

# MARYLAND VOICES



VOLUME XIII

MARYLAND VOICES:  
Volume XIII

Maryland Voices, Vol. XIII

Editor-in-Chief: Michelle Bank

Managing Editor: Harshitha Jeyakumar

Associate Editor: Tavroop Kaur, Joanne Yoon

Editors: Imogen Archuleta, Joanna Blackman, Maria Donegan, Yeseo Lim, Clara

Pan, Isaiah Shiao, Jasmine Sonpar, Kristine Won, Sunny Yuan

Marketing and Design: Hannah Chen, Thomas Lee

Project Director: Rus VanWestervelt

Maryland Voices logo by Tazeen Qudsi and Michael Sweeney

Maryland Voices 2003-2004 founding editorial team: Bridget Forsyth, Nikita Parson, Tazeen

Qudsi, Kaitlin Schwarz

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Centennial High School

4300 Centennial Lane

Ellicott City, MD 21042

410.313.2856

[cmafmarylandvoices@gmail.com](mailto:cmafmarylandvoices@gmail.com)

[www.marylandvoices.home.blog](http://www.marylandvoices.home.blog)

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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.org](http://www.marylandvoices.org) or email us at [cmafmarylandvoices@gmail.com](mailto:cmafmarylandvoices@gmail.com).

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Congratulations to those who were selected for this volume's publication! We commend you for your work and courage in submitting a piece and encourage all Maryland high school students to submit their stories in the 2023-2024 school year for consideration in Volume XIV.

To our managing editor, Harshitha Jeyakumar, I give the utmost thanks. Her dedication, reliability, and endless contributions lay at the core of what is presented to you today. Maryland Voices would be impossible without her.

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## Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Maryland Voices Volume XIII! What you see in front of you is a year's worth of accumulated efforts from our fantastic editorial and marketing team as well as the work of many dedicated high school authors. Thank you authors for your submissions and your dedication to the art of writing.

As always, our mission is to collect the best stories from Maryland high school students, and this year, they have not failed to impress. I know I speak for our entire editorial team when I say that reading this year's submissions was a great pleasure– one that I will certainly miss after my three years as part of the Maryland Voices team. More than anything, however, I will miss working with our fantastic team who continually bring their best to serve the voices of high school students. Their passion for the process of publication is the very core of Maryland Voices' mission and longevity.

As you make your way through the pages of our journal, we implore you to read with great care. These authors write with purpose– with the utmost of intent– and with the hope that you will hear them as they share their story. Thank you and enjoy reading Volume XIII.

Michelle Bank  
Editor-in-Chief

## Top 3 Awards

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

Thomas Evans, Mount Saint Joseph High School

Kaitlyn Faye, Howard High School

Sam Ritter, Mount Hebron High School

These voices speak for themselves. Thank you for the profound impact that you've made.

# Maryland Voices

## Top 3 Award

## 1

# An Outlandish Fear

by: Thomas Evans

*Today we gather as people, to share...*

It is a tight sitting arrangement for all four of us. The old man sitting at the end of the pew does not want to move down, so he makes us walk over him to the middle section of the pew that is really only made for three people. My father goes first, then sister, then my mother, and then I. As I sit down, the crusty man scoots in more to the left of me. His black leather jacket touches mine, and a putrid smell of rotting banana erupts in my nostrils. The smell shoots down my lungs into the pit of my stomach. I feel a light onset of nausea. I shift my head toward my mother's hair, trying to inhale any trace of her perfume. Lucky me, a soothing, balmy lilac scent drifts into my system. My stomach relaxes, gastric juices moaning for a possibly traumatizing situation averted.

Wait. I was not just nauseous. Was I?

The padded seat becomes warmer as a potent dose of cortisol rapidly shoots through my blood. Nausea: "An inclination to throw up."

The two words have been said.

*Throw. Up.*

My fear.

That disgusting bodily process I have only experienced twice in my life. The horrid act only sick, unhealthy people do. My body sets a ticking bomb. My hands wriggle wildly. Beads of sweat drip down my forehead like thick tears. I can feel them tickling my eyebrows. I recall reading an article on MayoClinic, which reads that before I throw up, my mouth should become sour. The orange juice I thought I brushed away clean with my toothbrush after breakfast reappears.

I hastily try to divert my mind to other images. The Spring Formal this Saturday! My heart skips a beat out of excitement. I will be going with the one girl that everyone--my fear stops me: "Yeah. You definitely will get sick during the steak dinner with her. All over the white tablecloths."

A lump appears in my throat at the thought of stuffing a large, oily hunk of filet mignon down my esophagus in front of her. The room will be stuffy and packed with couples enjoying a peaceful candlelight dinner. Sharing love without my intrusion. The pressure of the environment makes this a perfect condition for something like this to occur. I whimper weakly. My fear is right. It is inevitable. I will be *the* embarrassment of school. I will embarrass her. I will be *that* kid.

The uncontrollable shaking of my legs (a pre-throwing up sign, per May-

oClinic) brings me back to the present. What if I am the embarrassment of the church? Right here, right now. People here would never forget what I will do: my best friend seated right in front of me, the old man next to me, or even Father, just to name a very small few. I will be the sick boy at mass. The untouchable. My breathing increases in frequency. I am now swallowing deeply, closing my eyes, exerting enormous amounts of energy to push that lump out of my throat and back down into my stomach. But my fear is trying to push it out the other way, out of my mouth, where the entire world can see. I am in a losing tug of war.

