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Letter from the Editors

These past couple of years have been an extremely challenging one for all of us, and for our teens it has been particularly disruptive. Teens need stability and guidance – a lifeline, if you will. They also need outlets for expression, opportunities to try new things, and time to reflect on all that they are thinking and feeling — that is, a break.

Welcome to Lines & Breaks, a brand-new online literary journal with creative writing from WriteGirl teens and alums.

Lines & Breaks showcases the writing that can emerge from the minds of teens, if you create an inspiring environment where they can create. It offers a glimpse into the hearts and lives of WriteGirl teens as they share their stories and views on identity, family, relationships, women, culture, garlic knots, vaccines, and rocks with hopes and dreams. There is humor, anguish, tenderness, frustration and love — a tapestry of emotions and perspectives.

We have divided this literary journal into sections by genre, mirroring the WriteGirl season, where each month focuses on a different form. From poetry and prose to scenes and songs, WriteGirl teens explore a wide range of styles for their ideas, and we love how their individual voices soar on every page of this website, inspiring all of us with the power of the pen.

– Keren Taylor, Executive Director, and the editors of Lines & Breaks
Letter from a WriteGirl Teen

Every writer has gone through writer’s block. It may be due to lacking motivation, though your head is full of pockets of inspiration for the next great leg of your writing journey. Or it may be due to having motivation but lacking inspiration, perhaps because of the trying times of the year or a lingering blankness in the recesses of your mind.

That’s why, with my battered Les Misérables notebook in hand, I’m always excited to attend the virtual workshops at WriteGirl: I want to feel inspired again.

WriteGirl has the same feeling of welcome and warmth even though the workshop now takes place behind a screen. Executive Director Keren Taylor starts us off with a humor-laced monologue and then a challenge. For example, try to make an ancestor your muse, whether it be an ancestor from outside, like the apple tree hidden in the corner of your backyard, or one of your human ancestors, like a great-grandmother.

Then we go into breakout rooms dedicated to different topics — one for comedy and one for romance, for example — where I realize that romance doesn’t have to be between two people: it can refer to the relationship between two best friends or the relationship between a character and themselves. Additionally, romance doesn’t have to stand alone: you can merge it with comedy to make a rom com or even add it to a work of mystery.

At the end of the day, I leave the workshop with a bolt of inspiration pricking behind my eyelids, making me feel almost euphoric. There is nothing in the world like a WriteGirl workshop, and a quote by Margaret Atwood helps remind me of that: “A word after a word after a word is power.”

– WriteGirl Mentee Sam Krug, age 17
Poetry
Rachel Alarcio, age 20 (alum)

I wrote this as part of the "Becoming" WriteGirl workshop. It was inspired by the ambient music played as part of a writing activity. I wanted to play with repetition as well as with themes of evolution and paying tribute to our collective past as humanity.

Ancestral Evolution

the songs of your ancestors wrap themselves around your heart as a parental embrace, and you become and you become and you become
Eve (Cherry) Awad, age 16

My dad always takes pictures and has done so throughout my childhood, so we have a hallway in our house full of pictures of me and my sibling when we were little, and I always think to myself that I look so different.

Photos

Walking down a hallway framed with pictures
moments of you
your past on glossy paper, hung up and displayed
you can't recognize it
and you think to yourself
“How I've changed”
Ari Benor, age 13

This poem, written during a WriteGirl poetry workshop, is about how I found my place in the LGBTQIA+ community.

Questions, or Answers?

A straight girl.

It was an identity, a thing of pride, almost. But then it hit me — what if I like girls too?

A gay girl.

It was my identity, a thing of pride, even though it was a secret thing of pride. But then it hit me — what if I’m not a girl?

A question.

Wrapped into a cocoon with my blanket on the couch, looking up terms and labels and genders and identities.

A question.

What if I’m not a girl and not a boy but I still like girls? What’s that called? What if I’m neither and both? What if one day this fits and the next it doesn’t?

A question.

