Telling Our Stories,
Sharing Our Lives

A Collection of Student Writing
Brooklyn College • Fall 2017
Preface:

Brooklyn College students of the class of 2021 began their college experience through the freshman common reading of Trevor Noah’s *Born a Crime*. Once classes began, students discussed Noah’s memoir and wrote their own stories. We call this collection of student memoirs *Telling Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives*. 
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the support of:

Michelle J. Anderson, President
William Tramontano, Provost
Lillian O’Reilly, Vice President for Enrollment Management and Retention
Ellen Tremper, Chair, English Department
Martha Nadell, Director of Freshman Composition
Heidi Diehl, Program Administrator, Freshman Composition

Anthology Committee

Matthew Burgess, Heidi Diehl, Bonnie Harris, Erika Kielsgard, Maxine Krenzel,
Janet Moser, Martha Nadell, Steven Neal, Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva

Design & Layout
Virginia Marie Pruitt

Cover Art
Lily J. Antflick

Fall 2017 English 1010 Instructors:
Ana Acosta, Wajeeba Amjad, Stephen Aubrey, Bachi Ayala, Moustafa Bayoumi, Lauren
Belski, Melanie Best, Adesh Brasse, Lisa Clair, Caroline Coleman, Christine Costello, Heidi
Diehl, Corinne Donly, Rita Fabris, Jason Frydman, Justin Gallagher, Catherine Green,
Yasmin Gruss, Sandra Hong, Paul Hufker, Gizem Iscan, Rami Karim, Raffi Kiureghian,
Maxine Krenzel, Zachary LaMalfa, Ariel Lentheussler, Zachary Lloyd, Janet Moser, Steven
Neal, Crystal Payne, Susan Penn, Kate Ruebenson, Jonathan Sands, Lisa Stubbs, Kelly
Suprenant, Cherry Sy, Phil Thompson, Albena Lutzkanova-Vassileva, Leah Williams,
Eric Wojcik

Beth Evans and Judith Wild at Academic Works (Photos © Brooklyn College)

The Staff at Printworks

And, most especially, Trevor Noah
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Pride of an Immigrant” by Mahzabin Afsari</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mosaic: The Art of Communication” by Seher Akram</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Atheist Muslim” by Salma Ali</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Home is Where the Heart Once Lived” by Deanna Andreyev</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Book I Put Down” by Anonymous</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Threaded Struggle” by Sunmbal Aziz</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Crumbled Foundation” by Ornella Bonhomme</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Things We Did and Didn’t Say” by Silvan Carlson-Goodman</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Just Another Rahul” by Rahul Chaudhry</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Remember the Magic” by Sahil Chaudhry</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Break Free” by Noshin Choudhury</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Best of Both Worlds” by Sarali Cohen</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Different Folks and Their Justified Strokes” by Antonio Coleman</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mistaken” by Diamond Covington</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Story of My Mother” by Kayla Dorancy</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“How to Tune Your Ears” by Bethany Friedmann</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My Silent Apology” by Susan Gong</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My Grandmother: Begum Iqbal” by Areeb Hanif</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Perseverance”</td>
<td>Mary Huang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Belonging”</td>
<td>Zenab Jamil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“As the People Around Me”</td>
<td>Rebecca Kreiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“When Trees Fall...”</td>
<td>Elijah Lashley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Reflection’s Tremor”</td>
<td>Vicky Lee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Reality Check”</td>
<td>Lauren Menache</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A Short Tale of Two Cities”</td>
<td>Olynsie Morris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My American Dream”</td>
<td>Ariana Muniz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Have Strange Palms”</td>
<td>Isra Nazlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Smoke”</td>
<td>Kali Norris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Hampton”</td>
<td>Akeemah Robinson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Eighteen”</td>
<td>Nicholas Sossi Romano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Is It My Clothes or Color?”</td>
<td>Nicolas Roye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Knockoff Converse”</td>
<td>Indiana Santana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Roll N Roaster”</td>
<td>John Semanduyev</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Cellulose and Starfox”</td>
<td>Shenal Tissera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Intrinsic Locus of Adulthood”</td>
<td>Elene Tsagareishvili</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The Current”</td>
<td>Ching Wah Wong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pride of an Immigrant
by Mahzabin Afsari

A visit to the Grace Plaza Nursing Home was a typical Sunday for me during my junior year of high school. I was like a madman completing all my assignments on Saturdays just so I can go to the nursing home the next day. There was not a specific purpose for my visit. I did not have a sick grandmother or grandfather that resided there. My only intent was to provide company for the elderlies. I can recollect numerous stories that patients shared with me. They are true storytellers. The adventures they share are so captivating and enriched with such details that it allows me to create mental pictures of their experience in my head.

Among many storytellers I have crossed path with, one man’s anecdote of the past made me reflect on my childhood and upbringing. For a long time, I was embarrassed to share my past. It was easier to be a closed book than share my struggles with the world. Having said that, when this man, who was a complete stranger to me, shared aspects of his life so effortlessly I connected with him. It was then I realized that rather than being ashamed of my identity, I should be prideful of it. I should show pride in where I came from and who I have become. I should tell my story in hopes that someone else do not feel shameful and alone of their identity.

On that Sunday afternoon, for the first time, I related to a 92-year-old man. We are not the same race. We do not share the same religion. Our age difference is a huge stretch but I bonded with him. As he spoke of his youth and hurdles my curiosity grew. I found a companion. Among these senior citizens, whom I would regard as my grandparents, was a friend. It was as if this man and I are the same person, only separated by time.

The man’s name is Jose Ricardo. He was born in the 1920s in Peru. He grew up in a loving home with his parents and younger brother. As a young boy, Jose would often play ball games with his neighborhood friends to get out of doing school work. In his teen years, other than flirting with girls, Jose would read countless books about the United States. At the age of 19, he packed his belongings and headed for New York in search of adventure and opportunity. How can I relate to a man five times my age? Partly because just like Jose, I am an immigrant of the United States of America. I was born in a small country in South Asia called Bangladesh. At the age of 6 my family and I moved halfway across the world when my father got into the DV program (The Diversity Immigrant Visa Program). This program is administered in countries that have low immigration to the United States. Regardless of how I came here, what I experienced here was
far more complex than what I imagined. Just like Jose, I was faced with various
obstacles that challenged my knowledge of the new language, culture and the new
me.

Language barrier is what I struggled with the most. Coming into America I
was only taught two things in English, “Hello” and “How are you?” I had an accent
while saying it and I remember sitting in front of the television for hours repeating
the words I heard to make it sound similar. I often made trips to the local library to
attend workshops and reading clubs to learn how to read at the same level as my 2nd
grade classmates. It is ironic how over the years as I grasped better understanding
of the English language, I began to forget how to read and write my first language:
Bengali.

My mother always told me that you should never forget where you come
from. I found myself dumbfounded, conflicted between two cultures. In
Bangladesh, women drape vivid colors of silk cloth around their body known as
saris to symbolize femininity. On the contrary, in America, girls wear simple t-shirts
and jeans to suit their hasty schedule. Over time, I found ways to incorporate both
customs into my daily life. I can be seen wearing a blouse with skinny jeans in
school, then wrapped in a sari for a cultural singing performance at night. I fostered
the ability to stay true to my roots, but I have also embraced American culture.

If I could go back to sitting with Jose that afternoon, I would ask him one
last question: how much did he miss his parents being hundred miles away from
them? To be quite honest, I could not go a day without taking a quick glimpse of
my parents. When I was younger, both of my parents worked in fast food
restaurants. It brought me joy to know that my parents were surrounded by food in
their work force. What I failed to understand is that serving food was not their
dream, but my parents buried them to put food on the table and a roof over our
heads.

Their hands that once held college degrees griped tight to the spatula for the
minimum wage. My parents wanted to do more than just flip burgers with the
education they attained. My mother was a part of the graduating class of 1987 in
Domar University where she led class discussions about Islamic History. She
looked up to her professors and often dreamt of being a professor herself. Dinajpur
Government College admitted my father into their institution where he attained his
business degree. Eventually, my dad opened his own glass shop that attracted many
tourists. Soon, they left their dreams behind to seek for better opportunities for
their children.

My parents should take pride for being the parents that they are. They have
given up so much for my sister and me, including their dreams and aspirations. My
parents shaped our work ethics. We look to them in times when we get the urge to
give up. We look at our parents and understand that they are working hard to see us succeed, and they deserve to see that.

As I begin to reminisce of that afternoon, I wonder if Jose found our conversation as captivating as I did. I grow curious to think if he will ever recall the smiles and laughter we shared as we spoke of our journey to the new world. I hope to find a chance to let Jose know that he has inspired me to take pride in being an immigrant. With that said, it was my parents that have shown me the real meaning of pride. Every morning they wore their work uniform with pride knowing that they will bring home a paycheck. I am sure I am not the only immigrant who has once been ashamed of revealing their background. Now that I have gained courage to share my identity, I hope to motivate others to tell their stories of being an immigrant in America.
Mosaic: The Art of Communication
by Seher Akram

Mosaic art is an image created from the compilation of various glass pieces and stones of many kinds. Humans, in a sense, are also mosaic art. Individuals are a mosaic comprised of their experiences, cultures, backgrounds, languages, and so much more. At various points and stages in our lives these individual pieces shine, allowing us to benefit from the characteristics we possess—with language being the most prominent and beneficial of these characteristics. Language has not only been an integral part of my own “mosaic;” it has also allowed me to navigate a myriad of worlds, cultures, and areas throughout my life. It has allowed me to connect with a diverse range of people, from family to friends in various ways, form lasting impressions, and become an entirely new person as I code-switch my way throughout my daily interactions.

Being the only child to two Pakistani parents, communication has been, and still is one of my biggest strengths—to confine my knowledge of language, would mean restricting the horizons of my communication. Being able to communicate in another language not only means an instant connection with individuals, but allows you to quickly delve into richer and more complex conversations. Code switching has always been an intrinsic part of my life. My first language is English; however, Urdu is a strong second. Urdu is the language I speak most with my family at home and abroad. Language carries an extremely powerful sense of unity; when I speak to my grandma who is more than 7,600 miles away from me, a simple greeting in Urdu of Assalamu 'alaikum makes me feel closer to her. Language holds the power to break barriers, and overcome distance.

On Friday afternoons when I speak to my best friend on my way home from school, I speak to her, not only through my words, but also through imitations that we both laugh at, and hand gestures that only we can understand. I hear her speak to me as not only my best friend but a passionate young adult; however, I see a whole other person activated right before my eyes, as she speaks to her younger sister in Arabic with a motherly concern, and a warm tone that I can describe in no other way—I see how the words she says now mean something entirely different.

On Saturday mornings when I Skype with my cousins in Karachi, the cultural capital of Pakistan, my language transforms into a beautiful mélange of English and Urdu. My cousins, despite having flawless Urdu, throw in words of English here and there just to help me understand—to help me feel at ease. When I speak in Urdu, I feel closer to the place where both my parents spent their childhood, I feel a sense of camaraderie with my cousins, and most importantly I feel as though I have an amazing privilege, which allows me to become a part of an entirely
different “tribe,” and instantly switch to a completely different person.

Urdu is both a very passionate and polite language; it is known to be the language of *shayari* or poetry. The language itself is subtle yet bold, it is expressive yet contained, and the words are wild in the most tamed way possible. Where English is direct and blunt, the words of Urdu are beautifully intertwined together, making their meaning greater than the sum of their parts. In English, each individual word has its own meaning that is conveyed without deviation; whereas, in Urdu the context in which the word is used has a bigger impact on the word’s *meaning* rather than its denotation. In Urdu, each individual word means so much more than its mere definition.

I code-switch to feel closer to the people I speak to, to connect with them in a way that a single language would just not have allowed. Being able to code-switch from English to Urdu allows my parents to understand me, and vice versa. My mom can call me over a million times telling me to come downstairs and listen to her, and as usual I take my time; however, the minute she calls me over in Urdu, I sense the seriousness in her tone. Being able to code-switch not only helps you become a part of different groups with the people around you; it also helps you leave lasting impressions. This impression can be with a distant relative I just impressed by speaking fluent Urdu, or my internship interviewer who commended me for my use of professional language and conduct. We code-switch, appropriating ourselves to the situations around us, and enhancing the way in which we associate ourselves with those around us and simultaneously build a lasting and positive impression.

Language holds the power to unite, express, and communicate—it is one of those few shortcuts that allows people to connect, looking past physical appearance and social identity. With a similar language comes a sense of unity, trust, and camaraderie. Language is one of those beautiful parts of life that allows you to transform yourself into an entirely different person with the various people in your life. As individuals, we use these perks to our advantage. In Noah’s words, “Language brings with it an identity and a culture, or at least the perception of it. A shared language says ‘We're the same...’”
The Atheist Muslim
by Salma Ali

9 a.m. on Sunday morning. A time when most six-year-olds find themselves either wrapped up in their warm beds or watching cartoons and eating Fruit Loops. At least that’s what I dreamed a normal Sunday morning would be like. My Sunday mornings started at 7 a.m. when my mother would wake me up and rush me into the shower. Instead of enjoying “Blue’s Clues” in my Disney Princess pajamas, I had to go to Madrassa. Madrassa is the Muslim version of Sunday school. Every Sunday, Muslim boys and girls are herded to the mosque in the dark hours of the morning. It was where we learned the verses of the Qur’an and the history of our religion. Islam has been a part of my life from the day I was born. As soon as I learned how to talk my grandmother taught me to say “assalamualaikum” every time I entered her house. I didn’t challenge my grandmother on why we said peace be with you this way because I already knew she’d start with the whole, “Salma, we are Muslims” rant. So for years I never asked any questions, I simply learned, followed, and obeyed.

The mosque we went to while I was growing up was a huge two story house – at least it seemed huge in my memories, and it wasn’t the most appealing place for a six-year-old girl. The first floor was for the men, and the second floor was meant for women. It was confusing, maybe because it had been a house before it was turned into a mosque. There was no division between the ‘living room’ and the ‘dining room’ and there was no furniture, leaving one large room for all the women to sit and practice reading the Qur’an. The forest green carpet had been there so long it had turned to stone, and it caused the worst rug burn when we knelt to pray. We were not allowed to wear shoes in the mosque, so we put them near the door. This had the unintended consequence of molding the everlasting smell of feet that forever tainted the air.

All the other girls were at least five years older than me, leaving me with little to no friends. They would sit together in their own little circles practicing reciting the Qur’an with each other while I was all alone sitting next to my grandmother trying to focus on my own practices. The other girls looked at me as the cute little girl who seemed so lost all the time and got special treatment for being the instructor’s granddaughter. Oh, did I forget to mention the best part of Madrassa?...That’s right, my grandmother was the instructor.

If you think I got any leniency because my grandmother was the instructor, guess again. If anything, I had to work twice as hard as the other girls. I couldn’t make a fool out of her by not memorizing the Surahs. I once made a mistake in doing that and got disciplined with a pen. You may think that it doesn't hurt to be
flicked on your fingers with a pen, but you've never been flicked with a pen by my grandmother. After a few hard whacks, my fingers felt like they had been put into a blender. I had tears running down my face, and everyone had front row seats in the theater of my humiliation.

One of the first things that we learn is to practice writing the Islamic letters. It may sound basic, but it was the most grueling part of our training. Having to write letters that I could not even pronounce was so mind-numbingly boring that I began to draw in my notebook, making little doodles of flowers and stars instead of doing my assigned work. However, if my grandmother caught me, I instantly regretted ever thinking of anything other than my letters, thanks to her pen. The scary thing about my grandmother was that she didn’t say a word. She gave me the ‘I am disappointed in you look’ and went right into the whacking.

Later that night, when we were sitting around the dining room table, I asked my grandmother why she would humiliate me in front of all these people. She looked at me sternly, “Salma, you are my granddaughter. My blood. My student. I don’t embarrass you, I teach you to be better. Better than all of my other students.”

After that conversation I worked and worked and worked, studying a religion that I still couldn’t understand. I wanted to prove to my grandmother that I could do this better than any other girl she would ever teach. I didn’t want her to see me as a failure. A disappointment. I wanted to be her bright shining star, the girl she gloated about to her friends when they were talking, and comparing who had the better granddaughter. So there I was, a young Muslim girl trying to make her grandmother proud, trying to master a religion I would never understand.

I remember having to pray every day and recite Surahs, the verses in the Qur’an in a language I can’t understand. Not knowing what I was saying made it ten times more difficult for me to memorize the verses, which made it difficult for me to recite the Surahs, and that made it hard for me to be excited about being Muslim. I felt like I never would be able to reap any benefits from Allah’s guidance, thus making the notion of practicing the religion more utterly useless to me. The more I practiced, the farther away understanding became. If I had learned how to read Arabic, or even studied the English version of the Qur’an, I could have become enthralled with the religious practices. I watched the other kids, who looked like they were enjoying what was being taught to them. They looked like they understood the Surahs and how to recite them as if it were second nature. Or maybe they were just great at acting like they did.

I began to feel that I was sinning by performing these sacred acts of prayer just to please my family.

If you asked me today what my religion is, I would tell you that I am Muslim. Still I find myself at a crossroads, as to how I want to identify myself. Do I call
myself a Muslim, or do I call myself an atheist? Or am I somewhere in between? I could never see myself committing fully to being an atheist, but I cannot forget the fact that there are beliefs that I have that do not coincide with the Muslim religion. I believe that the husband is not the ruler of the household, that gay people should have the right to get married, and that women can have a life without asking their husband’s permission. However, I cannot deny the fact that the religion is still a part of me after all these years. It played a role in the way I was raised, and gave me a faith to believe in. It is a place where I go in an unconventional way when I need guidance through rough times in my life. I don’t wear a hijab or pray five times a day. I don’t read the Qur’an, and probably never will for the rest of my life. But I am a Muslim, on my own terms. Terms that I choose to define for myself. Terms that make up who I am today. Even though that six-year-old girl inside me may be long gone, she still wakes every morning to her grandmother’s assalamualaikum.

I never dared tell my family about the constant stream of second thoughts, the doubts and feelings of disconnection I had about being a devoted Muslim. I hated the idea of seeing my grandmother’s disappointed face, her shame because her only granddaughter didn’t want to study the religion she was so devoted too. I started to step back from Islam, from the beliefs my family wanted me to follow. After my grandmother stopped teaching at the Madrasa, due to her age, I stopped going. I made myself completely unavailable to the religion. I used schoolwork, or my friends to dodge having to pray or recite any Surahs for my grandparents. Soon enough, they stopped asking me to recite for them entirely. I wondered if they thought I didn’t want to be devoted to their religion, or that I was just a lost cause in trying to conform to their way of life. But I knew that I was different. I was myself, and they didn’t have the power to change that.
The Home is Where the Heart Once Lived
by Deanna Andreyev

The home is where the heartless live
Bright outside but dark within
There are memories stuck in the floor’s adhesive
And inside walls so paper thin

Although the home does not appear this way,
Inside it teems with sadness
They can’t see though the mask today
He does a great job of hiding the madness

In the rocking chair there sits a man
Who swears he’ll never drink again
Clinging to how it was before he began
She stays with him and wonders when

She used to be his everything
But now the alcohol is splitting them apart
Its erosion isn’t shy of anything
Not his liver, not his heart

She tells herself it isn’t right to leave
Although he clearly loves the bottle more
All she can do it stay and grieve
Stare hopefully toward the door

This house was built on trust
Each brick is filled with love
But now the pipes are wrapped in rust
The roof begins to cave from above

The floorboards creak, the windows shake
As the walls’ crevasses widen and wait
Her soul is consumed by bitter ache
And it begins to wilt with hate
The man he used to be is gone, he’s left no traces
And so she loses all her hope
Grabbing bags, and kids, and cases
Running to a place where she can cope

The floor caves in, the walls collapse
Gone with each memory they had outlived
Their house had been reduced to scraps
The home is where the heart once lived.
The Book I Put Down
by Anonymous

What's the most annoying phrase in the English language? For me, it's 'Don't judge a book by its cover.' I mean, come on. Even if you ignore the numerous awards this phrase has probably received for being clichèd to the core, we've all done it at some point, whether it was intentional or not.

When I was younger, I didn't know what it meant to be Pakistani. My family immigrated to America when I was about four, so, in my head, I was mandated to watch at least a hundred T20 cricket matches to be sworn in as a true Pakistani male. Everything I understood to be Pakistani culture came from my immediate family: my parents.

Growing up, it wasn't "Numan, honey, get dressed, we're going to run some errands." It was more of a get-dressed-and-find-out-where-we're-going-once-we-get-there kind of thing. It was ingenious because I had no choice but to go and this way, my brother and I couldn't complain that we've been to our neighbors house a thousand times this week.

But here's the catch. Say you had a valid reason preventing you from going somewhere with your parents. Let's say you promised your friend James you would study with him on Sunday for this big Chemistry test. Sunday morning rolls around, you finish up your work and you dial James but before you finish, your mother tells you to stop. The family is going to a restaurant with family friends and then over to their house afterwards. You protest that you have to study but the answer is almost always: “No,” “James can wait,” “You should have studied yesterday,” as if you were somehow supposed to anticipate this in advance. They tell you it's about family togetherness and it's just this once. But really, it won't reflect positively upon them if the guests saw you weren't there. Your situation could always be vetoed as long as your parents had to protect their prestige and respectability.

People believe Pakistan won its independence in 1947. I'll tell you right now, that's a huge lie: the British never left Pakistan.

After colonialism ended, the British left their practices and values. The Pakistanis adopted the British labor system, the British education system, tea time and cricket.

The South Asian man marveled at British innovation and transportation. Like how cool is it to hit a ball with a bat and have fielders try to catch it?

