



NORTHERN MARIANAS
HUMANITIES
COUNCIL



2023

MY MARIANAS

Writing Contest

A Collection of Winning Essays and
the Next Top Five Runner-Ups



2023

MY MARIANAS

Writing Contest

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The Northern Marianas Humanities Council is a private, non-profit organization established in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in 1991. Its mission is to navigate and explore the human experiences of the indigenous and diverse peoples of the Commonwealth by enriching their lives through research, publications, dialogue, and programs.

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Writing Contest

The My Marianas Writing Contest is a project conducted by the Northern Marianas Humanities Council to promote literacy and the diverse backgrounds and experiences of high school students within the CNMI.

The contents of this publication features the winning and next top five scoring essays (runner-ups) of the My Marianas Contest conducted in 2023. The Contest was announced on April 10, 2023 with an invitation to all high school students within the CNMI to submit a personal narrative essay by May 4, 2023, for a chance to win cash prizes and an opportunity to have their work published. The prize money was set as follows: \$500 for 1st place, \$400 for 2nd place, and \$300 for 3rd place.

Theme: Senses of Home

The Council received 57 personal narrative essays that addressed this year's theme: Senses of Home. Contestants were challenged to share their own reflections of home in the Marianas as experienced through one or more of their senses (sight, sound, taste, touch, and/or smell) through a 3-5 page personal narrative essay.

Acknowledgements

The Council wishes to acknowledge and thank all student contestants for making the effort to write an essay for this purpose and displaying the courage to share their personal experiences and stories. This would not have been possible without their teachers, friends, and family members who took the time to encourage and support their work. To ensure a disciplined approach to identifying the top essays, we enlisted the help of volunteer judges: Gretchen Smith, Randee Jo Barcinas-Mangloña, Ajani Burrell, Patrick Romolor, Jane Mack, and Brian Torres. We are grateful for their participation and commitment to ensuring that all eligible essays were carefully read and scored at least twice.

One Ocean, One Home

by Jill Anne Mallari
Mount Carmel School, 12th Grade

The ocean...

Standing by the shore, I was immersed in a sensory feast that only the ocean could provide. The waves crashed onto the sand, producing a roar of applause for the beauty of nature. The briny scent of the sea was so pungent that it seemed to tango on my taste buds. I could hear the sound of my body's internal rhythm as I stepped into the world's largest swimming pool.

As I gazed out into the ocean, I was captivated by its awe-inspiring grandeur. Its blue hue was tinged with a subtle green undertone, and its surface shimmered like millions of diamonds colliding with the waves and caressing the sand. With each step I took, the sand felt like a gritty cloud I could sink into.

The water played a game of cat and mouse, teasing my toes as it rushed back into hiding with each incoming wave. But as the cycle repeated, the water crept closer and closer, until I felt the rush of the current under me and the sand slipping away from between my toes and back into the ocean. In the distance, I heard my cousins' laughter, adding to the symphony of sensory experiences that made me feel so connected to the ocean.

Growing up on island was something I had always been proud of. My favorite answer when describing home was, "the ocean's my backyard." But surrounded by water on all sides, I always felt a bit out of place. I had never liked swimming in beaches. More so, I didn't know how to swim. Most kids learned to swim before they could walk, it seemed, but I never quite got the hang of it. The thought of going into the water filled me with a sense of anxiety, and I always managed to find an excuse to stay on the shore.

I did, however, admire the grandness of the ocean. Banzai Cliff has been my sanctuary for as long as I can remember. Before I could drive, I'd get excited when family members came on island to visit since it meant driving around the island and visiting Banzai once again. I was awestruck by the stunning view of the vast blue ocean meeting the clear sky. Sometimes, I would sit for hours, lost in thought as I contemplated the vastness of the sea and the mysteries that lay beneath its surface. And since I've gotten my driver's license, whenever I needed a break or a moment of solace, I would hop in my car and drive up to Banzai Cliff.

There's something special about being able to escape the hustle and bustle of daily life and just sit and admire the beauty of nature. Every day I get to be there, I consider myself incredibly lucky to live on an island where I can quickly escape to the peacefulness of Banzai and feel the ocean breeze on my face.

But the more I grow to love my home, the more it's taken away. Pacific Islanders are called to be the guardians of this ocean. But despite being the lowest regional carbon emitters, Pacific Islanders are the very ones experiencing severe negative impacts of climate change. Over the years, I myself have noticed a significant change in the way the ocean interacts with our island. I remember walking along the beach one day and noticing how high the tide had reached, covering much of the sand and creeping closer to the buildings behind me. It was a jarring sight, and it made me feel like our island was getting smaller. As the sea level rose, the beach that I used to play on as a child, Micro Beach, began to disappear. The water would come closer and closer to the buildings that lined the shore, and during high tide, large portions of the beach were completely submerged. I remember feeling a sense of sadness and loss as I watched the beach that had been such an important part of my childhood disappear before my eyes. It felt as if the days of hearing children laugh as they bike along the pathways, smelling the smoke of grilled barbecue, and watching the sunset were slipping from my fingers.

As time went on, the effects of climate change on our island became more and more apparent. Recently, I learned that military personnel had plans to release fuel into the ocean near our island. The thought of such a toxic substance being introduced into the very waters that are so vital to our way of life was alarming and deeply concerning. As someone who has always felt a deep connection to the ocean, it was difficult not to feel a sense of outrage and sadness at the thought of our precious waters being contaminated. The ocean is not just a source of food and livelihood for us, it is also a spiritual and cultural symbol that has played a central role in our lives for generations.

Still, my love for the ocean prevails. Even after all the challenges we face, I'm eternally grateful for our oceania and the ways in which it connects us. Whether it's through the food we eat or the stories we share, the ocean is a reminder of our shared humanity and our responsibility to care for the natural world.