I am a stream, flowing from puddle to puddle. I am fluid. I am a bird. Never staying in one place. Always moving, flapping, landing, flying. What is that called?

A question.

Nonbinary? Agender? Girl? It switches every day. How do I make sense of this cluster-clump that is me?

A question.

Gender stresses me out. I think I’ll take a break for now.

A question.
Taking stock of who I am and who I like. Girls, genderqueer people, everyone in between. Biromantic?

A question.

Do I have to keep thinking about this? Doing research everyday? Yesterday it was they/them. Three days ago was she/her. Two days ago it was no pronouns. Today, nothing feels right. What even is “right?”

A question.

Taking stock of who I like. Girls, boys, everyone in between. I don’t prefer any. Panromantic? Omniromantic?

A question.

I am a stream, flowing from puddle to puddle. I am fluid. I am a bird. Never staying in one place. Always moving, flapping, landing, flying. What is that called? Genderfluid?

A question.

Everything is a question. I am a question. Who isn’t a question?

A question.

Genderfae panromantic. Why did I spend so long thinking about that? It has nothing to do with my personality. Those thoughts swirling in my head like murky water. It’s been answered. So why am I still so different? I wonder if anyone else has these rolling questions.

An answer?

The people in my grade all seem to fit into these stereotypes, categories. Girl or Boy. Straight. Neurotypical. Where’s the “other” button?

Three people.

Two other people, a group, welcome a new member, me. Together we form the “other” button. All other twenty-four people in my grade are roped into Girl or Boy, Straight, Neurotypical. No room for questions. But we three, we are the questions.

A fourth.

We make room for a fourth, who opened up about their questioning. Now we have a group. To talk freely, to be in a corner together instead of alone. To have someone to talk to during recess instead of reading and drawing. We can not belong, together, and laugh about it without being laughed at.

Questions, or answers?
Emily Burton, age 24 (alum)

I wrote this poem after watching the “Becoming” podcast about the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County. My mother used to take me to the museum and the La Brea Tar Pits when I was struggling the most with my dyslexia, because science was one of the few things I always wanted to read about.

Preserved in the Asphalt

I scraped my knees playing alone on the asphalt of the Valley so you carried me to La Brea, walked me through the seeps and the spills of the place where it all began.

And I looked into your eyes and I looked into the remains of the Pleistocene and you held me a little closer and you told me: there will always be a soul here if you go looking.
Hritika Chaturvedi, age 18 (alum)

I have moved to and from nine different residencies across the world due to my father’s occupation as a software engineer. As can be presumed, my travels have more or less shaped who I am. Having finally settled down in the past month, I recently had the opportunity to reflect on my experiences as an itinerant of sorts.

Collage

We used to belong to the humid months of India, sitting in our Mumbai home, on marble tiles reminiscent of chocolate ganache. The cotton candy man was well awaited; we’d eat all three flavors, the sun’s rays penetrating the plastic wrap, punctuating the crystals of sugar covering my lips. Laughter flooded the room as beads of sweat descended our foreheads. The sky smiled in pink, the clouds in orange. The traffic on the main street became a background buzz. We’d talk until the palm trees rustled to silence us and the wind tickled us to sleep.

The wind became stale as planes became the norm. We traveled from palm trees to refreshing pines. We’d meet my friend, Adjustment, every two or three years as a new residency became a reality. From the harsh winters of Stockholm to the sweet spring of Massachusetts, my father’s occupation to thank. My Indian culture had been set in stone, but Cheetos dust replaced the sugar on my lips.

Today, we sit in uncertain stability, four years at the same address. Suitcases stay in the garage, having withstood the test. Friends aren’t of a temporary bond, with new memories forming in one institution at last. Studies, sleep and stress have become large portions of the schedule. It is only once in a while that I look up to notice the swaying palm trees. Now of a different type, from different seeds, in a different land. The sky still turns a tranquil pink, quickly becoming the day closer to the next deadline. Passion, identity and growth have become the truth. A sense of maturity has taken place,
as the laughter and home-cooked meals remain.
The talk is of a different kind and aspirations carry weight
It is a satisfying joy,
going tired to sleep.
One of the many things that have persisted is the wind tickling at my feet.
Ndolé

Boom. Boom.  
A clap of thunder.  
We’re leaving “Africa on the Bay” —  
the little African store in Tampa  
with skin-bleaching cream and canned sardines  
next to a Yoruba religious store —  
heading home  
where my grandmother  
waits on the couch, watching Nigerian films —  
even though we’re Cameroonian.