But the South Asian man was also deeply seared by his treatment. Exploited for the resources his land had, the South Asian man wasn’t seen as a human. A woman from Palo Alto recounts incidents from the 1930s: “When I visited India I witnessed several occasions of Englishmen kicking Indians off sidewalks or out of
the white man's way- very shocking & unforgettable.” As a result, the South Asian psyche was marred with an issue of pride for decades to come.

That translates in a few ways, some of which are: a) Pakistani parents want their kids to become something prestigious and end up forcing them to become doctors. b) They have a vicious cynicism and wounded pride.

Me: Mom, this toothpaste is really mushy and annoying; when did the dentist say I can start using regular paste?
Mom: You can start now.
Me: Wait, really? The dentist said so?
Mom: I said so. The dentist doesn't know what she's talking about. She just wants to make money.

Where my friend James’ mother would simply call the dentist and ask immediately, my parents would have to be coerced into doing so. I didn’t understand that they were a product of British rule, I just thought they were inconsiderate, arrogant and backwards. I was taken aback by her response and I felt like all Pakistanis employed caveman-logic in decision-making.

*Why bother with people who have such egos? They don’t care about anything but their own pride.* Thoughts like these would bombard me after I failed to reason with my parents. Contempt would fester within me, nibbling away at the rope that tied me to Pakistan. I stopped speaking my native language at home; I didn’t watch the Pakistani news; I didn’t attend cultural events and I didn’t interact with Pakistani people.

I never saw Pakistani culture in its purest form and I never tried to. I didn’t see the intricate poetry, the humor in theater, the amalgam of Greek, Persian, Pakistani and European architecture, the diverse Pakistani/Afghan/Middle Eastern cuisine, and the veneration of religious worship. I was too busy avoiding Pakistani people, trying to look through binoculars at some other culture to see the one that lay before me.

My avoidance worked for years and eventually, it failed. I was about sixteen and my family was staying at a hotel in Medina. I was coming back to our hotel and I realized I didn’t even know our room number, let alone have the keys. Irresponsible, yes, but that wasn’t the realization that hit me. I walked over to the reception and began worrying that all of the receptionists in Saudi Arabia spoke Arabic, when I spotted one guy who wasn’t Arab. In fact, he was Pakistani.

I went over to him and began to explain my predicament. However, the man wasn’t following. He didn’t understand me.

*Aap kai baayir se he?* It was that sentence that struck me. He asked if I was a foreigner. But the thing is, he wasn’t asking if I was new to Saudi Arabia. The receptionist was asking me if I was a foreigner to Pakistan. Though I didn’t internalize it at the time, he was asking me about my identity. In that split second, I
had to choose: Would I tell him I was Pakistani and bear the shame of being unable to speak my own language? Or would I avoid the issue altogether?

I told him I was from America.
He nodded, rationalizing how easy it was for a foreigner to speak poor Urdu. Eventually, and barely, I was able to explain, in broken Urdu, what was going on. It’s pretty embarrassing to think I spoke more fluent Urdu when I was four. Anyways, I got to the hotel with a new issue on my hands.

Something about that exchange was unsettling. Let’s start with what I knew: I had lied to that man. I was no foreigner to Pakistan. But it wasn’t just about speaking Urdu. I didn’t just avoid a lengthy explanation. I had chosen my allegiance. And in that instance, I had chosen America. The question was: why had I forsaken my roots? Why was I worlds apart from the very place I grew up? Why was it that I was so afraid of being caught with Pakistani people in a hotel elevator? Why would I conjure up ridiculous excuses in the impossible event that my friends saw me? I would muse over this, turning it over in my head.

Slowly, I realized a lot of it had to do with my parents. From their harsh scolding to their neglect of their children’s rights and emotions, somewhere along the way, I had severed the tie.
I had spent years believing my culture was inferior. I figured being backwards and inconsiderate was intrinsic to being Pakistani. Since they were all irrational, then they must be below everyone else. That was my thinking.

It was profound, the distance between that receptionist and I, when in reality he was a measly three feet away. Rather, it was profound just how far I was from acknowledging my culture. It was then when it clicked: I didn’t understand Pakistani people.

I’d love to say I took immediate initiative to research and educated myself, but I didn’t. Over the years, I stumbled upon articles of British influence on the Indian subcontinent and slowly pieced the picture together. I spent more time with Pakistani people and learned that unlike me, they valued their culture. I then looked at my parents through a clearer lens.

The wounds and the after-effects of colonialism were evident in the way my parents strove to earn and safeguard prestige. It was present in their cynicism of the motives of others. I had believed they were unbending and flawed, with nothing useful to contribute to the world. After admitting to myself that Pakistanis weren’t another breed of humans and that they weren’t inherently arrogant, I figured Pakistani culture was worth giving a chance.

I was like a British colonizer: I looked at a culture that was a product of circumstance, ignored the richness of it, and attributed its vices entirely to its people. It’s okay to judge a book by its cover--it happens and we don’t always have bad intentions. It’s not okay to put the book away without reading it and acknowledging its true contents.
A Threaded Struggle
by Sunmbal Aziz

Growing up in a Muslim family, I have been taught the basic morals every American household follows, as well as values that every Muslim is expected to follow. When I was twelve years old, I aspired to start wearing the hijab, which is the head covering worn by Muslim women. My mom encouraged me, but she also wanted me to understand what the hijab represented. Being that I was surrounded by many people who wore the hijab, whether it was my friends or my mother, I had a strong desire to do it as well. It was until one day after school that my desire started to slowly vanish.

In middle school, I used to take the cheese-colored bus home. It would always be full of a lot of kids. There was only one girl who wore the hijab in a bus full of almost fifty kids. She would constantly get bullied because she was seen as “different.” One day, I clearly remember that a ginger-haired boy made fun of her hijab. He called her Bin Laden's daughter and said that she was a “terrorist.” Everyone around the boy laughed and supported him while the helpless hijabi tried to fight back. They then got into an argument, and the boy pulled off her hijab, nearly choking her. All of this took place while the bus was in motion, and the bus driver was blind to what was going on. Ever since that day, a fear has been instilled in me because I learned that society will never accept you for who you are or who you are trying to become, and that is frightening.

Being a Muslim in our society today means that people have a preconceived notion of what you believe in, what your morals are, and how you think. Social media has projected an ugly image of Muslims for the world to see. Society is so brainwashed into believing whatever a television screen projects that understanding other human beings takes effort, and no one wants to leave the comfort of his or her prejudices. We need an “enemy” to hate so that we can feel better about ourselves. That is essentially what occurs when Muslims are labeled “terrorists.” Men with long beards and gowns aren’t the only ones affected by racism, but little boys named Mohammed and little girls who wear the hijab grow up in schools and systems where people loathe their very existence. This negatively impacts my daily life because it makes me hesitate to mention the faith I practice.

Similarly to Trevor Noah, under the system of apartheid, there were certain standards and rules set for South Africans. In Born a Crime, Noah’s life revolved around these rules which substantially impacted his relationships with others. As the son of a black mother and a white father, Noah lived a majority of his childhood hiding, mostly from the police because interracial couples were strictly forbidden during that time. Moreover, apartheid was threatening to his life because
he could have been separated from his mother if he ever got caught. When apartheid was still around in South Africa, the complexion of one’s skin determined everything, whether it was which group you belonged to at recess or what township you lived in. Noah’s grandparents would treat him like royalty just because of the color of his skin. His grandfather would offer to be his chauffeur and called him “mastah” (52). Although Noah was naughty, Noah’s grandmother wouldn’t dare hit him, because, as a black woman, she didn’t know how to hit a “white child” (52).

As a colored South African who was surrounded by not too many people who were the same complexion as he was, expectations were high for Noah. For example, when it was Valentine’s Day and Noah didn't have a valentine, he was urged by people to ask the only other colored person in the classroom. His classmates indicated that it was his “responsibility” to ask her because they were the “only two” (130).

Living with his alcoholic stepfather, Noah and his mother had a very tough life. Noah’s stepfather was a very heavy drinker, which led to him abusing his wife. Noah’s mother would constantly try to go to the police to get help, but they wouldn’t do anything about it. Domestic abuse was considered normal to everyone in South Africa, and the mistreatment of Noah’s mother greatly affected his relationship with his stepfather, Abel, and ironically with his mother too. Noah couldn’t take seeing the abuse that went on in the household anymore, which led him to say to his mother: “good luck with your life. I’m going to live mine” (271). That is when he cut off all ties with his mother and no longer spoke to her, because she stayed with an abusive man in the fear that he was going to kill her if she tried leaving. The norms of South African society got in the way of many relationships that Noah had with people he loved, people like his mother.

Our identity is often created by those around us. Noah wasn’t Noah; he was basically seen as the child of an interracial couple. Similarly, the girl on the bus has no identity beyond that which others around her saw her as. She was seen as Bin Laden’s daughter, nothing more. The boy with the name Mohammed wasn’t his own person; he was simply a terrorist.

When someone is labeled, it is hard to break away from the image that society has implanted on an individual. This further makes it difficult to create new relationships with those around them just as Noah felt difficulty making friends because he was the child of an interracial couple.
Haiti is a country in the Caribbean that takes up one-third of the island of Hispaniola, with the neighboring country of the Dominican Republic occupying the other two-thirds. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, Haiti has a total area of 27,750 square kilometers, which contains more than 10 million people. The capital of Haiti; Port-au-Prince, itself has a population of about 2.44 million which makes the capital one of the most overpopulated cities in the country (“The World Factbook: HAITI”).

Haiti, once known as “The Pearl of the Antilles,” is now a country unfortunately recognized as the poorest country in the western hemisphere. Haiti’s luck took a turn for the worst when one of the most damaging natural events hit the country. A 7.0 magnitude earthquake-whose epicenter was 15 miles away from the capital-hit at 4:53 P.M. According to History.com, “The quake was the strongest to strike the region in more than 200 years” (“Massive Earthquake Strikes Haiti”). This earthquake disabled a country that was already in a crippled state. Homes-dwellings, shacks, huts and cement houses- were reduced to debris, hospitals, churches and even national buildings either collapsed and were destroyed or were extremely damaged.

The earthquake also led to the death of “160,000 and displaced close to 1.5 million people” (Laurent). Yet, even with the unprecedented help that Haiti received, the country seems to be in a worse economic situation than it was before. Due to the government’s lack of services and help for the country, the people of each neighborhood began to take care of themselves. There is still faith in Haiti and the resilience of the Haitians that they will weather this centuries-long storm.

“It’s already a victory to see that the country hasn’t exploded, especially when you see what has happened in the last decades — from Jean-Claude Duvalier to Jean-Bertrand Aristide, from cholera to hurricanes, the country has faced a succession of social, political and environmental crises," Turine says. "The fact that Haitians haven’t succumbed to madness shows that they’re resilient’ (Laurent).”

Nothing prepared me for my life after January 12th, 2010. It was a peaceful day, warm as per usual, no clouds in the sky, no extreme winds, nothing that signaled millions of people that their lives were about to drastically change. It was a Tuesday, and that meant that I had gym. I went to a private, non-religious school; Centre Alcibiade Pommayrac and their curriculum is nothing like the one
in the United States. That day, I decided to linger on school grounds for almost half an hour and play tag in the empty playground with my group of friends. Afterward, I decided to take the long way home. I always think about what would’ve happened had the earthquake occurred sooner and I was not home and those thoughts never have good outcomes. By the time I got home, our maid was fixing up a meal for my cousin Winnie and me. Since I was famished, I decided to eat before showering.

It was exactly four in the afternoon when I managed to memorize all my lessons for the next day, finished all my homework and showered. I made sure I finished at four because “Frijolito” came on at 4:30 P.M. and I absolutely could not miss the one show; everybody watched. I would look absolutely silly the next day, trying to figure out what happened. “Frijolito” was also the reason a lot of people died. For example, if Henry did not have a TV in his house, he would cross the street to Cecil’s house and when the earthquake hit, Cecil’s house collapsed, killing everybody in it including poor Henry.

My father left earlier that afternoon so it was just my cousin and me in the house. We had settled to watch the show and not even 30 minutes in, the electricity was cut off. Now, this was a normal occurrence but even the company in charge of the power knew not to cut it off during this time in the afternoon. Before Winnie and I could properly react, we were interrupted by a large truck practically bouncing off the hill near our house. As we both ran to the window, that’s when the ground began to shake severely. Both of us, clueless as to what we should do, jumped on the nearby bed. My cousin threw herself on top of me to protect me and since there was nothing else for us to do, we screamed our lungs out. My cousin screamed for her dead mother while I screamed for God to save us because as far as I was concerned, the world was over.

After what felt like forever, but was actually about thirty seconds, everything stopped moving. To say I was in shock would be an understatement. I was crying and laughing at the same time while checking on my mother’s china. I did a lot of things that I don’t quite remember doing in the minutes that followed the earthquake until way later that night. For example, I changed my outfit, washed my legs because they were ashy, locked my back door and prayed all while crying and laughing. My cousin and I even walked halfway to our grandmother’s house when my dad who was on his way home picked us up and he described us as hysterical and dazed.

For the next couple of nights, we didn’t even sleep in our own home. We slept at my father’s friend’s house. While at his friend’s house, I had witnessed the craziest things. One of which was how this tragedy could bring a whole lot of people to God. The witch doctors next door prayed with way more fervor than any religious person I have ever come across. I also saw that people of all social
classes all came together. People who had humongous houses and people who had shacks all slept in one yard for a few nights and put their differences aside. And the most terrifying sight of all was a truck of dead bodies being transported to a mass grave. The stench was something of nightmares.

One thing that people know is that my dad doesn’t like to lose. Whether it is an argument, games or his glasses, he hates to lose. So the morning we finally went back home, was because my dad got into an argument with his friend. He did not lose but as it turns out, his friend hates losing too so we left.

We were home for maybe three days when my dad came up to me and said: “Would you like to go see your mom?” I was excited but confused. My mom was in the United States at the time with my sister and there were no commercial flights leaving or coming to Haiti. I answered with a yes and was told to only pack my long sleeve shirts and my jeans. My suitcase was pretty light. I said goodbye to the kids on my street who stayed and all the people in the neighborhood and told them all that I would be back soon and just in time for when school—which collapsed entirely—starts up. I didn’t even bother telling my family or school friends that I was leaving because I was sure that it was a vacation. I did not go back to Haiti until two years after.

I got to Brooklyn and not three days later, I was enrolled in school. I was petrified. I had to learn a new language, make new friends, and adapt to an entirely different culture. I was constantly frustrated with the people around me and myself because I could not understand them and they could not understand me. I am a very dedicated so not understanding the work killed me. But this was all only during the first month because the month after, I began to get the hang of things and even won the “Student of the Month” award and was known as the “smart immigrant.” I always thought to myself, “Of course I am smart. I know three languages and you only know one.”

The earthquake in a way improved my life because I got a better chance at education and I have a lot more options career-wise, but it also destroyed me. A part of me crumbled just the same as those buildings. I left a lot: friends, family, school and my culture. My foundation crumbled and there was nothing I could do about it.
The Things We Did and Didn’t Say
by Silvan Carlson-Goodman

Our teachers don’t always get to choose what they teach us. Sometimes that means that a curriculum is out of their control; sometimes that means that life and communication is complicated. We can never be sure what a student will take from a teacher’s statements or actions. I still try to unpack the lessons learned when my writing teacher, Ned Vizzini, threw himself off of a building.

I met Ned because at age ten I foolishly decided to become a writer. I read an autobiography by Chris Crutcher. Crutcher, like every writer I have read the life story of, spoke freely and openly about being a broken child. I knew some things about being a broken child. I had already been kicked out of multiple schools for my dysfunctions. This left me without a clear path into adulthood. That’s why I found so much inspiration in writerly stories of becoming a broken adult. I knew that I would be a writer because that was a path that made sense to me. I didn’t even like writing yet.

Ned represented that path which hit closer to home. He was a local boy who had made good. His brother went to same school with my sister. He grew up around the corner from where I lived. The difference was that his work was first published when he was a teenager. He went on to publish two somewhat high profile novels. In my teen years, he offered a free teen writing workshop. I attended to get closer to him; if there was any chance of him showing me the way to follow his success, I had to take it.

I was always at home with those writer’s workshops. He attracted a certain type of dark child. His most popular novel was *It’s Kind of a Funny Story*, which was based on his real account of attempted suicide that lead to a brief stint at a psychiatric ward. The book was notable to people like me who had decided that it was worth ending life at fourteen. Everybody who spoke about the subject would share a usual pablum of life being “worth it.” I had already moved through a parade of psychologists and counselors of all stripes. I had heard phrases such as “Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem” or “It gets better” – all the horseshit of the highest order. In stark contrast, Ned’s book was clearly written with a knowledge and an empathy that came from someone who had been there too. The book had answers and reasoning, but they weren’t simple and weren’t easy. Depression was a battle to be fought; it may be won, or may be lost.

So there I was, in a class with a bunch of broken children being led by a former broken child, then broken man. He was the elder statesman, though now I realized that he was only nine years older than me. Was it just the blind leading the blind? I don’t want to think so. He was never shy about sharing his thoughts or
advice on the subject of death. He said that suicide was only ever the ultimate act of cowardice. There might be additional factors or complexities, but don’t be mistaken; it’s only ever running away from your problems. Whatever he was running from, I can only hope he is free of it now.

Yet, it left me at a loss - here was this man that put so much faith and love into me. He praised my writing and praised me. I wasn’t just a student; we reached that phase where we moved from student/teacher to actual adult friends. I met his wife, and son. He told me so much about his life that it became real to me. He wanted to put me in touch with his agent when I finished my manuscript, a manuscript that I abruptly stopped writing the day he died. I stopped writing entirely. The audience of one who really appreciated my writing was gone - who would I write for? Who would care? Every now and then I see a movie or read a book that made an argument against suicide, yet all I could think was if it would have saved him. What if I had reached out more or told him how important he was to me? Would that have helped? I had a dream that we were at a party, years after the fact. I woke up in tears. This is a grief that will never go away.

I can confidently say that I don’t want to kill myself anymore. I don’t see it as a battle permanently won, though. As I approach the oldest age that Ned ever knew, I am overwhelmed with a new type of thought: I actually miss the suicidal tendencies. There was a freedom in them that made life easier. They meant that no matter how bad things were, there was always a way out. I’ve relinquished that hope of freedom; all that’s left was the pain of living day to day. Reality came with the knowledge that I will only ever get older, and friends will only ever die. Ned wasn’t the only person I loved from those days that lost the battle. He’s just the one who taught me how important it is to keep fighting. Not for myself, but for the people around me who haven’t yet lost the war.
Some of the most vivid memories of my childhood involve sitting on cramped couches attempting to stay awake and understand the Bollywood films my parents practically forced me to watch. As, at the time, my comprehension of Hindi was lackluster at best, I relied on the words or names I did comprehend to gain an elementary understanding of the corny plot I would later be tested on by my parents. The one question I most consistently got right on these frequent quizzes was the name of the main character. Aside from the fact that the protagonist’s name may have been mentioned several times throughout the course of the endlessly long movie, my correctness can also be attributed to the fact that the character’s name was, in many cases, you guessed it, Rahul.

Shah Rukh Khan, commonly referred to as SRK, is one of the most sought out and well-known actors in Bollywood cinema, and has a proclivity for going by the name of his alter-ego, Rahul. If you travel across India and ask any woman the first person that crosses her mind when you say the word Bollywood, she will more likely than not obsessively and overexcitedly respond with three predictable letters — SRK. Consequently, the popularity of Shah Rukh Khan throughout India also meant the popularity of the name Rahul for children.

I remember in elementary school, whenever a student in class shared his or her name with a character in a book or movie, it was a signal for the entire class to stare at the person. That unlucky individual was me any time I watched a Bollywood movie with friends and family. The only difference is that I was one among many children in the room named Rahul who received these awkward glares. Yet the blame for the lack of my name’s distinctiveness cannot solely be attributed to the beloved Shah Rukh Khan.

Rahul is translated differently in Pali, Hindi, and Arabic, yet the name is uniform in its cultural importance and popularity. Pali, the main language of the Buddhist religion, interprets it to mean “the son of Siddhartha Gautama.” In religious texts, Rahul is portrayed as a devout son, and is the first monk to follow in The Buddha’s footsteps toward enlightenment. In Hindi, the official language of the Hindu religion, Rahul is defined as “able and efficient,” and is greatly reflected upon in Vedic philosophical scriptures. Seeing as both religions were derived from the same male-dominated culture, both name translations represent what society expects of sons: success, allegiance, and religious faithfulness. Fathers wanted to define the characteristics they expected their sons to embody, and the name Rahul effectively expressed their shared vision.
has been marked by a large-scale immigration of Arabs to the United States. Such a trend can be attributed to increased religious tension and warfare in the Middle East. As a result, many have taken advantage of immigration reforms as an opportunity to start new lives away from the conflict they had once known. To these individuals, travelling represents safety and new-found opportunity. It only seems fit that previous generations named their children after something important to them, or in this case someone that embodies a life that they desired for themselves and their children – the traveler.

While the name Rahul has extensive cultural significance, its conventionality has made me question my own uniqueness. In my Long Island high school alone, at least seven other students were named Rahul. It bothered me that something so personal could be shared by others, and I often found myself in situations feeling overshadowed by those who shared the same label. The unexceptional nature of my name led me on a conquest to be exceptional.

I began to find ways to distinguish myself from my peers by taking on unique interests, including science research and community service, and building my distinctive character. I was on a quest to be defined by noteworthy achievements and unforgettable personality rather than my shared identity. Over time, I began to realize that the importance others place on labels shouldn’t define my own view of their importance. While names will always evoke certain emotions and opinions, they should not sway the way in which we treat those who bear them. Many believe that a person’s name can determine his or her path in life, and while I believe in fate to a certain extent, I refuse to believe that something so seemingly simple could constrain me.