As I stood on the beach, gazing out at the vast expanse of ocean in front of me, I felt a deep sense of gratitude for the community I grew up in. It was a community that understood the importance of preserving our home and protecting its natural beauty, a community that came together to do beach cleanups and other initiatives to ensure that our ocean remained healthy and vibrant.

It was a beautiful day, with the sun shining brightly and a gentle breeze blowing in from the sea. The water sparkled like diamonds, and the waves crashed gently onto the shore. It was hard to imagine that this peaceful scene was threatened by the impacts of climate change. But I knew that our community was up to the task. I looked around at the people gathered around me, volunteers from all walks of life who had come together for this beach cleanup. They were a diverse group, united by a common love for our island and a shared commitment to preserving it.

As we worked, picking up litter and debris from the beach, I felt a sense of purpose and belonging. This was my home, and I was proud to be part of a community that cared so deeply about it. And as we finished up the cleanup and gathered for a group photo, I felt a sense of hope for the future.

In the past, my biggest fear was drowning- the vastness of the unknown. But now, I no longer fear it, because I constantly live in waves of the unknown.

The ocean...

The crashing waves reverberating with each other, showcasing their might through their deafening roar and the distant cries muffled by the distance. The briny scent of terror tingling on my taste buds. The ocean seemed like a vast and bottomless pit of sorrow and suffering, dim and chilly with a sense of uncertainty. The sensation of an imminent end, yet not quite.

It echoes: "[The] sea is our pathway to each other and to everyone else, the sea is our endless saga, the sea is our most powerful metaphor, the ocean is in us."



The Scarred Knees

by Dryllynne Joseph
Kagman High School, 10th Grade

Glancing at a scar, scratch, or birthmark reflects flashbacks of core memories. Well, this is where my sense of home lies—the scars on my knees. Now, where did these scars come from? It's surprising to see how a big scar can remain visible but appear smaller as I age. I've always wanted these scars to fade since I got them at age 5, but now that I'm older, I might actually miss them if they disappear. The scars from my childhood have provoked some of my most cherished memories, like rolling down a small hill and taking gruesome yet entertaining baths.

It was a sunny summer day, and yet I wanted to play. The discomfort in my worn-out legs gave up on me as I struggled to get out of bed. My sore throat made the morning of the day even worse; I felt like I was already 80 years old. To my right side of the bed, I looked down and saw a cup of water on the floor and took a sip while basking in the golden sunlight streaming through the windows. My sister was sleeping on the floor beside me, and I couldn't recall how I got there. The pain in my legs prompted me to remember what had happened the day before.

While my dad was inside the house, I remember finding it amusing as a child to intentionally roll forward on a small grass hill in front of my house, pretending to be a rolling barrel. However, on one occasion, I rolled forward without realizing that there were rocks at the bottom of the hill. As a result, I experienced an intense stinging pain in my knees. When I looked down, I saw that my knees were scraped and bleeding.

I ran back to my house, crying as if I had just been pecked by a chicken or barked at by a stray dog. My dad was extremely worried when he saw how badly my knees were injured. Both knees were bleeding, and flies were buzzing around the wounds. Pieces of grass were sticking to the blood that was dripping from the two round open wounds on my left knee, and there was a large stinging scratch on the right. The immunity from the adrenaline had worn off by the time I realized the severity of my injuries. My dad first questioned me about what happened, but tears streamed down my face, and then he scolded me after I explained that I was just trying to experience the "world spinning around" (what was I thinking, seriously?).

After my mom came from work, he told her about what I said, how I was being impulsive the whole day, and that my actions had finally met their consequences. He assumed my mom would also get riled up and spank me with a zori, till she laughed and said, "How can you say that and not laugh?" I looked at her, and she was giggling. My dad started to laugh too and said, "You know what? I was just worried, okay? Mwasawas (in distress)." Despite the pain I was feeling in my knees, it all went away for a while at this moment. Just witnessing my parents' little wholesome discourse eased me.

Later on, my dad took care of my wounds by applying coconut oil, and I couldn't stop crying. He gave me a coconut apple to enjoy so that I could be distracted from it. Because of this, I enjoyed eating the several coconut apples he gave me. Which made up for my appetite since I'd been running and tumbling down a hill that day, which made me tired and hungry afterward. After my wounds were attended to, I had to take a shower because my mom told me I smelled and looked like a mango that had been rotting on the ground (I had dirt on my feet and grass in my hair). Looking at my mom, I stood there thinking if I should say something sarcastic too, but my mom flicked my forehead with her finger and asked, "Oh, you were going to say something?" before I could.

Unsure if my mom had read my mind or not, I was taken aback. Then there's my sister on the side, giggling like the gremlin she is, enjoying her mango coco. We made eye contact, and I gave her a side eye after she had glared at me. It was like one of those cowboy duels in the movies where we both have a staredown, but in reality, I quickly walked past her since my mom kept calling my name to go shower before I was going to get a whooping. When I was a child, my mom would boil water from the *Eugenia palumbis* plant and then fill those Plastic Corp. five-gallon buckets to use as a shower for me.

We waited for a while, and after that, my mom filled up her small bucket to see if it was warm. This shower was intended as a medicine healer to remove any negativity that had followed me when I played around at noon or night. My mom and dad believed in traditional healing, so bathing me with *Eugenia Palumbis* was like a spiritual cleanser. As I was ending my agonizing bath, I heard my dad playing one of his songs, "Juwe, Juwe," by Ozeky on his CD radio BH950 speaker while he was preparing our dinner. Which enlightened my mood because I was still hungry.

I smelled tapioca being cooked, and it was one of my favorite desserts to eat growing up. My mom would shred the tapioca, add sugar, and wrap it around banana leaves to put it in the pot to boil. Although my sister got it first, I was eager to eat it when my dad brought it out. Feeling sad since my sister had gobbled up the desert, I just dozed off in the kitchen and was lost in my thoughts, drenched in my dora towel, so my dad called out to me, "Nangun (nang-oon), go dress up!

