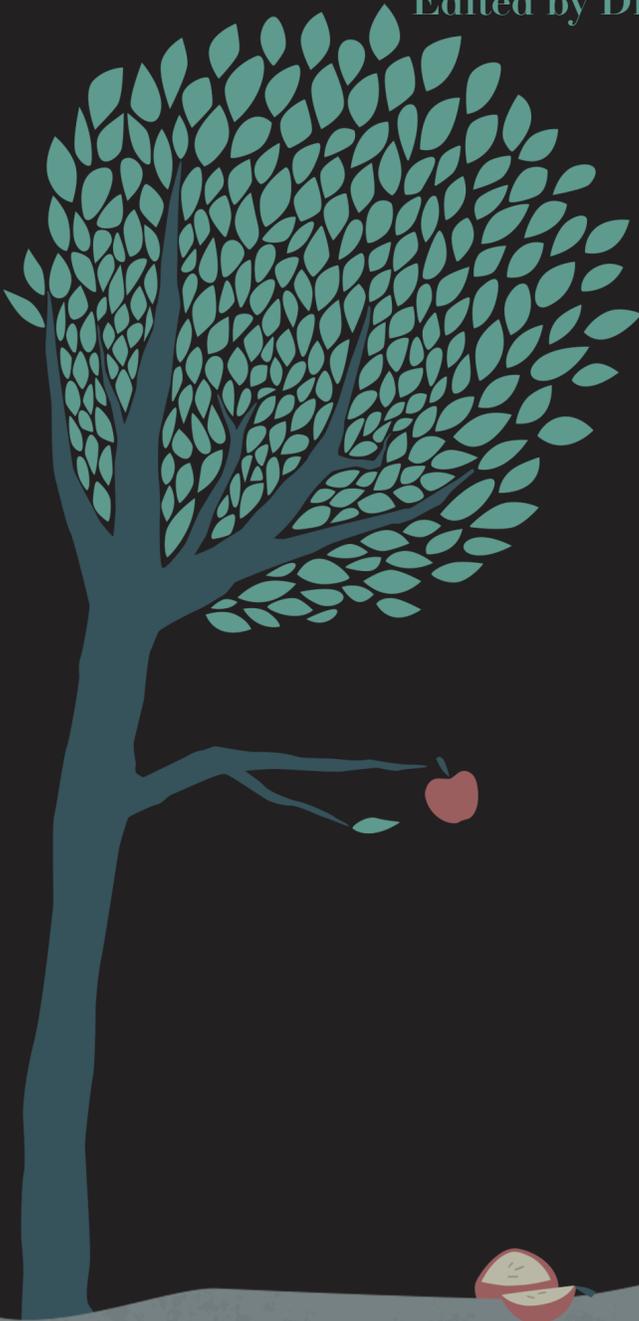


Edited by Dr. Aimee Weinstein



# Writing to Grow

Creative Nonfiction: The Story of YOU  
HNRS 122: Reading in the Arts,  
Fall 2020

# Writing to Grow

**Writing to Grow: Creative Nonfiction, The Story of You, HNRS  
122: Reading in the Arts, Fall 2020**

Edited by Aimee Weinstein, Ph.D.

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EDITED BY  
DR. AIMEE WEINSTEIN





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## INTRODUCTION

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One of the gifts of being a writing professor is what I learn from my students as they write. Sometimes when I teach research writing, I have students working on projects in the field of genomics or psychology. Some semesters I get to teach engineers about writing and then I learn about car engines or building hospitals. But this past year, in the midst of a global pandemic, I had the singular experience of teaching not one, but two very special groups of students in the George Mason University Honors College as we engaged in the study and practice of Creative Nonfiction.

Creative Nonfiction is notoriously difficult to define as it's neither straight-up nonfiction nor true fiction. I tell my students that at its true essence, Creative Nonfiction is story-telling. It has to be true and believable but with elements of surprise and other fiction-esque elements that make it compelling and engaging in its own right. Done well, most people would say that it's nonfiction that reads like fiction.

During the strange, masked, socially distanced (as best we could) semester of Fall 2020, the two classes had the gift of meeting once a week in person and met in designated writing groups to critique each other's work once a week. We read a story of the week, pulled out a critical element of the piece and practiced writing it. The result of the entire term was a fully fleshed out piece of creative nonfiction that had been through multiple edits. The students all worked hard, engaged in study and discussion about the pieces and the construction of them, as well as being committed to helping each other produce their personal best work. I have never seen two groups of students as dedicated to classroom community as I did that semester.

The Fall of 2020 will go down as one of the oddest times in university history and I'm happy to report that none of my students fell ill

and we all supported each other through the most difficult of times. These students are to be commended for their drive and perseverance in the face of great uncertainty and fear for the future. Class discussions were bright and lively and the work they produced was shining with promise. I think we were all holding on to each other a little bit in order to grab a tiny inch of something that was near-normal while we had the chance.

With that, I give you some of the best work produced by the two classes and I hope you will appreciate not only what is on the page, but the care and drive with which it was produced, in the most unusual of circumstances. I am so very proud of these young people.

Dr. Aimee Weinstein

May, 2021

"We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect."

-Anaïs Nin



# SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH ME

Colin Larrimore

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It's like waking up in a fog. You open up your eyes and everything just feels wrong. I don't know what specific emotion I'm feeling whenever I find myself in this fog, but it's overwhelming, that much I'm certain of. My body wants to escape itself, my mind wants to think itself into oblivion, and *I* simply want some peace and quiet. I'm tired of waking up in a fog.

Currently, I am prescribed with twenty milligram capsules of Fluoxetine, a substitute for Prozac. This medication is meant to help ease my anxiety and increase levels of serotonin, which, credit where credit is due, I have noticed it has made my anxiety more controllable, but something still feels off. Something is wrong with me.

Trying to confront this thing that's wrong with me has proven to be a challenge. Partly because I don't know what the thing is. I mean there could be a multitude of things about myself that are making me feel wrong.

*Maybe it's my face?*

I keep thinking about the times whenever my dad caught me in a

funk. Those moments when I just felt so low that I couldn't even hide it anymore. He'd always say things to try and make me feel better, even though they were said in a slightly aggressive manner. One of those things he'd say to me was that I was a "handsome guy." I get why he would say this to me, and I think if some people were in a similar situation that they would actually feel better hearing those words. But not me. I just, I don't know, I've never really liked my face.

Just saying those words makes me feel like I'm disappointing my dad. I know he wants to make me feel better by saying those things, but it's hard to control how I feel about myself. I just can't help but pick out the flaws I see in my features, dissecting my face to a dizzying degree. I notice the way my neck slouches, the way my chin protrudes forward ever so slightly, the length of my face, the hoods of my eyes, the blotches of discolored skin from acne. I notice everything, and I wish I could change it all.

### *Maybe it's my body?*

This is a problem I've tried to keep to myself. Largely because it's hard to comprehend, partly because it feels embarrassing to say. I've always felt indifferent towards my body. It's much like the struggle I have with my facial features where I dissect my flaws, but there's also more to it. It isn't just a problem about feeling comfortable with my body, it's also a problem about feeling *right* in my body, if that makes any sense.

A while back, a friend of mine had asked me what pronouns I would like to be referred to by. When he asked me this, I could remember feeling a slight sense of confusion. Not because I didn't understand their question, I fully understood what they were asking of me and the implications my answer would have, but rather I was confused because I didn't know my answer. That's the part that feels embarrassing to say. It feels embarrassing to sit here and admit that, despite being born a boy and raised to be a man, I don't always want to be perceived as a masculine figure. Yet, as long as I know that people perceive me to be a "man," I will feel wrong in the body I inhabit because I'm simply just not that. I don't know what I am, but

it's not that.

*Maybe it's my personality?*

What I would give to see how other people view me. In my head, I'm convinced I must be the most irritating person alive. I can't even hang out with my closest of friends without thinking of myself as some annoying other. In all situations, I feel as if I am the out group infiltrating the in group, and it's beyond frustrating constantly feeling out of place. Like my every action and reaction is being judged. Like something's wrong with me.

*What is wrong with me?*

In all honesty, thinking that something is wrong with me is probably what's wrong with me. Plenty of overthinking and anxiety has riddled my life and it's the reason I can think of so many things that could be wrong with me. My face, my body, my personality. But none of these things are really problems, are they? They're just a part of me that I have to accept, but accepting is a lot easier said than done.

I don't trust that I ever will fully accept myself. I want to believe that, with enough time and understanding, I can learn to embrace my flaws, but I don't know if I've ever met someone that has achieved such a feat. I suppose we're all facing this struggle. Honestly, it's nice to know that I'm not the only one racking their brain in the dead of night trying to make sense of who they are. Maybe I'll never figure it out. Maybe I'll always feel wrong. Maybe it's pointless. But I still want to try. Even when I have one foot in the grave, I will not stop trying to learn how to accept myself. I don't want to wake up in a fog anymore, I want to look at the world clearly and be happy. I want to be me.

# 2

## A WEDDING WITH HALF A BRIDE

Dhuha Baig

---

Nothing broke me more on my wedding day than when I touched the screen of my husband's laptop, hoping to reach my sister 5,899 miles away.

The faintest wind brushed against my face and sailed against a sea of grass, and—for the smallest moment—the happiest day of my life faltered.

She attended my wedding through Zoom. There was nothing I could have done to bring her here. For months I was on her case, begging her to check flights and pick dates of arrival. *Our new wedding date depended on her*, I thought over and over again. Weeks went by and I wasn't able to decide when to hold the wedding, she wasn't able to decide when to book a flight. We were in the heat of July and I was in the fire of irresolution; the age of world-wide misinformation and media overload left the both of us with more questions than answers. Booking a date without my sister's input took me one step further than where I wanted to be. The world shut down in the face of a terrifying, gripping virus. It took weeks for me to understand my older sister wouldn't come.

I was hardly a little sister to her growing up. My white t-shirt was

always tucked into my jeans, weird stains decorating me from top to bottom—she was exquisitely clean, perfectly poised, a delight to everyone. I would have much rather roughed it up in the dirt than played by her side. She called me a tom boy, and I called her boring. My sister could read ten books a day, or so I thought, and I would find fulfillment in doing exactly the opposite. Her gentleness reprimanded me, but Zainab was always more sensitive than I. I grew to desire her approval, envied her selflessness, and adopted her character. She completed me, I was only my whole self with her, and her presence centered me. Zainab: the desert flower who got married and moved across the ocean. I was 17 when she left. And we should have been able to laugh and cry together today.

“You’re going to be amazing,” Zainab tells me over the phone as I step into my dress.

“I can’t wait to see it all,” she says as the scarf is draped on my head.

Today, I’m finding the energy as a flickering candle. My heart is beating with heartache, longing, and love. My husband guides me past his mother’s garden, we walk beneath the shady, swaying oak tree. The grass is soft under our feet and the candle within me shines brightly. I automatically crane my neck to catch glimpses of my best friends and their laughter and hollers. I see my younger sister and sister-in-law, my brother and nephew too. The guests are divided by family household and I laugh at the Izze’s scattered around the tables.

I’m just half a bride, but I’m making my entrance.

I look up to meet the eyes of my newly wedded husband. My candle flickers, and I hold my dress up with instinctive grace a clumsy girl like I could barely recognize. Our wedding song welcomes us to a backyard transformed. But I see my mother and father and look around for my older sister, and the air in my chest nearly put out my flame. It will hurt to say goodbye. It hurts to move on without everyone here. Without my *Aapi* here. I feel a whole wind of emotion crashing in and I know that I can love and hurt at the same time.

Instead of her physical presence, I hear only her voice as her image pixelates with the internet's sputtering and stuttering. The brightness of the laptop reflected off my face as we talked loudly, over the music and the laughter of the wedding guests. It was only her and I for those few, precious moments. Her baby girl, Aneesa, born only four months prior, sits quietly in her lap. I can just make out the redness of her cheeks and the stunning similarities between my sister and her. I've never seen Aneesa in real life, it would be four more months until I do, and at that moment, I catch myself thinking about how it would feel to hold my niece along with my nephew, together, in my arms today.

