

Noni's House

By Ella Vonada, grade 7

Every day, people walk past this old, blue, wooden house. If you're lucky enough, you can place your small cold hands on the brass doorknob and enter the warmth of Noni's house. A child has infinite needs growing up: security, love, family, safety. When I was growing up, all I needed was my Noni's house.

When I was five, I'd come through her front door, into the entryway that always smelled of her perfume. The hint of flowers wafted off her coat collars, filling my cold, red nose with warmth. I'd turn left, into a room with a wall completely covered with a mirror. The mirror was carved by a man four generations ago—my great-great-grandfather. Turning right from the entrance, was my Noni's den where two worn, yellow leather chairs sat. Settling into Noni's yellow chairs was like sitting on a cloud, floating above all danger, because when I snuggled up close to her, I felt protected.

Have you ever been so deeply in love with a place, so fully attached, that it became a part of your being? Have you ever felt so strongly about a place that you would protect it as you would your own child? I have. My grandmother's home is the small blue one, one house from the corner. I'm lucky to know that when I enter Noni's house, I'll always be warm.

A sacred place is a place that I love and cherish—a place that makes me feel safe. Losing something like that can't be replaced. Once it's gone, it's gone. When I was one day old, I woke up to my birth

mother being gone. Then I was taken in by another family. A year later I lost them. One year old and I lost yet another family, yet another home. And then I was adopted at age one and brought here. I thought the rug was going to be pulled out from under me again. I thought I would be abandoned by another family. I constantly worry about that.

It's only when I'm at my Noni's that, I can forget about that. I'm able to tune out everything but the scratchy record playing *The Sound of Music*. I'm able to run around her big backyard without worrying I'm going to trip—if I trip, I have people to pick me up. Taking that house away would be devastating. The rug being pulled out from under me. It would be the feeling of an unexpected shock, and then before you know it, you're on your face again. I love that house. I love the memories it has. I love the people in it. I love how I call that house my sacred place.

The loss of my sacred place would make me want to fight for it. I would want to protect it like it protected me. There are many ways for one to do this. Like Rosa Parks I can start a boycott and sit at the front of the bus because we are all equal. I can walk out of school and join my city to protest against our president, Donald Trump. I can make a speech like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and make my cause be heard with the power of speech.

If Noni's house were to be destroyed, I would use my voice as its protector. a guard. I would speak to my school,

my church, my family, my city—
everyone who would listen, I would
tell. Destroying a sacred place isn't
only wrong, it's cruel and disrespectful.
Everyone I could gather would begin the
talk. We would begin to share, and we,
as one voice, one body, one cause, would
take action and use the power of public
speech to save my sacred place.

Standing Rock is the Sioux Tribes's
“Noni's House”. It's their safe place, the
place that shouldn't be pulled out from
under them. Year after year, place after
place, we have taken land, culture, and
language from Native Americans. We've
taken their home over and over again,
ruining their ability to feel secure. We
can't keep doing that. We've knocked
them down dozens of times, but they
will still stand, like a rock that can't be
moved.

The Bullfighter

By Isabel Hardwig, grade 8

A few weeks ago, one of my teachers discussed the concept of a *querencia*—a wanting place. The term originates from Spanish bullfighting, when a bull finds a section of the ring where he feels safe. As Ernest Hemingway said, “In this place he has his back against the wall and in his *querencia* he is inestimably more dangerous and almost impossible to kill.” The teacher then asked us to write about our own *querencia*. It was an easy concept for me—I understand the places in my life from which I draw my strength.

I am a writer, and I have places where my best writing hides. My trampoline is the most important one. I spend hours out there on a good night, throwing a yoga ball against the net and telling stories that I will never write down. People don’t tend to understand it, as it’s something of an unusual hobby, but it doesn’t matter. The best *querencias* are ones whose magic you can’t explain.

The magic isn’t in the physical place; I can recreate it without too much difficulty. My trampoline is a sacred space for so many reasons. When I jump on it, I feel like I can touch the stars on a clear night. It is sacred because I’ve had it since I was six, and it holds many childhood memories. Perhaps most importantly, it is sacred because it is a space that is wholly mine. It seems like everyone should have the right to a space like this that they can call their own.