Although I realize that it is an individual’s role to define himself, and not the name he was given without choice at birth, I eventually became curious in regards to how the etymology of my name related to personal character. I considered the various translations: In Hindi, able and efficient; in Arabic, traveler; and in the Buddhist religion, the son of Siddhartha Gautama. I couldn’t help but find meaning in the name that was given to me, whether it be in regards to my optimism and resilience in times of difficulty, my love for travelling to foreign environments and learning new languages, or my role as the dutiful son.

At times I find myself asking my family what I mean to them. They see independence, humor, perseverance, and dedication. It is often difficult not to view myself in terms of my unremarkable name and I find it necessary to find consolation in the external perspective of others. When I ask my parents why they named me Rahul, they tell me that they both agreed upon the name for different reasons, and that the significance behind it is not important to them.

Their distinctive outlook, or belief that actions speak louder than words or names, has in many ways shaped my own perspective of the world around me; it
has driven me to lead a life that is defined by my own interests and beliefs rather than one complicated by those of others. They have taught me that it is not the name that is of significance, but the significance that we give to it for generations to come.

While some people may organize others in their minds according to names, I find it easier to differentiate based on character: the person with the infectious smile or the person who never refuses an opportunity to help others. On my own path towards becoming a more confident and seasoned individual, I have come to realize that names are only what we make them to be, and viewing them as more than just a creative combination of letters is a mistake. Moreover, I have learned that names are not meant to constrict an individual’s personality, but to create a temporary boundary that can be transcended and redefined.
I Remember the Magic
by Sahil Chaudhry

I remember racing for the couches with my siblings, wands in hand, excited for the Harry Potter Marathon we so anxiously had been preparing for all week. I remember the precise 1 minute and 37 seconds for the popcorn to pop, 1 minute and 37 seconds impatiently waiting to get back to the movie I had already watched a dozen times.

I remember vivid nightmares of the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets, and my attempts to escape its petrifying yellow eyes, always unsuccessfully, and waking up in a sweaty panic. Yet for every bad dream there was always a magical one that persuaded me to experience the nightmare all over again.

I remember the feeling of joy on my sixth birthday when I received Harry Potter as my first video game on the Xbox. My brother and I would spend more time fighting over the controller than actually playing, hoping to be a part of the magic for as long as possible. Whenever we managed to come to a compromise, our parents would force the controller out of our hands because school was more important.

I remember leaping onto my light blue couch, Wii remote in hand, shouting “Avada Kedavra” at my brother, who had deflected the imaginary spell to my dismay. The duels lasted for a few hours, and wouldn’t end until we had lost our voices or had our sister decide who the victor was.

I remember the bright red embarrassment that manifested itself on my face when I first took the Sorting Hat Quiz and got placed into Ravenclaw. My feelings quickly turned around a few minutes later when I heard my sister got sorted into the ridiculed Hufflepuff house.

I remember starting to read the Harry Potter books when I was 10 years old, the exhilarating feeling of the off-white pages in my hands, and immersing myself into the wizarding world I one day hoped to be a part of. It was an experience that the movies alone couldn’t provide me, transporting me to a world in the comforting privacy of my own mind.

I remember (grief) when I ran outside to the mailbox on my eleventh birthday and found no letter of acceptance from Hogwarts addressed to me or my brother. I walked inside my house, eyes red and filled with water, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone else. I ran up the stairs and locked myself in my room for the rest of the day.

I remember being proud to be a part of Ravenclaw, characterized by my wisdom. My goal was to become defined by attributes of the house rather than my
personality. I looked up to Luna Lovegood and Hermione Granger to help guide my aspirations, hoping one day to emanate qualities of individuality, intelligence, and wit.

I remember leaving the premiere of The Deathly Hallows Part II at 12 AM, sad that a part of my childhood was gone. This movie marked a significant turning point in my life, and I slowly began to realize that this world was truly a fantasy. I couldn’t help but remember that magic and curses were only ideas, and I became more distant from the childhood I still yearn for today.

I remember going to Los Angeles for an international research competition, and having the opportunity to re-explore my past. I ran through an empty Universal Studio with my mind set on reaching the magical world I had always dreamed of being a part of. I happily spent every single penny in my wallet on endless butterbeer and chocolate frogs, and marveled at the sight of Hogwarts castle.

I remember the feelings of nostalgia as I took a ride through the school I once dreamed of attending. I remember walking through Diagon Alley and entering Ollivander’s wand shop, observing the intricate wandwork throughout the store. I remember the memories of my childhood and the emotions they evoked slowly flooding my mind.

I remember the magic.
Break Free
by Noshin Chaudhury

I call them Mom and Dad, they say they love me, but will they ever be truly happy with calling me their daughter?

“OWWWWW!” I scream, my hands automatically reaching up to touch my shoulder where the ball of ice slammed into my arm, “I’M GOING TO TELL MOM.”

“I’ll just tell her you hit me first,” my perfect older sister, Nishat, shrugs. I struggle with coming up with a comeback and I settle for the simple, “I HATE YOU.” I feel my face reflecting all the anger and pain boiling within me.

“Nobody cares! You know, daddy even said you’re ugly yesterday! U-G-L-Y,” she screams at my face, “He says it EVERY night!!” Within seconds my anger is replaced by pain until I compose myself and put on a face that I’ve perfected over time—my poker face. I glimpse Nishat’s dark brown hair glistening in the winter sun and light caramel skin tone glowing as she disappears into the house to tell on me. I know there is no point of my trying to tell my mom the truth so I prepare myself for the scolding instead.

I walk into the house and watch Nishat sob dramatically as she tells my mother her side of the story: I was the offender and I threw the ball of ice at her face. I pull my jacket off and stand still as my mother screams at me and asks me how I could be so stupid. I don’t bother telling her how the pain in my shoulder pulses throughout my right arm. I don’t pull my sleeve up to show her the black and blue bruise that is clearly seen against my dark brown skin. I don’t cry. There is no point. My mother does not bother to ask if I got hurt as she waves her arms in front of my face. I could tell she is screaming but I only hear, “You know, daddy even said you’re ugly yesterday! U-G-L-Y,” over and over. Could it be true? Does dad really think I’m ugly? There is only one way to find out.

I am always the first one to sleep, but that night I only act like I went to bed. A half hour later, I hear murmuring downstairs, a family conversation—without me. I slip out of bed and go sit on the stairs, straining my ears to make out my parents’ voices.

My mother’s annoyed voice echoes up the staircase, “You know Noshin threw ice at Nishat’s face today? Why are we raising such a wild child?”

“Yes daddy!! It hurt so much”

I could hear my dad’s anger, “How stupid is she? Why is she trying to ruin your beautiful face? Also, Nishat didn’t I tell you to stop going outside, you’re going to become too dark like Noshin. She’s so lazy, look at her already sleeping and it is only nine…” My father’s sentence slowly fades. How am I lazy? How is it my fault
that my skin is dark? Why does it matter if it’s dark? I feel my heart being torn in half as I hear the soft tap of my tears falling on the hardwood floor.

Everyone always asks if Nishat and I are twins because we have the same facial features and height. Strangers never notice the difference is our skin tones. But the difference is enough for my parents to mistreat me emotionally. Like most traditional Bengali parents, they believe lighter skinned girls are more attractive because they look pure and their color is an indication of wealth (the girls do not need to work in the sun and get tanned). I never thought skin tone would make a difference to how my parents view their daughters, but it does. I have become used to my parents’ favoring my sister and my sister’s telling me I should not wear a certain shirt because I am “too dark to look good in it.” Eventually, I become an outsider in my own home.

Every couple of nights, I sit at the stairs and listen to the conversation, hoping that one day my parents will compliment me. I start working extra hard at school, to turn my A grades into A+ grades, hoping maybe if my grades are better my parents will love me as much as they love Nishat. I start cleaning the house every day, hoping maybe if I help them more my parents will not think I’m lazy. I find myself scrubbing my skin raw in the shower, hoping maybe if I could become lighter, my parents will think I’m beautiful too. But every night, listening at the staircase, I find myself walking back to bed, sobbing. I am in a continuous loop where I find myself-confidence degrading. I realize that as long as I spend time with my family, I will never be happy with myself.

Thus, in high school, I begin to distance myself from my family. I begin to spend every extra minute I can at school. Boys start asking me for my number, their friends start coming up to me and telling me “that boy in red over there likes you” and girls start hating me because their crushes like me -- but I never think twice about these events. My parents think I am ugly, why would I ever think otherwise?

I decide to distance myself from my parents’ negativity. I start surrounding myself with people who fill my life with positive energy, people who love me for who I am, people who I now call my best friends. With these people, I experience monumental events in high school that boost my confidence: In Freshman year, I smile while remembering my friends calling me pretty as I walk home; I feel flattered. In sophomore year, I laugh until my abs hurt and tears run down my cheeks; I feel ecstatic. In junior year, I pass a group of popular kids talking about my friend group including the hottest girls in our grade, with me being the leader; I feel pretty. In senior year, I find out five guy friends are fighting and trying to figure out who can ask me to prom; I feel wanted.

I am constantly looking for approval and signs of affection in school and my friends and classmates are always there giving me the thumbs up. They persuade me that maybe I am not hideous. I grow comfortable with my skin tone. I no longer
hide in the shade during summer to avoid tanning. I no longer scrub myself until I bleed. I no longer let my sister’s harsh comments decide what color shirt I wear.

My parents begin to complain that I am too friend-oriented and that I should spend more time with family. But every moment I spend with them, I feel my self-confidence being torn apart. Their discrimination always makes me feel like I am not good enough. It is only when I find myself in a supportive environment surrounded with the love from my friends that I begin to love myself. That is when I realize the importance of who you surround yourself with. Sometimes, your situation is not the best but if you look for the right things, or in my case, the right people, you will find yourself happier.

My happiness always deteriorates when I go home. My parents’ judgment suppressed my emotional growth during childhood and it was only when my friends, my sunshine, came into my life that I was able to blossom into a beautiful flower. However, childhood experiences cannot be forgotten and to this day, I cannot bring myself to accept compliments. The cut made by my parents, the people whom I was destined to be born to and who were supposed to be supportive of me, left a scar that will never completely heal.
Best of Both Worlds
by Sarali Cohen

Everyone on this earth belongs to two worlds, whether it’s the house life versus school life, or different groups of friends; everyone has multiple versions of themselves, each with its own quirks to fit into the many worlds in our lives. For me my two worlds are an ocean away, and I often forget that the difference exists, but then I’m quickly reminded.

As a child with immigrant parents, my world always had a duality to it. Both of my parents are from Israel and lived there for the beginning portion of their lives. They met in Brooklyn, both of them pretty new to the country, and within two years I was born. Growing up, my parents’ English was pretty limited, and it wasn’t spoken in the house. Hebrew was my first language; I watched Israeli TV shows, listened to Hebrew music, and ate Israeli food. I never thought too much of it; I thought it was normal. All of my family members and family friends spoke Hebrew, and so I assumed everyone spoke Hebrew.

The earliest memories I have of not fitting in due to my lack of knowledge in the English language would be elementary school. By the time I was in first grade I had learned basic English, but as a six year old it was still hard for me to remember a lot of words in two languages. I remember sitting in class one day, not feeling well, and trying to explain to my teacher that I wanted to go home. I will never forget that day. I knew I needed to get out of that classroom, but I couldn’t remember the words. I looked at my teacher frustrated that she couldn’t understand me. What good were teachers if they didn’t know what you were saying? I ran out of the room, straight to the bathroom, and as I ran I yelled to my teacher איקל, which means to throw up. I think my running to the bathroom made it clear to my teacher what I was saying the whole time, and when I came back to the classroom she took me to the office to call my mother.

That wasn’t my last time having trouble with my “American” world. It happened to me all the time, still does. I remember listening to the girls in class talking about the latest Hannah Montana episode, and I sat there nodding along to all the comments pretending I knew what they were talking about, but really I was just trying to figure out what a “Miley” was. I quickly realized that Hebrew was the language at home, and that’s where it was accepted. Outside, at school or on the street, that’s where English was spoken. That’s where I needed to know how to pronounce yogurt, know what Hannah Montana was, and know the words to “I kissed a girl” by Katy Perry, despite being too young to actually understand what it meant, or the significance in the singer being female.

I had come to accept that in America I was Israeli, and then I went to Israel.
Up until then I thought I was Israeli, I knew I was viewed as different, that my peers didn’t think of me as American, but I had not considered not being thought of as Israeli. When I went to Israel, I was like some magical unicorn to my cousins. They had a cousin from America, from New York, the city that never sleeps; I was so cool. I could speak two languages. I was American.

It was interesting growing up and having to figure out how exactly I belonged. In America, if I spoke English I had an Israeli accent, but in Israel if I spoke Hebrew, I had an American accent. I didn’t understand how a person could have two accents at once.

I visit Israel a lot, at least once every two years. Being there so often gives me the chance to see the differences in cultures, and allows me to create the different versions of myself. I’m still myself. It’s not like I change every part of what makes me who I am, depending on the country I’m in, but there are certain things that are socially acceptable in one place that aren’t in the other. In America you wait patiently on line in banks, or to get on the bus, and you leave personal space between you and the people around you. The customer is always right in a store, crossing across the street when it’s not your light is a regular occurrence, and I am much quieter and respectful when I’m here. In Israel, the lines are a fight to your death; you have to push and shove, otherwise you’ll never get a seat. Workers don’t care if you’re a customer or not; they will argue all day with you, crossing the street when it isn’t your light doesn’t happen, and I am much louder.

I used to switch all those little things anytime I went to Israel, and when I would come back to Brooklyn, it always took me a couple of days to readjust. I worried so much about being the “American me” when I was in Brooklyn, so I started to speak less and less Hebrew at home, and that angered my parents. Anytime I spoke to them in English they would look at me and tell me they don’t understand and make me repeat myself in Hebrew. I think they were really worried about me forgetting the language.

Today I don’t switch so much, I tone down certain things depending on the people I’m with, but I don’t change. I’m not sure when I stopped caring but I did. I realized that most of my friends are either Israeli, or know that I am and thought it was cool, so there was nothing to hide. In Israel I’m the cool relative from New York that my cousins get to brag about to all their friends. Sometimes I’m a little too much for my friends to handle when I’m in my Israeli mood and all I want to do is dance and sing in Hebrew, but at least I’m entertaining. Sometimes my family will correct my Hebrew and laugh at my spelling, but I do the same to their English. I found a way to mold my two worlds into one, and maybe sometimes when my mom sends me grocery shopping I’ll forget that הילבוס means parsley, but my little slightly dysfunctional world works for me.
I’m not the first person to have immigrant parents, and I’m certainly not the last. Everyone has more than one world. First-generation Americans have a special duality to our worlds, but we all find ways to fuse them together and enjoy the best of both worlds.
Different Folks and Their Justified Strokes
by Antonio Coleman

"Who was the first criminal in history, and who was the first person to call them out?"

You’re right and I’m wrong; I shouldn’t question the majority and we should all just follow the leader, but why? Reading Trevor Noah’s *Born A Crime*, you can see crime as an overlapping theme throughout his life, and it starts to make you question: “What makes an action right or wrong, and who decided everybody else was going to follow and obey these rules?”

You are your parent’s child, or at least you are a product of the people influencing you in your early ages to be the best. These forgotten parents, your teachers, try and instill in the young complex ideas of math to subjective concepts of right and wrong. Teachers, like most parents, try their best with what they’re given to shape and guide children’s minds for the better. Good people generally pass off good traits. But classroom etiquette and remembering to say thank you don’t translate well in reality when you’re from the “wrong” side of town. If people’s actions can be excused because of their culture, and culture is defined by a person’s collective background, what does is say about me that I descend from poor immigrants and slaves? I grew up in a Tucson ghetto that happened to be conveniently built across the street from a dog-racing track where the adults liked to gamble. My childhood home was colored within the Poverty Lines, and my neighborhood made sure that anybody who lived in it knew it. All the houses looked the same shade of sad, and you never went outside at night. Part of the only light back then were the living people and their ability to overcome.

Looking back, I can see why people would call us thieves and go off on tangents on how we can’t be trusted, even if that’s subjective. But if you asked anybody from my neighborhood why we did the things we did, they would be more confused that you hated the action and not the reason. What I do know is that every person has their own set code of morality, and their own experiences to justify any of their actions; people only fight when their opinions differ from each other on what’s right or wrong.

Even though I grew up poor, my Mom made sure I didn’t know it every day. We had cable like the suburb kids and our shoes almost always looked the same: everybody went to the Swap Meet on the weekends and everybody knew that cool cable guy who could set you up in exchange for some under the table money. My clothes didn’t have holes in them—they may have been a size bigger but that was cool back then—and I was only really hungry when I refused to eat my vegetables. If not for the location, my childhood looked almost like every other kid’s in
America.

Of course there were some key differences, like how my Mom went about her parenting and how she was able to provide. In our house, stealing was unquestionably wrong and you didn’t tell lies; my Mom wasn’t going to raise somebody else’s idea of a Southside stereotype. You brushed your teeth twice a day and at least attempted to clean your room every now and then. From the outside, my family was good and we seemed to be getting through life well. But there are always two sides to every story.

In my family, the only person to break our “morality clause” without questions was my Mom. She would go off on her parenting speeches each time and explain why she had to do something “bad” and why we should never do it ourselves. My Mom had the answers to all of Poverty’s questions—as most moms usually do—and we listened and followed and survived.

I remember for a few months my Mom had to sell her food stamps to pay the essential bills: water, rent, and electricity. What most people don’t know is that most churches give out what they call "food boxes" to starving families and the homeless. Those boxes were the backbone for my family getting through those hard months, but cardboard boxes with green beans and corn can only do so much for a four person household.

My siblings and I started complaining like ungrateful kids more and more with each breakfast and its guaranteed bowls of cereal filled with powdered milk. So, one day my Mom told us we were going shopping for "real food". At the store she told us to grab whatever we wanted. Being kids who wanted a break from the boxed and canned foods, we grabbed handfuls of candies and found the tastiest looking cake. My mom, after getting more family friendly foods, told my sister, my brother, and I to go and grab as many grocery bags as we could without anybody who worked at the store noticing.

Confused at first, we stared bagging our own food in a back aisle with my brother as lookout. Losing no pride and with no hesitation, my Mom pulled out an old receipt from her also stuffed purse and walked us out the store, all while pretending to check the prices of all the food she’d just “bought.”

After that we became a well-oiled machine in the art of grocery shopping and went every fifth of the month; my Mom got her stamps on the second and had to sell them for the bills, so we didn’t go and get our food till the stamps were sold. We weren’t stealing or lying in our minds; to us my Mom was giving us an opportunity to survive and we were never hungry again, so it was different.

My family did a lot of things back then like “grocery shopping” to survive, and people on the outside will probably always think we were wrong, but I don’t and never will. Everything is something because somebody said it was. Where’s a God to say what’s really right? 50 years ago, being gay was bad in America; 100 years ago,
being black was bad in America.

Everybody has a different set of beliefs and a background to justify anything they do differently than you. Our moralities are just painted differently by the goals we have in mind so we rarely think we’re in the wrong if it's for a good reason. We committed crimes to survive back then, but are we really criminals?

In the poor neighborhoods you do what you have to to survive into the next day. For us, it’s okay to steal because we usually don’t have another choice. In the rich neighborhoods you steal because you’re bored, not for survival because you can’t afford it, and hope you don’t get caught with all that excitement. When my Mom was finally caught stealing a cart full of food, most upper-class passerby thought she should have been thrown in jail; they wanted to sweep the mess out of sight and end crime. It’s easier to project your opinions onto other people instead of trying to understand their cause. But who told you you were “right” in the first place?
Mistaken
by Diamond Covington

Everyone froze when the school phone rang. Ms. Biaz answered. I couldn’t hold back the grin growing on my face. I knew the call was about me, so I steadily began to gather my belongings, stuffing my books and pencils in my bag, prepared to bolt the second my name was called. Every fourth grader quickly averted their eyes back to the board once Ms. Biaz put the phone back on the receiver. She walked back to the front of the class slowly. She walked at a deliberate pace. She finally reached the front and turned her attention to me.

“Diamond, your mother is downstairs to take you home—”
She didn’t have to tell me twice. I was already halfway down the hall before she finished her sentence. I raced down the narrow hallways. Time grew to a standstill the second I attempted to turn the final corner to reach the desk. Being only within arm’s reach of freedom, I was suddenly snatched and roughly carted away in the arms of a security guard. We were now walking in the opposite direction.

“What are you doing? My mother is right there! Let me go!”
“Will you please stop fussing?” the security urgently whispered.
“That woman isn’t your mother. She said she’s looking for a Spanish kid just like her. Now stop squirming, I’m trying to help you.”

My confusion quickly turned into panic once I realized that no matter what I said they wouldn’t believe me. When it comes to my race and appearance, no one ever will.

Society has always had the same approach on race: assume first, ask questions later. It’s safe to say this is one reason why I relate so much to Trevor Noah, the comic who wrote the book *Born a Crime*. We’ve both been victims of QID: questionable identity disorder. When you look nothing like your parents, and your word isn’t enough, you either have the choice of setting yourself apart so there isn’t any room for assumption, or you adapt and blend where you can. Usually my choice has been to blend in. I never particularly leaned towards a race, mostly because they all leaned away from me. I wasn’t black enough to associate with the black kids, and I wasn’t a shoo-in with the Hispanics if I couldn’t even understand what they were saying. I blended where I could. I used to take the approach of standing up for myself, but that effort was futile since the moment I was taken out of the hospital.

My father, whose complexion has enough melanin to stop skin cancer for 20 people, stopped walking down the street with me when I turned 5. He said he was tired of the looks he got and all the questions we were asked. My mother, who
didn’t have a choice of giving up, tried to believe that there is a resemblance, when we all know there isn’t one. I’m obviously a brown skinned girl with thick curly hair, and my mother, who could pass for white although Puerto Rican, with her long chestnut locks and fair skin, couldn’t possibly be my mother. Raising me was a challenge.