The night sky was slowly creeping in, and a few stars winked and glimmered at us. I could just make out the moon over the trees. Dinner was over, and one by one our friends took the mic and spoke about our most embarrassing, nostalgic, unforgettable times. My younger sister took to the mic and read a surprise letter from my older sister out-loud. "The internet would cut in and out, its better this way," she said. I think it would have been too emotional for us.

My family and closest friends gathered under tents in the backyard of my husband's childhood home to celebrate the lifelong promises I made to the love of my life. But I so greatly felt my sister's absence. And there's nothing I could have done. Much of my wedding was out of my control. The venue we originally chose was beautiful and yellow. French doors led guests to the backyard garden, and the main hall's high ceilings had you feeling like a guest in a Parisian estate. Slowly, one decision after the next modified to fit the new age, and holding an indoor wedding became inconceivable. We knew the lives of our loved ones mattered more than our nuptials. I swapped heels for sandals, a better fitting choice for a once-tom-boy, and married my husband in the safest, most thoughtful way we could.

The backyard was dancing with light. My aunt shipped decorations she made by hand, and the fresh flowers tied to the archway, scattered around the tables, perfumed the backyard—rivaling any Parisian estate within my budget. My wedding day felt a little bit more

than just the exchanging of promises between two people, more than just the love and care two families had for one another. It was respecting the sanctity of life of people we know, and people we will never meet. People attending in the open air today, and the people we pass by tomorrow.

When the time came to leave, sparklers lit the way. We walked beneath the flowery archway, and our loved ones sang us to the getaway car. Behind the masks were smiles I memorized. The muffled laughs were music that got me through the roughest times of my life. Under the white tent was a family that cultivated the best of me. There was joy. There were tears. There was I, glancing at the backyard, still aglow with love of family, waving goodbye to what was now a memory.

*“You’re going to be amazing,”* she told me.

We hit the highway and were driving close to 90 miles per hour, experiencing life at the speed of light, and yet all the stars stayed in place. The car roof was down, and the wind embraced us with a force as powerful and soft as thunder, whipping in and out of our ears, dancing with our laughter, unable to infiltrate our tightly held hands. Our wedding bands glinted and shone, reflecting off the streetlights, and I admired their brightness. The voice of Cat Stevens singing “Morning Has Broken,” seemed to never end— he was singing to us, he had to be. My eyes were glued to the sky, and as I tried to memorize the patterns of twinkling lights, I began to feel the slowing of time, allowing us to experience the end and the beginning so holistically— my half-ness and almost whole-ness so effortlessly. The road ahead seemed endless. It must have been almost midnight— and we were committed to driving nowhere at all. Dhuha: the morninglight who got married in a global pandemic.

Four months later, I sat with Zainab in my new apartment with her baby girl in my lap as we flipped through some newly developed film pictures of the wedding day. Through the photos in our hands, we saw my teasingly periwinkle dress, the navy-blue window-paned suit my husband wore, and our glimmering, shiny smiles that caught

snippets of us falling in love. We saw my friends folding tables and chairs in their stunning dresses, and my mom and dad beaming with their grandson. Our guests were glowing under the summer sun.

*Aapi* was not in any of the photos.

“You guys look beautiful,” she says. “Everything is so beautiful.”

I picked up a leftover disposable camera, one still waiting to be developed, told Zainab to sit with Aneesa in her lap just like she did at the wedding, and snapped a picture.

# 3

## SOMETHING ELSE

Carson Henley

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The pit in my stomach followed me, throughout the day at school, through the seemingly only minutes at home, to the slightly tense set up hours before anyone would show up, I could always feel it. It was still a few hours before we went on, and so we were enjoying some of the free food that comes with playing at a sports bar. We mentioned which of the songs in the setlist were our favorites, memories we had of the songs, and of course, made sure we knew who was starting and stopping each song. I had one earbud in listening to the playlist on shuffle, making sure, in the back of my head, I knew each song and each part of each song. My dad had the other bud synced to his phone and was doing the same, a binder full of lyrics in front of him, like a college student stressing over an exam while walking into the classroom. We both knew that it wouldn't help at that point very much, once the lights were on, you forgot most of the last-minute studying.

While we were eating, I made some comment about how a particular song was my favorite of the more classic songs we did, and this stunned the bassist. "I remember when that album came out." I assumed based on the sound of the song that it was much older than it was. This brought my distinct lack of years on earth right to the

forefront of my attention, more at that moment than any other. I was not even 18, in a band with people much older than me, including my dad. I had always been aware of this, not only being much younger but having much less experience. I already looked up to both the bassist and guitarist, before we started this band half a year ago. We had been playing in the worship band at our church for a few years before the creation of our rock band “Extra Credit,” and now they were counting on me.

I had been at the bar for close to two hours at this point, and show-time was quickly approaching. My mind was starting to wander as the slight anxiety throughout the whole day slowly drained my conscious brain. I saw the gear on the stage, the five of us at the table, four bandmates, and my brother who was running the sound and lights for the gig, and I thought about all the people that were gonna be where I was then. Here I am, not even old enough to buy myself a drink, I mean I wouldn't even be allowed to stay past ten at this place if I wasn't in the band, but instead, they are all coming to see me.

I looked down at my chair, and the thought of just how many people would be there, how many different people would be here. Looking back, it's so strange to think everyone from my best friend from school to my dad's best friend that I have grown up around, to my orthodontist and my dad's coworkers and boss, to people I know and am close with at church, along with people they know from church that I am only acquaintances with, and most importantly, my new girlfriend of just 2 weeks would all be there. Many of these people I looked up to, some I had even played worship music with, and so I felt as if I had something to prove. In my head, it wasn't a performance, but a showcase, a showcase of many different things, all to different people. I had to show some that I was a good musician and singer. I was not used to singing; it still made me nervous to sing at band practice and now I had to perform in front of a packed crowd. Not all my motivations were super deep. I am a senior in high school, and about to turn 18. I did not want to have people just come out because they knew me. I wanted to be worth it, to give them a real show. I was presenting my project for it to be graded. I downed

my soda, and with it went these thoughts, and rejoined the conversation.

We continued to pass the time in the empty bar until we got close enough to the start time to begin sound checking. Each member of the band went individually, making sure the sound man was receiving a good enough signal, and that no instrument overpowered any others. We finished line checks and began to run a few songs to get the group's level. It was one of the simpler songs and helped to boost my confidence a little as we all started to groove together near the end. It also helped to hear the one old lady at the back of the bar cheer once we finished. I was met with a nice surprise as my mom had come early to make sure she got a seat and to cheer me on. She did what moms do best, and put my heart at rest if only for a second, and reminded me of how amazing it was that I was able to have this experience.

The sound was checked and we were about to start. We each talked to our families saying hello when they came and heading up to the stage when it was time. The room was small, and we were on the same ground as everyone else. We had our backs to the wall facing the long bar and many tables. There was a dull roar amongst the crowd as we strapped up and plugged in our instruments. I was nervous, but stage nerves were nothing new to me. I had been in many drama productions before, played in the church band for a few years, and played in my school's band. Somehow this experience kept me calm on stage but did not stop me from feeling how I felt leading up to it. And with a simple 4 count, we were into the first song. It was one I knew well and was even able to solo over for a bit. This particular song was an instrumental that we placed at the beginning as an appetizer for the rest of the set. I heard the volume of the crowd slightly decrease as we played, as they began to realize this was not another soundcheck, but the start of the gig. The song finished and the crowd cheered. It was more than just a regular cheer; they were ready for more.

I had never played anywhere close to this long, usually 10-minute sets at most, and this was three 45-minute sets. We rocked through

the second song, and for the first time, I was in a trance. My body was doing what it needed to, what I practiced so many times, my mind would occasionally step back and think about what was happening, but for most of it, my conscious brain was on autopilot, while everything happened almost automatically. But this was different. I have been an athlete and competed in individual head-to-head competitions such as in tennis or ping pong, and I know what it's like to be in that zone, but this was different. I wasn't hyper-focused, if anything I was relaxed. Instead of channeling all of my brain into one task such that there was no room for excess thought, this was more of allowing a feeling to take control. I was in what musicians call, the groove. My whole body was swaying and moving to the song, I would smile and look at my guitarist as he shreds a solo, or glimpse my dad as we both sing harmony. I noticed people in the crowd, my mom, who smiled and waved excitedly, my girlfriend who got all her friends to scream and we both laughed, and the goofy sound guy from my church, who just waved. The rush of hearing a packed room of people scream my name after singing my first song never seemed to die back down that entire night. And before I knew it, the first set was done.

I rushed out to talk to all the people that I knew of and they all greeted me with the same surprised look, coined by my dad, the puppy dog face. He described it as the face when people hear you are in a band and come to see just to be nice, then when they hear good music, they are left with this stunned look, which happens to him frequently as he is a dentist and runs into lots of people. I mostly spent time in the small group of my friends, as that was where I was most comfortable, but I was able to say hello to most of the people I knew who were there, and there were lots of them. I continued to ride this high for the rest of the night. And before I knew it, we were playing our last song. Many of the people had already left. It was still mostly full, but nowhere near the close-to standing only that it was at earlier. We finished and the mostly drunk people still there screamed their heads off, as we thanked them for one last time, and unplugged. I said goodbye to the people still there, including my mom, and we

tore everything down. We talked about the amazing experience we were able to share with each other and with the crowd, and how excited they seemed the whole night.

On the car ride home, talking with my dad, someone who had been in bands like this since he was 13, certain things began to stick out to me. How special it was that I was able to do what I did. The joy my mom was able to experience seeing me up there performing and seeing my dad, her husband, right next to me. How it affected my friend from church, who got me started learning how to play the keyboard just 4 years earlier, seeing me grow to the point musically and performativity that I was at now. How special it was to be able to share this time, this art, that my bandmates and I collectively worked together to create, and how that was even more special that I was able to do that with my dad.

We drove back without the radio and laughed as we each were unable to keep one of the songs we played out of our head, new ones coming as fast as the other left. He smiled at me and said, "Ain't nothing like it." I agreed.

## TEACH ME HOW TO THINK

Daniela Martinez

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I'm sitting on my bed. I wanna say it's around 10:30, but I can't be bothered to look, and this APUSH assignment is far more important than the time.

Dad always tells me to do my homework without music, especially not songs with lyrics in them, but I just can't help it. The playlists made for me on Spotify are spot on, and it would be a dishonor to not give them a listen. Plus, the only time I can really sit down and listen to the music I enjoy is when I'm doing homework. Right now, *When* by dodie is playing. She's one of my favorite artists from YouTube, and her EP came out not too long ago. I sing along to the lyrics:

*I'm sick of faking diary entries*

*gotta get it in my head, I'll never be sixteen again*

*I'm waiting to live, still waiting to love*

*oh it'll be over, and I'll still be asking when*

My hands stop typing. I've heard this song plenty of times before, but I've never really stopped to think about what the song

means. The thing is, the song isn't familiar just because of the lyrics or the tune.

The past few years had the same routine:

5:45 A.M: Wake up and get ready for school.

7:10 A.M -2:25 P.M: Be in school.

2:25-4:30 P.M: Volleyball or Key Club or whatever extracurricular I had committed to for the day.

After that: Come home and do homework until I went to bed around 11. If I had a volleyball game, then I'd come home at 9 and do the same. This was my life day in and day out.

Volleyball was keeping me busy nearly every day for the whole of Fall semester. We'd have practice and games during the week, and tournaments on the weekend. Essentially, my only days off during the on-season were Sundays. I was constantly with this group of girls, and since I spent so much time with them, one would think that we would be really close. But really, the older girls seemed to look down on our class because we weren't as good at the sport, and the younger girls had been playing longer than me and were a lot better. Very early on, I started to feel as if I didn't belong there. Things only got worse when we got to junior year and I was the only one in my class who wasn't playing Varsity. I was promised more playing time by my coaches the year before, and I felt like all of my efforts were amounting to nothing. All of those weekends and evenings spent at school were giving me nothing in return. Eventually, I got to be on Varsity, but I still would rarely play if ever, and I just got busier and busier.

My other extracurriculars were slightly more fun. I was a part of many volunteer organizations, and I do genuinely enjoy service. But aside from that, it was also an extra minimum 25 hours I had to commit, and since I *"had"* to get the service medal they give to people with over 300 hours at graduation, I was doing more than that.