I covered my head and ran towards my room, giggling all the way. However, I accidentally bumped into the wooden wall that separated the living room from the left side of our rooms, designed to create a hallway, which made me laugh even louder. My sister and dad were concerned about my sudden outburst of laughter and questioned me about it. (I realized later that aughing randomly was kind of a habit for me). During dinner time, I sat on a bucket or a small ladder chair because the table was too high for me. But we decided to have our dinner outside on a picnic table.

Eating outside was therapeutic because we could watch the sunset, see Garapan in the distance, and the cars going along the road in our Kobler village (thanks to the fact that our home was two stories). I also loved eating outside to see the birds that would fly by our house, and it was fascinating to see the ones far up in the sky flying in a "V" formation. When we finished our supper, my sister carried the plates back to the kitchen, and my dad brought me to the kitchen to wash my hands and mouth before taking me to bed to rest. Although I had some regret, I was slightly happy that I had done something so bizarre (my knees were weak for a solid week), and it sure was a lesson for me not to do things so suddenly. I was grounded for a month and my dad kept me inside the house everyday till summer ended.

I remember thinking to myself, lying on the bed, if these scars will eventually heal up, and if they do, I'll just play again. The door creaks open, and there's my mom. "Don't even think about playing outside again if you're healed up, eh?", she said. I giggled and tried to sleep. A distinctive smell caused me to be half-awake; the light scent of the coconut got stronger in the room, and I was thinking, "Damn, they're going to apply the coconut oil again." It was a painful process that led me to consider the careless actions that caused me pain. While lying on the bed and feeling a little drained, I shook my head and murmured, "Tsk, tsk." Even now, sixteen years later, when I look down at my scarred knees while putting on my shoes, applying lotion, pulling up my socks, or just holding my knees to my chest provides comfort, reminding me of the resilience I have gained through overcoming that experience. That incident has made me cautious when walking down hills, whether they are wet or dry, I always examine the ground for any large rocks. As my left leg takes a step forward, I am reminded of that spontaneous five-year-old girl. The mere sight of the scars on my knees evokes memories and bittersweet sensations that I will never forget. These scars hold value as a visible reminder of my past and have helped shape me into the person I am today.

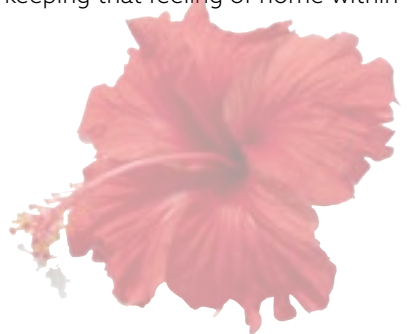


Our Beaches Become Our Memories

by Brissa Hunter
Mount Carmel School, 12th Grade

Living in the Marianas is the smell of salt water in the air on a windy day when you live close to the beach, and the satisfying feeling of finding a cold spot of water when swimming as the sun shines brightly down on you. Living in the Marianas is waking up in the morning and stepping outside your house to sounds of birds chirping, neighbors' chickens crowing, and dogs barking in the distance. Living in the Marianas is the feeling you get when you eat your first spoonful of chicken kelaguen from your plate at a family gathering. There are so many unique experiences that encompass what living in the Marianas is, and that is what is beautiful about these islands. Our experiences and memories of home, of belonging, and of community are built by everything from the food we share, the waters we swim in, the hugs we give, and the environment around us. I am proud to have been born and raised in the Marianas. While there are so many sensory feelings that make me feel that I am home, the feeling of being at our beautiful beaches and taking in the scenery with the warm sand between your toes and the luck you feel as a cool breeze passes by is one that is irreplaceable to me. Just the sight of one of our beaches opens the door to a whole lifetime's worth of memories and other sensory experiences that all intermingle to create my feeling of home.

I care deeply for our environment. I am happy that our community makes efforts to keep our beaches clean and teach children and adults alike to do the same; not just for our visitors, but for us. There is nothing sadder than the feeling of walking toward our blue waters ready to jump in when your foot catches on a piece of plastic in the sand. It is moments like that where I wonder if the piece of plastic is there by accident, or if someone had intentionally left it there. Why would people do such a thing? In a place that brings me so much happiness and sense of home, I cannot count the amount of times I have had to stop what I am doing to throw trash away properly. I sit on the sand under the shade of those trees with the little pine cones and wonder if we are doing enough to discourage littering, or if it will ever stop at all. It is at this point I usually get up to go swim, and then I find a cigarette butt thrown away as if the tree is a trash can. The cycle continues. Yet, even though there are people who could care less sometimes about the way their trash affects our beaches, there are a rising number of people in our community who use their weekends to do cleanups, who tell their children that it isn't right to leave your trash. And as I pick up the cigarette butt to throw away, I am reminded of our community and those who care about keeping that feeling of home within everyone when they go to the beach.



The feeling of home is finally getting out of the water to grab a Hi-C from the cooler and the refreshing cool feeling of ice brushing up against your hands when you go to grab it, because you have been in the sun too long. It is going back into the water to swim and how quickly time passes by because you see your mom telling you it's time to go. Sometimes, the beach reminds me of that time that my family went to swim in the evening during termite season, and we stayed in the water till they stopped swarming near our car and we were able to make our escape. All these memories are from being at the beach, and even just driving by and seeing one of our beaches brings me back to so many moments in my life. All of these sensory experiences work together to build these memories that I hold dear to my heart, that remind me of family and home.