With the constant struggle of doing a black child’s hair, she found it easier to slap some relaxer on it, style it as though I had fine hair like her, and call it a day. I was only ever presented as something I wasn’t. That might have been the start of my disassociation. Although I was clearly mixed, I was never raised to favor both sides, like Noah who has a black Xhosa mother and a white Swiss father. So when children’s curiosity grew and they played the game of “I Know You’re Black, But What Else,” I let their assumptions grow wild, and being fed up, never gave a straight answer. Trust me, there were always very creative answers, but as I didn’t walk around the school with a giant answer key on my back, the school security knew the answer to part of the equation, took one look at my mother, and automatically denied any possibilities of me being her child. Assumptions aside, it didn’t quite help when my mother denied me as well.

Knowing the full story now, my mother’s dry sense of humor got me into quite a tough spot. To excuse your child from school, you must approach the security desk, and request their dismissal while you sign their name. My mother picked me up often, but the security never took the time to keep in mind familiar faces. They were always too busy in someone else’s business to correctly attend to their own. Imagine their shock when she asked for me—the resident mixed kid. As she sat on the bench waiting for me, they grabbed the activity book, saw my name, and the wheels started turning. Diamond? That can’t be her kid, she’s not white. They grew courageous and asked: “Excuse me. You’re trying to sign out Diamond Covington? Are you sure?”

Who the hell asks a mother if they are “sure” that’s their child—as if they could forget the last seven years and three grueling hours of labor? Apparently, this went through my mother’s head as well, and she was fed up. She decided it would be more satisfying when she saw their faces if she gave a false description. She saw an opening and went for it.

“Yes, I’m sure. Diamond. Short, long brown hair. Light skin, looks just like me.”

“Just like you?”

“Nooooo. She is my daughter after all. Why wouldn’t she look like me?”

Taking this as confirmation, they raced from their seats, turned the corner and attempted to reach me before I ran into the arms of a “stranger.” In those moments in which I was being dragged away, my entire life flashed before my eyes. At the young age of seven, no one should have to prove herself as often as I had. I
had one parent, being the child of a single mom, and in a flash, suddenly I had none. No matter how much I recited my claims, or screamed my identity, it didn’t matter.

You know that feeling when you get in trouble for something you didn’t do? The feeling of futile efforts to tell the truth feels as though you’re screaming into the abyss. That was me in that moment. After a while, I drowned in my own frustration and grew silent. In that time of waiting for this to blow over in the main office, time stood still, and everything began to blur. Words couldn’t describe my helplessness. I broke. I thought of all the times when I couldn’t believe who I was caught up to me, like I couldn’t answer questions about myself anymore because I didn’t know who I was— I was only what others wanted me to be. All the questions flew into my head:

“What are you? Human?”
“I don’t know, you tell me. You seem to answer what you want anyway.
“Is that your mother?”
“Well she says she isn’t so I’m not sure anymore. We don’t even look alike.
“What race do you associate more with?”
“None really. I’m alone.”

I was pulled out of my internal interrogation by the warm embrace of my mother. Seeing my tear-stricken face, she swept me in her arms and repeated apologies. Although it was a joke, I don’t think I can truly forgive her. That was the first time that I stopped fighting for myself. She made me question my own belonging and, quite frankly, made me lose trust in myself and in her.

For the first time, I was a stranger in my own eyes, and seeing I was a stranger in hers as well cast me away to a place unknown. Since then, I think the only way that I find myself, piece by piece, is only when I hear shared experiences and testimonials from someone else. It gives me the “Ah ha! That’s supposed to happen? I thought I was the only one!” feeling. There have been a lot of experiences in my life that make me question myself and my purpose, all of which, through trying circumstance.

Reading Noah’s book now, ten years later, I feel closer to complete. Every line of every page made me feel as though I wasn’t truly alone in my experiences. Although many will never know the anguish I felt, and still feel even writing this, just as Noah said, “You’ll have a few bruises and they’ll remind you of what happened and that’s okay. But after a while the bruises fade, and they fade for a reason- because now it’s time to get up to some shit again.”

While reading this memoir, I think the bruises may have lightened a shade.
The Story of My Mother
by Kayla Dorancy

Heels tapped on the tile, flower petals scattered over the floor, soft music swayed through the air and balloons filled the sky. Unrecognizable faces moved past me, towards recognizable ones. "Mommy!" "Hey dad, look over here!" were the shouts I heard as parents got ready to take their seats. I scanned the audience, past the congratulations and diploma-shaped balloons on the last day of intermediate school. My mother was not there.

The graduating class of 2010 scrambled for seats in the back. It was noticeable that I was the only one whose parent had not arrived, considering it was only a class of thirty. The group of girls who had picked on me throughout the years approached me. One said, "well, that's nothing new for your mother. How could you still love her knowing she isn't here for you?" At that moment, I began to believe that my mother did not love me. Then I remembered.

My mother was born in the once British colony of Guyana. She came from the poorest farmland of the colony. Due to British imperialism and colonization, which began in the early 1600s, the country suffered a loss of stability and resources. Guyanese land was originally divided into four tribes when the Europeans conquered land: Essequibo, British Guiana, Co-operative Republic and the poorest land, Berbice. Over time, the British took over the whole colony. Their rule of the land continued until 1966, but Guyana was not fully independent until the 1980s.

In the early 1900s, the British had brought over Indians and Africans as indentured servants. My grandparents' families were owned in debt to the British landowners in India. This led to their travel from India to Guyana in 1929. My grandparents' families settled in Berbice, where many Hindus and Christians from India stayed. They brought many of their Hindu traditions into Guyana, which included arranged marriage and wives who served their husbands. My grandparents fulfilled that tradition. At the age of 18, they were arranged to be married, and my grandmother began her journey of bearing six children.

My mother is the second to last child. Born in 1973, she was introduced to a different Guyana in respect to government and economics. Guyana was granted the ability to have a president. However, there were trade losses that caused Berbice to become poorer than ever. Sugar, apples and other British-traded goods were no longer available in Guyana.

My mother could make food out of anything. We always made food out of what we had. I usually ate peanut butter sandwiches — which is why I dislike them now — cream cheese, or tuna if I was lucky. One time, we had not gone shopping
in almost two months. I needed lunch for one more day. However, we did not have peanut butter, cream cheese or even butter, so my mom had to improvise. I opened my lunch box at mealtime to see toasted pita bread with banana and milk cream. To my surprise, it was not half bad. That night, my mother told me a story about her childhood in Guyana. She had not finished her rice at dinner and she was going to be beaten. My mother ran away for a month, living off mango skin, jelly, coconut water and bread. She made numerous meals out of this. Until this day, my mother enjoys dry mango skin with jelly and a cool drink of coconut water on a breezy fall day.

Another time, all the heat in our house was turned off. My mom was a few days late on the heat bill. It was one of the coldest nights of the month. My mom knew exactly what to do. She kept me and my sister in the warmest room, which was her closet, and stacked us in layers of clothing. I suggested we go into the kitchen and turn on the stove. My mother told me it was never safe to use the stove for warmth, because the gas in a closed off area can cause dizziness and potential fire. She closed the doors and boarded the ends of all windows. As we sat, my mother told us about a time in Guyana when she did not have heat. Winters sometimes were colder than usual, because they were used to warm weather, but her uncle did not care. One night he let my mother and sister stay cold while he used all the warm blankets for himself and his mother. My mother improvised. She used cotton, fruit stickies and big leaves to create blankets and keep her sister safe.

Yet another day my mom and other parents chaperoned a school trip of mine. There was a man on the southern street of the zoo selling bracelets with zoo creatures on them, and every girl wanted one. I watched as parents and their daughters purchased bracelets one by one, but my mother was taking abnormally long. She was standing there speaking with the man's partner about changing the price from two dollars to 50¢. Some girls in my class snickered. Their parents rolled their eyes at my mother. I was pulling her arm and begging her to let it be. After ten minutes, the man gave it to her for 50¢ like she asked. On my way back to the bus, my mother told me about the time her mother needed fish from the man at a store and how she had to bargain her way from paying ten dollars to six dollars so she could buy a drink for two dollars instead of three. I always found that story interesting because my mother was so certain she could get anything for cheaper.

That is how I felt about my mom — unpredictable. A few years ago, when I was getting bullied, my mother told me the story of when she first got to America and was getting picked on. These girls wanted to fight her, so my mother met up with them outdoors. However, instead of settling the score physically, she brought paper for them to write down their feelings. It turned out there was a misunderstanding on one of the girl's end, and the girl told my mother, "I was really surprised you pulled out a pen, I thought it was a knife, to be frank".
So, while thinking about all the reasons I love my mother even if she missed my graduation, I saw her out of the corner of my eye. My mother entered with jeans and a dirty sweatshirt, with balloons and flowers in her hand. She smiled and made a kissy face towards me as she walked past. I told the girls, "I can love my mother because she always does her best to make me happy by using everything she has."
“White people, get off this block!” The words shot into my eardrums and reverberated in my mind for the rest of the day. I was just a kid riding my bike in the neighborhood with my dad and sister, like we’d always done. What had we done this time to evoke such an unwelcoming response?

That day was the first time I questioned whether or not I belonged in the Caribbean neighborhood I’d grown up in. Since the day I was born, Canarsie has been my home. But suddenly it didn’t feel so homey.

My parents later told me that the comment must have been made by a teenager trying to get some laughs. As I grew up, I joked with my diverse group of friends about white people and how odd it was when we found them on the streets of Canarsie. We’d laugh about the fact that I, too, was a white person walking those streets. But as we got older, the jokes became less frequent. One day I realized that they were still being made, but in code and whispers, not to the group, but between two or three people. *Why the subtlety?* I wondered. With the growing racial tension in the political climate, the only thing I could think to do was make assumptions.

Maybe they’re worried that I’m racist now.

January 20, 2017: the day of President Trump’s inauguration. My mom didn’t let me go ice skating with my friends that night because she thought people out in the world might be angry, and people do crazy things when they’re angry. *Really, Mom?* I thought, respectfully. I highly doubted anything would happen. But I didn’t go. We went to church instead. It turned out the angry people were on the L train on the way home from Williamsburg.

I sat in the L, reflecting on the nice service we’d just attended. Someone off to my left complained about Trump. That wasn’t unusual. Maybe he was on the phone. I caught something he said about white people stealing the White House from black people. *Yeah sure, that’s how that works,* I joked in my mind. Somewhere along the way I realized that he was directing his comments towards white people, and I got a feeling he wasn’t on the phone. But could he be talking to me? I was seventeen. I hadn’t even had the chance to vote. A white lady sat across from me. Surely, she was the object of his attention. Relaxing a bit, I closed my eyes, hoping I was right. “Open your eyes!” the man commanded. I never obeyed so fast in my life.

I sat there, my muscles rigid, my heart beating as fast as the train rode the tracks. I tried not to look in the man’s direction. I made small-talk with my little brother, hoping the man would forget about me. But he never stopped talking. He was angry, and I was scared to death. In the days surrounding the election I had
convinced myself that I needed to be on my guard, that people would make assumptions about me because of the color of my skin. Many times I had tried to talk myself out of that mentality, knowing that assuming people would think I was racist was a racist assumption in itself. But there I was, witnessing the manifestation of my greatest fears. I never liked riding the subway. Being trapped underground with angry New Yorkers is not what I call a pleasant experience. But there was nowhere else to go.

Ignore him, I told myself. He’s probably drunk. He’ll forget about you. But I couldn’t help but hang onto his every word. “I killed two big people for that White House!” he boasted. I didn’t know what he meant by that, but I certainly didn’t want to find out. We bolted out of that train and into the next car.

In retrospect, that story was an outrageous occurrence that seems laughable now. But it sparked a long struggle of trying to overcome the assumptions I’d made about others to protect myself. Don’t say anything stupid. That person probably thinks you’re racist. Don’t ask questions. Your friends already think you’re naïve. Lately I’ve been learning to view individuals as products of their experiences, and to understand that the experience of one individual does not invalidate the experience of another. I’ve been joking with my friends again, in an attempt to open the conversation and keep it light-hearted. But sometimes, a joke crosses an undrawn line, and everything stops. No more discussions about race, no more sharing of differing opinions, no more freedom to ask honest questions. Things are said, and assumptions are made. People get angry, and others are shamed. But no one admits it. We succumb to the reign of silent tension.

I have learned that shame does not spark action. Assumptions do not encourage understanding. Jokes about other races do not bring your own struggles to light. But a listening ear makes way for honest conversation. So I’ve been asking myself, to what channel do I tune this listening ear? The news and media constantly remind us of the tension. People who have been hurt sometimes spew angry words that don’t solve anything. It seems the static of hateful voices seeps in no matter how hard you try to listen through it. But in the words of Jon Foreman of the band Switchfoot, “there is no song louder than love.” Let’s learn that song together.
My Silent Apology
by Susan Gong

Dear Mom,
I hope you forgive me because I’ve forgiven you. I finally understand that someone hurt you and why you hurt me too.

…
I remember that first time in June. It’s the summer between first and second grade and I’m six years old. Most children are playing outside, enjoying the heat and sunshine. But not me. I’m sitting at a desk as you try to teach me multiplication. We go through the problems; one, two, three times. Fear rises in me as I feel your frustration growing. Sweat drips down my back and my fingers cramp, but I don’t understand. The numbers bounce across the page, jeering at my stupidity. Your hot breath rises to a shout and touches my face as I suffocate in the cramped room. Why can’t I be smart like my brother? Hot tears sting my eyes and I cry. You glower at me and reach for the discipline ruler. Whip! An angry, red line forms on my tender hand. A welt follows soon after -- a reminder to try harder. This happens most summers.

…
I remember that you’re a monster in my eyes. One day, you want to bond with me so we put red facial masks on. You finally look like what you are: the devil.

You try to explain to me that discipline fosters quick learning. You ask me to forgive you. I don’t, but I lie and say I do.

…
This hate lingers. I remember your trying to speak English as you communicate on the phone with your boss. You stumble over the word perspective. Your red lips and tongue at odd angles as you attempt to emphasize the right syllables. Your desperate eyes meet mine as you silently beg for my help. I look away, pretending to not notice. I laugh to myself.

…
I remember in high school I’m no longer scared of summers. I think you feel guilty and try to make it up to me. I remember those summers filled with warm memories. We eat mangos while sitting on the porch, our faces stained orange. Then, we set up a picnic in the backyard. The red towel on the grass. The orange beach umbrella haphazardly stuck into the dirt. The yellow sun warming your smiles and my skin. The books we read, a complex one for me and a simple one for you. You hate reading, but you know I enjoy it.
You ask me why I’m so cold. I don’t know.

…

I remember in college. We’re 100 miles apart. You call me every day. Sometimes I call back. I’m oddly annoyed when I talk to you on the phone. You ask me about my day and I brusquely reply: yes, no, I don’t know. I can’t wait to press the red end call button. After, I sit alone in shameful silence, wishing for someone to talk to.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me.

…

I want you to go back to your childhood -- I know you hate it. The past comes back in hot flashes rather than one collective memory. You are in Beijing, China. Your heart thumps in your chest as you run down the dusty streets. You blaze past cardboard shacks and red-brown mud houses; this is your neighborhood. Run faster, escape! Your mom chases you with a broom, screaming. She throws rocks at you. One slams into your ear -- momentary darkness and fiery pain don’t slow you. Blood-stained dirt marks your movements. That wasn’t even the worst time.

I remember your telling me this story the first time I return home from college -- the first time I’ve ever seen you cry. You say that you never wanted to be like your mother. And I remember, you’re human. You make mistakes because pain is the only love you’ve ever known. You need love and acceptance. You’re my mother.

So now, I’m sorry for being distant and ignoring your loving touches. I can never be the caring and affectionate daughter you’ve always wanted. So forgive me, because I’ve forgiven you. And this time, I’m not lying.
My Grandmother: Begum Iqbal
by Areeb Hanif

Imagine your child is hurt and bleeding, but you are ignoring him, because you are holding the dead body of your other child in your arms. Even the thought of an experience like this is unbearable to most people. In my grandmother's life, it was just one of the many tragedies she faced. Growing up, my relationship with my grandmother was very formal. She was a woman of few words and very strict. I disliked her, because I felt she didn't love me. But my mom always insisted that she was like that with everyone, including her, as she did not like to express her feelings. As my grandmother aged, she moved in with us. Over time, she became a lot softer. It was like she became a kid again. She shared her life story with me and my brothers, which left us in tears. It explained a lot about her as a person.

Pakistan and India separated in 1947 after the British left, as there was a lot of conflict between Muslims and Hindus. When the countries were formed, there was a mass migration. Hindus moved to India, and Muslims moved to Pakistan. Even though the countries separated, they retained a great dislike for one another and an unresolved issue. Both countries claimed ownership of a place named Kashmir, and this led to many wars between the countries. The most prominent of these occurred in 1965. This war changed my grandmother's life forever.

When the war started, most Pakistani men went to fight. Pakistan was outnumbered one to five. This left the women and old people on their own. It was dangerous, as some bad people took advantage of the departure of the men. They committed robberies and raped women. My grandmother lived in the city of Sialkot, which was about an hour away from Kashmir, the cause of the war. My grandmother was seen as a leader among the women in her neighborhood. They would always bring their issues to her. She was part of the women "sarpanch," which is a group that acted as the court of the region. It settled disputes between women and secured justice for them if a wrong had been committed. Men had their own "sarpanch," which was considered superior. When the men went to war, including my grandmother's husband and her three brothers, she took a lot of women who felt unsafe into her home, as she had the biggest house in the region. My grandmother at the time had two kids aged 8 and 9, sons named Ahmad and Hameed. They were very obedient and praised throughout the neighborhood for their respectful behavior and curly hair, which was very unusual there.

Towards the end of the war, violence was at its peak. Thousands were being killed. There were a lot of airstrikes and tanks coming in. Eventually violence came to Sialkot. My grandmother says she felt like it was the end of their life. She and all the women could hear the planes and tanks approaching. They took shelter in the
in the few houses that had basements secured for war. It was extremely humid since the basements were packed; they smelled disgusting, because they dug holes in the ground for toilets. Only a few bombs were dropped in her neighborhood. But a few Indian soldiers that were on the ground discovered the basement. They dragged some women by their hair, to take them with them. They were in a hurry as the Pakistani army was approaching. Two Indian soldiers tried to take a young girl from my grandmother's basement. The women retaliated. They grabbed them and took them down, resulting in the situation turning from bad to worse. One of the Indian soldiers open fire on all the women and children. The women ran into the opposite corner of the basement to escape the gunfire. The women ran over each other and their children.

The Indian soldiers ran off, and were later on captured that same day. After the mayhem was over in the basement, my grandmother started pushing people aside to look for her sons. Through the crowd of women and dead bodies, she found her son Hameed with two bullets in his chest. She was petrified and couldn't breathe as she lifted her son, who took his last few breaths in his mother's arms. Her younger son cried next to her, bleeding from a fall. At that moment, she was in disbelief. She felt hatred not just for her son's killers, but the whole world. As she describes it, she just wanted everything to end. She didn't cry a single tear when she held her son close to her chest. It hit her moments later, and she cried so loud, there were no walls that could contain her cries. There was no one to console her as others had also lost their loved ones and were deep in their own sorrow. A few days later, her younger son, Ahmad, passed away due to high fever and lack of medical care. Her lamentation multiplied. She felt like the most defeated person in the world.

A ceasefire was finally called between India and Pakistan. The whole country was celebrating, as Pakistan had pulled out an upset against a stronger foe. But the issue of Kashmir remained unsolved. When the war ended and soldiers returned, my grandmother, completely heartbroken, waited for her husband. The only thing she wanted in world at that point was to hug him and cry her eyes out. But he never returned. She got the news he died a brave soldier, along with her two brothers, who were pilots. At that point she felt as if her life had ended. The person who was known for being a lively person wanted nothing more than death. She went to live with her brother with no future in sight, as was the case with most widows in that culture, who spend the rest of their lives in agony.

My grandmother, despite being in depression for years, lived on. She continued with her life, got married to her childhood friend in an arranged marriage, and went on to have three more children, including my mother. Today my grandmother is on her deathbed. She has a memory disorder, which takes her into her past, and makes her go through that trauma all over again. Sometimes she looks at my little brothers
and addresses them as Ahmad and Hameed. She thinks they are alive in that moment and that's the happiest I have ever seen her. Now when I look at my grandmother, I see the most courageous and kindest human being I have come across in my life. I have nothing but immense love and respect for her.
Perseverance
by Mary Huang

She is the one person that will love me unconditionally, teach me right from wrong, challenge me with questions, and guide me through life’s hardships. My mother, as strong as she perceives to be, has always struggled to raise my sister and me by working endless hours as a seamstress. As an immigrant from Taishan, China, she came to America with nothing but a few dollars in her pocket and adapted to her new environment fairly quickly. She learned how to communicate with other minorities by picking up a few phrases and had an underlying ambition to succeed. Lack of education didn’t stop her from scraping together a few cents. Not once has she ever complained about how difficult it is for her to provide for her family. Her headstrong mindset and optimistic outlook on life has always driven her to persevere through anything that life throws at her. This is a quality of hers I have yet to obtain.

Like many first generation students, I grew up in a low income household with my grandmother responsible for being the one who took care of me while my parents were away at work. I remember I had just come home from school and there was a letter for me on the table labeled NYCDOE. I automatically knew it was a letter indicating whether or not I got accepted into the high school of my choice. This was the letter that I had waited six months for; this was the letter that determined my fate; this was the letter that I needed to read at once. Almost impulsively, I immediately ripped open the envelope only to discover that it was a letter of rejection to Brooklyn Technical High School, a specialized high school in which one has to reach a certain cut off score in order to be accepted.