And as if those weren't enough, my grades were the most important of all. The A's had to be straight, and if the possibility of me getting a

But even surfaced in my mind, it was TearTown USA. Not only that, the classes had to be impressive. As per the American high school standard, my school was very academically competitive. It seemed like if you had more advanced classes on your schedule, you were a superior being to the other students. On top of that, our counselors pressured us to take as many Advanced Placement classes as possible, so take as many AP classes as possible I did. That's why I opted for Pre-Calc and Chemistry honors, that's why I did the AP US Government section that spent the first half of the year also doing AP Comparative Government, and that's why I was sitting on my bed that fateful night doing AP US History homework rather than the regular course.

The few people I could consider friends were the people I was with constantly for volleyball and volunteering, but I never made an effort to ask them to hang out because I didn't have time. Plus, if they actually considered me a friend, they would have reached out to me because that's what friends do. If only I wasn't as annoying or loud or dumb, maybe then things could be better. After all, that must be what everyone thinks of me, otherwise I wouldn't be here, right? They would have sent me those party invitations that I couldn't see because they only got sent out on Snapchat and I didn't have the app. They would have texted me an invite to the sleepovers my parents would never let me go to anyways. They would have actually responded to me when I tried to enter a conversation. They would have thrown me a bone, anything! Nothing is what I was getting. So, I just tried to brush off the fact that I had few to no friends and dive into what I needed to do.

I had no time for fun, no time for friends; I had to work, and I had to work hard. After all, how else would I get out of Baton Rouge?

Baton Rouge is a fine enough city to settle down in. It's a college town with massive tailgating on the weekends, it has a lot of plant jobs available along the Mississippi River, and the culture of Louisiana is fairly strong there. But I was sick of it. As a teenager who had been there her whole life, there was nothing exciting to it. I went to LSU every Monday for piano lessons, the main shopping areas were

old news, and I just wanted more. Plus, LSU as a university couldn't teach me what I wanted to learn and was garbage as far as I was concerned. On top of the school not having a Chinese major - a must for me - they had the Greek life that was only good for getting drunk, buildings that were falling apart because the only thing that matters at the school is football, and probably the worst of all: familiarity.

One of the main things that BR lacks is diversity. The town is pretty divided on the basis of class, and not many people there had a world view that exceeded the borders from Florida to Dallas. As someone who wants to understand the world and its people, this wasn't the place.

It also had my parents there, which was also an issue for me. I can't say that they, namely my dad, were the worst, as I have a pretty privileged life and so many people have had it so much worse. But it was enough to make me want to leave. I quit soccer in part because my dad kept making me feel as if I wasn't working hard enough and like I'd never be good enough. I would sit at the dinner table and just listen to him talk about his politics because if I were to butt in with my own beliefs, he would make me feel like I was dumb and naive for thinking what I do. I would stay in the confines of my room most of the time because I felt like he was going to show his disappointment in me for just about everything I did. Even now, looking back, he still fails to say "congrats" any time I do something I'm proud of, which would mean more than he would ever know. I felt as if I was trapped with him. So, unless I got the best ACT scores and grades that I could, I'd be condemned to stay in Baton Rouge forever. But in that moment of listening to *When*, another thought clicked in my brain.

I think it was when doodie sang, "gotta get it in my head, I'll never be sixteen again," that really got to me. I was sixteen myself that day when I was doing my APUSH homework in bed, but I wasn't going to be for much longer. My 17th birthday was coming up in three days.

All of those nights I spent on that bed or at my desk thinking that I was fine came back into my brain. I remember thinking explicitly to myself so many times "my grades are more important than my mental health." I was putting myself and my well-being on the line for what?

To be able to say that I got numerous 4s on my AP exams? To get a 32 on the ACT instead of a 31? At that moment, those little numbers just didn't feel like they were worth anything to me anymore. Sure, I was doing them for a reason, but I was only sixteen. That's the year that all of the girls have fun and go to parties and learn about themselves in those coming-of-age teen movies. But rather than spending that year having sleepovers with my friends or going to the mall or whatever regular high-school girls do, I spent being sixteen in my room typing away at whatever assignment was due that week. I had wasted the whole year, and it was my own doing.

Like *dodie* was saying about herself in that song, *I* had been waiting and asking "when" I'd be able to go out and live my life like I'd always wanted to. *When* would I finally not have to sit in bed and have to do homework at 10:30 P.M.? *When* would I get invited to a party? *When* would I find a friend that wants to hang out with me more than once a month? *When* would I finally not have to worry about what Dad has to say? *When* would I be in a place that better suited what I wanted out of life?

That night, I just broke down. There was nothing else I could really do. After all, everything I had been doing for the past several years felt like it had amounted to just about nothing. And even worse, I could have done something about it.

But right in the middle of one of the lowest moments of my life, I realized that yeah, I *could* have done something about it. And who was to say that I still couldn't? I still had a year and a half to take any little sliver of a chance to put myself in a situation where I could be happy instead of sitting on that full-sized bed typing away. I wouldn't and couldn't live a life where I prioritized my work over myself. No more believing that my grades were more important than my mental health. I would and could not make the same mistake in my seventeenth year as I had in my sixteenth and the years leading up to it. From then on, I was going to live my life to the fullest.

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After my breakdown, I immediately realized that I had set myself up for the perfect opportunity to get started with my goal. In Octo-

ber, I had applied to a program that would send me to China to learn Chinese if I was accepted.

Of the short list of things that still brought me happiness at that point in my life, traveling and language-learning were some of the top two. Ever since I was a baby, my mom was insistent that her kids learn Spanish, and she would often bring us to Honduras to visit family when my brothers and I were younger. Once we had a bit more brain capacity to remember events, she and my dad began taking us on trips to other Spanish-speaking countries, and we would practice in restaurants and stores, often bartering with the street vendors for the souvenirs we wanted. It was those interactions that made me understand the importance of language in this fast-paced globalizing world we're living in. My dad would always tell me how lucky I was to know Spanish, and once I finally understood why, I gained an insatiable desire to learn more. I guess that's part of the reason that I wanted to get out of Baton Rouge so badly as well; I needed more. French got added to my language list during high school, and early on in my junior year I had discovered a program that would change the course of my life, unbeknownst to me at the time.

I guess I showed off the happiness those things bring me well enough in my application essays, because days before my fateful breakdown, I earned a spot on the 2019 cohort. That summer, I went to Chengdu, China for six weeks to learn Mandarin. It was going wonderfully at first; I was making friends and learning a lot about the culture and the language. But I still felt like something was missing.

After school, I would spend time with my friends sitting inside our school talking while sipping on bubble tea and playing King of the Court with ping pong, which was wonderful. But after I left school, I just sat at my host family's house or at my host mom's hospital doing nothing except the assignments we'd been given to do for the next day, and that didn't sit right with me, and oftentimes my peers would do the same. It took me a few weeks, but I decided to ask some of my friends - both American and Chinese - to go out to a mall with me one day after school. They actually said yes, and we had a great time. All of us went into clothing stores to shop around, we got to

have some amazing Sichuan foods, and we got to know a lot more about the culture and lives of our Chinese peers that we may not have learned about otherwise. After that, I researched and was able to figure out how to navigate the Chengdu metro system, which was the key to expanding our adventures to Buddhist temples, fun streets with lots of shopping, and different places to practice Chinese. In taking those steps, I discovered the missing piece in my self-discovery puzzle: going out on my own and discovering things with friends. I had taken initiative to keep myself from falling back into the loop of wasting the precious six weeks I had in Chengdu, and it really paid off.

I kept that lesson in mind, and when I got back to the States to start my senior year, I decided that another piece of the puzzle would be to lighten my course load. As I said before, my high school was very academically competitive, and our counselors pressured us to take as many Advanced Placement classes as possible, which supported my belief that I had to overload myself to get to where I wanted in life. That was the mentality I had going into junior year, and I suffered the consequences for it. So rather than taking so much time for homework, I lightened my academic load and made it a point to go out and have fun at least once a week, even if I had to go by myself.

I also remembered the fear I had of those “friends” in my extracurriculars not liking me, and clear-headed me decided that I’d had enough of feeling like I wasn’t good enough. I started inviting my volleyball teammates to go grab food after tournaments, and after doing that enough times, I found my best friend that I still speak to every day. In my volunteering clubs, I’d ask other members if they wanted to go to the same events, and that made for a nice few hours away from homework on the weekends. Those friends also eventually became my solid lunch-time group, and I wasn’t even alone at school anymore.

Going to a random Starbucks with friends and laughing until we can’t breathe, doing volunteer work and chilling outside while eating snowballs, or just sitting on the front porch with my grandma and telling stories while eating popcorn was a lot healthier than I ever

thought it could be, and it made me a lot happier. I also started looking at the activities I already did in a more positive light. In the first three years of high school, volleyball and Key Club were just other tasks I had to do after school. In changing my mentality, they became chances to hang out with my friends while doing something fun and productive at the same time. Though I still had to deal with late volleyball nights and tedious college applications that year, my life was overall better because I made more time for myself.

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A year after my fateful April Fool's Day breakdown, I had improved my life drastically. The puzzle was coming together with so many new pieces in it. Sure, there were times the pieces didn't fit throughout the year, but I learned from those moments and came out better from them.

I've kept my promise to myself so far for my eighteenth year too. This summer had a damper put on it because of this global pandemic, but I still did a lot of good for myself. Now that I'm in college, I'm in a new state far from home that has so much culture and things to do that I probably won't be able to do everything I want to in just four years. I'm also learning what I want to, which is also making me very happy. Even though my dad doesn't seem to have learned his lesson, I'm not around him enough to be as affected by him anymore. My anxiety, though still there, has improved a lot too. As for what I can control now, I've made it a point to see my friends at least once a day. We always have dinner together, and every Friday we go out and do something fun. I've improved my sleep schedule since I don't do homework after 10:30 P.M., and I do my best to go to the gym or jog three times a week. That routine has kept me sane, and I'm learning a lot more about life and what is important outside the classroom rather than in it because of my friends and my experiences. I'm turning nineteen in less than a month, and as much of a cheesy coincidence as it may be, I already intend to study abroad again, so the experiential train isn't stopping anytime soon.

If me a year ago could see me now, she would probably cry. That Daniela was so insecure and unsure if she would ever be happy.

Now, I am no longer *wishing my life away* or *asking when* like when I was sixteen. The life I've managed to make for myself is the best possible outcome I could have imagined, and I'm much happier than I was two years ago. Life isn't meant to be lived behind a desk until you can't take it anymore, it's supposed to be dynamic and exploratory.

## FOUR YEARS

Norhan Elsayed

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I try my hardest to hold back my tears but as the streets blur by from the large window of the little white bus that is supposed to take us to the airport, I realize it is near impossible to hold them in. They say before you die your whole life flashes before your eyes, but as I look out the window to the streets that have wormed a place deep into my heart, the last four years flash before my eyes. Maybe a piece of me is dying. With every tear that streaks a long track across my wet cheeks memory after memory filter in, willing to be remembered.

The blurry streets before my eyes fade away as I am transported into a younger version of myself. My jaw drops as I look at my parents' faces waiting for them to laugh and tell me it is a joke. "We are going to move to Egypt and live there for a couple of years" reverberates in my head as question after question shoots out of my mouth. Why? How? When? For how long? My shock slowly morphs into endless excitement over this new adventure and a little bit of fear over the unknown. Little did I know that those years would change my life forever.

I was eight when I first arrived in Egypt, my whole family was there

to greet us at the airport. My grandparents and uncles and aunts and cousins. They all drove about two hours just to meet us and I never felt more welcomed. After getting our bags, we all packed into the bus that was taking us to what I will call home for the next four years. I laid my head on my grandma's lap as she brushed her soft hands through my hair and fed me kofta sandwiches. We were driving by bumpy roads and brightly lit streets and people going on about their lives as if it was not the middle of the night. The Athan, or call for prayer, blared out from one of the mosques we passed and it was my first time ever hearing it so openly, it took me a moment to realize I was no longer in a country that fears me or my religion and despite me just getting here, I felt right at home. The entire bus ride was buzzing with infectious energy and excitement at our arrival and I did not know it then, but I could not be more grateful for the love and warmth of family.