While there are beaches all around the world, the ones we have here in the Marianas are the ones that will always be the most special to me. When my dad drives my family to check out how the current looks on a windy day, I think about how we come to see our beautiful beaches, and how at the same time these beaches saw me grow up into the person I am today. I think about how they will continue to see me grow as a person for the rest of my life. I think about how environments will change me, and how climate and erosion will change them. Will a little girl still be able to make sandcastles like I did in the future? I think about milestones like birthdays and baby christenings that have been celebrated here. And now, I am thinking about how much value is held in these beaches that play such a big part in many of our lives here in the Marianas.

I know that when I will be off to college in the states in a few months, I will only have the scenic pictures I've taken on my phone of our beaches to look at as a reminder of how important they are in my life. The thought of not being able to walk along the shore and pick up a hermit crab and watch it crawl across my palm before gently returning it or picking up a shell and wondering how nature makes such pretty things is going to be hard. This is because so many of these memories involve family and friends, who have shared in my experiences at our beaches throughout my life. The feeling of home will come to me when I think about how my dad taught my sisters and I how he and his siblings used to dig for clams near the shoreline to make clam chowder to feed their family. The feeling of home will come to me when I feel the sun on the other side of the world and wonder if it's an overcast kind of day in Saipan, the one where you are swimming and thankful for the shade the clouds bring for just a moment.

These experiences that all revolve around seeing the beaches here in Saipan will always remind me of who I am in this world and where I came from. No matter how difficult life may get in the future, it is these moments that I am sure I will think back on to remind me of the happiness that I felt simply running toward the water because I was barefoot in the hot sand. It amazes me how we have places like that with the ability to bring families or even the whole community together. To think that our beaches can prompt people to recall so many fond memories of family and friends throughout their lives here in the Marianas is incredible. For me, the memories made at our beaches are part of what make up who I am and who I will grow to be. Our beaches truly become our memories, and that is an aspect of living in the Marianas that I would never trade for anything else.

Traditional Gender Roles

by Cheyanne Koloni Sablan
Kagman High School, 12th Grade

My culture undoubtedly focuses on gender roles. Our ancestors drew a strict outline of what men and women should do and how they should act. That outline followed us many generations later. Some households are losing this "law" but others follow it honorably. Some people like me may say these roles we have to follow or live by aren't fair, but some are so stuck on following these "laws" strongly and firmly. The majority of people who ethically live by this "law" are the older generations.

Gender roles have been taught and lived by since the beginning of our time. There are fairly serious consequences when these rules of the roles aren't met or carried through. I believe these gender roles were one of the foundations into creating the start of our community. It was and still is vital in our society and culture, even though it is deemed as the "right way to live", there are many who think this way of life is unacceptable. My home is one of those households that are in between when it comes to gender roles.

I'm the only girl so all of the housework falls under me. I'm so tired of doing my roles, I do believe the things I do are important but I'd appreciate it if I'm not painted as the only one that has to be placed in this position. Every day after school I walk home under the scorching sun, then I have to begin my chores, it really seems impossible for other people to help out. Everyday I have to see the devastating state of my kitchen. Dishes are piled with stubborn stuck food that's been marinating since this morning, the dining table has all kinds of beverages that are pooled up with many empty cups and random items that don't belong in a kitchen. I also spotted the

empty rice cooker with dried crumbs of spiky rice around the counter, stains on our chairs from whatever condiments my family used while I was gone, and food that found shelter under the bars of the stove when they fell off the pans and pots while they were cooking.

If you aren't speechless from the state of my kitchen, let me explain my bathroom. I have no idea how my bathroom can turn upside down in just a day but imagine a single basket that holds a mountain of clothes, the sink filled with toothpaste marks, and lint on our dryer from not carefully taking out the filter. All the used dryer sheets scattered on the floor, and laundry soap on the edges of the washer. I have to clean all of that in the blistering heat. After all that work, sweat, and tears I have to sweep the whole house.

When I first start with the dishes, I scavenge the whole house for coffee cups and other hidden dishes that somehow didn't make their way to the sink. After I make my way back to the sink I get that strong scent of warm leftover chunks of food that's been marinating under the dishes since this morning, and if you know my island, it is super hot! I first move all the dishes into one side of the sink while I pick up the mushy sticky food that's been laying there for ages. I wash the food into the small strainer that catches food so it won't go down the drain, then I put it into this container for dog food. It is so disgusting, but I'm already so used to it. After, I carry on washing the dishes in the heat with only a single fan blowing hot air to my sweaty exhausted body. When I'm done with the dishes I cook rice, this is very easy and straightforward. I get that part done quickly.

Then I move on to the dining table, which I'm thankful it isn't a large table. I grab the clorox wipes and begin wiping all the chamorro punch and all kinds of watery residue left behind. After this I begin wiping up the food under the bars of the stove and putting it in the same container I put the gunk of food in for the dogs. Then I quickly wipe the gunk off the

chairs. If you think I'm finished, let me tell you about the restroom. The restroom treats me like a slave. When I first walk in I start with the floor, I bend and pick up all the used dryer sheets off the floor as well as put a load in the washer. I first check all the pockets of the clothes, I secretly take the money I find. While I do that, mountains of dust get trapped in my nose, dust that feels like a pile of dirt. I then clean off all the toothpaste stains off the sink, and scold my little brother for leaving it there.

After everything, I'm all soaking wet and dusty. I smell like light downy from the dusty dryer sheets and I'm about to faint from this oppressive heat. My hair is damp, I'm so exhausted and breathing heavy. I finally sit down and take my break which only lasts for about five minutes. After I sweep this whole house and arrange the shoes and slippers. Then I gather all the food in the refrigerator that went bad and the chunks of food in the container and mix it with dry dog food, then feed it to the dog. While I feed the dogs I have to gather all the leftover foods and dry food with a little bit of water then mix. After I give it to the dogs.