Within a split second, uncontrollable tears came streaming down my face as my ears burned hot and my nose turned bright red. An overwhelming feeling of disappointment and anger seeped into my soul as if I had been robbed from a promising future just because of a test score. All the Saturday mornings spent attending prep had gone to waste because in the end, I didn’t get accepted into a specialized high school. Not only did I feel pitiful, but I felt apologetic towards my parents for spending so much money on me for tutoring and still getting regrets.

My mother came home only to find me crying hysterically. She asked me what was wrong and it took me a while to finally come clean. I told her I got rejected from the school she paid so much money for me to get into. She took a deep breath and looked me in the eyes. While I was waiting for a reaction of disappointment, instead she told me something I would always remember. She told me, “Don’t worry about the school you get into. Rejection or not, you must always try your best. If it’s not enough, try harder. I came to America because it is the land
of opportunities; if one door closes, another will open. Education will always be obtainable, but the way you carry yourself will take you farther.”

Her positive outlook on situations rubbed off on me. I used to worry and overthink the severity of my situation, but now I just let things play out the way they should. I took her advice on trying harder to obtain my goal and luckily, there was a program that was open for students just below the cut off score to still get into the school without retaking the exam. After spending my whole summer in the program, I ended up getting into Brooklyn Technical High School. If my mother hadn’t sat me down and given me that speech, I think I would have lost hope and the desire to work hard for what I want. It’s easier to give up, but she reminds me that nothing worth having goes without effort. She inspires me to be independent, headstrong, and take initiative. No longer do I need to fear failure because that is the first step to succeeding. Once one falls, there’s only one direction to go and that’s up.
Belonging
by Zenab Jamil

It was a windy autumn afternoon when I was engulfed by the strong smell of coffee as I stepped into the Coney Island Hospital building to start my shift as a Comfort Specialist. A Comfort Specialist, at least by the volunteer department’s definition, is more than just the average clerk or volunteer. A Comfort Specialist is supposed to have one on one conversations with the patients, develop positive relationships, and do more hands on activities such as making beds, feeding the patients and so on. In other words, my primary job was to make patients feel welcomed and satisfied no matter what. Although that sounds relatively simple, it is often times, a test of one’s patience.

One such incident occurred on that same afternoon. Everything on the floor was running normally. Nurses were going from room to room like robots who are coded to perform the same functions every day. Phones continued to ring rhythmically almost as if someone timed them to ring exactly a minute after the other. The mellow humming of the printer next to me was about to put me to sleep when a nurse aid suddenly came to me and asked if I could help her with a patient. I nodded yes and followed her into the brightly numbered room 406W.

As soon as I entered, I could feel the sadness and sickness surrounding the entire room. One glance at the old lady sitting alone in the corner tugged at my heart because all I could think of was how isolated she probably felt in this foreign place. Little did I know that the only person who would feel like a foreigner in a few minutes was me.

The nurse interrupted my thoughts by shoving a tray filled with food in my hands.

“Feed her as much as you can and when she’s done, just help her back into the bed,” she instructed. I walked over to the patient and tried to put on a warm smile to make her feel welcomed. She looked at me scornfully and glanced at the nurse in disbelief.

“This girl with the thing is not feeding me!” as she gesticulated with her hand while pointing at my hijab. I was angry and confused at the same time. I was angry because the woman had no right to make a judgment about my character based on what I choose to wear, especially when I was only trying to feed her. But more importantly, I felt confused at how much hatred society had perpetuated in her mind against Muslims.

“She’s the only volunteer today. It’s either her or no one because I have to cover for another nurse too,” said the nurse as she raised her eyebrows at the old lady. Seeing that she had no other choice, the patient finally relented and put a
napkin on her lap to signify that she will allow me to feed her but didn’t make eye contact.

However, this didn’t mean that she would stay quiet. As I fed her from the dull yellow colored tray, she continued to talk between biting and chewing her food. “You know I’m so happy that President Trump won. He has true American blood. I can’t wait for this country to go back to what it once was before all the immigrants came,” she said passionately. I didn’t know what to do so I continued feeding her quickly hoping to not lose my patience before she finishes her food. Unfortunately, she continued.

“So soon there will be a wall and all the immigrants will be sent back,” she said with certainty. Then suddenly, she looked at me in the eye and said, “People who were involved with 9/11 don’t deserve to live in this great country,” she said as if she knew with great conviction that I was personally the mastermind behind the destruction of the twin towers.

I didn’t know whether I should stay quiet because she was after all a patient or if I should speak up against her for the sake of my friends and family who all come from different races and backgrounds. To this day, I don’t know if what I did was right.

I stayed quiet. I questioned myself later whether it was the right choice to make. On the one hand, maybe speaking up against her might’ve shown her that her views are too extreme and that she needs to be cautious when it comes to words. But on the other hand, it could’ve further perpetuated the negative thoughts she already had about minorities. One of the toughest facts about racism is that it often can’t be argued with because of how absurd it is. Not only that, but arguing about it often does nothing but create even more conflict because racists take pleasure in offending people. In other words, engaging with them only provides them with more satisfaction, which has been evident in the recent presidential elections.

I realized that when it came to picking between retaliating against her or doing my job and caring for sick people, what mattered more was the latter. Acting upon my own sense of right and wrong mattered more because I didn’t know about this woman’s past. I will probably never know what really caused her to lash out like that at me. Was she treated a certain way in society which brought out her inner resentment? Or was it because she had lost someone dear in the 9/11 attack? I couldn’t let go of these thoughts because deep down, I knew that I would never know the answer to those questions. The only thing I could do was think ahead next time and prevent a confrontation like this in the future. However, these confrontations or rather arguments are often unavoidable, which is why I have to learn to be even more patient and resilient to negative comments as lashing back at an already aggressive fire will only exacerbate it.
I had already put her in bed, placed the tray back in its place, and cleaned the mess. I then made my way to the bathroom to wash my hands. As I slathered the pink strawberry scented soap on my hands, I wondered if there was some truth to what she had said earlier. Should I not be here? Am I not as “American” as she is because my skin isn’t as light as hers? I stared at my hands as the water washed away the foamy soap. I looked at all my fingers carefully and smiled as I remembered what my mother always told me growing up: “Zenab, not all fingers are the same,” and despite the obviousness of the statement, it holds such a deep meaning. In order for a hand to function properly, all fingers despite the different shape and size, are needed to perform everyday tasks. In that same way, what makes a country great is not a lackluster similarity among people but rather the diversity of each culture as it blends into a melting pot. Thinking back to my decision, I told myself that change always begins with something small, and by choosing to be more patient, I was contributing towards putting an end to the aforementioned cycle of hatred in my own little way. I realized that that’s what truly makes me a part of the melting pot. And as I stepped out of the bathroom and looked at all the different colored doctors, nurses, and volunteers, all forming a gradient of melanin, running around the floor, I knew that I belonged.
As the People Around Me
by Rebecca Kreiser

The dining room table was covered with an exquisite white lace tablecloth. Generous slices of marble and seven-layer cake surrounded by clusters of grapes sat on a beautiful glass serving plate. I eyed the cakes, waiting for our guest of honor, my great-uncle, to choose something, but instead he turned towards me and said, “I remember Toba like it was yesterday, and you look just like her.” Deep inside I felt a warm glow spread through my body, one that I knew came from being compared to my grandfather’s ethereal sister; however, at that same moment I also felt a cool wind brush up against my shoulders. I shivered as I gazed at the photograph of my great-aunt that sat atop the curio cabinet. My great-uncle had just compared me to a young woman who had been murdered in Auschwitz.

From before I could even begin to comprehend evil, I knew that I was the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors. I was the granddaughter of “lucky” individuals who had managed to survive. Behind my grandparents stood the faces of their parents, siblings, nieces, nephews and friends. And as I grew older, I realized that those faces also stood behind my mother and me. Somehow, I could feel them clinging to us, unwilling to let go of their victory. Decades after the Holocaust, Nazi Germany had disappeared, but we were still around and had not forgotten where we came from.

It never even occurred to me that people wouldn’t see me in the same context as I saw myself. One day I was talking to an acquaintance, an older woman who was the daughter of Holocaust survivors. She had cornered me and, because I didn’t want to insult her, I stood there listening to her for a while. I wasn’t paying that much attention when I suddenly heard her say, “When you are raised by Holocaust survivors you never take anything for granted. All of you American kids today, you are so far removed from the Holocaust and think everything is coming to you.” I was taken aback because I barely knew this woman. Furthermore, some survivors were still alive, and I had been raised by one. I didn’t feel so far removed from the Holocaust. I perceived it to be a relatively recent event. All I had to do was go home and speak to my grandmother about it. On that day going home was the most amazing gift. At home, everybody understood who I was.

In a broader sense, going anywhere one feels comfortable and understood is an experience worth fighting for. In Born a Crime, Trevor Noah echoes this sentiment when he describes his time at H.A. Jack Primary, a government school in post-apartheid South Africa. Upon his arrival at the school, Noah was placed in the A classes because his skin tone identified him as colored (as opposed to black). However, after the first recess, Noah realized that he wanted to be with the black
kids in the B classes. At recess, he had been forced to choose which group he wanted to hang out with. A quick inner search pushed him towards the black kids but it wasn’t that simple. Noah felt at home with the black kids, but they were wary of him. A cursory glance seemed to prove that he didn’t belong with them, but once they spoke to him, they realized that he “belonged to their tribe” (58).

Once he was accepted by the black kids, Noah approached the school counselor so that he could be transferred into the B classes. The counselor tried to convince him that such a decision would have a long term negative impact but Noah had never been surer. His decision gave him sudden clarity that he describes as: “Being at H.A. Jack made me realize that I was black. Before that recess I’d never had to choose, but when I was forced to choose, I chose black. The world saw me as colored, but I didn’t spend my life looking at myself. I spent my life looking at other people. I saw myself as the people around me, and the people around me were black” (59).

Like Noah, I never spent much time “looking at myself” (59). Instead, I looked at my grandmother and mother. Yes, I had been born in America, but sometimes it didn’t feel that way. My role models lived with the past as a part of their present, so I began to do the same. I felt the presence of my long-gone relatives in my everyday life. They were simply a part of me.

In Noah’s case, just because his skin was the color of “milk chocolate” (54), everybody classified him as colored. In my case, just because I was born in 1998, many individuals failed to see just how much the Holocaust had shaped my identity. By not appearing like typical members of the groups we identified with, Noah and I both met people who generalized, and therefore, made incorrect assumptions about who we were. By generalizing, they ignored the fact that human beings are nuanced and complex. If staring into Toba’s unblinking eyes has taught me anything it is this: behind every face we encounter there is a story worth listening to.
When Trees Fall...
by Elijah Lashley

It was the tenth of August, a summer day, and my mind was stuck in a daze. The mental fog resembled the shellshock a soldier might feel after going face-to-face with his first grenade, ready to face many more as their war wages on. I had just finished my first year of middle school. I’d be in seventh grade after this summer, and I couldn’t be any more indifferent. The world turned slowly, and UV rays bounced hazily off of asphalt while most were holed into their cozy, air conditioned homes. I was too, until my grandmother urged my younger brother and me to come with her to a local clothing boutique. She bought my brother and me a pair of black suit jackets, pitch black. The color juxtaposed the sun burning above us all. We were at the register with bags in hand when my grandmother proposed that we visit my mother: it was more of a command than a suggestion. I winced at the thought. My aunt was waiting for us outside in her 2006 Nissan Murano. I placed our bags in the trunk, then sat beside my brother in the backseat while my grandmother sat in the passenger seat next to my aunt.

My mother had been battling lymphoma for approximately six months at that point. I felt helpless against the disease. My memory flashed back to a pair of letters my mother wrote for my brother and me. Each said “Don’t forget that I love you” in blue marker, complete with tiny hearts. Mine trembled in my chest, it ached; no one could tell. The drive to Mount Sinai hospital was eerie; none of us spoke. The air was heavy with routine; it was obscene. Time itself seemed lethargic as we cut through the city. I could see the quirks in the slightest movements anyone made as we sped through each street; everything from the way someone swayed their arms to the blinking of their eyes. I could hear the awkward pitch of my little brother's nose as it inhaled, struggling to overcome its clogged nasal passages. When we made it to the hospital, we checked in with reception, and took a spacious elevator up to the eighth floor.

There she was lying helpless, dilapidated, fatigued. Before the disease, her dreadlocks would fall to the center of her shoulder blades, but chemotherapy had stolen her beauty. Her skin would radiate warmth for me, bringing me a sense of home. Now, you could see her bones, barely tarped by her flesh. For about a week, her treatment left her in a vegetative state. I spent those first few minutes just eyeing her, hoping that she would roll over to give us some indication that she was stronger than she appeared. However, her condition simply wouldn't allow that. My naïve mind always viewed my mother as something of a superhero, someone indestructible. Suddenly, the reverend of my grandmother’s church seemed to emerge from the corner of my peripheral vision.
“Terrible...” she muttered.
“What is?” I asked.
“You mean to tell me that this whole time you were standing here, you didn't know
that your mother was dead?” the Reverend said outright.

There went my innocence. I felt that net of security that any child has with
their parents torn from my person. The world was a cold, unforgiving place where
the good and needed perish. Revelations sped through my psyche like bullets
piercing through skin tissue. Torn cartilage. The only thing that was made audible
to me was the deafening silence that enshrouded the tears of all those in the room.
This moment left me to ponder on every moment I could have shared with my
mother and deeply regret each second I had chosen to be away from her. Each
moment I had upset her instead of being the son she deserved. Each moment I
disobeyed her, lied to her, or disappointed her, all tore me to shreds.

None of us spoke. My uncle entered the room, slumped into a chair near the
heart monitor and started to cry silently with the rest of us. The scene resembled a
seance. I’d never seen a man do that before, especially not a six-foot-something
giant like my uncle. I was taught that boys weren’t meant to cry. Some girls in
middle school told me that boys didn’t have emotions; all we cared about was
pleasure, competition, and ego-stroking. It disturbed me that the bodies we used
every day could betray us at any moment, that the lives we lead everyday could be
taken from us at any moment. The body that gave me life was now a memory, and
the person that used that body to start a new life in this country is as well. A lot of
people laughed with that body, my father even loved that body. Did he love the
woman in it? He’d probably be here if he did. That body was on its way to receive
its master’s degree in Education. All of the dreams that kept that body motivated,
are dust, and soon enough they’d be reduced to ashes after the funeral. It dawned
on me now why we went to that clothing store.

Are our lives even our own? Will anyone remember us once the tides of
time wash us away? And as that ocean pulls us deeper, and further from the world
we once knew, will we matter? That shadow of doubt looms over me to this day. I
don’t know why any of us are here. I’d like to think we’re here because of
something more than our parents’ biological urges but who knows for sure? It
reminds me of that old adage: if a tree falls in a forest and nobody's around to hear
it, did it make a sound? All I really know is, trees fall. We fall. Some of the branches
on my family tree were burnt to begin with, and I could only hope to plant stronger
seeds before I’m buried.
A Reflection’s Tremor
by Vicky Lee

In the memoir *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah shares his childhood stories of growing up in South Africa. Through the memories of his past, Noah portrays his struggle of finding himself at the time apartheid was implemented and later lifted. Born as a mixed-race child, Noah reflects on the events that have shaped him into the person he is today. Although aspects of Noah’s experience with friendships, languages, and abuse relate to my own upbringing, there are differences in the way that Noah and I interpreted and reacted to such experiences that have shaped our outlooks on life.

One experience that I share with Noah is the strong bond we had with our friends during childhood. Friendships bring a sense of unity and understanding at a young age. When the connection between people is strong, it becomes difficult to part ways. When Noah discusses his kinship to the students of class B in that “[he’d] rather be held back with people [he] liked than move ahead with people [he] didn’t know”, he evokes a feeling of belonging and portrays his desires to follow those he can relate to the most (59). Noah’s decision to join class B enables him to avoid facing the proposition of being outcasted by his assigned class. Class B allows Noah to befriend those he identifies with, and he has the opportunity to be himself.

I also have made choices which were influenced by those I was around. When I was a child, most of my classmates shared the commonalities of their hobbies and interests, and this made it difficult to be myself without feeling like an outlier. I would be excluded from conversations and groups of friends. I was not particularly familiar with their interests, but I thought it would be better to try out some of their hobbies and be included in their group discussions. I found it simple to follow what everyone else was doing, rather than be alone. However, Noah and I made varying efforts to fit in. Noah was more comfortable with the people in class B, and changed his educational background based on his desire to fit in. Noah’s choice to be in class B exposed him to new people, experiences, and events that influenced his identity. On the other hand, I agreed with my friends’ day to day thoughts on music, culture, and more. I spent time doing similar activities as others so I could be included in group conversations. I changed my interests to fit in with those around me, whereas Noah changed his surroundings for his interests to fit in with others. Despite putting ourselves in situations where we had to mold ourselves to fit in, Noah and I found friendships that brought unspoken willingness, understanding, and loyalty.

Another parallel is how we each are able to speak various languages. In the memoir, Noah recounts events that show the positive benefits of being
multilingual. “[Languages] became a tool that served [him] [his] whole life,” in moments where Noah’s safety was in jeopardy (55). He was able to speak with those from conflicting cultures to his own, and formed a link of understanding between each other’s backgrounds. By learning from his mother, Noah’s use of various languages expanded his opportunities to influence others’ perception of his capabilities. On the other hand, being multilingual has its setbacks. As a person who speaks English, Mandarin, and Cantonese, I find it arduous to speak different languages. When I talk with people in their native language, they look down at my proficiency based on my hesitance or tones. People rephrase and simplify their sentences because they assume that I cannot understand certain words. Despite both of us being multilingual, Noah’s experience of using languages differs from my own.

Noah’s thoughts about growing up in an abusive household also resonate with my current and past reflections. In the later chapters of the book, Noah discusses his memories of witnessing the abusive relationship between his stepfather and mother. As he grows older, Noah accepts the idea of wanting to “live in a world where someone is good or bad, where you either hate them or love them, but that’s not how people are” (267). The quote elaborates on how Noah learns the complexities of loving someone despite the choices they make. Noah realizes how money, culture, and social expectations have factored into his mother’s choice of staying in a abusive relationship. Noah’s emotions reflected my own when I would see my mother’s mental and emotional health decline as the number of arguments in our home increased. Like Noah, I always wondered why my mother didn’t leave the relationship. How could she not make the choice that would be better for her? I resented her the way Noah was angry at his mother. However, I realized how it would be difficult for my mother to restart her life. My mother was a middle class immigrant from China who left her family, friends, and home overseas. Unlike Noah’s mother, my mother could not afford to fly back to her hometown and run away from her dysfunctional relationship. My mother did not have the support system, independence, or determination to raise two children on her own. Noah and I learned that the struggle of our mothers portray how there are other elements that may prevent people from making certain choices.

Overall, Trevor Noah’s childhood brought many experiences that expanded his knowledge of the people and environment around him. When reflecting on his past, I was able to relate to Noah’s personal insight and anecdotes of how he found himself. By being exposed to different friends, multiples languages, and an unhealthy family dynamic, Noah and I were able to find life lessons from our upbringing.
We were partners, my mom and I, and we faced our harsh new reality together. My brother Joely was born just a year and a half after I was, and he was born a healthy baby at 10 pounds and 4 ounces. Joely soon mastered walking and was potty-trained at a very young age. He was hitting every milestone for what was considered advanced for his young age. But a few months shy of Joely’s third birthday, my mom noticed some changes. My brother started wearing diapers again. He was also talking less and wasn’t making eye contact. My mom took Joely to a specialist and got the diagnosis. Joely had Autism.

At that point, my parents’ fighting was so bad that the police were sometimes called. I remember my brother and I lying on our bellies, watching our parents fight through the crack in our bedroom door. We did this most nights until we fell asleep. My mom and dad got divorced around the same time as Joely’s diagnosis. Although I know now that the divorce was for the best, it was extremely hard for me to accept. I was always daddy’s girl, and we were much closer than I was with my mom. But as the struggle of Joely’s care grew more difficult with each day, I started to let go of the anger I felt towards my mom after the divorce. I couldn’t hold on to those feelings because it was just the three of us now, and I could see that my mom was struggling too. She told me once that she felt like she was drowning, but I don’t think I understood the gravity of what she meant until years later.

Living with Joely was unpredictable. We never knew what he had in store for us. Sometimes he would take off all his clothes right before the school bus came to pick him up. He would often hit his head against a wall so hard that he would bleed and need to be taken to the hospital. One time at the hospital, he pulled out his own stitches from the back of his head and had to be restrained and hospitalized for a few nights. He was a runner and would often find ways to unlock the door in the middle of the night and run out. He once ran all the way to my grandparents’ house, which was miles away and on the other side of Brooklyn. He would memorize a route by just being in a car ride there and then take off running and know exactly how to get there on his own two feet. This was a scary time for us, and we needed to come up with a better plan on how to keep Joely safe. My mom and I developed a system: We would take turns taking care of Joely. That way we would each have time to care for ourselves, and do the necessary things like take showers, do our work, and even just sleep. We relied on each other for support, and we made the best of our challenging and sometimes unpleasant reality.

I related to Trevor Noah’s story while reading his book, Born A Crime,
because of the influence our moms had on our lives. Noah was born in South Africa during the apartheid era and had an extremely difficult upbringing. He grew up a child from an interracial couple, which was illegal in South Africa at the time. Noah could only see his father once a week, and could not interact with him outside, so as to not arise any suspicion which could lead to him being separated from his mother. It was also difficult for him to make any friends or fit into any social circle because of the parallel between the way he looked and the culture he felt more of a connection to. Although Noah’s childhood was filled with a lot of uncertainty and pain, he always had his mother to lean on for support.

