To be mad is wasteful, what good will it do if I think bad thoughts of him, like what he did to us. We can only be hopeful he will realize his mistake.”

I walk out of the car, shivering. My heart raced like I just ran ten miles. Baba notices, hugs me, and says “Don’t be afraid my boy, he won’t come back to trouble you, as long as **you don’t let him.**”

May peace be upon Baba

1946 - 2020



That Ball in My Throat

By: Alejandra Leon

Ticket Check. Arturo Merino Benítez International Airport of Santiago de Chile. Standing on shaking legs and eyes looking forward, I am with my mom, dad, step-father, grandparents, my brother Miguel, my little sister Mia, my great-grandmother Abuelita Mosi, and a ball in my throat. We are on the first floor, ten steps away from the first gate where they check the airline tickets. The gate where once we step in, there is no going back. My family and I are playing for time to not face what we fear the most, saying goodbye to each other. I see my dad shed tears. I don't want to cry. Knowing that we will be apart from each other for who knows how long is terrifying. Knowing that we will not wake up together every morning like we used to, hurts me. Knowing that after walking through that gate, I will no longer be able to hold my dad's hand, hurts me. Breathing without exhaling, I hide everything that I'm feeling with a simple smile. The last thing I want is for my family to see me cry. I want them to have an image of me happy for what is

coming. So I smile and say, "Nos volveremos a ver." But deep within me, I am not sure if I believe that we will see each other again. They make the final call on the loudspeaker. My step-father carries my sister through the gate. Miguel follows him. Then mom. I follow behind them with that ball in my throat, not looking back at the family I'm leaving.

Passport Check. The police officer looks at the photo in my passport and back at me, a small girl, with two braids, born in Santiago, Chile, on November 29, 2003. I used to live in the commune of La Reina. Every day after my guitar lessons I would go to buy fresh *marraqueta* for my family. If I was lucky enough and had leftover money from my Abuelita Mosi, I could buy myself a chocolate with *dulce de leche* on the inside. Sundays were special days. My whole family got together. We'd meet around 7 pm to take the *Once*, a Chilean tradition similar to tea time. I used to help my mother warm the bread. My brother and dad set the table while my grandmothers prepared hot water to serve us tea. My Tata would help when almost everything was done. I remember walking past him to go to the bathroom and he'd be eating peanuts while watching soccer. When I ran by to not block his view, he would secretly give me peanuts so that my mother wouldn't see that I was eating before dinner.

Security Check. The security officials scan me, and I feel exposed. I am thirteen years old. I have to take off my shoes, sweaters, and any metal jewelry on me. I wish I had the power to get that ball out of my throat, too. Every second is getting bigger and more annoying. I am being scanned by random people. I feel completely naked and insecure around them, just like I feel with the idea of having a different life. The security guy says: "Have a good flight" and those words close the hope of being able to get rid of that ball.

Takeoff. With the passing of years and new homes, schools, friends, and opportunities, I have come up with the conclusion that this ball of sadness and fear was necessary for my personal growth. It was not a matter of getting rid of that ball, but of understanding that it was part of my process to get out of my comfort zone and evolve, to be able to start my personal growth. This ball ended up being the potential energy that would raise and bring my voice afloat.



Unraveled

By: Marie Menchata

Normality is a state that can be altered depending on the situation or environment and that alone has been able to put me in some of the most uncomfortable and vulnerable situations as a person who fears and avoids change because of the uncertainty it brings along. I had never really been able to understand for myself the reason why I hated change so much until four years ago, 2019.