Drip. Drop.  
Downpour follows.  
I take it as a sign:  
We — my sister and I — are meant to cook  
for the first time  
on this day  
a meal from our Fatherland.  
From the Atlantic shores our toes have yet to take a dip in  
to the tea and coffee leaves on our great-grandfather’s old farm  
we have not yet grasped.  
I think of palm trees,  
mosquitoes,  
waterfalls,  
conversations in Bassa or Douala.  
Distinct markings of a country I have yet to touch  
and that colonizers of centuries ago failed to understand and respect.  
Drip. Drop.

We come home and I find my grandmother at the kitchen counter:  
cooking commences.
She lists the ingredients using her fingers.
I use my fingers to memorize things too.
Onions and celery. Bell pepper. Plantains.
She tells me to take notes.

Click. Click.
My sister's neon green acrylics tap against the countertop.
Chop. Chop.
I finish cutting the onions and celery.
Tsk. Tsk.
"The onions are too big," she tells me.
I chop chop chop again.
Dad stands in the corner
with his arms crossed and an impish smirk on his face.
"You're doing it wrong," he says.
She waves him away like he's a seabird.
"Mine is better," he insists.
We tell him to leave the kitchen
— he doesn't.

The plantains are boiling in a pot
instead of frying in a pan like I'm used to.
In one pan, a red paste is sizzling;
in another, garlic and ginger paste are heating up.
The shrimp is intermingled with the celery and onion,
and suddenly the kitchen is a melody of savory flavor molecules
floating in the air.
My mouth waters when I sniff.
"We wait now," she says.
"African cooking takes a lot of time."
My stomach grumbles.
I want to dig my teeth into the mushy plantains,
tear the shells off the little shrimp
and take another bite of that barracuda
that tastes like Heaven in my mouth.
"You like cuda?" Dad asks and I nod.
"I'll pack some for you to take back to L.A.," he promises.

Grandma stirs one of the pots and nods: "It's time."
My sister and I watch, in awe, shock, surprise
as the contents from every pot and pan
are dumped into the biggest pot on the stove
then stirred by my grandma.

My sister and I share a look of unease:
our weak Western palates are accustomed
to the division and separation of food.
As I grab a bowl and help myself to a modest serving,
I hope that I will like it
and tell myself that I will because it’s from my Fatherland.
It’s ndolé: the national meal.
What hamburgers and apple pie are to America.

Grandma leads us in grace.
Though my relationship with God is tricky,
I bow my head and close my eyes anyway.
She thanks God for this meal,
for her grandchildren,
our safety,
our interest in learning about our culture.

I take my first bite —
bitter leaf is foreign to my taste buds
and will take more than one meal to get used to.
My dad hums.
I picture him as a youth
coming home from boarding school on a weekend
and devouring a bowl of ndolé prepared by his mami.

Grandma can tell that the meal
isn’t “hitting the spot” — as we say in America.
I feel like a fraud,
an imposter,
like this identity,
this culture I was born into isn’t mine.
That I’m not worthy,
Too American
Too Western
Too confused …

“All that matters to me,” she interrupts my feelings of insecurity,
“is that my grandkids have learned
and tried the food of their father’s country.
That’s what makes me happy.”

I wrap my arms around her after I’ve finished eating,
clinging to her as if I’m a boat and she’s the anchor.
I can feel the energy of love transferring from her to me
as warmth.
I never want to let her go.
I want to cry, out of intense feeling,
but I don’t.
The sky is weeping for me
as the downpour continues outside the window,
adding moisture to the swamplands
just as it does to the tropical landscapes of Cameroon.
Drip. Drop.