When fighting a bull, you take away its

querencia. Better yet, you don’t let it find one in the first place. If the bull finds its place—if you don’t get there in time—then you try to take away the wanting place or weaken it. You want to make the bull think it doesn’t have a space where it feels in control.

Which leads to the question: why are we still trying to weaken Native Americans? When they have a place where they find strength, we try to take it away. Do we still believe the harmful rhetoric that they are “savages,” dangerous people who dared inhabit a place we wanted to live? Even now, in the 21st century, when we say we no longer fear what we do not understand, we are whittling down their strength into splinters.

Between beginning this essay and finishing it, the Dakota Access Pipeline was denied approval. It happened this morning. My carpool driver explained it excitedly to his kid. My friends whispered among themselves, “Have you heard? The fight’s over. It’s done.”

I’m thrilled that the protests of people who want to keep their sacred spaces have been heard, but I wish it was never a question. In a perfect world, no protests would be needed. Police officers would not be standing in the freezing cold on Thanksgiving, spraying peaceful protesters with water hoses and shooting them with rubber bullets that do much more damage than their name suggests. Nobody would question statements like,

“People’s homes should be respected,”
“Water is life and shouldn’t be put in
jeopardy,” and, “Native Americans have
rights that need to be honored.”

In a perfect world, *querencias* are
recognized. In a perfect world, instead
of taking away the bull’s safe space, the
fighter tries to find one of his own.

In a perfect world, I lie on my
trampoline, my friend twists in her
hammock, and my teacher hikes through
the woods near his childhood home. The
bull rears, and the fighter is ready. The
Sioux tribes wonder when the next fight
will be, but they’re too tired to think of
much other than victory.

We draw our strength from our
surroundings, and we look up into a sky
that wraps around us until we feel dizzy.
Feet on the ground, head in the stars—
this is where we return to.

Standing Up for My Mosque

By Saef-Aldeen Elbgal, grade 9

As a Muslim, mosques are a very important part of my life. Mosques are where we worship and practice our religion freely. Of all the mosques I've been to, the one that defines me most is the Oakland Islamic Center, located in Oakland, California.

The Oakland Islamic Center has helped me find out many things about my religion and my culture, and has given me proper guidance for the life I wish to live. This mosque is where I have met companions who I've learned to trust. It's where I have met people my age who come from families similar to mine, and whom I can relate to on many levels. Omar is one of my friends at the mosque. Our families both come from the same village in Yemen. We talk about how people at school treat us as Muslims, our Yemeni heritage, and what it is like being an English-speaking child in an Arabic-speaking family.

Most importantly, the Oakland Islamic Center is where I have heard stories and seen things that have taught me what is right and wrong. It is a place where I, and many other Muslims, seek forgiveness and guidance. I have seen so many people cry in mosques, begging God for forgiveness and mercy. I have seen grown men weep like babies. I have seen dead bodies in the back, being cleaned for the Prayer of the Dead. I have seen people convert to a new path of life, and become more humble.

I would feel more upset than nervous if the Oakland Islamic Center was threatened. If the government tried to

close down a mosque or tried to prevent one from being built, then I would call on other Muslims—people who stand up for their religion, who do not let “The Man” with power oppress them, and who wish to one day tell their kids, “I stood up for what I believe in.” I would disturb the peace and protest on the streets. I would ask non-Muslims to unite with us, too.

But if those who threatened the mosque were not official authorities or the government—well, I would get physical. I'm talking about those anti-religious nuts who want to wipe out someone's faith, like Craig Stephen Hicks, the Chapel Hill Shooter. In 2015, he killed three unarmed Muslims in their apartment, supposedly because they parked in his parking spot, though many people feel it was a hate crime. If people like Hicks approached us in the mosque and tried to break the beautiful chandeliers, vandalize the majestic Arabic calligraphy, or destroy the Qurans and other books, I would physically pull them apart, throw rocks at them, or punch and kick them until they left. You might think I'm exaggerating. Well, actually, I'm not. I would fight.