Finally I sit down, cool off, wash my hands thoroughly then eat. I eat inside my burning hot kitchen with the fan blowing hot air in my face. While I eat I watch a movie, chug ice cold freezing water, and eat really spicy food with handfuls of bright orange spicy coco. This is my everyday routine, my dad or brother doesn't help me with any of this. Honestly, even if my dad stays home from work he makes all this mess. He doesn't stop to think to clean any of his mess.

It's really annoying, even if I want to go out with my friends I have to finish those tasks first then wait for my parents to answer. Don't get me wrong I love helping around, but It's really hard if my parents don't clean up after themselves. If my parents could just put their shoes on their place, throw their trash in the garbage can, or even just put the dishes in the sink, it'll be a great weight lifted off my shoulders. I know my parents are tired, but I'm tired as well.

Sometimes I can't finish any of my schoolwork because I'm stuck cleaning after grown adults. But that is my assigned role just for being a female, doesn't it feel unfair? I know I'm not the only one, my female friends and I share the same stories and how we feel. But the things I do barely reach the expectations of what females have to do.

Traditionally, females have to cook and clean all day for the men and attend to their needs. Whether it be their laundry or a massage, we have to basically take care of men like their "babies". But men do help out too, don't get me wrong. Back in ancient times, men built us houses and hunted food for us and women would cook the food and keep the house clean. Men's roles today are to take care of the outside, as in making sure the outside is clean and well kept.

They also get jobs so we can live comfortably in our homes. Yes, the things men do are important, for sure! But men fail to recognize or appreciate the hardships women go through just to keep the house they "bought" feel like a home and the things we do to make food feel like a meal.

I feel like the things women do are overlooked because people think the inside housework isn't as important as the outside housework. Men do slave away outside under the hot sun to cut the grass, rake it up, throw the trash, and to make sure everything is well kept. But women have their fair share of being enslaved by their daily duties. We females would appreciate it if all men could realize and appreciate the things we do.

I believe these gender roles expectations have changed throughout many generations. Boys today don't have to worry about their expectations in their duties, but girls today have to. Girls are expected to listen to their parents every call and they are drowned by waterfalls of discipline unlike boys. That is what I see today in this new society happening in the CNMI. Boys get to lay back, hang loose, and not break a sweat of how they should act or how they choose to

live their lives. But for girls, it is very different. Girls are taught to act conservative, they are disciplined, they are expected to dress a certain way, and again do their daily duties expected of them.

As you can see these gender roles started as a great structure of how society should live their daily lives, but the rules and regulations got lost and somehow fell on all the females. I'm incredibly happy I'm starting to see a drastic change. Most women are taking back their "lives" and holding men accountable. We've come a long way of gender roles and the inequality it holds. The CNMI is still a place where it is strong in gender roles but little by little time is changing everything.



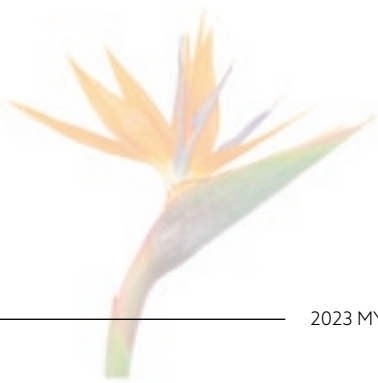
Cure for the Itchiness

by Ashley Muleta
Marianas High School, 11th Grade

My legs itched a lot as a kid. Do you know those prickly sticky birds that would scratch you in the midst of a field? Or those very annoying mosquitos that think you're the grand prize they've been waiting for all their lives? A small amount of ointment would treat that. But a Sunday afternoon greeted me with a new type of itch. The itch of excitement, after church, to spend the rest of the afternoon at Micro Beach, a place where I could obtain more scars as if they were pins of achievement. This wasn't an itch that my mom could rub betadine on. It was an itch where my body would only feel relieved when I visited my best friend. "Hoy, let's go now!" My mom yelled loudly, making me excited as I was a second closer to the beach.

Before going to Micro Beach, my favorite thing was acting like I was playing the game "bring me" by taking almost everything I could find useful in my closet and on my table. I put on my pink slippers and held two blue Joeten bags almost twice my weight basically doing a pre-workout before hitting the beach. It was a tradition in my family that we set a scheduled time to be in the car and leave but we leave 20 minutes after the scheduled time anyways. Honestly, it's one of my family's greatest skills. I turn on the radio and switch to Power 99, listening to 2000s pop music.

Finally, we were at Micro Beach! You could never forget the strong smell of salt and smoke even if someone stole your nose. Family chatter, volleyball bouncing, and the smell of barbeque grilling made the beach my favorite place to be. Almost like a second home. Though I had visited the beach a week before, I would still miss it as if she were my best friend who I could only visit every week. It was a love-hate relationship. Why could I only visit every week? I hated that it wasn't two times. But I still loved visiting. I opened my car door. In that one step out of my car, I could hear the waves crashing as the reggae songs harmonized with the ocean always knowing how to set the mood of an enjoyable beach day. The ground was filled with tiny pinecones that would threaten to make their way into your slippers if you weren't careful. With many hugs and comments saying how we were so late, my mom happily explained that her kids took a while. It was a great excuse. A smart excuse even! Thanks to the amazing cooking skills of my aunties, they already prepared lunch before coming here. My stomach jumped at the sight of buttered shrimp, red rice, short ribs, mungo, and chicken kelaguen.