Though I may be an ocean away from my Fatherland,
the tether between us is deeper than distance and ndolé.
Eden Hirsch, age 16

I wrote this poem about a recent outing that made me feel very nostalgic. I scribbled down my first thoughts about the experience while driving home, but it was completed in my room later as I was reflecting.

Like They Used To

I went to the pier for the first time in months
As I had every week for multiple years in the past

Families stood mask-less, standing side by side
Idolizing breakdancers and ignoring proselytizers
The salty brine of ocean air
Hidden only by the saccharine smell of churro-scented vape smoke

And things felt like they used to

In this pocket of a pier
The pandemic did not exist

Carrying a spare mask in your pocket
Will be seen as abnormal a habit
As storing spare cash in ice trays
Like after the Great Depression

There will be a time when this is over
And we will stand shoulder to shoulder
Breathing in each other’s churro-scented vape smoke
I wrote this poem for an assignment called “I Am” back in ninth grade. I am a stranger to poetry, so I was very happy when my teacher reached out to me about it now, in my junior year, saying it remains her favorite.

I Am an Armenian Girl

I am an Armenian girl, spirited but broken-hearted
I wonder how many people suffered for me to be where I am today
I hear the crying of a million-and-a-half souls, longing for life
I see my country’s lost mountains whose beauty was taken
I want to restore my homeland of its losses
I am an Armenian girl, spirited but broken-hearted

I pretend that I don’t belong to the diaspora, and that I can only call Armenia home
I feel like a lost dog who knows the way homeward, but just can’t get there
I touch the branches of the pomegranate trees dancing in the village fields
I worry that others will never get to see the beauty of my homeland
I cry when I remember that I am 7,000 miles away
I am an Armenian girl, spirited but broken-hearted

I understand why I’m in Los Angeles today
I say I don’t belong here in this melting pot of cultures
I dream of moving and spending the rest of my life in Armenia
I try to support my brothers and sisters there from my California home
I hope to feel whole when I arrive there
I am an Armenian girl, spirited but broken-hearted
Nia Johnson, age 17

This poem was written as part of the Ofrenda Community Project, a collaboration with the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County. The inspiration piece was the Tree of Origin, which represents life, growth and wisdom.

Family Trees

Grandma

The tree
Our lemon tree
Its roots buried into this country
When the ships came
Bringing our seed in chains
The gardeners with whips in their hands
But through that seed
A resilient and proud tree has grown
It has resisted:
Time
Whips
Chains
Masters
People
It has stayed strong
He is one of the many lemons
Strong skin
Full of flavor
Life tried to make him bitter
But like the rest of the lemons
He resisted
Grew
Became sweet
Added another branch

Gung Gung

The tree
Our orange tree
Is just a sapling in this country
We, the seed, have sailed here
With hopes and dreams
Leaving everything behind
Our sapling is resilient
Like other orange trees
Who have resisted:
Time
Oceans
Poverty
Mines
People
We have stayed and grown strong
She has a strong skin
Full of sweetness, a kind heart
Yet tart, a quick wit tongue
A true “Kwai Nui”*
Adventurous
A tomboy
Flirty
Actress
In L.A.
A son
In L.A.
He met an orange
And fell in love
She's an entirely different kind of fruit
I wished he chose a lemon
This orange
Is sweet
Strong
Full of flavor
I wish I was in L.A.
Watching him wear an African wedding vest
Watching them plant a new kind of tree
An orange lemon tree
New and resilient

She met a lemon
And fell in love
He's a different fruit
I thought, Why?
I thought, he would never fit
I thought, their fruit would be disgusting
Yet he has proven me wrong
He is strong
Sweet
Proud
Here in L.A.
Watching the Lion Dance surround the hall
Watching them plant a new kind of tree
An orange lemon tree
New and resilient

*Kwai Nui: This means “bad girl” or “naughty girl” in Chinese*
Jazzmin Joya, age 16

This poem was written as part of the Ofrenda Community Project, a collaboration with the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County. The inspiration object was a miniature of the Lowriders Imperial Club.