I was nine when I first grieved death. So much death. It was always around me, painting television screens and filling up stressed hospital walls and staining the protest-occupied streets with red. It was the 2011 Arab Spring in Egypt. The chaos that ensued following the uprising against the government was merciless. The Revolution did not care whose life it took, from old to young, men and women and children, Muslims and Christians and Jews. Every second was like holding our breath in the hopes that we do not set off an invisible ticking bomb. I saw the horrors but I also saw the strength and the spirit of the Egyptian people, of my people. I witnessed the grief-filled losses and the prideful victories. It is a beautiful thing, seeing people come together, fight, and heal as one. Looking back, that year opened my eyes to a world that makes me forever empathetic and thankful for the privileges and opportunities that I have. The curtains that every child has over their eyes were torn away and I saw the world for what it was. Imperfect. It made me see what many people are blissfully unaware of and I count my blessings every single day because of it.

I was ten when I was steered onto the long, exhausted road of self-discovery. So many firsts and new experiences that I looked forward to and shied away from simultaneously. My first day at a new school,

a different martial arts center, customs, and traditions that I knew nothing about. My heart raced and the blood rushed in my ears as I walked up the stairs to my first class with trepidation taking possession of every crevice in my body. My hands and voice shook as I introduced myself to my new teammates. It is a scary thing, the unknown. It robs you of your senses and twirls you around and around. It makes you wish for things that seem so far away, and I wished I was not so scared of the unknown. If there was ever a year that I truly wanted to go back to the States it was this year. I felt like an impostor in my own skin, pretending to be something I am not. Was I American or was I Egyptian? How Muslim was I? Thus, marking the beginning of a long tumultuous journey of finding my identity. It was not until five years later that I fully embraced myself as a Muslim American Egyptian, but I am indebted to my ten-year-old self for pushing me to find who I am. For helping me realize that it is not worth it to shed who I am for others and conform to a society that does not have much care for me. I do not have to be a pretty perfect rose blending in with all the other stiff roses in a well-controlled garden when I could be a wildflower brushing up against the soft winds in an untamed meadow.

I was eleven when I lived the best year of my life. I experienced the joy of being around those I genuinely love. All the memories and the laughs and the conversations that I do not have with anyone else and would not trade for the world. I did not know the feeling of laughing so hard that my stomach hurt and my cheeks ached until that year. I learned the value of a pure friendship that will forever leave a mark on my soul. It is a special thing and when you find it you hold on to it like it was a lifeline. I have grown incredibly close with my tight-knit family and built a special bond with my classmates and teammates. A bond that I will never truly find again. I was excelling academically and athletically as I finally found my place in this world. I felt comfortable enough in my own skin and I knew who I was. I was truly content and at peace. Sleepovers with my cousins as we painted each other's nails, straightened our hair, and exchanged stories, the laughter resounding through my chest as I worked with people who hold a

special place in my heart, the gathering of my family every Friday over hearty homemade fuul and koshari at the long glass dining table, and the exhilaration of celebrating with my teammates after a successful match are moments that I treasure and memories I relish in just as much as a jeweler would his precious and rare diamonds.

I look at my parents' faces and hear the words that I knew were coming. "We are going back to America." Sadness and elation course deeply through my body and battle one another as it finally hits me, this is my final year in Egypt. The memories and bonds I have made here are ones I have grown attached to. It became hard to see my life without them. The family and friends, the food and culture, the little moments I will never be able to live through again, at least not the same way. Home. I was leaving my home to go back to my home. I did not know what was waiting for me back in the States, how my old friends would greet me, or if I would be able to fit right into my old life before these crazy four years. Excitement bubbles in my chest over the thought of seeing the people and places I left behind, and a little bit of fear over the unknown. But I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I am not the same person as I was when my parents first told me we were moving to Egypt. No, I was changed forever.

So as the little white bus drives us closer and closer to the airport that will take me back to the States and lock the door on the craziest chapter of my life, I close my eyes against my tears and reminisce on those years. The memories forever cherished in my heart and soul. My four years in Egypt. Years that shaped who I am and taught me to appreciate the warmth of family, the strength and spirit of a country, the journey of self-discovery, and the joy of life.

*Author's Note:*

Someone once told me “The moments you cannot put into words make the best memories” and I had absolutely no idea what that meant until I started writing this piece. Sure, I thought it was deep and it made enough sense to me, but I did not truly grasp that concept of not being able to describe moments and memories that make me. Words can genuinely fail you when you cannot come up with ways to explain what is inside your heart and soul. Perhaps our bodies speak a different language than the one we speak. Otherwise, how would we express that incredible feeling of pure joy and warmth and fondness or that terrifying feeling of utter despair and hopelessness? Even those words seem too little, too insufficient. As I was writing about my time in Egypt, I realized that I have failed. I have failed to really capture the full extent of my memories, of what is sincerely inside my heart and mind. I came close, and perhaps that is all that we can do when telling our story, come as close to those memories as we possibly can without fully ever getting there.

# 6

## THE ONE WITHOUT A TITLE

Fyzah Islam

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Life is guided by what's black and what's white. There's no room for grey. I've become someone who accepts the cards life deals with no resistance. A deck of fifty-two cards flies in between the card master's hands, mixing their order: the clubs, hearts, spades, and diamonds intermingling. The card master stops shuffling. He removes five cards, your childhood, teenage years, marriage, future parentage, and retirement; these five cards set by fate set your life.

"The cards you are dealt, constant, unyielding, law." No one ever said those words to me, but I've codified them into the book of Fyzah, but I wasn't always like this. I never felt the need to define myself when I was in private school. Nor did I feel the need to accept the written narratives. My life was like a sketchbook; no lines, no colors. I decide how to fill these pages; pen, pencil, paint, whichever it may be, the decision was mine.

Once upon a time, I was Fyzah Islam; a Muslim, a student, and a girl who has roots 8,000 miles away in a country called Bangladesh. There was no question of who I was because there was no question of who we, a group of multi-ethnic Muslim students, were.

I like to think that at birth, in addition to our cards, we're given a blank sketchbook. While our cards define our lives and our future, the sketchbook is our method to make understanding, to make meaning. Until preschool, we fill these pages directionless; we know nothing about color theory – we certainly don't know anything about composition. We learn about shapes in preschool; everything else comes later. I started grade school with groups of Muslim students – only if you squint hard can you find the differences. Here was a world where everyone was celebrated, where the words of the Quran were taken to heart every International day, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, [God] is Knowing and Acquainted." This world put no bounds, no restraints on me, it created a sketchbook unlike any other. It's pages littered with colors and doodles; the colors slowly became more cohesive, the compositions, more harmonious, but creativity and freedom oozed out of the pages. There was only one instruction; start each piece with *Bismillah* in the name of God.

The instructions change; just saying *Bismillah* isn't enough anymore. Colors need to be defined; long gone were the days where you could choose pink because you wanted – pink had to have a purpose. Like the colors, I switched to an environment where my identity would be defined. Suddenly, I only had access to a twelve-pack of "Crayola" markers, and my sketchbook was filled with unerasable lines. My once black sketchbook now a color-by-number book telling me what to color, how to color, and where to color. And to some extent – defined *why* I color.

Suddenly, I started questioning if I was Bengali enough. I never called into question my connection to Islam, and I indeed never asked if I was American. These things were like water, eggs, and oil in the prepackaged brownie mixes; without adding those things, you would be devoid of a melt-in-your-mouth brownie. I was the daughter of Bangladeshi immigrants who were ethnically Bengali, a practicing Muslim who went to an Islamic school. I was the girl who

spent her mornings on the way to school listening to *Morning Edition* and memorizing the multiplication tables with her dad. I was the girl who practically memorized the Bangla hits of the 70s and 80s. Perhaps the beauty of a color by number lies in knowing the outcome; the beauty lay in knowing every turn on the journey and knowing the destination. The beauty of a sketchbook lay in its ambiguity, the endless possibilities

I felt different that entire time. And I didn't know how to process that. Once a part of a pack, once a part of the group with shared stories and experiences, I became this insanely shy character who always had her nose in a book, afraid of interaction. It was a defense mechanism – I didn't know the answers to their questions, so I made myself invisible. You can't answer questions if you can't be seen. "Keep your head down, keep your grades up, and keep to yourself; all is well, all is well."

By avoiding those questions, life was more comfortable. I was so acclimated to a community where these questions were nonexistent, shifting to a world where present and pressing questions made me afraid. Staying invisible meant that I didn't have to color within the lines -it meant that I wouldn't have to pick a color for the page.

Either way, what nine-year-old can answer the question: who are you? Add in a Hijab to the equation, how can a nine-year-old explain to children and adults why she wore the Hijab. No – staying silent is easier than answering questions.

As a child, I was used to seeing women like my mom, women who wore the Hijab. Women in headscarves who prayed with their hands folded across their chest, teachers who started each class with a melodious Arabic greeting conveying peace and blessings upon us. They all wore their hijabs differently, but the square pieces of satin and silk were a point of commonality between my teachers and my mother. School was a different kind of home.

Leaving private school was one of the worst things that ever happened; it was the most unfriendly, unwanted thing. With a change in schools, I lost a sense of home, community, and family sense. By second grade, I was already wearing the Hijab regularly without being

viewed as other. My wearing Hijab was praised and welcomed. Even if I was the only student wearing the Hijab, it wasn't questioned. Hijab was a part of our lives.

I was used to this environment. I was used to wearing Hijab, full sleeves, and full jeans. I was used to shying away from guys but still being outspoken. Leaving private school meant that I wouldn't have that community anymore. Leaving private school tossed me out of my comfort zone and showed me that everything "normal" was now "foreign."

Where once I was normal, I became strange. The lights flashed stranger danger all around me - I didn't know that they flashed over me too.

Just walking in that first day, I felt other. I became other. There were groups and people spending time together, chatting about the bus, reconnecting. Still, here I was, an impossibly shy nine-year-old in a bright pink zebra striped Hijab. The definitions were set for me; I didn't get a chance to define myself. Fyzah Islam: the girl who wears this thing on her head and sometimes comes to school in this matching set of pants, shirt, and extra scarf. Without ever picking a marker, my sketchbook was colored -I never got a say.

Every egg, no matter the color of the shell, has a yellow yolk and a clear jelly inside. There are so many ways to call an egg "an egg." In Turkish, *yumurta*, in Bangla, *deem*, in Hindi, *anda*. No language could describe my egg; I had a questionable egg - I had my Hijab and my strange name - here, they served vegan brownies. Nothing could change that. Similarities damned, I was other -I am different.

By middle school, I became more secure in aspects of my identity. If I was other, then so be it; I was different. In my recipe, there are eggs in brownies. I was unapologetically Hijabi, and I was proud of my Bangladeshi heritage -I have no reason not to be. So, what if the first pages of my sketchbook resemble a coloring book? The remainder of the book had pages where I could choose my medium, pages where I could draw whatever came to mind.

As I walked in the doors of my first high school, something changed. Maybe I was delirious from the lack of sleep, but something

was different. I was the opposite of the “set” definitions. It was as if I sat awake the night before and, page by page, ripped out all the pre-drawn, pre-assigned pages leaving behind ripped, jagged edges. I was going to set my own narrative. I refused to let anyone else set my story. Here on out, I refused to be the muse, sitting idly letting others draw their own renditions of me. No, from here on out, I would be the artist and the world my muse.

But as I walked through those doors something shattered. The egg in my hand slipped, the once white titles now sported egg shells and a runny yolk. Making the world my muse had unintended consequences. Somehow my faith in myself shattered and I began questioning the very identity I had just taken control of. To this day I question myself. Stranger danger may not flash all around and over me, but when I look in the mirror, the lights flash and the sirens blare. I don't know who I am looking at any more.

I've spent so much time accepting the definitions people gave me; it was an easier way to assimilate. I've spent so much time adjusting these given definitions to fit me. But in the process of incorporating, in the process of morphing myself to expectation, have I lost my authentic undefined self?

*Am I the reason the egg shattered?* I have spent so many years being drawn, being the muse, that now -today- when I have the confidence and the mobility to lift the pen, to lift the paintbrush, my hand quivers. I find my hands shaking and hovering above a blank, unmarked page, afraid of making the wrong mark, unsure what the first mark should be: a dot, a line, a word.