*The Gospel According to Luke.*

Father has not even read the Gospel reading yet. There are forty minutes left of agony. People begin to look at me for swallowing so hard, so they subtly check on me to see if I am normal. My best friend looks back at me, and mouths what looks like “are you good dude?” My beautiful date waves at me from the choir bench with an excited smile. The leather jacket man looks down at my face, his forehead scrunched at the noises he is hearing. My mother shifts uncomfortably. She knows what is going on. She tries to hide it, but I know she is already embarrassed of my fear. Her clenching fists speak volumes.

All these eyes are too much. I know I cannot make it. I place my shaking white hands beneath my bottom. I need another helpless image. I try to think about the track meet. How I will win first place, how I... would throw up in the first four hundred meters. All over my competitors. The shame of my parents. The disgust and anger of their parents. My heart pounds out of my chest. Long, deep heaves are my breaths.

“Remember Rachel?” My evil fear cackles. Rachel. My best friend. I remember how she threw up in front of me and her friends when her boyfriend broke up with her. She was not sick. She did not have the “stomach bug.” I can hear the laughter of her friends ringing in my ears. I can see the text exchanges that followed. The one text from a boy that called her a “sick dog.” A rock splashes into the breakfast sitting in my stomach. I know I am not sick. I know I didn’t eat anything bad for breakfast, but my body is in distress. That means I would just throw up. Being sick or not means nothing. People cannot tell the difference, either. They will prey on you regardless.

*Peace Be With You.*

Now God wants to share his body and blood with me. It is definitely not the time. I have to eat the dry bread and drink the bitter blood that will just add to my already sour mouth. I have to go up to the front in front of everyone where I will just be sick all over the white garments of Father. I have to. I can’t. I won’t. But the friends in the front will run to my mother after and ask why I do not want to be Catholic anymore because I don’t want the Eucharist. That is pretty bad too. Likewise, those same friends will run away from me when they see my pancake breakfast on Father.

“Go T.” People are impatiently waiting for me to go.

I wobble as I stand up. Everything my fear has conjured floods back into me: the banana scent. The sour mouth. The sweaty, white hands. My uncontrolla-

ble shaking. Rachel. The eyes of my friends. The filet mignon. My date. My track meet. My parents. The embarrassment. The shame. Me being the “untouchable.”

Me throwing up.

I reach for communion. Father smiles, though I know he would want to see me banished from the church after his white garments are not so pure anymore. I know I will do it right here. I can feel it. The lump in my throat is at the roof of my mouth.

*The Body of Christ.*

I place the dry bread into my mouth.

Nothing happens. Nothing has happened. And nothing will ever happen.

I have *emetophobia*. The fear of throwing up. Yes, you can laugh. You probably already feel that I am an “untouchable” kid who is sick. This thought is so random, so outlandish, so... invalid. I apologize that you needed to read an entire narrative about something so horrid. So nauseating. Truly, I apologize.

I recognize throwing up is just my body’s own response to a deadly pathogen or to stress. While it is definitely uncomfortable, painful, and repulsive, it will not kill me. It will not send me into a coma, but keep me out of one. Even if I do experience the nauseating lump in my throat because of my *emetophobia*, nothing will come out of my mouth. No breakfast on Father’s garments. Not anything. My counselor assures me so. It is even a proven, numerical statistic that throwing up never happens with *emetophobia*.

I helplessly tried multiple times to counter my fear with these factual assurances. Naturally, my fear should have just disappeared. Yet, my fear still lingers, stronger than ever. There must be something deeper than I have not yet uncovered.

When I flash images through my head of Spring Formals, of pretty dates, and of victorious track meets, I automatically picture my food on display for the whole world to see in that moment. Images of good times in my life that are meant to be memorable with people turned tragic. *People*. My fear chuckles. Guilty.

I eat perfectly fine when I am alone. When I go for Confession and I am the only one in the Church, I feel normal and relaxed. When I do not have to experience memorable times in my life with *people*, there is no lump in my throat. My body is at ease.

Maybe my fear is not throwing up.

Maybe it is of people, of you.

You have eyes to see my putrid appearance after I throw up. You have a mind to form labels for me, like “untouchable.” You have a mouth to tell others about how insensible I was not to excuse myself before I became sick.

My real fear screams in amusement.

“Have fun trying to get over me. I am just too powerful.”

## 2

# What's the Pointe of Being a Teenager?

by: Kaitlyn Faye

About a month ago, I got my first pair of pointe shoes. In the dance world, this is a huge deal. To be trusted with shoes where your entire body weight is on the tips of your toes is a lot of responsibility.

When my dance teacher was giving everyone their evaluation, I was so confident that I was going to pass. I had that cheeky smile where you know you did well but don't want to brag about it yet. I stood there in that hot, stuffy, purple room, leaning against the ballet bar without a care in the world. My teacher announced, "Okay, I have the people that passed. Please, please, please do not be disappointed if you do not pass."

The teacher started with me. The smile slowly faded from her lips, and the words that came out were, "So close, Kaitlyn. You're so close." Then it was my turn for the smile to fade. My feet were strong—I knew how to use the correct posture, and my calf muscles were ready, so why wasn't I going pointe? She went on to say that since my knees were hyperextended it would hinder my ability to get up to full pointe.

Hyperextension is when your knees still feel bent when they are actually straight. This causes your knees to lock into place which puts too much pressure on them when you go up to réleve and en pointe. I knew I had hyperextended legs for years. What I didn't know was how problematic it would be, and that it would stop me from going en pointe. My dance teacher had never mentioned it was that big of a concern until then. I had been in pre-pointe for over a year, wouldn't she have noticed it before? If she had told me a month before then I would have had time to work on it; instead, she sprung it on me so unexpectedly.