I would fight because we live in America, where people from different races, religions, and sexualities unite to build the most powerful country on the face of the Earth. Many other countries, like Yemen, don't allow freedom of speech. They try to tell people what to believe and what to do. I have heard of and seen many people in Yemen get punished for speaking out or teaching another faith to others. The poor schools, which are the

most common schools, teach students to hate non-believers of Islam. As a matter of fact, that is what caused the Yemeni war between the two Muslim groups, the Houthis and the Sunnis.

Unlike Yemen, the U.S allows its citizens to be free. I am willing to protect my mosque, even if I get arrested. It isn't fair that we can't exercise our First Amendment right just because some people think certain religions, like Islam, shouldn't be allowed in this country. I do not want the removal of my beloved mosque to be a symbol of the weakening of Islam. More importantly, the weakening of this country.

In "Why the Founder of Standing Rock Sioux Camp Can't Forget the Whitestone Massacre," LaDonna Brave Bull Allard states: "Our young people have a right to know who they are. They have a right to language, to culture, to tradition. The way to learn these things is through connection to our lands and our history." Allard is trying to tell people that Native Americans need their land to feel pride in who they are. That pride inspires Native American protesters and motivates them to stop the "Black Snake" from destroying their lands. Their children need to know what their ancestors believed in, who their enemies were, and what they accomplished.

Allard's quote demonstrates the importance of maintaining a sacred place. A sacred place teaches a generation about what their ancestors protected and fought for. This relates to the mosque because mosques tell the next generation of world leaders what people in the past and present have worked hard to attain. I hope that the information and lessons we give our children will motivate them to continue what their ancestors started long ago.

In a mosque, young Muslims learn about their religion and how it can benefit them throughout their lives. The Mosque also teaches us not to be greedy, and to follow the Prophet Muhammad's lessons of humility and kindness. America is stronger because of its mosques, and I will fight to keep it that way.

Half of Who I Am

By Imogen Rain Cockrum, grade 10

My father is American and was born and raised in California, and my mother comes from the small country of El Salvador, in Central America. I was raised in a multicultural environment where I was taught to speak both English and Spanish. I have been raised between two cultures constantly crashing against one another like waves; sometimes they blend well, other times they don't. Speaking English, living in a multicultural neighborhood, and celebrating American holidays overshadow the influence that comes from my mother's El Salvador. But every time I hear my mother speak, eat her home-cooked meals, or get pulled into dancing cumbias, I am reminded that I am from somewhere else. My roots spread far, even if they don't manifest in obvious ways.

The most I exercise my foreign tongue is whenever I am in my mother's hometown, a small village named El Carrizal in the province of Chalatenango. It is hot and humid there—so hot and humid that it is hard to breathe. I gaze from my grandmother's porch, which overlooks the village plaza, cursing the mosquitoes and rocking in my hammock, desperate to create any kind of breeze. Across the plaza, there is a run-down church with fading white walls. It looks a century old, like something from an old movie. In spite of its lack of physical beauty, it serves as the heart of the village.

Everyone stops at our house on their way to and from church. I laugh and

play with my sister and cousins while the adults talk and gossip, as only people from a tiny town can do. Exclamations of ¡Puchica!, ¡No me digas! and ¡Dios me guarde! echo from the chattering groups. They are loud, but only because they live from the heart and are unrestrained in their passions. If noise was a color, my mother's family would command the entire Crayola box. We dance when the town hosts a dance, and we feast when my grandmother hosts a feast.

This small town, barely the size of just two city blocks, holds a tremendous place in my heart. In spite of the influences from where I live, I know that my mother's country is home. Distance, time, and life's distractions sometimes cause me to forget this place I love. But when I am there, I know who I am. I know that my mother's country is home. El Salvador is as much my country as the United States.

However, this wondrous land, which I cherish, has its own haunting past. As LaDonna Brave Bull Allard states in her article "Why the Founder of Standing Rock Sioux Camp Can't Forget the Whitestone Massacre," "We cannot forget our stories of survival." My mother was forced to escape her country in spite of her love for it. She had to struggle through poverty and survive a war. It was the government against the people, and the people against the government.