Aside from eating delicious food, it was time for the grand finale. One of my favorite parts about staying at the beach was, of course, swimming. I was literally the champion of chicken fights back in the day. I toppled on top of my cousin to sit on her shoulders. I put my arms out, ready to push and attack. The fight begins! I stay low, using my balance to keep me from falling. WHACK! The first push catches me off guard. Next, I aim to make my opponent fall sideways. POOM! POOM! After pushes that seemed like forever- SPLASH! Say hello as you're reading the essay of a chicken fight champion. After digging deep holes through sand and discovering sand beds, I felt tired. I lay in a starfish position, floating on the ocean's surface. When you lay on your back, it's almost like the ocean is gently holding you ensuring that you'll be okay. My nine-year-old self was, without a care in the world, embracing the feeling of sand between her clothes, the sweat on her forehead, and the thought of the ribs she had eaten. No mosquitoes or sticky birds came after her. She didn't know much about what it was that was so comforting and refreshing about doing the starfish pose but one thing I knew for sure was that she never wanted to leave this place.

Before I knew it, my world turned upside down when I was 13 holding a plane ticket to the Philippines. From enjoying my beach life to city life, it was like bringing a baby chick to the jungle. Never-ending car-honking, crowds, large buildings, and that itch! My body itched again. It was even worse because it wasn't an itch I could slap or poke at. It was an itch that never went away. It wasn't the type of itch where sticky birds pricked me when running through the field at Memo. It wasn't the type of itch where mosquitos made me their target as I climbed large rocks under coconut trees. And it wasn't the itch that gave me scars on my legs. I had a scar on my heart.

If I had taken a temperature check, the thermometer would've spelled out "homesickness." I had a fever of homesickness that I wanted to throw in the ring and knock out myself. I wasn't ready to leave so abruptly. I missed the mornings of Sabalu Market where I hand-picked bags of Titiyas that looked like they had more slices. And oh how I missed the beach. The closest thing I had to a beach was a small chlorine-filled swimming pool. While my relatives and friends made my experience better, that itch longed for me to go back to Saipan. A space in my heart was made for the island that gave me unforgettable memories.

Living on Saipan made me love the beach and nature no matter what. I was never a city girl. I was never bothered about the scars on my legs and arms but I became bothered by the scar on my heart. After three years of missing my best friend and nights when I had a fever of homesickness, I returned to my home. I was back on Saipan, on the beach, sowing back the scar on my heart with the cure that this island could only give. People would often say that you'll outgrow the toys and interests you played with as a child. But I know my nine-year-old self will thank me for reliving the island life I had truly missed.

My Home Away From Home

by Donovan Cabrera

Sunday is my favorite day of the week. Let me tell you why. My grandpa is the beginning of my day. He's my alarm clock, the only alarm clock I look forward to. My cousins and I wake up and get ready quickly because it's crunch time. Our grandpa doesn't wait for anyone and we don't ever want to be left behind. On Sundays, adrenaline rushes through my body as I rush to secure my spot on the truck. We're headed to my favorite place. A place that many people of the Marianas find sacred. A place that is part of our culture, our traditions, our way of life.

Before we head out, we load up our chairs, tools, and tanks for the water. It's go time once grandpa gets in the driver's seat. Our first stop, the water tank. We have to load up our tanks with water for our cows. It's not a complete trip unless our trailer is full of water. Once that's done, we begin heading to our final destination. Our family lanchu in Talofofo. The drive to Talofofo is sacred to me. Since my childhood, this drive has been one of my favorites. As I sit in the back of the truck, alongside my favorite cousins, I feel complete. We spend most of the drive laughing as we share stories or jokes. Actually, most of the time we laugh because we can't hear each other. So we hear a lot of "Ha?" or "What?" during the drive, which ends up making all of us laugh uncontrollably.

As the laughs put a smile on my face, I can't help but smile some more as I take in the scenery of the drive. Green fills up most of the view, but I'm not complaining. The color green is an important part of the Marianas. Green represents all the trees that give us the breath of life. Green represents the tangen tangen that feeds our goats. Green represents the sakati that feeds our deers and cows. Green represents the stems of all the beautiful flowers that make our island full of color and life. Green. Such a simple color, yet holds so much meaning and beauty to the Marianas.

As the drive continues, we are faced with many bumps in the road. Like literally, bumps in the road. Upon every bump, grandpa drives slowly to make sure we or the water tanks don't fall. Who said we ever needed roller coasters? We have gravel roads that can feel like you're on a roller coaster. It makes the drive more fun and exciting. As we ride the island version roller coaster, we know we're almost there because we're greeted by the smell of cow taki (poop). The cows begin to get excited once we pull up and begin to run towards the truck.



Once we park, it begins. Grandpa, like a commander, gives us our jobs for the day. My cousin and I are in charge of getting grass for the cows, so we head back out and start our hunt for quality grass for our precious cows. My cousin pulls over to the side of the road and that's when we start. There is no sakati trip without a machete. We begin to chop away. Our arms get and hands get red and itchy, but that's the way it is. The pain is so worth it. The pain reminds me that I am a lanceru in training. As we arrive at the farm, we start feeding the cows right away. If they could talk, I bet they would tell me how good this grass tastes. On the other hand, our pigs don't have to talk to tell us that they're hungry. They never fail to squeal at us non-stop until their food fills their mouths.

After the animals are fed, it's time for us to eat. Our stomachs have been rumbling like thunder. The smell of charcoal burning tells me it's almost time to eat. This is the time we all unwind. One by one, we all finish up our tasks and gather near the grill. My uncle John is the master on the grill. I peek over and see that he's grilling up some marinated ribs and chicken. Around this time, I hear the cans opening up. I turn to see a familiar sight at this time, grandpa and my uncles all with beer cans in their hands. It's about that time to celebrate a long day of hard work. Except me, of course. I grab myself an ice cold bottle of green tea.

There's no better feeling than being here. Everything about this place is special to me. From the cow taki to the sakati that gives me cuts, from the water tanks to the trucks full of tangantangan, the lanchu is my home away from home. It's around this time where my grandpa and uncles share their stories. Stories from their childhood, how they were raised, what life was like back then. I am always humbled by their stories, their upbringings. They teach me life lessons. The stories my elders share have shaped who I am today. They guide me through and lead me down the right path. The lanchu is more than just a place with animals. It's an ongoing learning experience.