In dance you stare at someone's body and pick out every little thing that is wrong. That is what makes it an art form as much as it is a sport. Everything is so clean and precise. That is why I love dance. When something is wrong, they tell you. It's something I've struggled with my entire life.

Everything in my life has always been "okay." Nothing special, just okay. Sure, I dance, but not competitively. Sure, I do theater, but all of my previous roles have been ensemble members. Yeah, I like to write, but none of my teachers have said that anything I have done is exceptional. It is all "okay." But I want to be more than okay. I want my work to be excellent. I want my writing to be remark-

able. But I can't do that all on my own.

It's like when my mom asked my brother to do the dishes for the first time. Reluctantly, he walked over to the sink and just stood there. He called out, "Mom, how do I do this?"

Her response was, "just figure it out on your own, you can do it." My brother then called out to me, but I had an English paper due that night so I didn't have time to help him. He attempted to scrub the dishes with his uncoordinated hands and ended up breaking a cup instead. When my mom came back down she said, "Oh, honey all you had to do was put them in the dishwasher." How was he supposed to know that? How was he supposed to know that all he had to do was put them in the dishwasher? My brother and I both got annoyed because this is a common problem in our family.

All my life I have had to figure everything out on my own. Humans don't naturally know how to do the dishes. We have to be taught. If my mom had been more direct with her directions, there wouldn't be one less cup in our possession. It's frustrating when someone automatically assumes you know how to do something. You did not teach me, therefore I do not know.

For humans to improve, we need feedback from other people. We need second opinions on our art so we don't get too self critical. We can't function without our support systems. I never really had that in my life. Watching hours of videos of professional ballerinas motivated me to go en pointe. My mom who was a dancer could have motivated me so much, but instead, I had to find the motivation elsewhere. I had to find it inside myself. Everything I do is based on self-motivation. Yes, having responsibility is good, but it is also so damn tiring. I just want to be a kid. It is a lot to put on a person, especially if they are only a teenager. I want freedom. I want to be allowed to make mistakes. I hate having to be perfect all the time. Why can't I have fun and enjoy being a teenager for a little while?

The part that sucked the most was since about half of the class passed, I had to go to the dance store and buy the pointe shoes anyway. I had to buy the shoes even though I could not wear them yet. What's the point of buying 100 dollar shoes if you can't wear them?

Imagine this: you go en pointe for the first time. You feel your entire body weight on just five toes at first. Then you are standing on both feet, six inches taller than you normally are. You feel like you are flying. It's the best feeling in the world. But it's also the worst. Because you don't think you deserve to feel this way. You don't deserve to do it because technically you didn't earn it yet.

And you can't help but blame yourself. Maybe if I had figured it out on my own. Maybe if I had noticed all these issues before. But how would I have known that? It is not my job to know that. It's not my responsibility. I am the teenager. And I want to feel like one, because what's the point of being a teenager if you can't enjoy it while it lasts?

## 3

# The Feathered Art of Watching

by: Sam Ritter

I met her first on a doorstep of snow, in a house of gray skies and walls of stoic foliage. She lay beneath these silent watchers, unmoving, bright black and blue in endless white and gray. To me, however, her eyes seemed most distinctive, reflecting the whirlwind around her in soft browns and a hint of lilac. A distorted mirror. She did not speak. She did not cry. She lay there, seeing beyond me, beyond herself, kept company only by tree limbs and icicles. And me, the uninvited witness.

Her nest lay a meter away, misshapen and wounded like her, ice crystallizing on the edges of the outermost twigs. Unfairly small. It stood out, an inkblot in the snow, a period to the point in my life before I knew the innocence in another creature, the powerlessness we all share on this little gray earth. I went to it. Nature is best left alone, it is true, but the little twigs seemed so helpless lying there that I could not help myself.

My boots crunched, as though walking on bones, as though walking on graves. She watched me. I did not look at her, but I know she did, her eyes a pressure on my soul, a defense and a request in dueling fashion. One of her feathers lay ensnared in the twigs. I'd like to think it was a warning. *This is what will happen if you are cruel. This is what will happen if you decide you cannot care.* She didn't know, then, that I could not help but care. Whether she compelled me, or I compelled myself, I doubt I'll ever know, but I believe that I could no more have stopped myself from helping than I could have stopped the sunrise.

The nest held only moss and a dusting of snowflakes. No eggs nor shell nor sign of life, save the ensnared feather and her eyes still pressed against me. Like a hollow corpse, or a vacant room.

A mark of potential, of what could be, and all that isn't. An empty nest. An unimportant martyr. I find it relieving how inconsequential twigs and moss became, then. No life within them as her heart still beat; in an instant she recaptured my full attention. I stepped, stumbled, really, and knelt by her head in the snow. For the first time, she spoke, a warble bubbling from her chest without strength nor structure. The air swallowed it nearly as quickly as it came. Lilac and brown and shallow breaths, her wing a grotesque imitation of how it should be. A thin river of ruby carved a canyon in the snowfall.

I know not how long she lay there before I found her, but I knew then it was too late. I could offer her nothing but warmth and a witness to the inevita-

ble. Ice burned my knees and hands. My heartbeat in my wrists, too loud and too fast and *here, here, here*. I tried, valiantly, foolishly, to beat for the both of us. I cradled her head in my palm— too cowardly to move her wing lest it cause more pain. She was already cold, as though Life was impatient to be rid of her. But her eyes and breath remained. I held her, shaking; whether it was from cold or grief, I do not know. I gave her my tears and whispered goodbyes. A minute, or an hour, or a lifetime later, her eyes fell glassy, and she lay still.