Definitions are like line segments. Human beings are like lines. One has a stop and an end; the other flows in either direction with no end or beginning insight. I write this looking at a framed picture of a baby, no more than a year old – she looks happy like there is no care in the world. There are no constraints on the directions she can flow through. Her sketchbook filled with the homey, indescribable, yet familiar smell of clean paper, beckoning the babe to slather her colored hands across these blank pages creating her first mark in the world.

The circumstances we face, the situations we go through, force

us to reckon with a version of ourselves that – at that time – is unknown. We emerge from them changed. The concept of defining that experience, coloring in the lines, is not required until we are asked. The ancients created myths of the gods and goddesses whose anger would incite pain; whose joys would beckon tranquility. Questions seldom remained unanswered; everything had an explanation, and every person their place.

My desire to make the world my muse with no barriers to the mediums I use is unrealistic. To throw away definitions and prompts, I've become unsure of who I am and who I am becoming. Every one person has a place, just like every deck has fifty-two cards. No matter who argues what, that fact can never be changed.

Definitions and pre-assigned sketches give dimension, dimensions that guide us toward making our own masterpieces. There are nearly 200,000 words in the English language, there are more than 10 million colors in the world. Perhaps there are colors and phrases that every individual uses more frequently than others; it becomes their signature. Our signatures do not define us; they are a part of us.

Until recently, defining my colors, defining my words was beyond my purview. I lived life according to my own term; I began to doubt my terms when I started to take account of the recurring colors and words across each of my pages. I began to rip apart every page that had even a line on them. But the lines and dots that litter my pages are references to the history of my signature. Defining life by black and white became an escape. After all, if life is limited to yes and no room for error, there is no room for questions.

But limiting life to two variables makes my identity a mystery to myself. I am defined by certain words and colors. I am defined as a Bengali Muslim American woman who wears the Hijab. There is no hiding from that definition. Refusing that description is akin to denying myself. Morphing that definition into a signature, adding that signature to my sketches' right-hand corner is the first step to accepting myself.

## THE MILLISECOND

Sadie Garcia

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The sun rose above the low buildings of the suburbs, turning the sky a light blue. There, a white car sat on the center of the intersection, the front crushed and wide open, leaking fluids. Small pieces of metal and plastic scattered the asphalt around. Yet, no glass was shattered, no airbags deployed, and the rest of the car looked as though it had not been touched. The Scion xB faced about 90 degrees away from the direction it was originally heading. I sat on the sidewalk with my sister next to me, attempting to calm down. Bystanders and police moved around the area. Less than a hundred feet away from my car, two other cars faced each other, one practically on top of the other. How did this happen?

In the summer of 2019, I had my first job at the local waterpark, SplashDown. To get to and from work, my family bought me a 2005 Scion xB, a brand from Toyota. The most distinct features of this SUV were its white, cube-shaped body and its stuck-out bumper, a unique car in my eyes. It reminded me of a specific toy car for barbie dolls I had from my childhood. I had recently acquired my driver's license in March of that year, so driving to work became quite an experience. Like any beginner, I was cautious on the road. Carefully

inspecting who got to the stop sign first (even if they were a couple feet behind the line), going at the speed limit, checking the mirrors every ten seconds, stopping at yellow lights, and yielding to vehicles I thought were too close (though, according to my mother, an experienced driver, they were still pretty far). I went the whole summer driving responsibly. Even finding joy in driving.

A couple months later, on August 19, my sister and I woke up earlier than usual to help the teachers at our school set up their classrooms for the first day of school. As a senior in Key Club, completing thirty hours of community service was required, so I wanted to get started as soon as possible. Even if that meant a week before the first day of school. My sister, Camila, who is a year younger than me, also joined me in this opportunity to gain hours for Key Club. Once at the school, we walked to the Key Club sponsor's classroom to receive instructions. She informed us that all the teachers would soon attend a meeting in the auditorium. My sister and I were unable to find a teacher to help before the meeting began. Instead, we had to wait in the sponsor's classroom until the meeting was over.

Camila presented the idea of going to Starbucks for breakfast while the teachers were at their meeting. In my head, I calculated the amount of time it would take to go and come back. We exited the school building, as I took out my keys to unlock my car in the nearly empty parking lot. Camila got into the passenger seat and buckled on her seatbelt as the engine roared to life. As I pulled out, we noticed a parked police car in the parking lot with an officer inside it. As slow as a walking person, I exited the parking lot, going five miles per hour less than I usually would have. I veered left to exit the school's parking lot.

I drove down the twenty-five mile per hour road to a yellow light. My foot switched to the other pedal as we neared the intersection. Two left turns, one straight, and one right turn arrow. My car glided to the second left turn arrow. In my peripheral vision, I knew cars were all around us. As our voices and giggling filled the car, the light turned green. It took a second to move my foot off the break to switch to the gas, then another second to move the car. As the car left

the road, it continued straight. The muscle memory in my hands and feet proceeded to perform the left turn maneuver like they have done many times before. But the car never turned onto the other road...

I felt a jolt in front of me, my chest hitting the steering wheel. For a moment, everything seemed to stop. A second later, I sat in my seat, confused as to what had happened. I saw jagged metal through the windshield, sticking out like mountains on a horizon. The car's engine made strange noises, as if it wanted to go forward, but something was stopping it. Over the sound of the car's engine, I could hear a 'click' and the cries of my sister. My first instinct was to put the car on park. I pulled and pulled on the gearshift, but it would not budge. I did not pull any harder, for fear of it breaking. I turned my attention to the key, I twisted and pulled, but nothing. My sister cried that she could not open the door. Then, her door swung open, a bystander hurried us out. My sister stepped out of the car, I followed, jumping and scooting over her seat.

I gazed upon the damage, almost frozen. I had already begun shaking, with tears flowing down my cheeks. The stuck-out bumper with the license plate laid on the asphalt. *This cannot be happening. Liquid leaked from the front of my car. Gasoline? No, antifreeze or windshield cleaner.* My head turned to watch the people of the car who hit us. A middle-aged woman stepped out of her vehicle, then three children opened their doors to step out. Their face had such a calm expression, almost annoyed, not feeling the same distress Camila and I were feeling.

I held my legs in front of me as I sat on the cement with my sister next to me. I continued to watch my car, see the other vehicles slowly weave around it. *It could be fixed it must be fixed. The car means too much.* Camila dialed our mother's phone number. I could hear the muffled greeting of our mother's voice recording before my sister left a voice mail. *What do people think of a teenager in a car accident. "It must be their fault they are least experienced" is most likely what they think.* As my father answered his phone, Camila's shaky voice explained what had happened. I was still shaking with tears when the police officer asked for my license and registration. I walked back to

my car, the officer leading. Unfamiliar music entered my ears, playing from my car radio. *Turn it off.* After passing the documents to the officer, I reached for a tissue from my car. *But it works! It could be saved!* I walked back to the corner where my sister waited, carrying my small backpack.

Less than ten minutes later, our father arrived in his work uniform. I immediately embraced him. My mother called back to say she was on her way. She parked on the corner across the road from us. As she stepped on the median strip, cars rushed by in front of her. I watched as my mother turned her head to see my car on top of a tow truck. Once she saw the damage, I could hear her cries over the sound of passing cars. She crossed the last stretch of road between us, finally embraced us, relieved we were unharmed after seeing the damage. I finally began to breath normally.

My mother helped me realize how the outcome could have been different. Since the car came from the left and hit the front of my car, it could have easily hit my door if I had gone any faster. Looking at the damage the collision caused, the lady was probably going at the speed limit, which was thirty-five miles per hour on the road she came from. The damage could have been inflicted on my side of the door. My life could have changed. It is a miracle that mere milliseconds made all the difference at the moment. Camila and I only went to the doctor that day for a checkup, otherwise, we were completely unharmed. Unfortunately, Camila was traumatized from the accident. To this day, she is having difficulty learning how to drive. She has had a panic attack when my mother had her drive on a somewhat busy road. We have learned this is most likely due to her seeing the car coming at us the second before it hit us. I was focusing on the road when the car hit us, I did not see them coming like Camila did.

On the same day of the accident, my mother asked me to drive back to the school to pick up my sister as she had chosen to continue volunteering that day. My mother said she needed to make calls to the insurance company, but I knew why she had me drive that day. As a mother, she wanted to make sure I was still comfortable driving, not traumatized. Calm as if the accident never happened, I drove to

pick up my sister. I am fortunate that the accident did not affect my driving or mental health. It was as if all the emotional turmoil I had that day were all let out in the moments after the accident. Even after my mother explained how it was a miracle that the car did not hit my door instead, the realization does not negatively affect me. Maybe it was never laying eyes on the car before it hit us. Maybe I was more focused on the car than me. Or maybe I unleashed all the emotions the events produced that day instead of keeping it bottled up.

What if I decided not to volunteer that day?

What if I woke up earlier or later than when I did?

What if we found a teacher to help before the teacher meeting?

What if there was no teacher meeting that day?

What if Camila asked to go to Starbucks at a different time during our wait?

What if the police car was not in the parking lot?

What would happen if I had gone slower or faster when driving that morning?

All the choices I made that day led to the accident, and if I had made different choices or even took more or less time dwelling on a decision, it could have changed the outcome. Seconds can change anyone's life for better or worst. Fortunate for me, the accident only changed my day, not my life. I will not live in fear that something bad will happen, because any choice taken will lead to an outcome whether I like or not.

## A PATH TO OUR MEMORIES

Hana Al Shawi

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I.

It wasn't my surgery to begin with, so why I did I feel my grandfather's pain in his heart, fighting for every beat like a dedicated Samurai warrior? I watched him as he peeled the skin off a peach and cut it into small slices so he could eat it. Two very distinct yet very unrelated thoughts trickled into my brain in that moment. My first was how much effort it could take for a sick person to eat a fruit. And my second was how on earth did he have such great knife skills?

Although I could process my grandfather's feelings of pain, I couldn't understand any of his emotions. I was too young to understand complex emotions such as fear for one's life, stress, anxiety, or disappointment. Even if I tried understanding these emotions, I still wouldn't have known how it truly felt...How it truly felt to be struck by these strong emotions like a truck, unable to move out of the way in time to avoid it. I was lacking experience in life. I was only a little bird that was still in its nest, not quite flying yet. I remember the way he looked at me as I ate a slice of his peach, his eyes glistening, a smile appearing on his wrinkly face at the sight of life and chaotic energy produced by me.

## II.

It was the first surgery that I have ever recalled. As a seven-year-old, I didn't understand the significance of it, nor did I realize the many different ways that it could have affected me. It was summer. I remember I broke my own record by eating three ice cream cones in one day, as if they were my meals. After each ice cream cone, I felt as if my bones were becoming icier and I was slowly turning into *Frozone* from *The Incredibles* movie.

My grandfather had just arrived to our house, along with my grandmother, and my three aunts Dania, Noor, and Hiba. The family agreed that staying at my house would make matters easier. I could see how heavy my grandfather's feet were as he dragged them along the stairs and into his bedroom. I don't remember how I greeted them, but I do remember I was disheartened when I found out that aunt Dania didn't bring her kids along for me to play with. Over the course of their visit, I found myself surrounded by adults yet scrounging for a companion to play with.

## III.

Right when I would hear my aunts calling on me, and the sounds of suitcases unzipping, I would come running through the hallways of the house, feet stomping, and standing in the room like a trooper awaiting to be rewarded. I would do this every time they visited.

I loved receiving presents as a kid. The sensation of getting showered with my favorite toys and picking which to play with first felt as good as jumping into a pool on a hot summer day. My favorite toy was a stuffed doll that had green hair and a purple dress on. I got it from my aunty Noor. It was such an odd doll, but it wasn't one of those creepy dolls that you would've stuffed in your closet before going to bed at night.

Gifts were like a compensation, a compensation for being a well-behaved kid. Once a year, when my entire family gathered in one house, I got the privilege of receiving gifts. Since each of my aunts lived in a different country, it made me feel as if I'd spent the whole year working hard to finally earn those gifts.

#### IV.

I've always dreamt about being in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. It was every little kid's dream to go to Willy Wonka's factory and be greeted by Oompa Loompas and the sight of luscious snacks waiting for you to dive into. My love for candy surpassed any other. My eyes would spark each time at the sight of candy, a rush of serotonin surging my body.