She Reminds Me of Everything

Her eyes are everywhere
They stare deeply at me as I grow
She's engraved on the candles we place to give my loved ones light
She holds my mother’s hand,
Keeping her together or else she might fall
She's the Virgen my ancestors grew up believing in

She's the telenovela that always plays on my TV
The only entertainment at my mami Mona's house
She saves lost souls like myself who pray for her guidance
Her white rose gives hope
The sappy drama written by Hispanic writers
All feels safe
Reminding me of my late Hispanic abuelita
Who loved telenovelas as much as she loved me

She's the reason for the loud, clapping of feet hitting the street pavement
The reason people from my street gather
Crowded up in one yard
To hear the priest talk about the Virgen on her birthday
A large portrait of her, lit with dozens of candles
And silhouettes of white roses
Stands at the front
We all stare, at the beauty
Pozole and champurrado dance in the air, tempting our bellies
I remember staring in awe at the dancers
Skirts rattling as they move swiftly on their feet
Honoring and celebrating the Virgen
The one who will help them if they make the wrong decisions

I admire the Virgen de Guadalupe
She symbolizes some of the best parts of growing up
She reminds me of time I spent with my mami Mona
She's who I think of when I see a white rose
She's who I pray to when I pass a mural of her
I smile every time I hear the theme song to “La Rosa de Guadalupe”
Because it reminds me of her
And she reminds me of everything
Morning Prayers

I am hopeful for tomorrow morning when I walk to the fenced-off river behind houses, greeting the squirrels on the wall. I am hopeful that tomorrow when I remember the camera, that one bird with gray feathers and black chin and white cheeks will be in the papaya tree, looking over its shoulder at the 7:40 sun. I am also hopeful for the storks on the sandbank, long toes buried in the rotten water. I am hopeful for their measured stride through washed-up garbage and for the way they hunch like old men in flight.

The little heron follows them through the air and also the gray heron and the egret, legs hanging like party streamers. They are hopeful for fish, just as the blue-tailed bee-eaters are hopeful for rain and telephone lines. Like the storks they launch themselves upward, pterodactyl wings cutting shining turquoise wedges through the river air.

Like the bee-eaters I launch my voice through a telephone, catching open-mouthed the sound of my grandfather’s blue silk shirts; like the shimmering birds swinging on the wires our good mornings flicker south to north throwing themselves high in search of the same hellos.

Hannah Ling, age 16

I wrote this poem inspired by the theme “Onward.”
Grace Lyde, age 19 (alum)

*You write what you need to hear.*

**Cost and Becoming**

butterflies bleed when they leave their chrysalises
so too will you when you outgrow the things that bind your wings
they may have harbored you while you transformed
but do not confuse constriction for comfort
what was once a part of you will not always be
and *that* is nature, my dear.
you can come out now, it's alright.
soar as you were meant to.
Alejandra Medina, age 21 (alum)

This is the metaphor I thought of when searching for the one that captures how it felt for me to grow up, passing through phases and faces, until discovering who I really was.

I've Become the Moon

I've become the moon who spends each night slowly going through her many phases until she finds the one that fits and becomes wielder of the tides.
“Stones in Paris, Italy,” written during a WriteGirl Poetry Palooza, takes the perspective of a rock on the side of a SoCal road. Rocks really do rely on others for their fate — they can't move on their own, so it takes the wind or a flood or some person to move them into what's next, and all this rock has of its own are hopes and dreams.

Stones in Paris, Italy

I dream of mornings, afternoons and evenings on a beach, somewhere in Italy. Or at the bottom of the Indian Ocean. I've heard they've got sharks down there and I've just gotta see one.

I know it's wrong, but sometimes I wish for a flood. Rivers of dirt and debris will take me somewhere more beautiful. But I've heard that we are in a drought. And that means there is no tide to take me anywhere.