Understanding rides on the coattails of grief, but I scrubbed grief off in the shower that night, scalding water until my hands stung the memory of her into unconsciousness. Processing is a fickle thing. Powerlessness held equal hand with honor, unable to help and yet blessed with the role of witness. Who could blame me for craving oblivion? I shuffled twigs and ruby in the snow to some far corner of my psyche, something to revisit weeks and months and years later. And I would, eventually. Her and her eyes imprinted on my soul, and though it took me a while to understand, their mark never wavered. But that night, I didn't want to understand. I merely observed, and mourned for a little life lost in my arms for the very first time.

All I could give her was a witness, but perhaps the greatest gift of all is to remember.

# High Merit Awards

## 4

# Estoy Orgullosa De Ser Puertorriqueña

by: Sofia Cabrera

In the summer of 2016 at approximately 11:30 a.m. I experienced what no one would ever desire... the first lunch period at a new school. But my little self, who knew nothing about a cruel 4th grader, was excited. I was excited that my mom had packed sancocho—a delicious Puerto Rican soup filled with starchy potatoes and soft chicken. Not to mention, after a long day doing multiplication problems I was starving, stomach growling and all. So I sprinted to the lunch room instantly after hearing the loud bell on the intercom. Two minutes after I sat in the first seat and began scarfing down my delicious lunch, I spotted a group of fourth graders coming to sit down. It took them no time at all to start making sharp, hateful comments about my lunch. “Eww,” “Why does your lunch smell like that,” “gross,” “that looks disgusting,” “why would you eat that,” they all repeated. At that moment, I knew. The booming school lunchroom that I once fantasized about was not as it seemed. At least for me it wasn't.

This experience, among others, shaped my appreciation for my culture as well as my urge to end the racism and bullying towards people of color like me, but this experience didn't always have the same effect on me. Originally, it did the opposite: causing resentment towards my identity, it led to a domino effect of self hatred shown through the hours of scrubbing my caramel skin in attempts to lighten it, through the time I spent indoors nearly as much as a vampire to create and preserve the Bella Swan like complexion we all know and love, and through my abandonment of my native language, nearly forgetting it all. My community applauded my attempts to become like them. This reaction made me want to conform more. I mean a child's number one goal is to fit in, so if there was a way to make it happen I think we would have all jumped at the opportunity to do so; I sure did.

It was not until my seventh grade year that I started to rekindle the love for my culture. It was September 16, 2017 when hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico. That day did not only change all of Puerto Rico, but it also changed me. My dad blew open my bedroom door in a panic, telling me the news. After this brief frightening experience, I decided to go on my iPad to see what tragedies had occurred. Yes, I saw destruction, loss, and death, but I also saw a community of people working together to help each other. It wasn't until then that I realized that

this was my community. I was ashamed of the years of resentment. Starting on that day, I worked to right my wrongs and reverse my actions of self adjustment to fit in. I am now proud to be Latina, and I will never let others dictate my identity.

*Estoy orgullosa de ser puertorriqueña.*

## 5

# Shifting Waters

by: Miriam Dia

I was always the perfect one, the model student, the responsible class president, the teacher's pet, the defender of the weak, and the voice of the people. Yet, for nine months of my life, I was the bully. I was a bully. I realized this only in retrospect, believing myself entirely justified and not remotely or intentionally hurtful at the time. I was just making sure Juliette knew that the friends she thought were hers were, in fact, mine. The nature of my classmate only made my actions less tolerable: she had Trisomy 21.

“You do know that Jad doesn’t like you, right?”

That was the meanest thing I had said. We were at the pool. Had you asked me a moment later why I blurted that out, I would have said—and sincerely—that I was trying to spare her the mockery. Our class, including Jad, humored her, but we all knew what I had ignored tact to say. Ask me now and I confess, after examining the context, that my unjustified and surely jealousy-driven aggravation was at its peak: she was the strongest swimmer in the class. That was my role. When I left the pool that day, my dignity remained in the water.

I apologized the next day, and the rest of 7th grade is now a blur. Juliette moved back to France to go to a school with a better special needs program. At least, that’s what I heard.

Two years later, my family moved from Dakar back to Towson. My declaration resurfaced every so often, triggering crippling remorse despite my apology, though less and less—until my AP Biology unit on genetics five years later. Now, after much regret and self-reflection, my actions evoke different emotions:

“Everyone is grappling with some kind of hardship at any time. It’s important to look through the veil we unknowingly place on ourselves sometimes. Just... just be compassionate.” All eyes and minds were on me. I took a deep, shaky breath and blinked back tears in the silence. “Still, I’m not here to tell my story; I’m here to tell Juliette’s success story. I learned from an old 7th grade classmate that Juliette represented Senegal in the 2019 Abu Dhabi Special Olympics and was a two-time medalist. She earned bronze in the 25m freestyle and silver in the 25m backstroke.”

I clicked the “next” button of the clicker: “and here are our sources.”

There was a moment of still silence before my AP Biology class erupted into applause. A whirlwind of high-fiving, hand-holding, smile-exchanging, congratulating, and sympathy accompanied me to my seat. In the commotion, my

teacher rose from her desk. Only when she began speaking did I realize that she, too, was holding back tears behind her glasses and mask: "This is what biology is about... As someone with an unusually large collection of personal stories with diseases, I know how important sharing is for our development as people, living beings... isn't that what biology is about, after all? Life."