It was surgery day. It was nine in the morning, and I could feel all the tension in the air as my family was preparing to drop off my grandfather at the hospital. My mom came up to me and said, "Hana if you're good today, I'll buy you candy" so I was driven to prove to my mom what a good girl I was. I knew the basics; no yelling or screaming, no running in the house, and certainly no whining.

#### V.

With no cookies, a jar of cookies would just be an empty jar. In this case, my grandpa was the cookies to our jar. One might think that having a house with more than six people there is full and chaotic, but not our house. Our house felt empty and cold, missing the presence of its light and warmth.

While my grandpa was in surgery, I spent my time playing with Lucy, my green-haired doll. That afternoon, the sound of prayers filled the atmosphere of the house as they were being read by my grandma. What I didn't realize came along with each word that escaped her mouth was worry. Worry that her husband wouldn't make it out alive. Worry of losing the man she shared a bed with for over 50 years. Worry that restrained her from doing anything but read prayers till the second he got out of surgery and came back home.

I wasn't feeling anxious, stressed, or sad. I was too small to fit these big emotions in my body. I was just simply waiting for my grandfather's return home, watching the clock tick by and playing dress up with my dolls. Like any other kid, at the return of my grandfather, I greeted him with a big hug and tumbling feet jumping up and down. I didn't feel the immediate relief that everyone else felt at the sight of him, but I was definitely glad to see him again.

## VI.

It was October 15<sup>th</sup>, more specifically my eighteenth birthday, I was in the backyard with my two best friends sitting around a bonfire. The wood was crackling as our marshmallows were melting like butter onto the crackers and chocolate. Our mouths were watering with each bite we took, the gooey melted marshmallows warming our bodies up through the cold breeze of October. I felt like I have come so far along in life.

Being at the age of eighteen and looking back at the event of the surgery, I was able to put the pieces of the puzzle together after so many years. I realized that I couldn't obtain some of the puzzle pieces until I was a grown person with my own experiences. With each year, I unlocked a new level to play and beat. It wasn't until I've experienced it myself that I could understand the complex emotions of stress and anxiety that one could have. It's like getting to know your own taste palette; you won't know if you like something until you try it.

## VII.

I had been doing my homework per usual as my mom came back home from work and her presence filled the house. I didn't go down to greet her right away because I was in the middle of an assignment for my chemistry course that I just wanted to be done with. As she headed upstairs to her room, I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary just yet.

I walked into her room as she was praying, as I heard her prayer my heart slowly started sinking with each word pushing it further down. Waiting for every second to pass by so she could finish her prayers and tell me what was happening.

"Your grandpa had a stroke." As I heard these words come out of my mother's mouth, they echoed into my soul, and I realized I couldn't go back to the simple minded seven-year-old little girl. Words were so jumbled up they couldn't escape my mouth and so were my thoughts. The complexity of my emotions started stirring up like a hot pot that was about to spill from its sides.

It was in that moment that I had felt worry like my grandma did 11 years ago. I knew I only had two options to choose from, I could allow my train to run off the rail track, or I could choose to have faith and push my train to continue on this bumpy journey. I knew that it was the right choice for me to follow the tracks for which my journey is taking me; growing my tree of faith, and watering it at each train station that I encounter.

What I realized that day, is that I had to be an adult. I couldn't choose to have a simple mind again; I had no other choice but to keep moving forward. It was as if life kept pushing me from my back without allowing me to go back to earlier destinations.

## VIII.

*“Our childhood memories are often fragments, brief moments or encounters, which together form the scrapbook of our life.”*

-Edith Eger, The Choice

I understand. I understand now how my thoughts and emotions were as simple as a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a black and white movie. I only knew good or bad, right or wrong, up or down. It was like a two-dimensional cartoon, but as a kid I enjoyed it. Sometimes, the best type of reflection that one could have is when you are looking at an event with a different mindset than the one you had during that time. It provides you with room for interpretation and thought. Memories are like gifts; gifts that everyone receives yet not many utilize.

The moral of the story is that you never stop learning more about your past memories. As we grow older, gain more life experiences, get hurt, get passionate, get inspired, or even get frustrated, we start reflecting more on the memories that we have made. Every thought, every emotion, and every interpretation are keys that open up closed gates of different lenses that can be used to look back at our memories as kids.

## DEAR SEPTEMBER

Izzy McCaffrey

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All summer long, the only thought in my beach-highlighted head was the juicy, tantalizing prospect of finally being free. I was going to George Mason with not even a sliver of a worry. I couldn't wait to live by myself, finally escape my old life, and to make new friends and build relationships that I hoped would last a lifetime. I thought college to be some kind of fairy tale, having been raised on Percy Jackson and even worse, the Harry Potter series, I expected nothing short of a magical summer camp or maybe *7 years* of magic ending in me defeating a world-terrorizing villain with a wand that chose me.

Sadly, there was no real magic. Only the magic we created- a sprinkle of substance abuse and a whole lotta teenage fantasy. Moments in time where all I could do was take a mental picture and tell myself that all my dreams were coming true. It wasn't all my magic, I had the help of friends, a castle called Taylor Hall, and a magnificent carriage to take me to all the balls/frats imaginable.

The first day was a doozy. My mom cried a little and my dad refused to help with the assembly of my *many* Amazon purchases that were *absolute necessities* for my dorm. We hugged, said our good-

byes, and my new, fantastical, adult life began.

Snigdha was supposed to be my roommate until she decided that on campus housing wasn't for her. A decision that turned my dorm room into a single, something that we were both disappointed about until I realized just how much personal space I needed.

She came over with her friend Vismaya and we hung up my disco ball, had a quick dance party, and got down to business.

“What are we doing tonight?” Sniggy's question.

“I have absolutely no plans.” The obvious answer.

“Omg, this girl Sophia moved in today and might have moves.”

“NEW FRIEND!! Snap her right now and tell her to meet us at Taylor- 4400, Izzy can go let her in.”

“Dude, bet.”

And instantly, plans were made. 20 minutes later, Sophia arrived. I wish I remembered the moment a little better because later she would become one of my closest friends. Everyone we met thereafter would ask us how we came to know each other, expecting us to say high school besties or maybe even middle school ones- nope, just two girls looking for fun in a ghost town campus.

Silly Sophia and I quickly became inseparable. Both business majors, both Honors College, and both anxious as hell. The first night I realized that Sophia was my best friend at Mason was a rough one.

We were walking down Sniggy's driveway after her surprise birthday party and she could tell something was up. I was shaking, tearing up, and stone-cold silent. All it takes is those three signs and I know I'm about to have a panic attack. I've struggled with them for years and I'm at the point where I can handle it- alone. But the added presence of a new friend was enough to send me over the edge. A stage 2, easily handled panic attack became a whirlwind 5.

The labored breathing, hot tears, and turning stomach is easily explainable. However, the mental aspect of panic attacks is worse. My brain goes black, every thought becomes dark and the thoughts

come fast, they build and build until a breaking point. *Crack*. Silence in my head and then a smattering of suicidal thoughts, add a dash of guilt and embarrassment for absolutely zero reason and there it is. My brain's perfect panic attack.

I made it to my car and sat down, hoping Sophia wouldn't be weirded out. She wasn't. I tried to explain and realized an explanation wasn't necessary with her. We sat there, me violently, silently sobbing and her rubbing my back and assuring me that it really was all going to be okay. It was.

Sophia, if you ever read this: thank you. Thank you for being the most accepting and kind-hearted person I know and for your unconditional love.

Sarah, Rachel, and Sophia are suitemates- I got them special on a three for one deal. We were always up for something and down for anything, but just being with each other was fun enough as it was.

Wind whipping through our hair, throats hoarsely shouting lyrics to 2010 pop songs we were expressing to the family in the car next to us that we were care-free and cool. 18, going on 30, wide awake in this new city with 16 cents to our names.

My car battery had died earlier and we'd stressfully been mansplained to by our friend on how to correctly jump a car. Not only that, but I had fidgeted with my convertible top for what felt like ages, trying to coax it off, rearranging the nonsense in my trunk until my car acknowledged that it was just right. To let off steam, I sped out of the parking lot, my broken speakers tinnily blasting played out chords as we used my last gallons of gas to keep my car going. Rachel asked to chase the sun, and we did. I spent an hour driving straight on into the boiling gas giant that keeps us alive. The massive lit-up fire ball slowly seeped into a dark purpley-black cloud, the air was cooling down and Sarah complained of the chill, yet I was warm: riding high on friendship and the luscious breeze of fall.

We turned back around and I felt that unexplained joy that can only be found at twilight, a heady, giddy feeling of unadulterated freedom, freedom on one gallon of gas. I tore back into the parking lot and showed the world how fast my car could fly. The surprised screeches

of my friends shot through the night as my little Volkswagen zoomed through the lot and into an open parking spot.

The slam of the car doors echoed through the still, brittle evening and we walked back to the dorm humming happily, and then there was silence. Collectively taking in the feeling of a crisp new night, a weekend of ill-planned and ill-thought-out adventures in front of us, a lifetime of freedom.

Freedom is a feeling that I have found myself constantly chasing. I need the wind on my face and the past at my back. I've realized that the only way to be truly free is to live as yourself. Unapologetically. Ferociously. The people who taught me that life lesson are Hope, Ella, and Lindsey. Collectively referred to as: the boys.

"Lindsey, truth or truth?" It was a new game. Hopped up on skittles and having only had two hours of sleep from the night before, it began.

"Truth."

"What would you do if you really, truly only had three hours left to live?" It was my question.

"Three hours? I've seen the ones where it's twenty-four, three- that's just not enough time."

"Ok well that was the question, so answer the question. Three hours left to live- what are you doing?"

"Ok first I'm visiting my out of state relatives, like the ones in Pennsylvania-"

"You do realize that would take six hours right-" Ella felt the need to interrupt.

"It's fine, she's on her deathbed, they can come to her."

"Thank you. Ok so that's my first hour, I'm seeing my dad and his girlfriend too. Then 30 minutes at the beach-"

"By yourself?" Hope this time.

"Yeah, by myself. And then thirty minutes with the boys, of course."

“THE BOYS!” “LET’S GOOOOO!” “THIRTY WHOLE MINUTES!” We erupted into raucous, rowdy cheering.

“And then an hour with my mom and Andy.”

“AND THEN YOU’RE DEAD.”

I couldn’t tell you who said that, could have been any of us.

“Why was that necessary-”

“Wait, shit. I forgot Lilly.” Lilly was Lindsey’s newest girlfriend.

“Ooooooh, she forgot Lilly poo.”

“Ok we’ll do fifteen with Lilly-”

“And fifteen with the boys?”

“Nah fifteen at the beach by myself, and then fifteen with Lilly.”

“Damn, imagine if we really only had three hours left.” It was now 5:07 AM, I was exhausted and getting teary-eyed.

“If you keep getting sappy, you’ll have three *minutes* left to live.”

“Shuddup.”

“No, you shut up.”

“No, you shuddup.”

“No, you.”

“You-”

“Shut y’all damn mouths.” Lindsey easily cut off the outworn good-natured bickering. “Ok my turn. Hope, truth or truth?”

I had driven to Longwood the afternoon before, gassed up my carriage with the last of my paycheck. It was a three-hour drive to a brand-new place and *WOW* did I feel mature. Mature adult Izzy visiting her adult friends at school.

I actually cried three times on the way there (two possums on the side of the road and what looked like it could have been a housecat) but that is really just beside the point. Stick around, I cry a lot. Something that I used to hate but have *learned* to love. I feel things with

all my heart and since being away, I learned that be it love or sadness, there is no wrong way to express yourself as long as it is true.

I think at this point in my droning, a dedication is in order; to September. Thank you for the freedom, the reflection, the learning experiences- and the fresh starts.

*All my love,*

*Izzy.*

## REGRET AT THE LAST MINUTE

Mackenzie Vivian

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I stared at my pitiful reflection in the blurred windows. The staring contest continued on until I heard my mother's sweet voice drawing me back to reality. Turning my head to face her, I observed the slowly aging rice paper that blanketed the walls. There were little messages and signatures scattered across the faded walls from previous customers that dined at the restaurant. My mother called to me once again, disrupting my wandering eyes.