While Noah and his mother gave each other trouble sometimes, or seemingly made each other’s lives more difficult, they both knew the trouble came from love, and that in the end they would be there for each other. Noah tried to cut ties with his mom. He did this after hearing that his mom had gotten pregnant by Abel, his stepfather, for the second time. And Abel had been abusing Noah’s mother for so many years. Noah told her, “I can’t live this life with you. I refuse. You’ve made your decision. Good luck with your life. I’m going to live mine” (271). But as soon as he heard that she was hurt, he drove as fast as he could to her, and was willing to do anything he could to save her. I’ve had many fights with my mom and decided the same thing Noah did, that I would cut ties with her. But in the end, we went back and probably always will, because our mothers are our sole support system. They are the ones who took care of us when our fathers couldn’t be or weren’t there. Our mothers have an incredibly large influence on our lives and who we become, and I’m grateful for that.
A Short Tale of Two Cities
by Olynsie Morris

“Oh beautiful Guyana, oh my lovely native land…” is the beginning of one of my favorite national songs from my homeland Guyana. It tells of Guyana’s lush beauty and magnificence and come to think of it, is not too far removed from the New York people’s choice anthem of “Empire State of Mind” by Jay-Z and Alicia Keys. Same sentiment, just different genres. Similarly, that’s how I feel as a Guyanese non-immigrant international transfer student here at Brooklyn College. Same me, just different locations. There is an old colloquial saying in Guyana (and most likely elsewhere in the Caribbean region) that says “come see me and come live with me is two different thing.” This basically means that not everything that glitters is gold and that appearances can deceive you, but in time the truth is revealed.

During my teenage years and into my early twenties, my parents afforded me the opportunity to travel to the USA during my summer breaks from school or university. These trips were filled with fun, visits to family and fortunately were quite short. Two to three weeks was just enough time to see all my family, enjoy the vacation and leave before becoming a nuisance to whichever family member I decided to stay at. However, after visiting for so many years, my parents decided to migrate to the USA and made plans accordingly. Long story short, they moved without me and after I graduated from the University of Guyana, I applied to various schools in New York and I chose Brooklyn College. And I thought that since I was already familiar with the New York lifestyle, then I could cruise through it. But the life I imagined here is much different from what I expected. That honeymoon phase of two to three weeks is now null and void. My parents both work non-stop and I’m navigating through a new world of new transportation, new school, new rules and new people. And for the first time I am really entering the world of varying cultures that most would identify me as ‘black.’ This American societal ‘black’ identity comes along with this overwhelming sense of allegiance and responsibility to the black community at large. I must now prepare myself for the physical, mental and emotional consequences that I may or may not experience due to the evident racial divides here—a preparation that had to be done quickly and that I am still working on, because I’ve never had to use it.

In hindsight, I would say I had (and probably still have) a certain naivety towards racism in America. I knew it existed, I saw it on television, but I never comprehended it. I never thought I was inferior (nor superior) to my peers because of race. Maybe because of poor grades one term, but never because of a difference in skin tone. Perhaps that’s due to the fact that Guyana is a land of six peoples
(probably ten by now) and we lived peaceably among each other, unless unfortunately it was the time the country’s general elections. That is the only time, in my opinion, racism was evident.

Historically, the election period in Guyana has been a trigger for racial divides among the two main ethnicities (Indo and Afro Guyanese) since Guyana gained independence from Great Britain in 1966. This is because two major parties arose after that, one led by an Afro-Guyanese and the other by an Indo Guyanese, and the people in the nation supported their own ‘kind.’ It has always been this way it seems. I remember vividly the political unrests, uprisings and rioting that would occur only during and after the pre-election process. But as soon as the elections were over and the usual uproar due to the results had diminished, everyone was cool with one another again. So basically the African ‘black’ or Indian ‘coolie’ categorizations only meant something once every four years.

Another hurdle I didn’t think I needed to jump was a language hurdle. Now Guyana is the only English speaking country in South America. I speak English. But what I didn’t realize was that I spoke two languages, Standard English and Creole English. It’s pretty much the same but not the same at all. The words may be the same but the inflections and tone of voice differ. So I found myself unconsciously trying to sound like the people around me. It’s just easier to communicate and it allows people to see beyond the stereotypes that can come with being from another country. It also skips over all those micro-aggressions I don’t need to hear like “Why did you come here if you have a university back home?” “Wow, you speak well for an international student.” “So you speak Spanish right?” The truth is I moved to the USA because of the opportunities afforded to all those who seek it. In Trevor Noah’s book “Born a Crime,” he equates money to freedom. “People don’t want to be rich. They want to be able to choose. The richer you are, the more choices you have” (Noah 188). So quite frankly, I want to be able to choose. I want to achieve my goals and put myself in a better position to help my family.

To play on the words in the first chapter of Charles Dickens’ “A Tale of Two Cities” Book the First, I conclude by saying that there are bad days and better days, days of tragedy and days of rejoicing, a season of winter and a season of spring, times of division and times of unity, times of oppression and times of liberty, and times of evil and times of good. But during all these times, people live, exist, move forward and thrive. My life has been shaped in my homeland as a bright-eyed ingénue ready to seize the world despite the odds and I am determined to keep that same light, love and enthusiasm during my time here. Perhaps that light may grow brighter.
My American Dream
by Ariana Miniz

The first time I was separated from my mom was at the age of three. We were on our way from Mexico to the United States to meet my dad. Instead of going with her and crossing the border, a more dangerous and riskier path, she sent us with a lady she knew because it was safer, even if it meant being apart for some time. The first memory I have of being in the United States was looking out of a window of a house I was in. I was on a high ground and there were a lot trees that surrounded the house. It was just my brother, the lady and me. She said to me, “Stop putting your face close to the window,” but I didn’t stop. She seemed really worried, pacing back and forth, like she was in a rush, kind of like in a movie where a person is hiding from the authority because they did something illegal. I heard a car pull up; I ran to the window to see what was going on. With the sun beaming on my face through the window, I saw a really gentle and glowing face get out of the car. It was my mom. Instantly, tears started falling down my eyes. I didn’t know what was going on because I was too young to understand. The next thing I knew, we were on an airplane on our way to New York.

In my religious education class, they taught us that parents are willing to do anything for their children’s own good. Just like Jesus, going through the pain caused by the lashes that hit him, dying for our sins, his children’s sins. Instead of my parents being beaten and suffering death, they left their whole life behind in their country and migrated to the United States with my brother and me, for our own good.

Growing up I always felt like I had to be better than everyone else; I didn’t know why. My mom always explained to me that I should remember where I came from, which was Mexico. I never understood why she said that if I was American. I mean, I’m living in New York, right? In elementary school my favorite part of the day was standing up straight with my chest up high, like I was in the military, laying my hand on the right of my chest and pledging allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. My school used to pick a student from a different class every day to recite the pledge of allegiance; I always wished to be one of those. I think I used to be the loudest too, wanting my voice to stand out in a classroom of 30 students. Everyone stared but I didn’t mind. I even pledged allegiance and sang the national anthem at home. “Ariana, why do you keep saying that? You’re not American,” my mom said to me. “Yes, I am mami, oh say can you seeeeee by the dawns early lightttttt,” I sang louder. My mom just stared at me shaking her head with disappointment. I started to feel bad because of the way she was looking at me so I asked her, “Mami cual es himno nacional de Mexico?” She started teaching it to me.
and I was amazed by the meaning of the anthem. I felt connected to Mexico’s national anthem as well as the United States’ national anthem. I’m living the best of both worlds. Only I felt as if I didn’t belong.

Eventually I started to question where I belonged. Am I Mexican or American? When in school, I would be asked, “Are you an immigrant?” This was crazy because I was being judged by my skin color. Of course, I didn’t want to be left out of being American so I always responded, “No, I’m from here (the US), but my parents are from Mexico.” I knew I shouldn’t have responded like that, but I wanted to save them their negative comments.

I spoke two languages, Spanish and English. At home, I only spoke in Spanish because my parents didn’t understand English. If my brother and I would speak in English they would feel offended; they took it as disrespectful. The only time I spoke in English was at school and in most situations where I was my parents’ voice. Since they didn’t speak or understand the language I was their translator. I put up with many people insulting them, telling them to go back to their country or hearing the words, “tu no comprende?” I felt insulted myself because as a nine-year-old I shouldn’t be hearing these insults, but I did. I learned how to deal with situations like these, I always told myself, “they’re ignorant, don’t pay attention to them.” I never understood why people treated us so bad, but my mom’s idea of telling me where I came from started to make sense. She has been preparing me for the worst all along. How difficult could my life get?

By the beginning of my senior year in high school, I finally understood the point of my mom telling me to remember where I came from. I’d always known I was an undocumented immigrant, but it hit me harder than ever during the college application process. Though I had DACA I was still unable to apply or qualify for financial aid; this is what my mom was preparing me for. She knew that things like these would affect me in the future. Unlike every undocumented student that usually finds out that they’re undocumented while applying for financial aid, my mom didn’t want that for me. She was preparing me emotionally, so I wouldn’t be hurt, but I was still hurt. Unfortunately, it was my dad who was hurt, too. He knew that he didn’t have the money to pay for my tuition. All he wanted was the best for me; that’s why he left his country. I was scared for my future, what was going to be of me? I have a dream of becoming a special education teacher, but how would I pay for college?

I started doubting myself whether I was going to college or not. I have lived my whole life thinking I was American; I felt American but my immigration status said otherwise. I tried getting all the help I needed to pay; I applied for three different scholarships: The Dream.US, Hispanic Scholarship Fund, and Jaime Lucero. Even while applying to these scholarships I was losing hope. My guidance counselor never gave up on me; she kept pushing me until I finally submitted the
scholarship applications. Late one night my mom told me, “Ariana, let’s pray to God that you at least get one of these scholarships because if not, I’m sorry mija, you’ll have to take a one year break to save up money.” With my voice starting to break I told her, “Mami please, you guys cannot do this to me. You know that I want to be someone, please don’t do this to me.” I cried myself to sleep that night. I couldn’t risk having my dreams delayed by one year, so I prayed and I prayed like I had never done before.

A week later my prayers were answered. I was in the mall with my friend, shopping for a new purse. As she was trying on some sun glasses, I felt a vibration on my leg, I jumped a little. I had gotten an email, the pop up said, “Congratulations!...” I couldn’t believe what I was reading, I rubbed my eyes to make sure I was reading well. I opened the email right away, “Congratulations! You have been chosen as a recipient of The Dream.US Scholarship.” I started crying, but this time I wasn’t crying because I was sad, these were tears of joy. Everyone in the store started staring at me, asking me if I was okay. As I went outside for some fresh air, I called my dad right away telling him the news. I couldn’t even speak properly. With his voice breaking over the phone he said, “Felicidades mija, te lo meres. Todo tu esfuerzo va a veler la pena. I love you.” (Congrats mija, you deserve it. All of your hard will soon pay off.) It was really weird for me to call him first, being that my mom was my preferred parent, but my dad had suffered the most. The day he found out that I wouldn’t be receiving financial aid, he cried like never before. He blamed himself for not being able to give me what I wanted, which was to go to college. I felt prouder of myself. I have just gotten the opportunity to study for free. If I could do that, I can do anything that is put in my path.

At the beginning of September Trump made the decision of repealing DACA, leaving 800,000 undocumented immigrants in fear. I belong in this country; I’ve lived in this country for 15 years and deserve to be here. I shouldn’t be blamed for my parents’ decision to come to the United States. My mom tells me the story of migrating all the time. They had to sedate me because I didn’t want to leave her. She regrets separating my brother and me from her because during her journey the only thing that was on her mind was whether she was going to be able to see us. She prayed and hoped she did, which she did. After the sacrifices my parents made I promised myself that I wouldn’t disappoint them. Surely, I suffer the consequences of their decision, but I don’t blame them. They did the right thing for my siblings and me. Even if DACA is over, nothing is going to stop me from achieving my version of the American Dream.
I Have Strange Palms
by Isra Nazlin

I have strange palms. And I don’t necessarily believe in palmistry, but undeniably the notion of palms brings to the mind the notions of fortune telling and destiny and fate. I was the age of twelve when the lines on my palms had begun loitering around in my mind, and the thoughts of what the lines could mean gnawed at me every time I felt something in my life was going wrong.

I became aware of this anomalous phenomenon during the two years that my family and I lived in Pakistan. It was after sixth grade when my mother, a widow and an illiterate, decided she could not raise her four children all on her own, and so she flew us from our ample apartment in Brooklyn to the humble, unnamed village in Pakistan.

One cold, winter night, bright stars were scattered across the clear, dark sky. I could easily make out the outline of Leo the Lion. The moon’s illuminating rays contrasted with the dark, cornered shadows. I sat with my uncles, siblings, and a dozen cousins, around the clay stove in our open-area house, trying to absorb the warmth of the embers. Each of us sat on flat, six-inch, wooden stools, with our arms resting on our knees and our hands hovering above the glowing, red embers. Our backs were exposed to the persistent whips of the winter breeze and the thought of seeking refuge under our thick, wool blankets made us very cozy, but the warmth of the blazing embers was too addictive for us to even imagine trekking through the icy wind to our rooms.

I looked around at everyone. They sat still consuming the warmth, and one of my cousins was outlining the three prominent lines on his palm. Other than the three bold lines, the rest of his hand was smooth with small, thin lines here and there. Instinctively, I looked down at my hands and began tracing the lines on my left palm. Unlike him, in addition to the three prominent lines, I also had around four other clearly visible lines. I showed my cousin. “Woah!” he exclaimed. “That’s so weird.” He pulled my hand towards him and began comparing it to his own, moving his head from my hand to his and back to mine. “Why do you have extra lines?” I was confused too. *Why do I have extra lines?* Soon enough, all of my cousins and uncles began comparing their own palms to each other, noting the apparent similarity in their own palms. I looked down at my palms and glanced at the palms around me. My palms were the only ones with more than three clearly visible lines. From the twenty relatives that sat around me, I was the only one whose palms didn't fit in. *What was wrong with me?*

I had wondered, ever since, what the lines on my palms were telling me. Curiosity plagued my thoughts. My fingers itched to type my questions into the
Google search bar, but I was hesitant. What would happen if I did find what my lines were telling me? One day, I had gone so far as typing the question and hitting “enter” but before my eyes could discern any answers, I closed the window.

I realized, as time progressed, that the lines on my palms were simply lines, not windows to my future. Eventually, this phase of curiosity and fear seemed silly, and by the sixth month into our stay in the village, I had a new headache: the naggingly oppressive women of the household who were shoving me and my sisters into the pit of Pakistan’s male-dominant culture. In my meager village where the main source of finance was farming, it was understood that women lived to serve men, who in turn, lived to bring home the money to buy food. This understanding of hierarchy also applied to meal-time, where women would first serve the meals to men, and upon their satiation, would finally sit down and enjoy.

One blazing day, I had returned with my uncles and cousins from a long day of work at the farm. We had been crouching and kneeling all over the plantation, planting the seeds of cotton plants deep into the moist, fertile soil, and once we had completed two acres, I was famished. As soon as I walked into the house, I washed the soil off from my hands and under my nails, and with my uncles and cousins, settled down to eat lunch.

I was about to reach for the icy-cool indigo juice when my aunt called me. “Pour your uncle’s juice and wait for them to finish eating before you start, Isra,” she commanded, giving me a disapproving look for not understanding this on my own accord. I hate this, I thought. Ignoring my aunt’s order, I stole a quick glance her way and grabbed a glass from in front of me. I will not pour anyone juice. My aunt and cousins hissed at me from behind. It was very unladylike to sit down at a table with the men to enjoy lunch. But I had worked as hard as these men today, and I had toiled just like them at the farm. I had an equal right to this lunch.

At this point, I thought about my palms. I had always thought the unusual lines on my hands would lead me to an unsatisfactory life. As unbelievable as I knew it was, I had this thought that the weird lines on my palms meant that I was doomed. But as I sat there on the table with the men, being hissed at by my aunt and my cousins, I thought about the fates of these women. Their subordination to men came not only from the society they lived in but also from their own enriched belief that they were nothing more than devoted housewives. They believed it was their destiny to always remain subordinate and dutiful to the men in our house.

And as blatantly as the community in the village looked down on women who pursued independence and education, women, including my own cousins, had set their own standards so low that they never even bothered pursuing what could have been their own interests. My uncles did not have a problem with me sitting at the table with them, but the women did. What these women were confined by wasn’t fate, it was their own choice: their mentalities. Even if my fate had destined
me to a dreadful ruin, I realized that I had choices.

“How’s the juice?” I asked the men, pointing at the glass jug of the bitter-sweet, indigo drink. Behind me, I heard my aunt sharply hiss my name. “It’s cold and refreshing. Take some before I finish it,” my uncle said, pouring me a glass. Taking a sip from the glass, I secretly dared the men to say something to me about sitting at the table with them. I had already prepared my responses to them in my mind. That’s not fair. I worked just as hard as you today. If I can work beside you, I can eat beside you. But no one said anything to me, and eventually, even the hissing stopped. The men continued their conversation about baiting flies and the power of eucalyptus oil, and the women were back to discussing what they would make for dinner. This was so easy, I thought, and as I swallowed the last sip of the delicious purple juice, I drowned away the thoughts about my palms and the fate my lines had drawn for me.
Smoke
by Kali Norris

I don’t want to write about 9/11. I am extremely fortunate. But more than failure or loss, fear to me will always look like smoke in the skyline. Even from a distance, even on TV, fire is impressive. Collision is impressive. Fear is the silence when everyone has stopped saying it must have been an accident. That’s the kind of feeling that lives in a person. I was very lucky. But none of us were totally untouched.

This is not my story. Or if it is, it is also the story of my entire generation. We were young, and we were confused, but we weren’t all in Times Square. I couldn’t tell you now how caller ID worked on corded phones, but I was allowed to answer if it was my father, even at five. I don’t know what time it was, but my brother was still a baby, so my mother was asleep. I was making myself breakfast. It’s hard to say how my dad’s voice sounded on the phone. It didn’t seem important at the time.

I used to play in the roof garden. My mother liked to get us out of the soot and sketch of Hell’s Kitchen. She grew up downtown, and always liked the views from the bottom of the island. My memories of the Twin Towers are vague, but we were there at the end of that summer, maybe a few weeks earlier. I’m sure half of New York was there in those last months. It could have been any of us.

Some parents have a fear voice, an obey-me-there’s-real-danger voice. Not my father. I wasn’t scared when he told me to wake up my mum. I don’t think I was even scared when he said the words plane crash. He was safe. We were safe. Tragedy is so abstract when you’re that young. I understood danger, strange men trailing me and my pregnant mother through the park, her fingers a death grip on my small hand, but aeroplanes? It’s hard to conceptualize. The buildings were just features of the natural world, absolute, factual. The same way someone who lives by a river accepts that river. It’s hard to imagine a plane crashing into a building. It’s hard to believe even when you see it.

I woke my mom. My brother must have stayed asleep. The way I remember it is this: My mother, bleary, sitting cross legged in bed, hair in a messy bun. I stood by its side, phone to my ear, and interpreted: turn on the television. Chaos at first, the same thing always happens in a crisis. And then the most vivid part. There was this one clip they played over and over, and If I forget everything else, it will always be burned into my memory. The side of a building, the nose of a plane, and the collision, slower than slow motion, pressing into the building, crumpling like tinfoil on impact, and fire. It had to be an accident, they were saying. My mother kept repeating it. She looked at me, my brother, a babe in arms. It had to be an accident.
A tragedy, but an accident.

I don’t remember the turn of the screw, but it was fast. Two planes, and another at the Pentagon. We were afraid, we weren’t fools. I think my dad came home. It’s hard to describe the feeling of that time. I don’t remember if all those anthrax attacks were at the same time, or if that was a little later, but it all seemed so fast. It could have just as easily been the Empire State Building a few blocks from us. We put clothes in suitcases, and three days after we got the news we were in New Jersey. There’s a bridge to New Jersey near the top of Manhattan, between Washington Heights and Inwood. I don’t know what it’s called, but I remember it viscerally. My last view of the city was from that bridge. It’s not much of a skyline from that angle, everything is more or less stacked. I don’t know how long Ground Zero smoldered, but there were still plumes of smoke in the sky when I took the last look I’d get for nearly a decade.

There were no choices but those born of fear. My brother was a baby then, and I was still small. My parents were afraid, I know. They didn’t want to be trapped on an island that was being beaten to rubble. There were no logistics. A rented car, and the few things we knew we needed. From our cousins in New Jersey to my grandmother’s place, waking from my sleep in the back seat of a rented sedan to the mists of the Georgia dawn. We arrived in Florida with nothing, digging through small town thrift shops for clothes and toys and books. We were going to be there for six months, but it took more than six years to even get our things sent down to us.

I was lucky. My family lived. In the face of that kind of tragedy, fear is nothing. It’s a drop in the ocean. But a child’s world is rather small. For me, and I suspect a lot of people my age, that fear was formative. We were young, and the world was not kind. I don’t know how to bring this full circle. Eventually, we came home. I’ve flown in a dozen planes. I can’t smell the smoke. It’s long over.
Hampton
by Akeemah Robinsin

“I want my daughter back. I sent you there as one person and you came back a completely different one,” my mother would always say to me. She wants the joyful, vibrant, outspoken child she once knew and raised, but instead she’s stuck with a quiet, cold, depressing, distant teenager. She’s hellbent on the idea that maybe, one day, a sinister spirit possessed my body at Hampton. If only she knew she was right.

It was a normal evening at The Hampton High School for girls every day and this one seemed to be no exception. The bell rang from outside, summoning us to Quad. I picked up my book bag and left the dormitory. I placed my book bag along with the others inside the dining room before joining the other girls outside at Quad. I stood in the cold, in a perfectly straight, single file line for the 7th graders. The 8th grader line was to the right of us. You could hear a mosquito fly by; no one would dare speak. It was Quad time; time for everyone to worship the Christian God, or else.