I sat down, wiped emerging tears, and smiled. I had made it through the presentation after all! We had been tasked with presenting a genetic disease so I, naturally, wrote my group's name next to the first mention of "Trisomy." We ended up with Trisomy 18 and Trisomy 13. Had the teacher forgotten Trisomy 21? Oh well. I worked on the presentation and dismissed any thought of Juliette. On presentation day, the teacher realized she had forgotten to add Trisomy 21 to the list and asked if anyone would present it. My hand floated up. I considered adding a Trisomy 21 slide to the PowerPoint while I listened to other groups but figured it was too late: presentations were today. As my group and I walked to the front of the class to present, the bell rang. I sighed and accepted that tomorrow was the predetermined time to come to terms with this.

Tomorrow became today. Standing in front of the class with Juliette's face projected behind me, I felt like I was on trial. What was I doing, exposing myself like this? It was too late to back out, so I generated words. I began to hear soft gasps, see sorrowful smiles, and notice nods coaxing me to continue. I was reaching people. Was telling my story beneficial to only my conscience? Did I have the power to catalyze change? To keep even a single person from replicating my mistakes? My factual retelling slowly became heartfelt. Being the best swimmer in the class wasn't my true role, telling my story for people like me and people like Juliette was. When I left the class that day, my remorse remained on the desk. I had traded it back for the dignity I left in the water five years prior. It had been waiting patiently for me to reclaim it.

## 6

# Scattered Origins

by: Sakina Ibrahim

For a long time, if you asked me who I was, all I could give you was my name. I had little connection to my roots— the colorful cultures in my mixed-race home clashed with each other, and in the end, mixed to make a muddy gray.

Despite my mother's Ukrainian-Bolivian heritage, my childhood was primarily infused with my father's Pakistani culture. With no set connection to either of these different cultures, I felt like I was drifting, with no strong basis on which to build my personal identity. At Pakistani events, I frequently felt humiliated when I struggled to recall the name of certain cultural dishes or when I came off as disrespectful because I couldn't understand an older auntie who was asking me to get her kashmiri chai.

Our previously Pakistani-Muslim lifestyle began to splinter when my parents divorced, and soon, only my dad engaged in it. Meanwhile, my mom's Ukrainian-Bolivian house became more Western and non-religious, and she reconnected with her own heritage by shopping at the Ukrainian store and often going out with her Latino friends. My mom attempted to thrust me into Ukrainian culture to make up for my primarily Pakistani upbringing, but I struggled to identify with other Ukrainians.

One day during my sophomore year, as my mom and I were driving down a neighborhood road, I complained to her about why she never taught me Spanish, since I'm part Bolivian. Instead of entering into an explosive argument, she looked at me from the driver's seat and reminded me that she, too, was mixed race. Growing up in Ukraine, a part of the Soviet Union at the time, her parents abandoned her at a young age to be raised by her grandparents. To her chagrin, she was always darker, hairier, and looked different to other girls in her school. Like me, she could never escape what made her inherently dissimilar.

In the end, she never fully immersed herself in any culture. Instead, after work she relaxed with Bolivian coca leaf tea and Ukrainian poetry. She cooked beef filled piroshki, and drizzled spicy Bolivian llajua salsa on top to complete the meal. She adorned her house with colorful Bolivian tapestries, and filled her shelves with Ukrainian Motanka dolls.

To find balance my mom became her own person, and I had to as well. She and I were in the unique position to claim what we wanted from each culture, and could form worldviews based on intimate exposures to different cultures that others weren't given the opportunity to experience. Thus, instead of trying

to force myself into the conversation, I sat back and learned from my different cultures. At Pakistani events, people celebrated unapologetically and to the fullest extent, sequined and smiling, making the most of the moment. When I had altitude sickness in Bolivia, my great-grandparents prescribed me herbal remedies for altitude sickness instead of pills. They taught me to respect the land, feeding me natural foods and taking me on frequent walks. From my Ukrainian grandmother, I learned about artists and literature as we toured museums and libraries. By opening myself up to these cultures, I was able to find beauty in them, rather than reminders of my outsider status.

I then embraced my mixed-race heritage by finding ways that it helped me rather than alienated me: my Ukrainian appreciation for the arts, my Bolivian appreciation of nature, and my Pakistani zest for life. With these cultural values at my side, I've realized that what makes me happiest is having the freedom to indulge in the mundane, slower aspects of the present.

Now, if you were to ask me who I am, I would show you that I am more than the muddy gray of my childhood home. The sum of all my inherited hues is a new color and a new perspective that I can share.

## 7

# Theophany

by: Reanya Jackson

I'm squished between my three cousins in the back of our 2005 Toyota Hatchback. I recite Matthew 5:8 over and over and over, trying my best to drill it into my brain. *Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God*, I repeat, engulfing myself in words in hopes of silencing the noise. We pull into the church's parking lot and file out of the car, toppling over each other. My grandmother plucks at our flyaway hairs and straightens our clothes, giving us her usual "don't embarrass me" look. Her mask is equipped with furrowed eyebrows and curled lips.

We all walk hand in hand through the bustling parking lot. The building is compact; if you didn't read the sign or spot the thinly painted cross on the door, you'd probably never know it was a church.

It sits in a dismal shopping center between a Dollar General and a liquor store. Fractured glass bottles and plastic bags aimlessly occupying the parking lot. I drag my feet along the cracked pavement, scraping the soles of my light-up princess shoes. My grandmother holds the door for us as we toilsomely trudge inside. We are greeted by the familiar smell of warm cinnamon and sour bacterial spray. The slight hum of the choir warming up is strident in our ears as we all dispersed to our appropriate places. Most Sundays, the adults stay in the main room while the children trample to the basement.