I was born because my mother survived. In the same place that holds a sacred place in my heart, blood was spilled—

my family's blood. My grandfather was taken and killed by guerilla fighters. Meanwhile, my mother, the youngest daughter of ten children, was forced to escape with her siblings and my grandmother. As a young child, she counted corpses in the road and suffered in refugee homes with strangers. Seventy-five thousand people died in this war. This is the same country that I love.

I fear that if El Salvador were taken from me—in the same way that it was once taken from my mother—I would forget half of who I am, half of what I love. I would be devastated, and I would fight for its survival.

As I grow older and the opportunities to visit become more difficult, I find myself fighting to keep the memories and lessons from this place alive. They allow me to know that what I hold at my core are simple truths about what's really important in life—that we are always connected to where we come from. When I smile, laugh, or even dance, I am showing the world not just who I am, but where I come from. This is what I am fighting for.

Candlelight

By Mara Peruzzi, grade 10

The place I consider sacred is neither physical nor concrete, but rather mental and abstract. My sacred place is the art of Zentangle, a very detailed art form that involves drawing designs that, when put together, form intricate structural patterns.

Zentangle is a beautiful and soothing thing. Its warm and welcoming hands reach into my heart and ignite my inner candlelight, quieting the bustle in my everyday life. Its radiant colors waltz across the page, hand in hand with my pencil and, “poof!” my frustration disappears.

Creating Zentangles is my personal therapy. Here, in this mindset, I’m free from the buzz and chatter of noise, and from the violent blizzard of anxiety that small sounds conjure up in my mind, freezing me, paralyzing me with insecurities. When I’m drawing, nothing interrupts the quiet. The flourishing fire inside of me is protected by a sturdy and sure barrier: the power of my mind. I feel safe from disruptions and self-condemning parasites. And, most importantly, I feel in touch with my surroundings and with my heart.

Unfortunately, I can’t stay in this paradise without a fight against an opposing force. I have recently been diagnosed with misophonia, “hatred of sounds,” a rare neuropsychiatric sound sensitivity disorder that causes severe annoyance and anxiety when triggered by small specific sounds like chewing, sniffing, clicking, typing, breathing, or

almost any repetitive noise.

To me, seeing and hearing someone chew (especially gum) is as if an annoying little brother is yelling and poking me non-stop. Sometimes, someone breathing through their nose gives me the anxiety of nails being scraped across a chalkboard. With the click of a pencil, I feel like a ticking time bomb about to explode. Sniffing makes me feel like a jackhammer is tearing up a concrete sidewalk right next to me. While sounds like these may not bother the average person, for me they make my soul feel like ice. My sacred place is destroyed, and my inner candlelight is extinguished.

It is hard for most people to grasp this rare concept because it’s something they’ve never experienced. Misophonia may sound unrealistic but it’s a very personal part of my life that I am forced to deal with every day. When the blizzard of sensitivities strikes, it leaves me with a whirlwind of insecurities: What is misophonia? If only a minuscule fraction of the population has this, why me? How can so many little sounds irritate me so much? What’s wrong with me? These are the questions I ask myself, but I have recently learned that asking these questions won’t get me anywhere. Instead, I jump to the most important question: How can I get out of my own head? As the Dalai Lama said, “Do not let the behavior of others destroy your inner peace.” By keeping in touch with our bodies and creating an enlightened sacred space—like I have done with

art—we can rid ourselves of worries and excess anxiety.

LaDonna Brave Bull Allard states in her YES! Magazine article, “Why the Founder of Standing Rock Sioux Camp Can’t Forget the Whitestone Massacre,” that “We are the river, and the river is us. We have no choice but to stand up.” This quote shows the importance of standing up for yourself, or a part of you that you love. The quietness of art has always been a part of me, and I am a part of it. I have no choice but to stand up when misophonia threatens to destroy my sacred place of art and calm my state of mind. I must use the power of my mind to fend off the blizzard of sensitivities.