I grew up in a very familiar environment, everyday changes happened like moving to a new school but that never bothered me because I was always assured that there would always be people I knew around. Most of the friends I had were people I grew up with, which meant I never really had to do the whole making friends thing but what I didn't know was that it would affect me enormously eventually because I didn't expect it. Three months into the first semester of the school year at Saker Baptist College, an all-girls boarding school located in Cameroon Africa. I was carrying out my day's activities like I normally would and then I got a call from the Principal's office

telling me my Dad was there to visit me – saying I was surprised would be an understatement. My Dad wasn't the type to visit me out of the blue. I made my way to the office and greeted my Dad. I was happy he was there to see me but curious as to why as well. He went on to tell me to go to my class and grab my stuff from my classroom, get some books to study at home, and have one of my friends look after my belongings in my dorm. I was stunned, not only was he there to see me but he also came to take me home which was a rare occurrence. I went over to my class and grabbed my stuff and explained to my teacher that I had been given permission to leave and said bye to my friends. When we got home that day, everyone was busy packing up food and clothes, I was beyond confused. Although I was aware of my Dad's plans of traveling as he had taken my junior sister and I to the American Embassy a few months back to get our visas, I didn't think it would be this soon.

The following days were spent in a rush and the day of our departure finally came and we were at the airport saying our goodbyes. This was going to be the furthest I was going to be without my mom, we've been tied by the hip since I was a kid. I was sad to leave her but to my knowledge we were going to be back after two months, safe to say things didn't go as planned.

A spiral of events and family talks led to me having to stay here and go to school. It was a better opportunity so I took it. School was nothing like what I saw in the movies, no mean girls, and bullies just kids doing whatever they wanted. I hated the fact that I was new because of the way people stared at me like I was an alien with my buzzcut and all. Never had I thought that my lack of experience in making friends would end up being the reason why I discovered I had social anxiety. I was uncomfortable half if not all the time, I felt left out most of the time, isolated myself and let myself be the outcast. I realized that

no one shunned me out or made me an outcast, I did that to myself. I had already labeled myself the weird new kid. I didn't try to fit in or learn how the new community worked, I just stayed in my safe little bubble of ignorance and stereotypes afraid of the consequences of stepping out and being judged. I ruined the one chance I had at properly building friendships I could keep till high school but I learned from that experience and that's all that matters now. I'm still in my bubble but it's shrunk a whole lot now and I see that as a sign of growth and wisdom.



How to Say *“I love you”*

By: Phung Vuong

Dear Ba,

Ever since I was little, my biggest wish as your daughter is to have you walk me down the aisle one day, but lately, I've been worried that you won't be there when that time comes. It's that part of getting older where you realize you're not the only one growing up. It's the self-absorption in one's own life and the ignorance of a child who knew nothing, but the beautiful lies told by her parents.

“Ba, did you or mom choose our names?” I asked my Dad.

“I did,” He replied.

My older brother's name is Long, meaning dragon in Vietnamese, while mine is Phụng for phoenix. Together we were a dragon and phoenix. It was a unique pair, only possible with one boy and one girl.

“How did you know what to name us? What if I were a boy? How would our names have worked?”

“I knew you were going to be a girl.”

“What?” I laughed, “How could you have known? You can’t decide that.” “No, I knew.” He replied.

When I retold this conversation to my cousin, she laughed. Of course, my father couldn’t have decided the gender of his children. But what he said stuck to me. Not because it was silly, but because it made me feel special -- as if it were my brother and I he was specifically waiting for. I never realized how meaningful my name really was. Despite this, I have always hated introducing myself to new people. I hate how I do not know what to call myself when people ask for my name. Am I “Phung” or “Phụng”? I hate how quiet I get when someone asks me to repeat myself when I say “Phung.” I hate how embarrassed I would feel when I hear them repeat it to me like it’s a question, “Phung?” like maybe they didn’t hear me right. And so, for years, I have always been insecure of my name without realizing how much it meant to you. Of course, you didn’t give me this name to have kids make fun of it, nor did you give me this name to have me hide it.

I was a coward who was insecure about her culture. I was a coward who hid her thermos at lunchtime because I feared even the smell of my “exotic” fried rice would scare the other kids away. I loved it when you packed me peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and I hated it when you packed cơm thịt kho. Now, I find myself loving every meal you make me because I don’t know how many more I can enjoy before I have to be the one cooking for us. I stopped asking for snacks and toys whenever you brought me along to get groceries. I stopped telling you whenever I’m craving something, yet you still manage to bring it home for me anyways. I never expected you to stay for any of my concerts, yet you still came to record me. That was the only time I ever found you in the crowd, but it was more than enough. I hide it whenever I break my phone because I knew you would

get me a new one even though we don't have the money. Even then, you would still replace every screen I cracked and even buy me the newest model. I always played the piano on my phone because I could never bring myself to ask you to buy me a real one. But now I sit in the dark at 2 am playing the piano you brought home from your friend. Although we don't have much, you always find a way to make me happy, even when I don't ask for it.