Today, the youth pastor is out, so all kids are instructed to stay with their parents. The service starts, and not long after, my cousin dozes off, slobbering over the cushioned pew. The pastor begins with an adoration prayer and everyone bows their heads—except for me. Scanning the room of familiar faces, I realize, despite spending every Sunday with these people, how little I knew about them. The melody morphs mute in my mind as I replace it with my own imagination, letting it dart freely from person to person before the psalm snags me back to existence.

Music at our church feels like a concert; everyone stands up and dances to the soulful melody. I watch the men wave their arms and tap their feet to the tune. I watch the women fanning their sweat-lathered skin with makeshift fans, shouting "Amen!" The wrinkles on their faces told stories of sorrow, yet behind their reddened eyes, there was still somehow a spark; a glint of light reflecting from their tears.

*Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall SEE God.*

As the choir belts songs of praise, my eyes stay on the women. What do they see?  
What do they see that made them drop their canes and straighten their backs?  
What do they see that willed their weeping? What do they see that I don't?

I went home and read the entire book of Matthew. I prayed, asking God to show me what he showed those women.

# 8

## Nature

by: Tanisha Khan

When my mom drives me home from school, without fail she always ex-claims “Subhan Allah!” to the trees as if it were her first time seeing fall. She isn’t wrong; the leaves are gorgeous when they haven’t fallen, bright neon colors guiding the way back home like a wealthy welcome mat. It feels impossible to get tired of the sight. I huff in amusement and roll my eyes when she barks out an order to grab her phone and record them. The video captures my shaky grasp and my mom’s clumsy opening of her folded case and waxing scriptures under her breath like second nature. It feels like watching the scene behind the leather-coated stage curtain of the hot car seat. Her songs aren’t meant for me, but I can’t help but feel like I am sitting with the sole audience member that was God.

She’s always sent images to the family group chat where relatives around the world can see, but I’ve never seen her send videos of the trees. The phrase “Subhan Allah” translates to “Glory be to Allah,” which would fit the context in a direct sense, as if my mother were complimenting God’s meals. One of the primary beliefs in Islam, when it comes to living day to day life, is intention. Doing good for the sake of it is not enough, rather people must do it for the sake of God instead. The Quran states that the benefit of saying “Subhan Allah” is that “all sins of a person will be forgiven even if it could cover the sea” (16:12). Does she say those words with so much excitement because she still feels weighed down with guilt, or is it simply a cultural phenomenon to ask for forgiveness every waking moment spent, thanking God for your successes?

You swallow when you drown because it is inherent. When news stations take up every channel on the TV, mosques are packed. It becomes a skill to think about God when you are not in distress. He is thanked for what could have been lost and what is won, but hasn’t been thanked yet for that partially burnt slice of bread with jam lazily swiped onto it. You made that lackluster breakfast, why does He get the credit? He’s already praised for the moon’s rotations and the mountains, and you’re your own person. When will you be punished for your crimes and not for the absence of forgiveness?

Nevertheless, I am small enough to admit that the world He made is impressive. For these sights, I thank God and curse His name in the same breath to build my own tally of faults. He treats me too well, and I’m selfish. I bask in His banquet with neither a tucked napkin nor remorse.

My favorite sight is when the sun shines its blatant light, to the point where

its blaring saturates the color of the ground it blesses. The color of light affects its shadows as well: a warm light makes a cold shadow, a blue tint added to the blurred borders of the shade, and a cold light forms warm shadows. I find color in the most obscure places it seems. Dead grass has purple, and birch bark is spontaneously orange and blue side by side. There's so much gray in the world, but that's what makes it so beautiful. Desaturation means there's more varying colors clumped together, and the more gray there is, the more the bright colors shine brighter.

The pine trees in my backyard act like a fence. Sap sticks to my soles as I waddle on over, as if my zebra-striped sandals would protect me from nature's unconventional dirt. Many trees are spotted and stripped of bark, as if they are slowly melting. Some have old scars of short branches, and I can see gross dead cicada shells stuck to them. Light peeks through the thin trees, and the vague purples, blues, and reds turn to a gorgeous savannah brown. Variation is sacrificed for saturation, but the dark green shadows under the dead pine needles make up for it. If I were given a canvas and told to paint the scene, my art teacher would scold me for color blocking too much instead of first placing down the general value scale. Sorry, I'd think to myself as I paint over the thick plastic; I can't help but get lost in details.

## 9

# The Place of Dreams

by: Thomas Lee

The late afternoon sun greeted my family and me as our car passed through the gates of Island Beach State Park. It was one of those car trips specially planned by nature lovers. Our itineraries were filled with words like “state forest” or “national wildlife refuge.” This time, we were in New Jersey exploring its state parks and nature reserves. As a teen nature photographer, there is nothing quite like a drive with my family down a long, empty road flanked by low-lying trees and shrubs, the ocean never too far away. I rolled down my window and the cool ocean breeze licked my face. Overhead, the sharp cries of seagulls brought life to an otherwise serene landscape. Breathing in, I instantly felt at ease.

Looking back on the spring break of my junior year, I wonder how many more times I would get to create such memories with my family. Soon, I’ll be in college, far from the suburbs of Howard County, Maryland, and even farther from Blackwater, Chincoteague, and the Alleghenies. I am lucky to be in a family that loves the outdoors. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, we would embark on a journey every weekend or so, hoping to discover another corner of Maryland that would leave us feeling enchanted.

Island Beach could very well be the setting of a pleasant dream. Unlike the crowded and industrial part of New Jersey that many are familiar with, the Jersey Shore is a magical place. About a few dozen miles up the coast from Atlantic City’s colorful lights lies one of the last undeveloped stretches of barrier island, home to ospreys, songbirds, and a sly yet curious resident—the red fox. My expectations weren’t high, however; as the sun began to set, so did our hopes of finding this unlikely creature.