When the stories of the day wear out, and the sun begins to set, it's about that time that I know many can relate to. It's when story time transforms into a jam sesh. My uncle grabs his ukulele and my other uncle grabs his guitar. It's our Sunday night routine to jam the night away. We always start off with Chamorro songs, where we all sing our hearts out. We either stick to Chamorro songs or jam out to some 80's or 90's rock music. My love for music began here, alongside my family who show me how love and culture is demonstrated through music.

There's something about the lanchu that I just can't describe. Surrounded by my family and animals, learning the ways of the farm, hearing the manamko's stories and singing together, this to me is home. Because home to me is a place where you feel the most safe. It's more than just a roof over my head. It's a feeling of belonging. And here at the lanchu, I know I belong. And no one can take this away from me.

A Son of the Marianas

by Luke John Agulto Lizama
Kagman High School, 10th Grade

"Reminiscing the Sense of Home," where roots sprout, stretch, and grow into the ground, and no matter where I go, I am grounded in this sense of belonging. I know I can always return to my lovely and beautiful home, whether by walking on a physical landscape or traversing a dreamscape. It is an anchor -home- it keeps me from drifting away from my roots. My family, culture, and language are deeply planted in rich and fertile soil. There is no feeling better than being intertwined with the fullness of life as its roots creep and nourish with a sense of love, respect, and memories.

Every color and shade of the fire flame, plumeria, and coconut trees, and with the surrounding mountains and the deep blue sea defines "Home". There's no place like home in the Marianas. It is where I felt unconditional love revolving around family, school, and community values seeking nothing in return which often comes first from my parents and my immediate family members. I remember the loving times I was sitting on my mother's lap, and listening to my father's great stories. The time I was husking coconut with my oldest brother outside our backyard, and helping my grandma prepare her meal by her bedside. Love was the center of family. Growing up I wanted to be like my father. He was a fisherman and automobile mechanic. He was my hero for teaching me the culture and bringing me up this way - to walk in the same footsteps as my older brother and harvest food from the same place my great grandfather once inherited from our ancestors.

I was born on August 10, 2006 in Saipan. A piece of my heart and soul is in my dad's island home, Rota, which I also call home just one hundred twenty seven kilometers away. I stayed in Rota for a year and moved to Saipan when I just turned two years old. While here on the island of Saipan, my family and I lived with my grandma. I greatly appreciate my grandma raising me while my parents were at work. At this time my mom was a teacher and my dad was a sales delivery man at Joeten Ace Hardware in Susupe village. As time flew by, turning five years old, I was ready to go to school. I would always cry out for my dad being the baby of the family. At the age of six we moved to another place much farther than grandma's house. It was a pretty small home that I had made a lot of memories in. While staying in that house I'd always see my dad cutting grass, while I'm on the side getting the broom and imitating him.

When I turned seven I got to hold on to the bush cutter, and that was the very first time I ever cut grass. While I was cutting grass a few of my neighbors went out of their doorstep and watched me. I am sure they were impressed and amazed to see a young boy partaking in family chores. I also look up to my oldest brother who taught me how to cook rice on the stove when I was eight. Most of the weekend my dad and I would be outside under the palapala. I would watch him fix cars while my brother was his assistant mechanic. It got me really interested to know about the different types of cars and their parts.

About at the age of eight or nine, I was excited to hear about the addition to our family. My mom spilled the beans on us that she was pregnant. Oh, at this moment, I had goosebumps because of the eagerness to see the next youngest baby to be born in our family. As days and months went by, my mom looks happy as well as my family and I. About six months later, what a terrible news had saddened me a lot. My mom had a miscarage. My tiny little brother wrapped himself with the umbilical cord around his neck. I never understood how that happened but it

hurts to lose someone because I've always wanted a younger sibling. So my parents decided to bury our "angel baby" in my backyard. The area was surrounded with rocks, so I asked my parents to plant a "lalangita" seedling (tangerine) to mark the ground. Today, the home is occupied by my older sister and her little family. Everytime time I get the chance to come by and visit, I will feel like I'm reminiscing about the sense of home again and bounding with brother who is our little angel of the family.

As I grew older till the age of twelve my parents taught me how to cook spam and eggs. I was enthusiastic to learn to cook Chamorro dishes and perpetuate our own culture. I learned how to make estufão katni (meat adodo), the best tasting appetizer of deer and beef kelaguen to pikakaka (hot) for my elders, deer and beef soup, chicken soup, and etc. With my dad and mom teaching me how to cook well really got me thinking to start a business and make the same thing but with my own homemade ingredients because when cooking Chamorro dishes, it just makes me feel the joy of home, and being self-independent with a little of guidance from adults. I am willing to try new things and been successful in life.

With the protection I feel at home is not like any other. As an individual I want to feel safe, especially at home because it is my safe zone where I can just be myself. Home is where my life begins and where my roots are grounded. It is where I was taught to have respect for myself and for others. In the home I live in, respect was a necessity. Some Chamorros priorities I usually do to honor my elders is listening to their awesome advice, and not answering back in a disrespectful way. That is the home I live in, because if I don't show respect there are small and big consequences.

The sense of home in the Mariana Islands, I am strongly promoting "Gineftao yan Ina'famao'lik" at my young age which is the giving and sharing of our Chamorro culture and language that may brings more people to visit the uniqueness of the fifteen islands in the Pacific Ocean. I really described my Chamorro culture as hospitable and generous. During times of sharing and gift-giving, I truly understood the importance of how my Chamorro value is operationalized. I learned from my elders and parents the cultural practices of generosity and custom of "chenchuli" which is an elaborate system of exchange, responsibility and obligation. Both gineftao and ina'famao'lik are highly valued and respected. The giving of food everytime I see my parents share to family and friends whether "mâsa or mâta" (cooked or uncooked) and the service of "chochu kannai" by helping families and the community in contributing to a party or big events. It is deeply rooted and ingrained in my Chamorro traditions till today.