I learned that you never liked going to the beach. Despite this fact, you would still take us every single year. I also learned that you rarely went in the water because it reminded you that you were a refugee -- that you had to flee on boats to escape the war. Even then, you still walked out with me into those waters when I was too scared to face the waves myself. We were both scared to go into the water. A 5-year-old girl, afraid of seaweed monsters, sharks, and the salt that burned her eyes and nose. And you, 55-years-old, back in the eyes of your 23-year-old self facing the harsh, cold waves that rocked the small wooden boat you clung onto to make it to safety. Even forty-one years later, the war still lives inside you.

I learned that your legs were always haunting you with pain, yet every day you would walk for hours from house to house to deliver mail because you are a mailman and because that's all you can be. Because that is the life you have to live for Long and me to have more than you grew up with. And with those legs, you still played badminton with me and held onto me when I first learned to ride a bike. When I was little, you would never let me carry heavy things or do hard yard work, "Leave that to your brother. You're a girl, you shouldn't be doing these things." But now you are too weak to tell me no or take the boxes from my hands.

Dear Me (Mom),

Lately, I've been writing down all the stories you've told me because I want to retell them to my children. I was never aware of how little I knew about you. It was only recently when I found out the design of the dragon and phoenix on dad's pillowcase was actually embroidered by you.

"Mom, you made this?" I asked in surprise.

My Mom stayed focused on her iPad, "Yeah, your mom used to be a seamstress back in her days."

"Why did you stop? This looks amazing!"

"Because I moved to America."

At the age of seventeen, my mother had already opened up her own tailoring shop. I loved hearing my mom brag about all the work she has done, from making simple shirts and pants to suits and elaborate traditional dresses. I thought America was the place to pursue your dreams. What are you doing here working as a nail technician? Why is the potential of your gifted hands wasted on painting nails and massaging people's feet when you could delicately create such alluring, intricate art with just a needle and string? I know that passion still burns inside you, but this is the new life you have committed to. It is one of many things you have sacrificed as your job as a mother.

The ticking of the clock was the only sound that echoed in the tight empty room. I looked over to my mother with her head down in her hand. I laid back down on the bed but refused to fall asleep seeing how my mom restlessly waited for a doctor's appearance. It was four in the morning and we had been waiting in the emergency room for two hours. Occasionally, I would get up to blow my nose with the rough paper towel that dispensed at the sink. My nose would sting and burn from every wipe. The heaviness in my eyes constantly urged my body to fall asleep. Even my mom would tell me to go to sleep, but the guilt

of burdening her kept me up. I couldn't let her stay up for me when I was the one who forced us here. The panic from two hours ago had settled down and the symptoms of my emergency were gone. There was no longer a need to be in the emergency room, but still, we waited for another hour. When we finally left the hospital, the sky was still dark and the roads were empty. With the entire night wasted in the hospital, we were home by 5 am. Despite the sleepless night, I would later wake up to see my mom's car missing from the driveway and realized she had gone to work.

No matter how late you stay up by our bedsides to make sure we are ok, you are always out the door by 8 am to go to work. I learned that you don't eat breakfast, and on some busy days, you don't eat lunch either. I am always filled with guilt seeing how much you strain yourself to take care of this family. I hate the way you only pick out clothes for me when we go shopping, and never for yourself. I hate that you tell me "Don't be like us when you grow up." I hate how you can't say sorry or good job. I hate how we never hug or say I love you. I hate the way you make me cry and the way you comfort me. I hate the way you gave up yourself for me. I hate how we're running out of time for each other. You have given up so much for this family, yet what do I have to give back? All I can do is desperately yearn to pay you back for all the love and pain you've spent on me, worrying that day will never come or worrying it will never be enough. I still have a list of things I want to do for you that I have not gotten to cross off yet. Each year passes at the same pace, but I feel you leaving my life faster than I can catch up.