Pretty stones get skipped, tossed into water to start their new adventure. And I hope someday there will be someone who will deem me worthy of being thrown into the next phase of my life.

This has not happened yet, but dreams are just unhappened reality. And I know that one day, my life will look like suntanning and baguettes somewhere in Paris.

That's in Italy, right?
Marina Orozco, age 21 (alum)

I wrote “Alabanza,” which means “praise to this,” because as a Latinx woman I wanted to captivate the power that I possess. In light of recent events and our country’s history of devaluing the lives of people of color, I felt that it was important to remind myself and others like me that we are forces of nature — powerful, beautiful, terrifying and world-changing.

Alabanza

The dust disturbed beneath my heels composes the constellations.
I wear the five rings of Neptune on my fingers.
I swallow the moons of Jupiter like candied almonds.

I am born from the ashes of the old gods.
From Tezcatlipoca and Tlaloc.
From Itzamma, Ix Chel and Quetzalcoatl.
I speak the old tongue,
the language of blood and teeth,
of black holes and dark matter.

I am the heavenly flood,
the shaking of the earth.
My screams are the rolling thunder and I demand to be heard.
La Florecía de Gargantas

Me encanta el ritmo de las palabras,
Los rum-tum-tum-tabas,
Las formas de lengua
Como besos
Que producen
Mágico.
Los dientes
Moviendo
La mente
Creciendo
Y creyendo:
Al principio cuando aprendí,
Nunca sabía la diferencia
Entre crecer y creer.
De verdad, ¿hay una?

Suspiras de sueños llenaron el aire
Y una docena de escaleras lisas de hablar en la calle
Que nunca vamos a callar.
Vamos a chillar
Con el calor
De un millón de fuegos
Sin que nos importe
Si les gustarían
Los puñales
Que ellos le llaman bocas
Ni
Las pistolas
Que ellos le llaman lenguas,
Las flores que ellos le llaman quejas, molestas
Ni
Las hermosas que ellos le llaman gritos disparátes.
Nunca vamos a callar
Nuestros ritmos de voces
Como si tuvieramos los tambores en los pies,
Y los violines en los puños.
Todo empieza con
La florecía
De gargantas

The Flourishing of Throats

I love the rhythm of the words,
The rum-tum-tum-tabas,
The shapes made by the tongue
Like kisses
That produce
Magic.
The teeth
Moving
The mind
Growing
And believing:
At first when I learned,
I never knew the difference
Between growing and knowing.
In reality, is there one?

Sighs of dreams fill the air
And a dozen smooth staircases being spoken on the street
That we’re never going to silence.
We’re going to cry
With the heat
Of a million fires
Without a care
If they would like
The daggers
That they call mouths
Nor
The guns
That they call tongues
Nor
The flowers
That they call
Complaints, annoyances
Nor
The gorgeous ones
That they call
Nonsensical screams.
We’re never going to silence
The rhythms of our voices
As if we had the drums on our feet,
And the violins on our fists.
Everything begins with
The flourishing of
The throats
Angeline Plumb, age 16

I started writing this poem in the WriteGirl poetry workshop inspired by the theme “Onward.” I’m pretty new at poetry, so I’m still getting used to writing about my emotions, and I wanted to write a poem about looking forward to the summer and describing my feelings about it.

The Sunny Season

I look forward to summer.
Even with its blistering touch,
I crave it more than spring cherries
or crisp autumn leaves.

Because summer holds memories.
Ones of bare feet on soft, damp grass.
Dirt clinging to them as I’m rushing toward a refreshing body of water.
Annoying loved ones with light splashes until I tire out, and begin floating peacefully, gazing at the gentle, blueberry sky.

Or older ones
of forbiddingly playing under the sprinklers.
The fluid sinking in the burning black concrete formulating an oddly beautiful fragrance.
And I tenderly observe a yellow beam reflect onto the droplets, and gift me a personal rainbow.