I am making it my mission to shield myself from this blizzard, and to keep my inner candle lit. When I developed this rare sound sensitivity, I also nourished and redefined the beauty of Zentangle and its peacefulness. I dug out the artwork I had created before my diagnosis, looking for inspiration to get back to a safe state of mind. When I am focused on art, I can quiet the howling storm and focus on the path to mindfulness.

My Dressing Room

By Valerie Hoffman, university

I wasn't very successful at finding other queer people at my previous high school. This was partially due to my own insecurities with trust. When I entered college, though, I decided to join the Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) to meet more companions in the LGBT community and to better myself as a leader and defender within it. I was elected the treasurer of my GSA, and I will be forever grateful that its members placed their trust and confidence in me to handle the group's finances for the 2016-2017 school year. I feel blessed to be surrounded by so many people like me.

While I expected to find other transgender students in my college GSA, I was very surprised to find out that I was actually in the majority. Most of my fellow GSA members are trans. I have never seen so many people like me in one place. All of them have been so helpful, from giving me advice about how to run the GSA to suggesting places to buy feminine clothes, like the Clothing Swap where I found all my dresses.

College is the only place where I wear feminine attire. My parents still don't know the truth about me—when I am home or elsewhere I am forced to present myself as male. But at college, I have an office adjoined to the larger GSA office where I can dress and store my clothing, giving me the privacy I need. It's an approximately 10x10 room with a couch and pride flags adorning the walls. The dressing room brings me not just a sense of safety, but also of belonging. I

don't have any secrets when I'm in there.

The 2016 election put all of this into jeopardy. Although events like the Women's March have given me hope, the Republican Party shows no sign of stopping their efforts to disenfranchise transgender people. Even things as mundane as bathrooms are being politicized to fit the Republican Party's agenda—now they're trying to force us to use bathrooms that correspond to the sex on our birth certificate.

One of the last gifts that former President Barack Obama gave before he left office was the option for transgender people to change the gender markers on their official IDs, like passports and driver's licenses. Unfortunately, not all of us had the time or money to change these markers before the new administration took office, and the little window of time that we have is closing fast.

Trump's administration will strip away many laws that protect human rights. And gender markers on IDs will only be a small part in a much larger-scale attempt to turn back the clock to America's Puritan era, when witch hunts were common and dissent was forbidden. When it was unheard of for anybody to speak openly about sex or religion. When it was impossible for people to speak about loving people of the same gender or to freely express their gender identity.

At times, feelings of doubt start to creep

into my mind. When will the transphobia stop? Why does it feel like nobody is standing up to this? What's the point in moving forward when it feels like we're marching through quicksand? But even in the recesses of my mind where I find such self-hatred, I also find self-confidence. I know that things seem bleak, but there are inspirational people and places to guide us in the right direction—like historic LGBT sites.

One place in particular, the Stonewall Inn in San Francisco, is a beacon of hope for the LGBT community. The Stonewall Inn is a historic gay bar, a national monument, and the location of what became known as “the shot glass heard around the world.” That shot glass was thrown on June 28, 1969, by Marsha P. Johnson, an African-American transgender activist, after her famous words, “I got my civil rights!”

The Stonewall Inn reminds me of LaDonna Brave Bull Allard's words on the importance of preserving sites for future generations: “The U.S. government is wiping out our most important cultural and spiritual areas. And as it erases our footprint from the world, it erases us as a people. These sites must be protected, or our world will end, it is that simple. Our young people have a right to know who they are.” Whether it's a safe haven to change into clothes that make us feel like ourselves, or a national historic monument that helped define the modern gay liberation movement, we will fight to preserve these sacred spaces for future LGBT communities. In the end, we may not achieve victory with all of our goals. We may not stand with raised fists in the air, but instead with our knees buckled to the ground, still breathing. We will still be here, and we will always be here, to

protect what we deserve.

As bleak as things seem right now, I can never truly stop being so grateful for what life has given me so far. I have the GSA to support me. I have the Stonewall Inn to keep me inspired. And I have my sacred space, my office dressing room, where I'm free to be me. If this continues, then I may might be able to have “the talk” with my family someday. And no matter what, I will never stop fighting for a better world where transgender people can enjoy the human rights they deserve.