We sang songs of praise, quoted bible verses from our memories and prayed, all while standing with our hands to our sides; the Quad prefects inspected each line from start to finish and made sure of it. After Quad, I retrieved my book bag and made my way to the assigned 7th grade classroom before it was 8pm for Prep (mandatory study time). My most valuable possession was my watch; it saved me from the wrath of my superiors. Tardiness? Absolutely not a trait of a Hampton lady.

I studied chemistry and did my physics homework in silence from 8pm to 9pm. If you needed to borrow an eraser, you had better borrow it before 8pm. Talking while studying? Something a Hamptonian would never do and if you weren’t clear on that, the Prep prefect would kindly give you a series of harsh punishments just to clarify for you. You’d get to wash dirty dishes every day after school for weeks. How kind.

The prefects were 11th, 12th and 13th graders who had great academic and behavioral standards for all the years they spent at Hampton. They were the officers of the Hamptonian penitentiary who enforced the rules on the ground and reported only to the officials. As a 7th grader, I tried my best to stay away from the officials, such as the headmistress (the principal), because meeting them only meant one thing: you were in big trouble.

I was doing well for the few months I had already spent at boarding school and I planned to keep on the same path for the next seven years I would be there. So far, I had no significant negative run-ins with the superiors; I kept my head
down, followed the rules and minded my own business. However, one might wonder, what could a child do to deserve such a fate? I wonder myself too, but not about what I did to get there, but why I did it.

I was sentenced to seven years at Hampton because I intentionally aced the exam required to go there. As a child, I had big dreams, so I aimed at the top school in Jamaica and hit the bullseye. I was excited to start Hampton until I realized that I was in for more than I was prepared for. I only realized this on the first day of school, when my parents drove off, leaving me, a 12-year-old child, atop a bleak hill in a 150-year-old stone cold building, ran by monsters foaming at the mouth with control and power.

After Prep, I walked to my dorm. There were 21 of us in the dorm, including our dorm prefect. The dorm prefect had her own cubicle within the dorm that separated her from us. I took my clothes off and got ready for bed before the lights were turned off at 9pm. Once the lights were off, no talking was allowed. Hampton always had a no talking policy. It was a ‘shut up and do as you are told’ kind of school. Once, one girl whispered after 9pm. I heard the voice, but didn’t hear exactly what the voice said. However, the mere fact that the dorm prefect could hear anything else, but silence, was a major problem. We were all forced to leave the dorm and stand outside, in the cold, at 3am in the morning until school officially started at 8:30am. This was a common tactic used by our superiors to get us to control one another in fear of being punished for someone else’s wrong doing.

At 9pm the entire boarding school was as silent as a morgue. I could hear the wind whistling outside, but before I could shut my eyes and rest in peace, the bell started ringing raucously. “Girls, get up and into the dining room now!” We heard a voice shout from outside. The dorm prefect rushed outside of her cubicle and turned on the lights. The lights were on after 9pm. This never happened. It had to be serious.

I sprung from my bed and grabbed any decent clothes I could find. Decent clothes at Hampton meant any top with a sleeve, any bottom that fell below your knee and any closed-up shoes; flip flops, tank tops and shorts were strictly not allowed. We quickly advanced to the dining room in orderly fashion. Lines were pouring out of dorm rooms and into the dining room like ants on a molehill.

Waiting for us inside was a large woman, peering over her glasses, pacing, as if she was seeing red. It was the boarding mistress. The silence soon broke, “Two girls on a bed,” she said. The disgusted look on her face was almost as intense as the confused look on ours. My schoolmates and I watched in horror and shock as she proceeded to rant and rave as she gyrated, depicting the possible homosexual activities she thought happened between the girls she discovered sleeping alongside each other on the same bunk bed. “And on top of that, another girl using a phone!” she added. The room went from bewildered to flabbergasted. Everyone knew that
the only thing Hampton hated more than sexual relations between two human beings (especially of the same sex), was a girl with a phone; having an illegal item such as a phone, laptop or any electronic device was the greatest offense at Hampton. If we weren’t scared yet, we were scared now. We were scared straight to bed.

I doubt anyone slept well after a night like that. After a fearful night rose a nervous morning. We left the dorm by 7am, for school, as usual and attended Quad before school officially commenced, but this time, the headmistress joined us after our worship. We knew that meant the day was doomed. We knew she knew what had occurred the night before, we were prepared for her wrath, but we were not prepared for when she said “Kneel.” Who knew she would be this wrathful? We knelt in the gravel before her with our hands to our sides; all 1200-odd of us.

The sun looked down on us, in our light blue apron-like uniforms, as we silently gritted our teeth in pain, for almost an hour, as the sharp, rough rocks threatened to pierce through our knees. Though, our pain could not compare to the two girls on the bed who were expelled for hypothetical homosexuality and the ten girls who were suspended for the phone (one girl for using the phone and the other nine girls for having known that the girl had the phone and did not tell the superiors).

We thought this was an unusual day at Hampton, but for the next seven years, we would come to know that this was the norm. The price to pay to be a Hampton lady is a steep one. Along the way I became possessed by a spirit alright-the Hampton one. The one that slowly took over with all the programming and packaging. Immense pressure makes diamonds and immense control makes Hampton ladies. Once you land on the hill, there is no thwarting your unjust fate; just follow all rules to stay safe.
Eighteen
by Nicholas Sossi Romano

I remember the early mornings, the faint creak of the rocking chair, and the warmth of my mother's gaze, always silent, always meaningful.

I remember my old house, a second-floor apartment above a doctor's office, where every room was my playground and my imagination was only limited by the stories I told myself.

I remember the colorful television mascots intent on one-way conversations and spontaneous trivia sessions, and my two-year old mind absorbing every word like a strange hybrid between a sponge and a dictionary. The wooden bookshelves towered over me with thousands of colored volumes, pushing me with every inch I grew to reach the next shelf of new information.

I remember the artificial sound of aquarium bubbles on the computer's screensaver downstairs, and the various people who walked down the stairs instead of up to see me. The colorful variety of aquatic life made me realize that nature is vibrant and beautiful, even though the fish only breathed in binary, and my outdoor experience was a gray-toned city street.

I remember the shine on the bass drum, and my parents smiling back at me and my sister, knowing that their recent purchase would lead to something someday, minus some loud headaches, but I forget staring at the black and white keys, dreading the idea of practicing the same notes over and over again...so I didn’t.

I remember the first feeling of change, new house, new life, and how quickly those two can slip away from you.

I remember endless hours in the library, all three in the five-mile radius from my house, all to find that next world to capture my attention for a few more minutes. The fantasy adventures gave me a literary weapon to fight against the paragraphs of armies I envisioned, while the mystery novels forced me to overlook red herrings and focus on the small details in every character flaw. The dialogue was my drama and the world ended with an epilogue.

I remember that feeling of isolation in a crowd as I was learning how to divide, while the other kids were learning to draw the letter “d.” They hated me, always
had, always will, so I sat by myself and tried to learn.

I remember the comfort of having a best friend, someone that my eight-year old brain could tell everything to, and how everyone I knew had seven.

I remember playing manhunt on the block with all of the kids, silent and impatient, waiting to see if someone would come to find me, or if they would just forget I was even out there.

I remember the feeling of the brick wall outside of my elementary school because it hurt less to press against the rough material than it was to be picked last again and again and again and again.

I remember the first feeling of what I thought was love, and how quickly my lack of confidence pushed my personal thoughts to a public announcement to a hundred other twelve-year olds in the cafeteria.

I remember the first time I cursed out loud; I was alone, playing a meaningless game, but I felt for a moment that I could say whatever I wanted without an extra pair of eyes looking at me. It was the moment I discovered what independence felt like, and what I take for granted now became a surreal epiphany.

I remember when I justified my seven years of karate as I stared at the eighth-grader on the floor that had put me there so many times before. Then I remember smiling to myself because he never bothered me again.

I remember seeing her for the first time, and how she got to know me as a person, but she somehow left out the part in our vivid memories where I said I loved her.

I remember when I picked up a pencil not for the class in front of me, but to write my feelings in the back of my notebook, forming a chorus of some sort. The chorus evolved into harmonies, and from there I crafted verses and bridges, riffs and countermelodies, and soon I discovered my purpose.

I remember the waterfall in my room, and how each drop felt like my only friend because all of the others had blamed me for every mistake I had made in sixteen years.
I remember thinking about a final breath and how selfish it would be for everyone to cry for me when I was no longer able to.

I remember looking myself in the mirror and smiling, because it was the first time I didn’t hate the way I saw myself.

I remember writing about the last eighteen years of my life, and how I would like to write about eighteen more.
Is It My Clothes or Color?
by Nicolas Roye

Ever since middle school, I have tried to keep up with the fashion that was trending. My other classmates would have on either the new Jordans or a trending designer shirt or both. If you did not have one of these then you were ridiculed. However, I was unfamiliar at the time what was “fly” and what made you worthy of being called a “bum.” I had grown up in the first generation of Jamaican immigrants who had arrived in America for a better opportunity for themselves as well as their children. With them, they brought their culture, which believed in hand-me-downs and cleanliness, so a better sense of fashion didn’t fly with them. They didn’t care about what was the “optimal” fashion. So, my parents and I, at the time, didn’t care exactly what name brand I had worn. We valued education over the fabric on my body at any time.

Eventually, I wanted to be the typical school kid—someone who wanted to fit in. Thus, I declared my rebellion in the name of fashion. Many of my battles, as expected, ended with my defeat. It started off when I tried to ask my parents to buy a specific name brand that I had seen my friends wearing. I tried to convince them with “crocodile tears,” but they were stubborn.

I had started the war by asking, “Mom, Dad, can I have a Polo Ralph Lauren shirt?”

Then my mom replied with a face and voice in confusion, “What is Polo?”

I continued with the hope of getting a new shirt, “It’s a name brand that has a man and a horse...”

Cutting my hopeful words off with his sharp words, my father explosively exclaimed, “As long as ya clothes and ya batty nice n’ clean, you no affi bother about name brand.”

Then my mother continued with a calmer yet disagreeing tone, “Wha’ you wan’ new clothes fa? Ya brotha clothes still clean and can fit you still.”

I walked out of their room with my head high knowing not to give up because things didn’t go my way the first time. This battle continued for about two weeks and ended with me getting ceaselessly shot down. I knew had to take a different approach. I came up with the art of stretching. I attempted to stretch out some of my brother’s clothes, ripping them or making them too big for me. I would whine to my mom saying I needed new clothes because they surprisingly got an embarrassing hole or had become too large for me to wear outside of the house. I thought I had this in the bag. It was a fool-proof plan, or so I thought—until I saw my mother walk to the closet. She rolled down a giant, evil, pitch-black bag. It hit the tile floor, making my heart jump.
She opened it and said menacingly, “Look through di bag and me know a heap a clothes in de can fit you so don’t try fi ask fi new clothes.”

In that dark bag, it seemed like they had an unlimited ammunition of more of my brother’s clothes waiting for me. I thought: *How did my brothers even get this much clothing?* but I figured that he probably had hand-me-downs from my parents or our older relatives that he thought were new clothes for him. I couldn’t stretch out all those clothes because it had taken me a few hours to stretch out a handful of clothes with my weak hands.

Eventually, I became older and wiser and made the perfect peace treaty. Being a naughty child who was notorious for being the class clown, I had gotten quite a few beatings that had put my school priorities into the right place. School was my parents’ one and only weakness, and I knew how to exploit it. I offered to get the good grades they always wanted me to have, and in return I would get what I had long desired. It was a win-win for the both of us. At the end of every week, I would show them the grades I received. No, I didn’t have the perfect 100% all the time, but it was the overall improvement that made them see that I deserved a nice shirt or pair of pants at the end of the month. I eventually started to cherish school and graduated as Salutatorian in my eighth-grade class. I let go of the Jamaican culture of “wearable hand-me-down’s,” and I embraced the culture around me. It wasn’t until high school that I realized that clothes can be more than just fabric.

I finally reached the stage, and the age of a high school freshman, where I would no longer let my mother do my clothes shopping or buy any clothes for me. If my mom was going to the mall, I would not only tag along to be the good son who helps his mom carry the bags but to pick out the clothes for my new wardrobe. Lucky for me I went to a uniform school, so Dress Down days were only for special occasions. That gave me enough time to develop the new style. I would pick out clothes similar to what I seen my classmates and some of my friends wear in my school and outside my house: Polo by Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, and Hollister. I went as far asking my mom for her card to do online shopping. She would allow me to do it on occasions when she had the money and she knew that my grades deserved a reward.

However, something clicked when I was browsing for True Religion brand jeans online. I noticed my classmates were talking about buying a new pair of those, so curiosity overcame me. I looked at the prices on the website, and my jaw dropped. I had never seen prices so high with my own eyes, and I knew that my mom wouldn’t spend that much on some denim, so I didn’t even bother asking if she wouldn’t mind. However, I started to save up money for them, hoping my mom would not notice the mountainous price.

As I saved, I checked the website to admire pictures of the jeans, until, one day, I noticed something I’d missed before: I realized that the logo was a large man
holding a guitar near the belt loops. When I first glanced at it, I only noticed the horse shoe logo that was on the back pockets. I did some further investigation of this mysterious, heavy-set man and found that it was the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Then it all came together. The “True Religion” the makers were referring to was Buddha. I started to contemplate, “Why do I even need them?” I am not the most religious person, but I did go to church and a private Christian school up until high school. Jesus and Buddha both believed that material things meant little, so I kept my faith and put aside the thought of buying anything from True Religion.

My clothes no longer conflicted with my religion, but they faced the stereotype of the media. The media, especially in the music industry, portrays most African Americans wearing expensive designer belts, shiny jewelry, and all sorts of clothing from foreign countries. In high school, everybody listened to rap music, which usually mentioned popular and expensive name brands along with guns, money, and the “hood” the rappers grew up in, and women. These songs always interested my fellow classmates and made them talk about buying clothes when they got the money. I looked these brands up out of curiosity about their price or appearance. I’d never felt so poor before. I felt poorer than I had in middle school. I couldn’t keep up with the trend, nor did I want to. I didn’t care what people thought of me. I didn’t want people on the street to view me as the negative image of someone dangerous just to impress them. Unfortunately, I realized that being stereotyped is unavoidable regardless of what I wear.

This became clear to me one night when, going home from my girlfriend’s house, I called a taxi. She called the usual taxi company. I usually had to tell the drivers that my brother would pay them when we arrived at my house, and I hadn’t had a problem before. This one summer night, however, I walked into the taxi with my usual cargo shorts, Polo Ralph Lauren shirt and Jordans on—not even a hoodie. By the look of the Puerto Rican boxing gloves hanging off his rearview mirror and his accent, I knew that the driver was Puerto Rican. When I asked him if I could pay him when we arrived, he refused to take me.

I said to him as gentle as the breeze that night, “Sir, please! I’m just trying to get home and I won’t cause you any problems. I would never imagine hurting anybody.”

With the snap of a finger he replied, “No, I need the money now.”

Calmly, I said, “I don’t have any money right now. My brother will give it to you when we get there. I promise.”

Like a drill sergeant, he demanded that I put my wallet in the front seat. I willingly put it there. I was thinking that he was doing it to avoid getting robbed. Then I understood why he put on the show. Shockingly, I knew that it wasn’t for his safety, but it had to be because I was black. As he drove off from her house, he
sighed, “Moreno.” Coming from a high school with many Spanish speakers, I had picked up a couple of words here and there. It hit me like Mayweather jab when he said that word: “Moreno.” I knew that it was the derogatory term for a black man, and I knew what he thought of me.

While he approached about half-way to my house, I said with confidence, “I know what you said. *Me habla chiquito Español.*” I saw half of his face change from frustration to shock. I continued, “I know what *moreno* means.” I put on a façade, pretending that I was fluent in Spanish, but I knew I wasn’t at all. “Did you do all of that and not trust me because I was black?” His voice went from *muy macho* to high-pitched when he said, “No, no! It’s just that people try not to pay me and I just have to make sure. They would run off when I get close to the stop.” I chose not to reply. I think I got my point across. He was silent, and his whole mood changed. I felt like I’d gotten first place for the National Confidence Award that night. He got in front of my house, and my brother paid him the $20, and I respectfully took my wallet from the front seat and wished him good night.

I don’t want to be judged by my clothes or my skin color. I should be able to wear whatever I want: expensive, inexpensive name brand, “thug”-looking, or professional attire. I shouldn’t be stereotyped for what I wear. The world taught me a lesson that night: even a Puerto Rican man, who is a minority just like me and who is technically black by history, would still be racist against his own race and category. I tried to change my style so I would not be seen as a “bum,” or a “thug.” Unfortunately, clothes aren’t the only things that cause people to make assumptions.
I was in the fifth grade and lived in the Dominican Republic when Converse sneakers started to get trendy. Everyone either had a pair or wanted a pair. Of course, like everyone else, I wanted the sneakers too. “Mamá, look at these sneakers. I want a pair,” I told my grandmother, Rosa. “Ya tienes muchos zapatos,” she answered. “No, I don’t, I only have three pairs, and one of them are from the third grade. “Will you please get them for me? Please!” I begged. “Everyone has been talking about them, and they don’t cost a lot.” “Okay, okay, está bien,” she said with a smile, “I’ll get them for you.” A few days later she came home with all black high top Converse. I didn’t like how they looked at first. Black? Only losers wore black. Black was definitely not my color. But, they were still Converse high tops, so I was pleased.

The next day I got up earlier than usual. I had laid my outfit on the couch along with my Converse high tops the night before. After I got dressed, I made my mom do my hair as I ate breakfast. I could barely eat; I was beaming with excitement. I hopped onto the bus and walked towards the back. I made sure everyone saw my sneakers.

In my class, everyone knew each other since we had every class together. We didn’t move around from classroom to classroom, instead, the teachers came to us. For Spanish, the period before gym, everyone was full of energy. My classmates would scream across the classroom trying to talk to their friends, until the teacher arrived and threatened to fail us if we didn’t sit down and stop talking. I walked the long way around the classroom to the overfilled garbage can to sharpen my pencil. I didn’t have to sharpen my pencil; I just wanted to show off my new sneakers. I walked back and sat next to my friend, Abel. Genesis immediately got up and walked around the classroom showing off her new Pumas. A few minutes later, she came up to us. Although Genesis was always making fun of me and trying to make me look bad, I still considered her my friend. Abel complimented her Pumas and my Converse, saying they were both “fly” sneakers. Genesis always had to be better than everyone else. “Los zapatos de ella no sirven. Son falsos,” she said. Abel laughed and said he still liked them. I laughed along as I felt my face turn red. My whole day was ruined.

I was so embarrassed. I felt like the world was crashing down on me. Although I didn’t know whether the sneakers were fake or not, they immediately became fake because of Genesis’ comment. I hated them. I wanted to tear them off my feet and throw them out the window. Back then, Genesis’ opinion was everything to me. She was considered one of the popular girls in our class;
therefore, since I hung out with her, I was popular and cool as well. Although she constantly made fun of me, I liked being around her, I liked feeling popular, like I was important. I thought I was cool, and I was accepted because of her. It just so happened that being friends with her also meant getting made fun of. Every time Genesis called me estúpida, or made fun of my teeth, I would go home and cry.

The next morning, I cried as I got ready to go to school. “Mom, please let me stay home today,” I said, as tears rolled down my cheeks. “I really don’t want to go to school, please.” My mom became angry. “What do you mean you don’t want to go to school?” she answered. “I pay a lot of money so that you’re able to get an education; some people would die to go to school,” she said as she brushed my hair. My mom didn’t think I was lazy; she just thought I didn’t feel like going to school. She didn’t know that I didn’t want to go to school because Genesis was bullying me, and I wouldn’t break the code to tell her, even if it meant getting in trouble. Genesis was nice to me at times, but most of the time she criticized me to make herself look better. Nothing I ever did was right to her.

By the time I got home, I was bawling my eyes out. Genesis had completely ruined my day after calling my sneakers fake. I threw down my bag and kicked the sneakers off the side as soon as I got to my room. I told my mom I didn’t want to wear the sneakers anymore because they were fake. I told her not to say a word to my grandmother. I didn’t want to make my grandmother feel bad. My mom promised she wouldn’t say anything. The next day, I didn’t want to go to school like usual. Not after Genesis had made fun of my new sneakers. My grandmother came up to me at breakfast. I was sitting in the wooden stool eating boiled eggs. “How dare you say those sneakers are fake?,” she asked in that way that’s not really asking. “They are not fake, just so you know. I am never getting you a pair of sneakers ever again!” I was shocked. I couldn’t believe my mother told my grandmother, especially when I specifically asked her not to. I felt betrayed. I did my best to explain to my grandma why I thought the sneakers were fake, but she shook her head and stormed off.

I didn’t want to upset my grandmother. She meant a lot to me. My grandmother was young and beautiful. She would wake up every morning at 5am to exercise. My classmates always asked me if she was my mother. I considered her my second mother. My mother told me I was just like my grandmother, organized, demanding, and studious. Grandma took care of me and made me arroz con pollo y habichuelas rojas. When my mom wasn’t there, grandma would teach me how to sew, which came in very handy when my shirts had a hole. After my grandma left, my cousin came up to me and told me that if the sneakers had the logo that said “Converse All Star” in a circle with a star on the side, the sneakers were fake. The sneakers grandma bought me had that logo. From then on, I barely wore the sneakers, and when I did, it was to church events, when I knew kids from school
wouldn’t be present, and only to please my grandmother. I was thankful she got them for me, but I didn’t want someone to make fun of me again. I didn’t want to wear fake sneakers.