So I look forward to summer.
Patiently moving onward with time,
to remember more of these gems I’ve kept stored and to collect more in various, vibrant colors.
Charlotte Shao, age 17

I wrote this poem for the “Becoming” prompt at a WriteGirl workshop, inspired by a video clip of construction.

High Riser

Steel pylons and wooden frames  
Crack dirt and spread concrete  
Rising, ever rising  
Scrapping blue sky  
Glass enfolds metal skeleton  
In a shining cocoon
Milissa Sutton, age 14

I wrote this after the killing of George Floyd because I felt so stuck and unable to do anything about it.

Black Girl Broken

Black girl broken by bruises  
Wounded by bullets, shot by the blue-wearing bully  
Branded by the past no one wants to talk about  

I am broken  
The system is broken  
We  
Are broken  

We can't feel good about ourselves  
We can't like being Black  
When our dignity and Black pride are ripped from us  
Along with our lives  
They turn them into trophies and set them on their shelf  

I am broken because  
The police say we shouldn't live  
When his neck  
Became the target  
His knee  
The weapon  
Our skin  
The threat  

I am broken because  
When I turn the pages of my history book  
I don't see the chapter on Black history  
It wasn't torn out  
Just not important enough to be printed  

This Black girl is broken because  
February is only about Rosa and Martin
Not that they aren’t important
Because believe me, I couldn’t sit at the back of the bus
And Martin is my role model
But 400 years of slavery
Isn’t valued enough to even be discussed
In 28 days
29 If we’re lucky

Don’t want to make the
White
Students feel uncomfortable
But I
A
Black
Student
Am uncomfortable 365 days of the year

Walking down the street police get the wrong idea
Peaceful protesters tear-gassed
And killed
Just because our ideal
Calls for justice

I am broken because
The melanin in my skin
Is a weapon
The police see and feel is bigger than the batons on their waists
Deadlier than the guns on their hips
I can’t rip through flesh and blood like a bullet
But I’m still on the wrong side of the barrel

I am broken because
Segregation ended in 1964
But the world is still divided

I am broken because
The list of unarmed Black men, women and children dead
Is longer than the Emancipation Proclamation
Which actually
Did nothing
For my ancestors
This Black girl is broken because
Life
Isn’t
Fair

She doesn’t have the same rights as others
She’s seen as less than a human
She’s seen as a weapon
A murderer
A criminal
A person who doesn’t deserve to live

When he pulled the trigger he didn’t care that she was going to high school
He didn’t care that she had a best friend
He didn’t care that she had loving parents
He didn’t care that she had three siblings
He didn’t care that she had a goal
A dream
A life worth saving
He only thought that it was his job
To add her name to the list

They say “Black don’t crack”
Then how come it’s always the first to be shattered
Chloe Vigil, age 21 (alum)

This piece came to me immediately after reading the prompt of “Becoming,” which reminded me of a quote I saw recently that said we are most ourselves in childhood, and growing up means coming back to that child. I tried to capture that belief within my poem.

Back to Becoming

I’m coming back home to myself
(becoming home for myself)
mixing childhood memory, wisps, with slow, sweet honey.
Take up the magic lost in rhyme,
and find
it was me the whole time.
A Day of Online Learning

It’s morning in a McKinley High School virtual class, and Mrs. Foyer is in the middle of virtually teaching an AP English Language and Composition class.

“Trust me,” she says. “You guys do not want to see the chaos that ensues in an AP grading facility. One time, when I opened the test packet, there fell a crisp $10 bill. Not this again!”

She scoffs. “What are these kids thinking? I know you guys, my darling 10th graders, may not know the difference between an open and closed thesis statement, but at least you’re not stupid enough to pull something like this!

“Well, anyways, it did make the —” she leans forward and whispers, “hell,” she returns to her original position, “worthwhile ’cause, I mean, come on. If you’re telling me that this is the level of writing the American education system can produce, society will cease to exist.”

She pauses for effect. “You think I’m joking, but really, no civilization can exist without the proper implementation of syntax and line of reasoning.”

Mrs. Foyer sighs and slowly rises from her seat.