I have always aspired for the day I can finally take you to the places you always dreamed of visiting. It hurts me to watch you guys grow old, but I have learned to move past such

-MV-

fears. Everyone ages, it's the part of life no one can avoid. Every day, I am pushing myself to live the life you have given me to the fullest potential. Whether or not you will be there to see me be the successful girl you made me out to be, I will forever remember the sacrifices and struggles you went through for this opportunity in life you never got. For the mother who gave up her dreams, for the father who hides his pain, for the love you guys give, I am always grateful.

Sincerely,
Phung Vuong



Pop-pop

By: Abigail Ward

What I am about to tell you may seem fake or like some story out of murder mystery book, but I would like to tell you that it is completely real. Me and my family have to experience every heartache and unbelievable plot twist encased in this tale.

I run into the house in my swimsuit bringing in the stinging smell of chlorine that was trapped in my soaked hair. The race upstairs keeps all the water on my body and off of the floor. I desperately need to take a shower, but my grandparents are waiting downstairs. My parents are going somewhere, and they are going to take us to their house for the night. So, I rush, take a shower, pack my bag, and get dressed. The bag feels light and my hair still smells like chlorine, but I went downstairs anyway. When I walk down the stairs all the lights are off, our house has lost all the warmth and life. The looks on my grandparents' faces match the room: "your grandfather fell on the boat. Your parents are going to go down to see him." Even though to some people an older man falling might be worrying and scary, I wasn't scared. My grandfather is a mason and is still working. He has fallen many times before and always got up. He has had hip and knee replacements, but you could never tell.

We got in the car, rushing off to their house. The sweet summer air still. Music blasting in my Air Pods and blankly staring out into the beautiful sunset. Nothing was bothering me except for my dog shaking underneath my legs. At a red light my grandmother asked for us to listen with tears in her eyes, “Pop-pop, he did not make it.” Affliction. The summer air that once was so sweet, now was choking me. Claustrophobia. My brothers squished by my side were now apparent. I wanted to hug them, but I also wanted them thousands of feet away. My dog, still jumping and shaking, unaware of the situation was making the anger rise in all of us. I closed my eyes to hold the tears and the anger that was fighting to escape. I hold it in until they get to their house, but as soon as I plop down on the bed, all of the gates open and they feel like they will never be closed again.

“I left for a second to go get a wagon. When I come back, he is face down in the water. I jump in after him and I am trying to keep his head out of the water. I don’t understand how it happened. I was only gone for a second.” The cold silence filled the room as soon as the last word escaped his lips. A son should never have to watch their father die.

No one could figure it out, how in the time that it takes to walk fifty feet, a man could fall and drown in six feet of water. These unanswered questions have made it even harder to come to terms with his death. My wandering mind takes me back to the last time I saw him; the salty air was still inviting and warm. We spent a lot of our time on the boat and crabbing. Those memories were the last with him – bittersweet. The sun was so enjoyable. Then I start to remember what happened when the sun went down. Our beach house was small, so one night we had to sleep on the couches. In the silence slow, shallow wheezes sounded as loud as fireworks. I tried to fall asleep, but the sound

was so bothersome I had to move to my mom's room. I did not realize that he was sick, until I recalled this memory. Frustration – I thought if I had stayed and ignored the wheezing that there would be a different outcome to the story.

Even after the sorrow and regret, I still reflect on my moments with him to be ones shared with a friend and not just a grandfather. I miss him so much, but looking back I realize the impact that he has had on my life and that who I am could never be matched by anyone.



Upside Down

By: Abigail Wilson

Upside Down. I woke up from a sound sleep. *Where am I?*

Silence.

“Is everything okay?” My Mom screams. “Chloe? Abby? Lily?”

I’m trying to figure out how to get down, and hearing her cry... nose bleeding... The floor being the only thing in sight. Except for one thing. It was over my head. *What am I going to do?*

I still had to be a big sister even if my daddy’s truck just flipped over.