Yet, within a few seconds of parking our car by our second trailhead, a strange, thin figure appeared on the boardwalk. The creature yawned and stared at us with a forlorn look in its eyes, as if it had been waiting for us all this time. It started towards our car, making its way across the parking lot and sitting down just a few yards away. Elated, I reached for my camera and slowly stepped out of the car, taking care not to frighten the lonely fox. Then, paying little attention to the gritty sand that covered the hard asphalt, I got down on my belly and began snapping photos of this seemingly docile creature. There was a mystical quality about this little Reynard. Its dark sepia eyes, long black whiskers, and faded golden fur told of a bygone realm. Eventually, the fox went on its way, disappearing into the undergrowth. We continued our hike on the boardwalk that spanned the

width of the barrier island, from the vast Atlantic Ocean on one end to Barnegat Bay on the other.

Pretty soon, the wind had picked up and golden hour was waning. We arrived at our last trailhead and followed a muddy path surrounded by tall reeds to a bird blind. Shutting the wooden door behind us, we sat in silence as we peeked through the slits in the walls. Midnight blue waves danced beneath cotton candy clouds. In the distance, two ospreys courted above a nesting platform, their dark silhouettes standing out from the peach-colored sky. The wind blew all around us, and for a brief moment, I imagined myself living in that small shack, far from the noise of human civilization and closer than ever to nature's loving embrace.

The clouds were now an electrifying tone of reddish pink. Indeed, the sky now appeared to be on fire. We had driven to the southern end of the park, where the road disappeared into the sand dunes. I scrambled up the slope, my feet sinking into the soft sand as I passed by patches of reeds and the occasional prickly pear cactus. Finally, I reached the top. It was windy and cold, but I didn't care. Behind me, murky clouds rolled over the dark Atlantic Ocean. Before me, the last few bands of fluorescent rose gradually faded into the twilight. Closing my eyes and breathing in deeply, I enshrined that moment into my memory, always to cherish when I find myself caught up in the flurry of everyday life.

That day, I realized how lucky I am to be alive on this planet, to be breathing clean air and walking amongst beautiful creatures. But time is running out to save our planet from its climate woes. Will future generations be able to enjoy nature's gifts just as my family had done that April evening? It's easy to feel pessimistic. However, if we can all take some time each day to appreciate Earth's natural wonders, to listen to the birds, to touch the grass, to smell the rain-soaked earth, maybe we can learn to see the blue marble as our paradise, our Eden, and strive to become its humble caretaker.

## 10

# How The Little Mermaid's Voice Returned

by: Ruchel Limbos

The red ticket for the open mic was secured in my grasp like it was the Golden Ticket from Charlie's Chocolate Factory. The hallway grew louder and busier, fueling the fireworks in my veins. My thoughts raced by just as fast. *Calm down. You practiced. Relax.*

I was about to do my first poetry reading, and I wanted to be seen as a writer who used their voice to speak for the people who needed it, just as others had done for me. I stood in that hallway like a fish bound to a rock while the tide rushed past. I wasn't nervous. I was excited. Soon I would be testing the waters to see if an audience was really out there. Who knew that it could be so close by? For a moment I was lost in my swirl of thoughts. I wondered who else was performing, what grades they were in—oh, how much longer would it take before I could stand in front of that mic?

Soon I would be trying to reach at least one soul in that tumbling sea of a crowd. Performing would be like a one-sided conversation, and all of the judgment would only be in my head. Who knows how they would interpret it, how they would interpret me? *Silly...* I took a step back. *That's why I write in the first place.*

My writing was much like myself the first half of freshman year: a little too honest, and mostly kept away from others' eyes.

Performing or public speaking, especially as an artist, can be a wonderful opportunity, yet when the time arises, one cannot help but overthink consequences. Such experiences also tend to be good reminders to get out of one's head and accept that no one is perfect, especially in their art; but that doesn't mean that it cannot be enjoyed... and that is why we perform.

The line finally moved forward and I handed my now slightly warm ticket over to one of the event organizers at the door.

I sat in the back near the table laden with hot chocolate, whipped cream, and marshmallows. The atmosphere was warm and the ceiling was laced with golden fairy lights and paper snowflake chains.

As I held my printed poems, I knew that I was going to be alright. I had practiced all week until the tone felt right and the words started to sing. Poetry feels like singing—a vibrant chameleon of a song. I placed the pages on the table

to rest until the time came. *Now we wait.*

I focused on each performance to calm down and distract myself from the continuous buzzing that made me shift in my seat and tap my fingers on the desk. If I sprouted wings at that moment I wouldn't have noticed until they brushed the ceiling. Like an incessant flow of percussion, it built up before ending in a crash of cymbals around my heart beat.

"Now we have Ruchel Limbos, who will be reading two original poems." I sighed and made my way past tables and backpacks with my papers in hand. I stood at the mic and knew that in this silent battle, it wasn't my enemy. It was my greatest power. "Hi, I'm Ruchel. I'll be reading two poems for you today...the first is called '*Waxing and Waning*.'" I paused, took a deep breath, then began.

"Wounds hurt most while healing  
Become deeper when torn over and over, ignored,  
covered up..."

It was so quiet yet my voice was so loud and so close because of the echoes of the microphone and speakers.

"...a young bird,  
you chirped in laughs and made-up songs;  
you remained true  
to the world deemed open for your small palms..."

Time passed slowly like I was walking against the weight of the ocean...

"...Focusing on the clock hand,  
filling in each tick with a goal,  
each tock with a worry

in a stupor your feet trip over each other;"

...yet once I looked back, I realized that I was farther from the shore and closer to myself.