"Mackenzie, the food is here. Are you alright?"

I nodded my head. But I was not really alright. I was sad. Thoughts about leaving my home left me depressed and rather grey. How could I be alright? I have only been able to experience a culture that is a major part of me for three years.

I have a Korean mother and a white father, making me half Korean and half white. I have lived in the United States for most of my life, moving from place to place because my father was in the military. Yet, my mom has tried her best to make sure my sister and I have had opportunities to understand and learn about our Korean background; however, I was never truly able to comprehend the importance of certain holidays, foods, and mannerisms until my dad was finally stationed back to South Korea, giving my sister and I the

opportunity to learn firsthand about the culture and history.

The smell from the food that had finally arrived shook me out of my thoughts. I glanced around the table and in front of me sat the steaming hot kimchi stew I had ordered. The scent of the pork and kimchi teased me and caused my mouth to start watering. I stared at my family at the table to see if they were ready to say grace so that we could eat the delicious meals prepared for us. We bowed our heads, and gave our thanks for the food we were about to eat, and for the great fortune to live in Seoul, South Korea for three years. Lifting my head, I tried to focus more on the food and the present instead of wallowing on what I wish I had done differently while I was living in Korea.

I remembered a conversation I had with my dad a couple days before. I call it a conversation, but it seemed more like a small lecture when I think about it. Pouting, I told my dad how upset I was about leaving Korea, and how badly I did not want to leave and wanted to stay. He furrowed his brows and looked down at me with eyes that were calling me a liar. All he had to say was, “Mackenzie. The only thing you’re worried about leaving behind is your friends. While we have been here you never took the opportunity to explore your mother’s culture or learn anything about the history here. I know more than you do. You have your grandparents and uncle here too and you made no effort to spend time with them unless you absolutely had to...”

I felt myself fill with anger and disappointment as I tried to argue back to my father that what he believed was not the case at all for me. That he was in fact, completely wrong. But when I take the time to recall what I had done to make more connections between myself and my mom’s culture, I can think of nothing I did the three years I was living in the beautiful city of Seoul.

Taking a spoonful of my hot stew, I brought myself back to reality. I once again began to stare blankly ahead of myself as I observed the way the fatty pork had started to melt in my mouth. I sighed, taking a bite of steaming, hot rice, and some of the kimchi stew broth, reflecting on how much I allowed myself to be influenced by my friends in-

stead of just letting myself enjoy the opportunities made available for me to learn more about South Korean culture. As much as I hate to admit it, my friends really were the deciding factor for a multitude of activities and events that occurred while I lived in Korea. My parents would suggest I attend a class, or visit certain places, and I would casually mention it to my friends to see what they had to say about it, and most of the time they would talk about how boring they find that occasion, or how lame it is; and because they had no appreciation for the country they were living in, I found myself not appreciating the country that is essentially a huge part of me.

I was pulled back to reality once again, but this time, by my father. “Mackjo– why aren’t you eating your food?”

“I am, I am. I’m just taking my time, not inhaling it like the rest of you. I take my time and *savor* the flavors.”

My dad gave a lighthearted chuckle and shook his head at me as he continued to eat his food. I gave a small smile and continued to eat, still regretting the choices I made while I was here because I was not sure when I would be able to come back. Once again, I became lost in my thoughts. I felt tears beginning to form in my eyes, and with a shaky breath, I managed to keep them from falling down my face. I did not want my parents to worry, and I most definitely did not want to cry like a baby in public.

The possibility of not being able to come back and see the place I now consider to be my home, was the worst thing that could ever happen to me. I had to wait at least ten years before I finally got to visit the country where my mom was born and raised, and where my parents met each other and fell in love. The three years I spent in Korea went by faster than lightning and I was not prepared for that. I stared blankly at the somewhat bubbling stew in front of me, observing the colors present– the broth was a mix between orange and red, a color combination commonly used to depict anger, which was one of the emotions I was experiencing. My sadness and regret transitioned to frustration and annoyance with myself. I hated myself for not taking advantage of the opportunities handed to me while I

lived in Korea.

Six years later, as I sit in the Johnson Center at George Mason University listening to “Sofia” by Clairo, and reflecting on the thoughts and emotions that my fifteen-year-old self had, I realize I feel a bit different now than when I was younger. Of course, I still feel extreme regret and sadness, but I am not as distraught. In fact, I have been planning for the next time I go back to Korea. I have even been taking more time in studying the history and culture, as well as trying my best to learn the language. I often ruminate on what I can do differently now that I am older, instead of just stressing myself with so much anguish over my decisions in the past.

Every time I decide to write about my time in Korea, I always find myself coming back to this specific memory. For some reason I can never forget the restaurant we ate in a couple days before we left. The image of the faded rice wallpaper, the mouthwatering smell of the kimchi stew, the sound of my mom’s voice calling for my attention, the way the pork melted in my mouth as my thoughts wandered, asking myself when I thought I would be able to come back and why I decided to mess around more with my friends, than learn about my Korean background and spend time with my extended family.

It has been just about six years since I was last in South Korea. The emotions I had when I first left, still reside within me, but have evolved in a way where I just think about what I will do differently to make up for my past mistakes. Every day I ponder about what I could have done differently that could have changed my experience when living there. I think about how when I finally go back to visit, how I will take the opportunity to take more pictures of the city lights, take in the scent of the air, watch the hustle and bustle of the people, gaze in awe at the beautiful architecture of the past, gain a better understanding of the culture in general, and spend more time with my Korean grandparents before they get too old.

Instead of dwelling too much on the past, I have been trying to focus more on the present and making plans for the future, so I have no regrets. I will not find myself moping over what I could have done differently because I will have done exactly what I should have and

wanted to do. I will find myself back in my mother's home country, surrounded by the culture that *is* me.

## THE AUDACITY TO DREAM

Jatsuka Mikaela Pozo

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### *E·qui·fi·na·li·ty*

/ ěkwəfɪˈnalɪteē /

*noun*

1. [In complex systems] maintains that there are multiple pathways to an end.

**E***quifinality* focuses on pathways instead of ends, highlighting the validity of each possibility. Sitting idly above what used to be burial grounds, cocooned by the red oak, I ponder the path I am journeying on. A path leading to the end of a joyous life, laced with an ideal I held onto since I was a child: a state of happiness and purpose. It becomes hard to brainstorm all the possible journeys when I don't know the details of the end I aspire towards. I try to envision my future but I come up with nothing. The distance between where I am and where I want to be elongates. I am left musing what used to be.

As a child, I favored ladders. Its linearity was simple yet practical and with each rung you were directed to a predetermined destination. The ladder became a blueprint to my future. It aligned with what I have been told all my life: work hard and you'll have a good life. The implication being that that path would be a linear step by step process. It seemed like a simple formula to follow.

When I was six, my love for ladders took the form of mathematical operations. It was a rainy day in Bolivia, my first home, and I charged towards the flooded parts of the streets as we — my mom, cousin, and I — rushed to catch the *Trufi*, a kind of taxi. I felt emboldened by my mischief for my mom was too occupied with getting us swiftly away from the rain to scold me.

It wasn't long before we were met with the warmth of the heater and the relieved faces of all the other passengers who were able to make it inside before being fully drenched. We would be making the forty-minute drive from the city, where my school was, to the small province where we lived. I squirmed in my seat as the minutes seemed to pass like hours. The teacher in my mother patiently observed and quickly figured out an activity that we could do.

“What is two times eight?” she commanded.

“Sixteen,” I grinned.

“Six times seven?”

“Forty-two.”

“Eight times nine?”

“Seventy-two.”

The conversational pauses resembled the clicking sound of a metronome. Our back and forth created a beautiful rhythmic song. With each question, I grew more confident.

“What is twelve times eleven?”

“One hundred thirty-two.”

“Good job, mi amor.”

“¡Gracias, mamá!”

which was my way of saying back, I love you.

Being quizzed on the multiplication table may not sound particularly appealing but it was one of the few moments we shared, and I cherished every crumb of our time together. Up to this point, I had

been living with my grandparents in Bolivia, while my mom worked, saving money, in the United States. I hadn't seen her in years, and here she was teaching me the multiplication table on the *Trufi*. From that day forward, I fell in love with math for it reminded me of my mother. Most importantly, I understood math.

My love for math was rooted in its seeming linearity: its easy discernibility and objectivity. Thus, lingering complex feelings grounded in a culmination of events that don't have a clear beginning or end are difficult for me to grapple with. They are hard to wrestle with because (1) noticing, separating, and naming all the feelings at play is a tumultuous task; (2) figuring out the origin of those emotions can be nearly impossible when they seem so imbedded into your life as if there wasn't a moment in which you didn't feel that way; (3) they are easily reaffirmed, exasperated, and highlighted by new occurrences which allow them to continue lingering.

There are many pieces of my life that I have yet to reconcile with or understand their impact. Yet, through writing I hope to try to make sense of some of them. To understand how the loss of something you never had can be so damaging. A tragedy of silence.

I was eight when I listened to my father's voice. Outside the darkened windows, the moon shone brightly and the wind howled at its beauty. My father answered the phone. Words eagerly formed in my head detailing everything that had happened in the past 8 years of my life. Descriptions of my friends, my school, my dreams, and the journey we went on to get to the United States. For the first time I was able to place a voice to the image I had created in my mind, but nothing more.

I was too occupied with forming the right sentences that I forgot to ask all the questions that had been building up in me for years: why have you never called? where have you been? do you love me? All my thoughts and feelings were smothered by the love I had for this stranger — though, unrequited. Our call lasted 5 minutes at most. He left me with a promise: "*Les voy a volver a llamar.*" I believed him. I kept those words close to my heart as the silence extended past the

falling leaves and the sprouting tulips. Silence was something I was accustomed to. I knew I could wait.

It was now the eighth year of this silent waiting game. I saw my mom crying but I didn't know why. She later informed me that my father had died in a car accident. Just then, his death put an end to this silent waiting game. And all at once, I felt everything: anger, hurt, loneliness, and rejection. It's kind of ridiculous to feel rejected but I did. I felt naked, as if his death had uncovered something I feared about myself—that I was unlovable. I still don't know if he ever loved me. His actions surely did not show it. I cried that day not for the loss of a father. After all, he was only a stranger to me. I cried for the unspoken: all the unanswered questions, missed conversations, never-formalized I love you's, and harbored fatherly advice. The tragedy was not his death, it was his silence, now permanent. I'd always imagined meeting my father, perhaps at a coffee shop. I would have an established career and I would finally get an explanation. I would be able to show him how amazing I am and he would regret not loving me. If only I set my pride aside, if only I wasn't afraid, I would have looked harder. I would have forced closure and not waited for a day in my early 30s to really tell him how he made me feel, how his avoidance, his absence hurt me. But now I am only left with the silence. I am left with his first and final words: "*Les voy a volver a llamar.*"

Sometimes in the mornings I see a ghost. Each time leaving me more bereft. My tawny skin reflected back at me from the placid mirror. Eyeing the person in front of me, I don't recognize her. I get lost among the curves of her cheekbones and the barren craters of her eyes. My mom makes it her mission to remind me that I am my father's daughter. It's her attempts at creating closeness between me and him. My father decided to make my resemblance to him my birthright. I've never met or seen an image of him and yet I mirror his mannerisms. I share a striking resemblance with him. It's my eternal inheritance. I haven't been able to conclude if it is endearing or cruel. Is it the universe's way of giving me what I always wanted: a piece of my father? Or is it an eternal reminder of his silence?

For a long time, it was easier to view my father in absolutes: as a man who never loved, who was cowardly, and who lacked empathy. It was easier for me to live in binaries of good and evil, turning a blind eye to the greyness of the world. I knew so little about my father, and yet he was my big bad wolf: evil personified. He had to be. Rarely did I ask what he was like. Maybe I was afraid to learn that he was loving, empathic, and noble. It would mean he was all of those things to everyone but me. It would mean that I was the reason for the silence, the avoidance, the indifference. I couldn't bear to carry that guilt and shame, and yet deep down I believed it. An unspoken truth, a heaviness, that cloaked my existence.