When I hear the beautiful way that young people today express their gratitude, Saina ma'āse', it always reminds me of the awesome responsibility that the saina in the family have of shedding wisdom on cultural practices and traditions. I want to stay connected to my younger generations to these traditions and fully understand why we do things a certain way and what our identity as a person holds in our way of life. My parents will always urge me to pay respect to our older relatives with the admonition, "hanao ya un fangnginge'" (Go and receive the blessings) The word Nginge' is the act of smelling, it also means to draw in the spirit of the one held in high esteem. So, this cultural practice is much more than a greeting, it represents an exchange of life force and ancestral spirits. When I was growing up, we were always expected to show respect through this custom. It was through faith and identity coming together in a powerful way to strengthen family bonds, spiritual connections, and a sense of belonging.



Barbecue is Life

by Ravin Sablan
Kagman High School, 11th Grade

Charcoal. Lighter fluid. A grill. Tongs. Can you tell where this is going? Ribs. Hotdog. Chicken. Fish. Breadfruit. Are you hungry yet? Because I am. When I think of home, I think of barbecue. If someone from a foreign land were to ask me what about my home is special, I wouldn't answer that question. I simply would give them a plate of barbecue and invite them to a cookout with my familia. So sit back, relax, and prepare your taste buds as I take you on a journey.

Here in the Northern Mariana Islands, we're known for a lot of things. Our cultures, dances, music, attire - the list can go on for miles and miles. But for me, it's the food, aka chow that really matters here. And out of all the diverse options of food we offer, I believe our barbecue is at the top of the list. Barbecues are a strong knot that ties families together. If you hear that there's going to be a barbecue at any place, there's a hundred percent chance that you would go because of the food you'd expect to see on the table. With a plate of barbecue in my hands, friends and family sitting near me, local music jamming on the speakers, kids running around and laughing, what can beat this feeling? This experience, I always wish time could freeze so this moment would never end. This is my feeling of home. This is where I belong - alongside people most important to me enjoying delicious barbecue together.

Barbecue straight off the grill is immaculate. But the process to get there isn't as simple as I wish it was. There is a lot of preparation that goes into barbecuing. I would say that chicken is the hardest one to prepare. From the store to the car, it's a workout trying to carry the case of chicken. I could use the cart to make my life easier but I'm from Saipan and we never take the easy way out. We carry fifty pounds of rice on our shoulders like it's nothing. We can carry cases of drinks and gallons of water as if it's as light as a baby. We could've done it the easy way, but some of us like doing it the hard way.

Same goes for our barbecue marination. We don't just grill our meat and glaze it with store bought barbecue sauce at the end. Our marination process takes hours. The process starts with a lot of chopping. We need onions and garlic, and the more barbecue we need, the more onions and garlic we need to chop. Then we need to gather the rest of our ingredients. Starting with the most important part of the marinade, one of the most precious ingredients of the Marianas, soy sauce. Every single household in the Marianas has soy sauce. It's a must. Our marination is complete once we add lemon, vinegar, sprite, salt and black pepper. Remember when I said the process takes hours? I wasn't kidding. Barbecue should be marinated for at least three hours. I prefer it marinated overnight, so the meat can really soak in all of the goodness.

Any morning of a barbecue day starts with charcoal and lighter fluid. These components are the heart of the grill and keep the heat burning. How can we start a fire without them? Well, actually, you can just grab cobra which is a brown coconut and when you husk it, it has mesh inside and it's good on starting fire and senko which is a Japanese incense that chase mosquitos amd other flying critters to start the fire. If you don't have charcoal you can use tângantângan but it has to be as dry as a Sahara desert in order for it to burn longer. You can tell if it's dry when it feels light and when there's no smell. But if the tângantângan is not dry, it's not going to burn for too long. That's why it's best to cut down tângantângan every couple of weeks so you would have endless reserves of tângantângan. Make sure you keep it out of the rain or else it'll suck the water up like a sponge.

Once the fire is ablaze, it's time for the best part of the day. The sound of the charcoal burning is music to my ears. The smoke begins to burn my eyes. Beauty is pain, or at least that's what I heard. I believe it now because as the smoke burns my eyes, I know the barbecue is grilling to perfection.

Now, let us shift our attention to the best place to barbecue in my opinion. The beach. Brothers and sisters of the Marianas, can we take a moment to appreciate our beaches and how beautiful it is? We should be proud to have such magnificent beaches and the marine life that lives within them. It's a place that has been part of our lives from the moment we took our first breath. That's what makes barbecuing at the beach so special. The salty wind that the water blows to us, the hot sun burning our skin as we try not to dongus our meat, the sight of families gathering together. And you feel free like the birds that fly above us, and that's what it is, freedom. What do I mean by freedom? Well, you get to go to the beach anytime you want and barbecue anytime you want. And no one has a reason to judge you because it is normal here. You're free to barbecue anytime and anywhere, just not in private properties or any government offices.

In our home, the latte stone is the base and foundation of a traditional Chamorro house. Like the latte stone, barbecue is the base and foundation of our people's way of life in Saipan. Barbecue is the pillar that holds families together. It's what brings us together. That's why we must teach our ways of barbecuing to the next generation. To keep what brings us together alive and for them to teach their families. Time stops for no one, But the same goes for barbecuing. The kids of Saipan are interested to learn our ways. So why not teach it to them? So barbecuing would continue for generations and keep up with time till the very end.

So what do you think of my home? We may be a small rock but we're a big family. So, want to spot and barbecue with me?





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