"...drawing on your own light to shine  
While facing darkness by the side of countless stars...You may waver:  
but *never* diminish."

My hands moved on their own as if they were conjuring the spells that I had written to cast them on the crowd and make them feel the emotions that they wouldn't otherwise know that I had—or the emotions that they had. I barely registered the applause before I realized that I had finished, and I smiled with a feeling of serenity. At that microphone stand, I was in a bubble where my voice reflected my soul amidst the shipwrecks of my experience that my words depicted.

"Thank you...here is my second original poem, '*Galaxy*.'" A new universe wove in my mind as my hands began to trace it into the air.

"They say the eyes are gateways to the soul.  
Hers are fogged alarmingly so:  
nonexistent figments mesh with reality  
ever more distorted and foreign  
*when exposed in a world they don't belong to...*"

Feeling the power in truth, I reminded myself of just how much I belonged in that spot and how much I loved poetry.

"...And *still* she looks up at the uncovered rim  
*the vines become ropes to climb to the sun, thorns meeting each grip.*

Look at her so, and she won't stand it:  
 it's *absurd* for someone to have such interest in *her*

As a person: she won't believe it, half the time  
 A silly question: who *wills* to brave a black hole's edge-  
 nonetheless *fall* into it?

If *only* she weren't blind herself- !

*'Look up from those pages, read people as you do this substance called words.'*"

My voice became more stable, more certain, as those lines of verse unfurled their wings and soared from the page after waiting so patiently.

"...They say the eyes are the gateways to the soul. *What is a soul?*  
 its substance isn't tangible. you won't find it. Neither will she.

Her soul is the *journey*."

I felt seen, and I felt whole. I was introduced to that feeling a writer has when their work is finally recognized by others, and I realized...*my work has meaning. There is an audience waiting.*

How could I have thought of trading my voice for comfort in conformity, when my comfort and my voice are one in the same? I was already a part of this world. I didn't even need to make a bargain with a sea witch to find it. Someone may covet and call after it, but my voice could not be copied. I realized how far my words could echo at my first open mic; and here I am now, echoing the life in the world around me, with my own voice.

# 11

## Youth

by: Chikamdi Okeakpu

One thing that's good about being a child is that we often see the world in color: the trees so brightly green, the sky so vividly blue, the people we meet, the friends we have, everything is always so perfect. But why does the spark in our days get dimmer as we get older? When asked this question, some would talk about how we are in some type of reality that is not controlled by our own will, but frankly, I feel like that answer is just them trying to make up for the absence of what they don't know. If I'm being honest I think we have made the future something not worth looking forward to. We paint the picture that being an adult or growing up is something to fear and something we don't truly want. The truth is that the only time we get to truly enjoy life is when we are children—when we have the freedom of having nothing to do and just being ourselves, when we have the freedom of just being able to go to school without worrying about our body image or if we look good enough for the boys around us, the freedom of still be a child. With the way our society has changed, there really is no space for children to be children, and neither do I have the space to be a child.

As I sit on my bed looking out at the dull skies and wondering what my future will turn out like, the sudden thought, "*don't rush into the future*," pops into my head after countless days spent thinking about my future plans. I find myself wondering about the day I'll go to college or the day I'll finally get the chance to see what I'll become. The thought makes me want to rush so far ahead to the point where I find myself forgetting the present. I don't want to deal with school anymore, I don't want to deal with the stress of waking up at 6 am every day, but then I remember this is no ordinary thing that I'm trying to rush. I'm trying to rush my childhood. My precious childhood.

That in itself was not a good thing. The reality check that my youth was beginning to be left behind, the wave of sadness I felt at realizing that as I was forcing time made me understand that I was giving something precious in return: myself. Now I stand torn between my past, present, and future. After much of my time being lost I have realized one thing: I don't actually want to rush this moment. I want to live in this moment. I want to have fun with my friends, and I hate to say it, but I want to go back to my childhood. I want to go back to being younger. I want to go back to the days when each summer I would perch myself on my couch, watching the latest TV shows, or the days when I would run out and play in the sun, waiting for the ice cream truck to show up, or just the days

when I would take naps in the midst of a warm summer to wake up to just being a kid... and just being me.

Nowadays I often find myself reminiscing about those summer days when I would walk home in middle school, the days when I felt like I was actually myself- how bright those days were, how the sun felt on my young and innocent skin. While I will still have more summers to come, I will never experience the feeling I felt in the summer of my sixth-grade year, walking from my school to my house on that last day of school while listening to my favorite songs through my headphones. Knowing I will never experience that feeling again, I have slowly started to come to terms with the fact that I genuinely don't want to grow up too fast. I want to slow down and take in all that's around me. As each day passes I realize that I'm getting older and older so I try to grasp onto any little childhood I may have left.

Looking back, I realize how much I would say that I wanted to grow up to experience the world in a different way, and when I think about it, very soon I will get what I always wanted *but...* *Is that really what I want now?* Soon I'll begin applying for colleges, and before I know it, I will be graduating from high school. It's crazy how I am excited for that future when at the same time, I dread it. It was something younger me wanted, but here I am battling my younger self between wanting to go back to my younger days and growing up. I realize now what I wished for was not what I truly should have wished for, and now I can hardly even remember what my childhood looked like because I lived it so fast. I wanted to grow up so badly that I forgot childhood is something you only get to experience once, and once you've experienced it you will never get the chance to experience it again. This is the reality that we all don't want to, but have to face as humans, and in a little over a year, this reality that I so wish to avoid will come to stand me in the face.



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