Twice.

On its back.

Upside down.

Hitting the red button of the buckle, I hop down from my booster seat. Flipping myself back to my feet., my blood is no longer all rushing to my head. Blurry vision. Still questioning where I am, my eyes travel upwards.

“Click.”

There she is. My baby sister in her car seat, which is hanging from what is now the ceiling. The only thing keeping

her in that car seat is the buckle. Salty tears dripped down her face and her screams are muffled in my ears.

My body tensed with fear as my eyes became drawn to my father laying on the ground. I felt my heart beat out of my chest, *Is he dead?* At this age, you don't really counter the factors of being unconscious or asleep. All that flowed through my mind was *Dead. Dead. Dead.* Before I could even process anything, sirens blared from the distance. Panic filled the blood in my body. *How did this happen?*

Slowly, as his eyes fluttered, he sat up and a sigh of relief escaped from my chest. As many thoughts stirred through my mind, I tried helping my mom kick out the windshield to escape the destroyed army green Super Duty truck. Blood rushed out of my mom's nose after hitting the dashboard. Fear dispersed throughout the blood in my veins. Finally, being able to step out of the vehicle, shards of glass filled my older sister and I's size eleven feet. Paramedics raced Lily, Chloe, and I over into the ambulance. I wasn't disturbed as my parents are firefighters and paramedics as well. I knew the drill. Not a word was said between me and Lily. Just a blank stare. "Are you okay?" The paramedic asked. I stammered: "Yes I am fine." *I'm really not.*

Lie.

Lie.

Lie.

I couldn't cause more worry for my distressed parents. After my vitals were checked, the list of questions began. "What is your name? What is today's date? Do you know where you are? Are you dizzy? How many fingers am I holding up? Follow my finger with your eyes." The list goes on. Tiny shards of glass are slowly removed from my feet. With my eyes clenched shut, and the tweezers going back and forth from my foot to the metal tray, I stayed as still as possible. *Don't move.*

-MV-

Mostly everything became a blur besides one vivid
memory playing on repeat through my head.
Upside down.



Learning in the Competition

By: Eric Xu

Young and nervous. I fell apart when it really mattered.

After doing well in the local It's Academic competition, I moved on to the state level. In round 1, my dad and I waited in the room where I would be proving my worth. There were four other kids ready to do the same. The judges read out the questions and I hovered my hand over the buzzer, shaking. The judge started with, "This famous inventor..." *Tesla*. I had an answer, but the plastic buzzer felt heavy, like my world was resting on it. It glared at me and anxiety filled my mind. So I held myself back and waited for more information, and waited, and waited.

A buzzer went off. "Nikola Tesla."

"Correct."

Someone else took the question. In a round with over 30 questions, I didn't buzz in once. Round 2 was the same result.

There was an intermission where everyone could rest up and eat, and I spent it at a table with my dad in the corner of the big hotel lobby. My dad came over, sat next to me, and gave me

something to drink and eat: a juice box and a packet of cheez-its. He wiped my tears and patted me on the back. He looked me in the eyes and told me in broken English, “You need to answer if you want to get the points. No one will judge you if you get it... the answer wrong. It's okay to get it wrong and mess up. You need to take risks to get far.”

I didn't take his advice to heart. It sounded fake. It was something people would say in the Disney movies I watch and everything would magically be better. It was something adults would say to keep kids happy. Before I left to go to the next round, he grabbed my arm and told me that even if I didn't listen to him, even if I still failed, he would still love me, and everyone else who did would still love me too.

Round 3 started. A judge said a prompt, and I stewed. I didn't want to answer, but I thought of what my dad said and how much he looked like he meant it. So I buzzed in. “That is correct.”

I felt a weight lifted off my chest.

Round four and five pass. I did better, but I didn't win. There was no medal or shiny trophy that I hoped for when I came in, but I left with something more important.



In the face of an incredibly difficult year,
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
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These are the voices of Maryland high-
school students, leaving a mark and
creating an impact.

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