The complexities that drive people's behaviors and define their identity puzzled me. It defied the binaries dominating my beliefs. I retreated to my math classes: a place I found comfort and familiarity. A place that had my mother's love and pride imprinted in it. I could count on the fact that at the end of the day, there would be clear answers and designated pathways to get to them. I was eased by the notion that at any moment I could find out if I was right or wrong. Of course, this is more reflective of the way that math is taught in school. As I learned about the complexities of math, I learned about the creativity that it required. The once rigid, stable, definitive tool was as complex as everything else: people, morality, the world.

Whenever I felt lost, I looked back to my blueprint. It was the only way I knew how to live, how to view, how to think. When I would notice my blueprint's practicality eroding, I would swiftly replace the faulty rungs or even the ladder entirely, with a stronger, reliable rung or ladder. Its linearity intact. I never stopped to consider that what was causing the eroding was the linear structure itself, for no matter how sturdy its replacement was, it inevitably deteriorated. Only now have I started questioning its linearity. How for these past 18 years, it has limited my perspective by nullifying and negating coexistence, variety, and complexity. All for the sake of repelling ambiguity and upholding conformity.

I held onto my blueprint coming to the United States. Like many other immigrants, I believed in the American dream. I thought that with hard work I would be able to reach it. I bought into the belief that everyone had the same chance at reaching that dream. But slowly, through daily disappointments, and through seeing the social and political disparities, I knew that was not true. I soon realized that my dreams of grandeur, of achieving the glamorous, emerald green light across the river that separated me and this country, were supported by a blind faith in meritocracy that turned out to be a myth. This became my crisis of faith. I fear that privilege will always trump hard work. Sometimes I hear arguments that overemphasize individual achievement, echoing sentiments of “needing to pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” and I wonder if I am to blame for not “achieving.” I wonder if what they say is true, that I am just bitter. I am tired of blaming myself and feeling like an imposter. I am tired of trying to be the exception and “respectable” just to be accepted in this country. I have given too much of myself that at times I feel like I am nothing at all. Yet, it is never enough.

I’ve become hesitant to advance with certainty. Hadn’t it been unfair of me to simplify my father to singular terms? I knew my estranged father had another family and even though he might not have loved me, surely, he loved them. Surely, he was a good man, at least in their eyes. Doesn’t that show the “goodness” in him?

I am not so sure about anything anymore. What happened to the little girl who dreamed of becoming a president, singer, author, or lawyer? What happened to her certainty and conviction? Many things perhaps, but that doesn’t matter anymore. I have spent years thinking about when I became so unsure and afraid — maybe I was always afraid.

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Once again, I find myself under this red oak, pondering my life almost to oblivion. I like this red oak for, like a catholic confessional, it makes no judgment or asks anything of me. It keeps my secrets etched onto its bark. Close to this red oak lies another park. There, I drift among the babbles of the pond, the laughter of small children, and the rustling leaves. I watch the waterlilies sink, slowly veiled by murky waters. A painfully beautiful spectacle. I can see myself in the waterlilies who gracefully sprawl their bodies over the surface of the water, only to then give in to the cold, merciless fall. Am I sinking too? Or am I already submerged, lost, stranded, departed into an abyss? Have I surrendered to the quietude and solitude of this inky world?

I can't shake these questions away. I don't know what I dream about anymore. Do I even believe in dreams? If meritocracy is dead, is strength alone enough to overcome it? Or will I once again be disappointed in trying to fight it? I see myself giving in to disillusion and letting the daily disappointments chip away at me until I am too hollowed out to protest. In a last attempt to flicker hope within myself, I have to ask: is it possible to dream with your eyes open? To know that privilege reigns and that inequality plagues but also dare to dream that one can make a difference. Couldn't I hold onto a contradiction? A contradiction that washes all my experiences and that of those who have come before over me as proof that to dream is a dangerous game, yet have the audacity to persist. Not out of delusion but out of hope.

I don't know what difference I will make in this world but if I learned anything about *equifinality* it is that there are multiple paths to an end. With this in mind, I thrust forward into the unknown.

# 12

## IF I COULD TURN BACK TIME

Zita Ribeiro

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December 2020

The letter has been sitting in my desk drawer for over two months. The little winged angel still jeers at me every time I reach for my erasers. Eventually I stopped opening it. Opting to slide my hand in, feeling for objects the way a doctor searches without eyes for the crowning of the baby's head. The way an abuser fixates on a point above their victims, avoiding their eyes. The truth of it is I'm scared to send it. He's dead. I can still feel his warm embrace lifting me at the door of their house, obstructed by a few plastic tubes. His hair once black has turned silver, almost reflective now, and the weight that he had carried on his body melted off of him until only a skeleton remained underneath. I can imagine the old ladies at church and the middle-aged men surreptitiously asking for his dieting rituals, wanting to know the secret to weight loss. Complementing the loss of every pound. Not knowing that his fastly fading weight was a sign he was disappearing, being claimed by God, cashing in his pound of flesh. But how can I face the death of a man without holding myself accountable for the words that precipitated his death?

March 2010

He sat at the oak dining table. Our dining table, overflowing with school projects and textbooks, had been wiped clean. I had been delegated begrudgingly to wipe the table for his arrival, soothing the scratched and cratered surface with orange oil. Pressing a worn washcloth over the surface, rubbing out the stains I pondered about the importance of the man that had caused this flurry of domestic motion. It was a rarity we had visitors. I had spent that morning having breakfast with Mr. Clean erasers, tasked to cover over green crayon and pencil marks on the walls I and others had put there many years ago. Trying to place a name to a face, only a black goatee surfaced from the fog. It may have been a rarity to have visitors but grumbling to myself, I couldn't be gladder to have been antisocial that day. My brother had been tasked to do the vacuuming, I had been designated the responsibility to straighten up the place, while my dad had claimed 'management' directing the troops.

When the car pulled up, a procession had been assembled ready to carry in suitcases and luggage. The Minniears had six children, but on this trip only Brianna, Josiah and Caleb had come. Pop had always made it a point to be particularly difficult when we had relatives, less so when they were his own, or family friends over to the house. After the initial eruption of 'Mt. Vesuvius', he switched to stewing and bubbling making his demeanor even more meddlesome while Mom and I cleaned the house and cooked. But on this occasion, he hadn't said a word. In fact, he had spurred on efforts for the house to be cleaner, going so far as to have us paint over the marks on the walls surveying the unkempt areas in his loosely wrapped plaid lungi and stained t-shirt. Who was this man who had the power to make Pop so eerily pleasant? Sitting at the oak table in his dusky blue button and slacks, his black hair well combed and his goatee glistening with wax, he smiled at me. So, this was Pastor Minniear.

We crept upstairs, Caleb in the front and I in the rear. Pressing the silver pack of 7 up cherry gum in his hands more tightly, we slipped into the bunk bed room. Josiah, half asleep sprawled out on the

bottom bunk dangled with one hand open invitingly over the edge of the bed. Smothering our eight-year-old giggles, we closed his fingers around the stick of gum and pulled. Screaming like a banshee he got up and chased us down the stairs, only to find we had closed ourselves behind a locked door. Downstairs adult laughter wafted upstairs, mingled along with the scent of pancakes and sausage. The mischief spread like electricity. Our hairs standing on end. We shocked each other, and were mentally shocked ourselves when Dave received a bolt and emitted a low chuckle. We knew better than to do that to Pop— we would have seen and felt sparks fly.

August 2020

We had been driving for 8 hours straight. Pinned between an ornate Thai paper lamp and an oil pastel painting, I focused on flexing my feet under Niles' leather seat. The cross-country trip to Colorado had just begun and moving all of my sister's belongings proved to be more difficult than anticipated. As we lurched over the dusty highway the acid bubbling in my stomach shot upwards painfully. Coughing into a tissue, the foaming liquid seeping through my fingers I struggled to gasp air. Thankfully, Tevy had pulled over to tank up gas at a nearby truck stop. The next moments passed by in a blur. The burning in my stomach had been pushed mentally aside.

“Hi, mom”.

“Hey Tevy, sorry to bother you while you're on the road, but Dave sent me a text this morning. Apparently, there was a riot in Dublin near the hotel so we are changing our place to the Quality Inn.”

“Okay mom, should we wait outside for you or do you want us to check in?”

“Just go ahead and check in”

“Okay, Bye mom”

“See you soon, Tevy”.

We have been huddled together outside, breathing in the blue sky,

bathing in the sun. There is an unspoken agreement to stay longer, letting the wind ruffle our hair and smell the mid-August leaves. I can feel the new candy apple car smell being rinsed off me. But I can't stay, I am going back to the stale indoor air. Muscles aching, I wrapped myself in the musty sheets and closed my eyes, knowing that I had only an hour before we had to drive to the Minniear's. Why couldn't we go later in the evening? But there was a curfew. If we didn't get back to the hotel by 9:30 PM that night we would be arrested for breaking quarantine restrictions. So begrudgingly I got back in the car again, speeding towards Columbus. Conjuring an image of Dave sitting at my dining table and his Jack-Sprat wife Kim, only thicker than a pencil during pregnancy I couldn't help but imagine if they had changed. In my mind's eye they looked the same.

"Hello sweetheart" Dave gasped. My stomach dropped and I could feel the blood filling my mouth. I opened my mouth to say something but it had ironically gone dry.

"Hi" was all I managed to parse out, before "What happened?" He was anchored to the porch by a toga of green tubes. Bound by medical house arrest.

"Well, huh I was recently huh diagnosed huh with huh a lung disease huh called pulmonary huh fibrosis huh." Taking a moment to catch his breath, and adjusting the nasal cannula he said "come inside, we made huh chili" "by we huh, of course I mean huh Kim and Jessica" he chortled. "Oh, you can huh take off the mask huh." Feeling conflicted between his safety and wanting him to see my face I hesitantly asked "are you sure?"

"Of course, huh" and gently he removed the mask from behind my ears. His goatee is gone now, instead molding into a shaggy neck beard. Squeezing the air out of me I feel his stubble graze my cheek, "You have huh, really grown up huh into a beautiful huh young woman." Feeling the tears pricking my eyes I blinked rapidly and smiled. Has it really been ten years? Helping to carry and disentangle his oxygen tubes, the rest of my family piled into the house. The aroma of chili from the pots on the stove mingled with the politics until we

gathered around the table clasping hands to pray.

“Dear huh Heavenly Father, huh protect Tevy on her huh journey to huh Colorado...” my stomach sank. Fingers tightening around Kim and Jessica’s hands, I sent a morse code message to God. Please let him live. I felt compelled to say it. Opening my mouth quickly before it was too late, I blurted “and keep Pastor Dave, safe from Coronavirus during this time.” Little did I know that I had predicted his soon to be death. Sitting on one corner of the crowded wooden table, positive energy filling my body, I gently reached for the platter of bread. Catching my instinct, he winked at me and passed me a large piece, ripping off a hunk for himself. Passing a bowl of olive and garlic sauce. He dipped his piece of french bread in, inviting me to dip my bread into the bowl. Like the way Judas had betrayed Jesus, my mouth had betrayed him.

September 2020

Only a month later Dave Minniear contracted Coronavirus. That morning I did something in my dorm room I have never done. I humbled myself before God with my body. I got down on my hands and knees on the freshly vacuumed floor and I prayed like never before. I begged God to save him. I pleaded God not to take him from us. I banged my fists on the ground knocking on heaven’s door. I even begged him, looking back at it shamefully, to take my own father instead. I drew an angel to protect him and wrote a letter to him telling him I was praying for his good health. At first it looked hopeful. After two weeks in the Ohio State ICU, he was transferred off of a ventilator. Spirits lifted, I prayed less fervently, and became complacent, believing he would make it. He had after all, asked for pizza and had even gone through speech and physical therapy. And then I received another text from my brother, Sergio, “Did you check CaringBridge?” Heart beating, I clicked on his picture, and skimmed the posts till I got to the bottom. Hospice Care. He passed away tossing and turning restlessly in his sleep, God only knows what angels he wrestled. I didn’t even go to his funeral. I had the

opportunity but I made excuses. First it was I was too busy, I had an exam, but the truth is I am ashamed. I didn't even know what I would say.

I thought God didn't hear me, but he was listening. Some might say it's the delusional side of me wanting the validation of a higher being, but I say the Lord works in wondrous ways-- he has exposed my fear. I will conquer it in time.



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## CONTRIBUTORS

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