Years later, I started buying Converse again and I found out my sneakers were never fake. It turns out Converse high tops have the logo “Converse All Star” on the side, while the low tops don’t. They say “Converse All Star” on the top without the star and circle. They’re both real. Ironically, now I want a pair of all black high top Converse. This time I won’t ask my grandmother to buy them for me. She would probably rub it in that she got me a pair years ago that I didn’t appreciate. I currently own four pairs of converse sneakers, black and white high tops, red low tops, grey low tops, and all white low tops. I plan on getting more. Recently, when my grandmother came into my room to drop off laundry and saw my little collection of Converse, she smiled.
Physical locations are often comparable to old men with scruffy white beards. You know what I mean: those old men that look like they’re going to collapse at any second. The ones that sit by themselves on park benches munching on stale bread and sharing it with the pigeons. Those are the same old men that you can just look at and say: “That guy went through some shit.” If you sit next to those old men and listen to their war stories, you feel history and time rushing through your blood. It is an exciting feeling. That same feeling compares to when you walk by that house you used to live in 10 years ago. This nostalgic euphoria engulfs you, gets you high, and proceeds to tell you a long story you feel like you have heard a thousand times before. Sometimes you yearn for that same high at random moments throughout the day. It could happen when you are stressed, or just bored. All in all, that feeling never leaves you. Nostalgia, it’s a funny feeling, isn’t it? It keeps us trapped in the past wanting an escape, but it also keeps us safe and feeling happy.

Let’s take a trip to Manhattan Beach Park. We have to focus in on a particular part of the park. The area is meant for little kids, maybe even toddlers. I used to love hanging out there with my best friends Brandon and Leon. I used to go there often during the summer and wintertime back in high school. I loved going at night; not a single other person was in the area. There was always a beautiful breeze that caressed my cheek and made me feel so at ease. This kiddy-area of the park was small. There was a single playground tube, a small slide, a ladder, a bouncy bridge, and a small staircase. Brandon would often stand on one side of the tube, Leon liked to sit on top it, and I loved to pace back and forth between the bouncy bridge and the other end of the tube. I’m sure the security that always drives by the park at night thought we were typical suspicious teenagers consulting in numerous illegal activities. In reality, we just talked. We talked there for hours. We loved discussing philosophy, debating politics, discussing math and physics, and just talking about life. I enjoyed every minute of my time spent there. I have been on so many adventures with these two, but it all boils down to a kiddy park.

Every time I walk by the park I feel sad and happy. I miss spending pointless nights at the park talking about dumb things that have no impact on anything. I know those nights will never come back to me and that upsets me. Those nights are now concealed in pockets of memories. However, at the same time, every time I walk by that park I remember some of the best moments of my life that I spent with my best friends. I remember feeling safe around people that care about me.
Nostalgia can be so cruel. It makes us want more, but we know we will never get more. The college life has forced me to realize that I can never go back. I am stuck here now. The constant flow of good memories is begging me to find some way to go back in time.

It’s already been two weeks since college has started and every time I walk onto campus, I get an overwhelming feeling of fear. Brooklyn College will be my home for the next four years. That scares me. I have made so many new friends here, I love my professors and advisors, and I love the school itself; however, I will never forget those innocent moments at that park. Brandon and Leon leave for college at the end of this week, and that marks the last time we’ll ever have our weekly hangout sessions. Every time I step into Ingersoll Hall for my chemistry lecture I am faced with the realization that I will likely drift apart from Brandon and Leon. As we begin hanging out less and less, soon we’ll be completely different people. Every time I open the doors to Boylan Hall I hear Brandon’s boisterous laugh fading with each second. Every time I enter the library café every morning I see Leon performing his comedy bits for me in the corner of my eye. If I stare directly at him, he disappears. I’m scared of losing them and being forced to grow up in this new home.

In ten years, when it is likely I will never see Brandon and Leon ever again in my life, I will always walk by that stupid pointless little park and fight back the tears. Brooklyn College represents my fear of growing up as a physical barrier. I must climb over this wall to accept my future. I know that the moment I jump down from that obstacle, I can never go back. I have to learn to accept the future and forget the past, remembering it has only made things worse for me. It makes me upset, and sad, and anxious. Everyone keeps telling me I’m not a child anymore. I guess I’m not then. Brandon and Leon will never see this essay, but I’m sure they feel the same way. If they could read this right now, I guess I’d ask them never to leave me. They are my only symbol of happiness and my childhood I have left.

Common hour is about to end. I am going to head to English now. I hope there’s a big crowd of people outside Boylan right now. I’ll try to slip past the door as someone opens it in front of me because whenever I hold onto that door, the memories fight back. As for my morning pick-me-up at library café, I’ll start buying from the Dunkin Donuts near my house. I hate their coffee. I’ll also try my best to avoid Manhattan Beach at all costs. Hopefully, eventually, I can finally grow up.
New beginnings can be such fickle beasts. Starting Kindergarten? Amazing new beginning. Who can complain about toys as far as the eye can see and unlimited nap time? I certainly couldn’t. Your uncle getting married? Well, looks like my velcro wallet just got a little bit fatter with birthday cash. Grandma’s coming to visit the family for a month? Definitely a temporary positive in the new beginnings category. For that moment in time, life was purely amazing. My uncle and soon to be aunt lived in our basement and I’d always come down and be a little annoying six-year-old doing six-year-old stuff like messing with the computer monitor or jumping on my uncle’s guitar case or just playing with my new aunt. She was starting to become like a second mom for me. It was amazing. But like I said, new beginnings are quite the fickle beast. They can creep up on you, pounce from behind, and make everything else in the world feel irrelevant. When my mother’s kidneys failed, those basement visits with my second mom didn’t mean anything; those new beginnings had no weight anymore.

It was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced in my life. Simply hearing the news right after a pleasant day at school threw me into an agonizing stupor. No one in my family thought my mother was facing such dire circumstances. At the time, she wasn’t herself and it was clear there was something wrong. But nowhere in the realm of possibilities did we think kidney problems were the culprit, let alone kidney failure. Once we got to the hospital, the dialysis had begun and the excruciatingly torturous wait for a small sliver of hope that everything would be alright ensued. I dreamed for everything to soon return to normalcy again, as if nothing ever happened. The image of my mother walking through the front door, with the hospital bed left in the dust, arms reaching out to embrace me and my brother burned through my mind each and every day. Maybe tomorrow, that dream would become reality. Tomorrow didn’t come but maybe the next day. If not the next day, then maybe the day after that. Or after that one. Or after the next… That’s how every day felt, each one as gloomier as the last, with no end in sight. My mom was suffering in the hospital on dialysis while I was starting kindergarten, trying to enjoy all of these new beginnings cropping up in my life, except for one that spoiled all of the others.

My uncle and aunt postponed the wedding to wait until my mother’s health improved. So of course my aunt took over everything my mother did for all of us in the house. Another new beginning for everyone, and something I certainly didn’t want. She cleaned the house, vacuumed the rug floors, did the laundry, cooked our meals, did everything my mother did and more. However, there was one more task
didn’t want my aunt waiting outside the elementary school doors to pick me up. I wanted my mom. I didn’t want my aunt to make me my cream cheese sandwiches. She didn’t cut the crust off like my mom. I didn’t want my aunt to make me dinner. Mom’s cooking was just different. Nothing she could do was good enough for me because good enough was deeper than simply having a nice sandwich to eat and a clean room to sleep in. As my aunt became more and more involved in my life, my frustration grew and grew and my tolerance thinned and thinned. I found myself constantly yelling at her for the silliest of things. If my cream cheese sandwiches weren’t cut the right way, I would throw a fit. *My mom wouldn’t cut it like that!* If I had to wait one minute for her to come pick me up from school, I’d let her hear it. *My mom would never be late!* God help me if I didn’t like the dinner she made. *My mom always made tasty dinners!* Anything that my mother did for me that my aunt was now doing could somehow be critiqued by me. I was like the Simon Cowell of daily activities.

She was trying to be a mom for me when I needed and yearned for one the most, but my stubborn six-year-old self couldn’t see past that hospital bed with my favorite person in the world, my mother, lying in it. The future was a little too bitter for my taste and I was just craving the past. However, I failed to realize the fact that the past never really changed, it just appeared like it did. Yes, there was a new beginning that made life unbearable, but things really didn’t change all that much. It took me a shameful game of Super Smash Bros. Melee to figure that out. As a little kid, I mostly took out all of my frustrations through video games. GameCube was practically my life at the moment and Super Smash Bros. Melee was the “it” game. There was one character that was really fun but really hard to play with, StarFox. It took a lot of skill that I had none of to play the character well. But I tried anyways and made my poor grandma an innocent victim of my training. However, I’d soon realize that I would somehow manage to become a victim of my own doing.

The sinister idea came to me as I lost for the umpteenth time against the CPU in the game trying to be the greatest Starfox player of all time. Sick of losing each and every time, I decided to try and get a win streak going to catch some momentum. If there was ever an easy win in this game, it would be my grandmother, right? She came from a third world country, didn’t speak much English, and did not have any kind of grasp on what technology really was whatsoever. This had the markings of a guaranteed win all over it. Finally, my goal of finally being good at this game was coming to fruition! So, I forced my grandma to come upstairs to my room, sat her down in front of the television, picked her character for her, and of course I picked Starfox. Then the match had commenced. As my grandmother put down the controller and proceeded to read her Sri Lankan newspaper in an attempt, key word attempt, to let me win and appease me, I was trying to show off all of the moves I had “mastered.” It was going great in the first
minute. I was showing off all of the “work” I had put in with my character. I was ready to finish the match off but something went terribly wrong. Somehow I ended up falling off the stage twice, which meant my grandmother had won the match for she still had one life left for her character. After realizing I had lost to someone who wasn’t even looking at the television screen in which the game was displayed, I completely lost it. I started hollering at my confused and innocent grandmother, claiming she had obviously cheated. Tears were pouring down my face at a breakneck speed. My father rushed upstairs, thinking another medical catastrophe had struck, only to realize his son was crying about losing in a game to his GRANDMOTHER of all people. With his wife in the hospital at this very moment, he had much more pressing matters to attend to and swiftly walked away. My brother couldn’t figure out which was funnier, the fact that I lost or that I tried to measure my skills using my grandmother. But my aunt? She neither laughed nor dismissed me. She listened to my many theories on how my grandmother could’ve cheated. She believed me when I pleaded that my Super Smash Bros. Melee skills were elite. She even played the game with me, and let me win as I showed her my Starfox skills which were nonexistent. But from that moment, I could tell what was existent.

A mom. That always existed. That was always present. That never went away, not even for a second. My mom was still there, picking me up from school. She never left. My mom was still making me cream cheese sandwiches. She never left. My mom was still cooking me amazing dinners. She never left. My mother was in the hospital, tearing me up inside, leaving me completely empty as each day passed without her presence. But my mom. She never left. And I should be so lucky. Some people don’t have the most basic thing everyone on this planet starts out with. A mother to love and be loved by. Let alone have a “second” mother to sub in for when one’s actual mother is sick. In the end, all of the new beginnings that came along the way, good and bad, were lessons for me, big and small, and gave me another person in my life that I will cherish forever. Even if it pretty much spoiled all of my time in kindergarten and took one of my mother’s kidneys.
The Intrinsic Locus of Adulthood
by Elene Tsagareishvili

In eleventh grade AP Psychology, our teacher, while taking off his kippah and running a hand over his sweaty head, enthusiastically told our class about the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic loci of control. People with an intrinsic locus of control, he explained, tended to view life as something they could influence, while people with an extrinsic locus of control believed the opposite. I realized, for the first time, that I had always had an extrinsic locus of control. This was not the first time I had pondered about this; Naruto Uzumaki had long before taught me that fate was only a made-up concept. But my teacher had just exposed the human psyche, and my brain automatically connected all my previous choices to where I was sitting today, in that classroom. Every decision I made had ultimately led to another decision, and together, these decisions shaped my future. Like an intricately woven spider web, where each strand spiraled down to the center.

Earlier that month I stood outside my English teacher’s room, a blank recommendation form in hand. I needed this letter to apply to college, but for some reason I found it difficult to ask for help. In my mind, I tried bribing myself with powdered donuts or the 25-cent gum that featured a short comic on its wrapping from the deli down the street. But my shyness got ahold of me, and I walked away from her office without going in. As a result, I had no recommendation and had to scramble in the first two months of senior year to get it. Trying to get a recommendation during that period is like stepping into the Hunger Games: out of the huge pool of students, only a few would pry recommendations from unwilling teachers.

As I walked home that afternoon, my mind wandered back to that room. There were only two possible outcomes to that situation: One, I could have walked in and asked for a recommendation, giving my college application a higher credibility and me a better shot at getting accepted. Or two, I walk away with no recommendation and risk not getting into a college. I had chosen the latter and left my future, a delicate clay vase, to sway back and forth on an uneven support. My stomach churned anxiously. What if I didn’t get in anywhere? My family was counting on me, the one here in America and the rest that I left behind in Georgia to pursue a better education. It seemed that my fate had always been set in stone; I would get a higher education here, earn a well-paying job, and make my family proud. Now, I had tested fate. The vase would lose its balance and shatter on the concrete floor of my passiveness. It would become a regret; a could have been as I looked back on my life years later and wished I had done something to save it.

The usual prescription to my anxiousness had always been a good talk. But I
wasn’t too eager on telling my mother about my predicament. So, as I often do in these situations, I turned to BlahTherapy, an online chat room where you can either vent or listen to strangers. Talking to strangers brings a different kind of relief than with someone you know personally. Strangers do not hold you accountable, nor will they hold to your vague memory for long. But for some reason, on this afternoon, I decided to relieve the pressure in my chest by hearing someone else out. Clicking the “listen” button on BlahTherapy’s welcome page, I patiently waited for the venter to come on.

OrangeMango (BlahTherapy gives a random name to unregistered people in the chat) started out by telling me that he had a bad day. When I asked him why, I expected to be presented with a shallow complaint, one that would be solved with a few comforting words. To my surprise, OrangeMango was not a thirteen-year-old boy whose iPod had been confiscated by his mother. Rather, he was a middle aged man looking for guidance through a profound situation he was stuck in. OrangeMango was a criminal and currently on probation. The threat of being sent back to prison was a noose looming around his neck, and a single misdemeanor would knock the support from under his feet, killing him. I realized I did not have the necessary life experiences to offer him good advice, but what could I do now? The man had already started telling me his life story. With my heart rapidly pumping blood through my veins and my hands slightly shaking, I continued questioning him. He told me he hated his current situation more than everything bad that had even happened to him. He told me of his regret and how he wanted to change for the better. He willingly spilled his deepest secrets to an 18-year-old. And how was I, a mere child, supposed to convince him that he was capable of change?

My teacher’s lesson sprang into my mind and I asked OrangeMango if he had ever heard about the intrinsic and extrinsic loci of control. He had not. I frantically recounted my own narrative to him, afraid that if I typed for too long, he would leave. I told him there was no such thing as fate. Things happen because you make them happen; things are an outcome of a web of choices. I had to think with an intrinsic locus of control. I had to equate results with my actions, or the lack thereof. This meant that if I got my recommendation, I would go to college. If I didn’t, I would abandon my family and myself to foreign forces.

“You can change,” I told OrangeMango, and the high school student and the ex-criminal were the same. Three tiny dots blinked in and out of existence in the chat box for a minute. Then, OrangeMango typed out a “thank you” and left the chat. I don’t know if it was because he did not appreciate my advice or because it made him realize his potential, too. I hope it was the latter.

The next day, I took my own BlahTherapy advice and walked into my Psychology teacher’s office. I knocked on his door to alert him of my presence and entered when he crooked a pointer finger at me. The fresh smell of the wall-
climbing ivy plant wafted in my direction as I walked toward my teacher’s desk, catching the eyes of his gray-white bearded dragon follow me from its terrarium.

“Mr. R, are you still giving out recommendations?”; I cut straight to the point.

“I am,” Mr. R answered and took the blank paper from my hands—“come back in a week, and I’ll have it ready for you.” I thanked him and sped out to my next class. I couldn’t help the smile on my lips. I was so proud of myself, even if asking for a recommendation seemed a little silly to be proud over. I had done it; I had changed my future.

Before the end of the year, Mr. R had a handmade thank-you-card hanging up on his little corkboard, and I like to think that OrangeMango was still living life as a free man.
The world held its breath for that one Friday on December 21st, 2012.

Thousands of years ago, the Mayan empire collapsed, but left remnants of its civilization. One of them was a calendar, inscribed in a stone tablet. Engraved in the stone was a 5,126 year-long cycle that ended on December 21st, 2012. Researchers scrambled to decipher the meaning of that date as it approached. Some of them said the Maya people marked that Friday as the beginning of a new era. Others said the Maya were foretelling that that day was going to be everyone’s last. The latter triggered the biggest response from the public.

Many outrageous theories exploded about our presumed fate. Conspiracy theorists believed extraterrestrial forces would invade on that day. Some believed that we would all be wiped out by a giant tidal wave, or an explosive volcanic eruption, or a planet would collide with ours. There were even predictions of a zombie apocalypse, and people talked about how they would survive one. Some people might have spent their “last day” saying goodbye to their loved ones. Perhaps others might have scoffed at the idea of the world ending, but fear lingered in the back of their minds.

It might seem funny now looking back at how much unnecessary panic there was. But at the time, people didn’t know what to expect. The future was foggy to them, just like our futures are to us. Nothing is set in stone.

The world was prophesied to end on December 21, 2012, but it didn’t. We have all buried that event in the past, but the whole apocalyptic scare represents how many people think about their lives every day. When the future is unclear, people believe the world is going to end for them, but it doesn’t. Like the rhythmic swaying of the ocean waves and the endless drifting of the winds, the passage of time never stops and life moves on. As natural-born survivors, we swim against fierce currents, we pull ourselves out of the water when the rain pours down, and we climb steep, rocky mountains even after countless stumbles for that
breathtaking view at the top.

I am a survivor.

I was thirteen years old when I heard about the apocalyptic scare on the television, but I wasn’t pulling out my hair and screaming; I was getting ready for school. I turned to my father and said, “The world’s not going to end!”

I expected him to agree with me because he was never superstitious, but to my surprise, he uttered, “I don’t know, maybe you should stay home, just in case.”

I raised an eyebrow at him, then laughed and said, “The world’s going to end for me if I miss this test,” and headed out the door. As I closed the door behind me, I caught a glimpse of his sad eyes, which tried to hide behind a pair of his friendly reading spectacles.

One month later, on a January morning, the sun crept out from behind the clouds and illuminated the city of New York. The sunlight streamed into my messy bedroom, making even my numerous piles of unfolded clothes appear to gleam with gold. The air had been cold and crisp all season, but that one particular day was warm and fuzzy.

I woke up to my father asking if I wanted to go grocery shopping with him. If only this one moment had changed, I wondered what could have happened differently. There was a big difference one decision—one word—could’ve made.

And I bluntly replied, “Nah!” and rolled over and fell asleep again.

That was our last exchange.

My small hands held a golden paper crane as I stood before the open casket. One of the funeral directors came up to me and said, “It’s okay, you can leave a gift.” He took the paper crane from me and placed it beside my father’s heart, the organ that had failed him when he was out that day.

As they closed the casket, I looked over to my oldest sister. She trembled, clutching the large, framed portrait of my father the funeral directors made her hold. A tear ran down her face and fell onto the glass with a tap. The portrait was of my father from his younger years, since we didn’t have many clear, recent ones of him. It depicted a man in his thirties with a receding hairline, a slightly downturned mouth, and raised eyebrows. His eyes stared back at us, but never saw us.

My family and I were driven to New Jersey by the funeral directors for the burial. It was a long, silent ride. I leaned against the window and looked out to see that we were crossing a bridge. The skies were filled with thick, gray clouds as a few sun rays fought to peep through. It looked as if a storm was brewing above, but the river below looked calm. My eyes fluttered, and soon, I fell asleep.

When we arrived at the cemetery, the ground was muddy from the rain and the winds were howling immensely in my ears and shook the trees. A few minutes
later, my extended family and friends of my father filed out of a bus to mourn him. As he was lowered into the ground, the wind let out a sigh and a light drizzle fell over the cemetery. The wind blew rain against my face, which blended with my tears.

All I remember thinking was that the world was over for me. I wondered who was going to care for me as much as my father did. I thought I was never going to be able to grow up. It felt as if time had stopped because the future seemed so hazy. Everything was gray. For a while, I thought I was too young and too little to do anything by myself. But gradually, I came to accept I was more than that. I was alive.

My world was shattered into a million pieces that day, but I picked up the broken shards and put it back together. I fixed and fixed it even when my hands got cut and bled. The world didn’t end for me, but it changed. The pain had sharpened me. I had become less reliant on others because I learned I could make it this far on my own. Besides, we never have one person with us forever. People die before you. You die before others. I still cared for the people around me, but I tried my best to take care of myself, too, in my father’s place, because that’s what he would have wanted.

I’ll never forget about the worldwide apocalyptic scare, which even scared my father. Hearing the fear in his voice ended up making me scared of the apocalypse as well. I always looked up to him because I thought he was invincible, but behind those spectacles I saw on the morning of December 21, 2012, were eyes filled with doubts and fears. It wasn’t that losing the world meant he would lose everything he had, it was losing everything he had that meant he would lose the world. He was afraid of losing his family, losing the privilege life gives you to make memories, and experiencing more of the small delicacies of life. That day taught me that that was the universal fear: a future where you see nothing.

But even when the future is unclear, we can control the present. The purpose of life is to keep moving forward. My sisters taught me to never give up even when things are rough. My mother taught me to use ambition as motivation. My father taught me to cherish memories and the people around me, and most importantly, that I was strong enough to overcome anything and move forward with the current.