“You know … I could have been a star, or really, on Dancing With the Stars. I was the most sought-after belly dancer in Two Peaks, Wyoming. At first, my talents were wasted by performing at preschool graduations or senior centers, but after years of these pitiful events, I was noticed by a talent scout who attended one of little Susie’s celebrations. But even with my superb talents, I turned down all offers that would have thrust me into stardom, all because I felt the words on the page calling to me.”

Her voice starts increasing in volume.

“How can one resist the voice of destiny as it beckons you into its loving embrace? How can one disobey the path that has already been set? HOW CAN —”
She pauses as if someone is talking to her and sits down.

“HUH? Can you repeat that again?”

She pauses once more.

“Oh,” she laughs. “Can you guys hear me now? Okay good. Well, I guess now is a good time to start class. If you could please visit Google Classroom …”
Remy Davis, age 17

I wrote this monologue this past December for my theater class. I submitted it and won the Greenway Arts Alliance (the company that runs the Melrose Trading Post) small monologue competition. My monologue can be interpreted as a day during 2020 or 2021, or a day in the far future.

Lifeless

I found myself at my old middle school. I climbed up the concrete steps to the entrance. The front doors swung open, but the hallways felt lifeless. As I entered, I could imagine students running around with hall passes. Wearing the uniform that we all once dreaded to wear day after day — the uniforms once bought new and fresh.

I walked down the smooth, cold floor of the hallway, peeking into the offices, envisioning students standing around, wearing their backpacks and holding their notes. I walked down the smooth, cold floor of the hallway, sticking my head into the classrooms, envisioning students working hard, the teacher standing at the head of the class, her eye out for passing notes during a test. I could almost see someone pass a paper to the person next to them. The class that I could imagine once full of life.

I walked into my sixth-grade classroom. Years ago I once sat in this plastic chair, the broken chair that once sliced my leg open. I walked through the entire class, through rows and rows of chairs: the chair where my best friend sat; the chair where the funny kid sat; the chair where the rude kid sat. The chair where my teacher sat, spending her days teaching us, the cushion still on it, ripped up and worn out.

My teacher’s holiday decorations were still up, hearts and sparkles everywhere, a teddy bear lying on the tiled floor, a pink and red card torn up. These decorations lying around for years and years. Years. And years.

I walked onto the field. I could imagine the happy students playing games on our free days. I could also imagine the students running endless laps, tired and mad, P.E. teachers blowing their whistles, basketballs and soccer balls soaring across the yard. I saw a deflated soccer ball on the other side of the field, all of the shoes and feet that have endlessly kicked it. The ball was once full of life.

I look forward to the day when the school will be full again, full of students and laughter, full of life.
Amelia Pinto, age 16

I wrote this for the screenwriting workshop for WriteGirl. It's also a response to the recent anti-Asian hate crimes and reflecting on some of my own experiences as a mixed person.

Hasan-Minhaj-Hilarious

I used to be embarrassed of my family’s accent. It was thick like honey in milk. Sharp and twisted staccato. We’d hear it in a movie during class and all eyes would turn to me, cheeks flushed red — my Asian-ness pushed deeper down in my pockets. It could’ve been a documentary on Third World countries or a caricature in an SNL skit. A debate resolution characterizing entire races of people as terrorists. A Punjabi grandmother killed at FedEx in Illinois. And I was taught all these things. But never pride.

When you’re the child of an immigrant, culture is filtered through 8,711 miles. It’s shifted and translated and torn up in pieces for you to pick up and tape together. When you’re the child of an immigrant, sometimes you forget. That among the white suburbs and wealthy friends, your identity doesn’t fit in.

A friend once told me, “Indians are funny.” I held my breath for a moment begging his reasoning to be Hasan Minhaj funny and not The Simpsons Apu funny. And instead, he plays a video of an exaggerated accent — loud and abrasive. I already know it’s a Bollywood villain, but if I told him, it wouldn’t make any difference. He hasn’t had enough conversations with my dad to remember his voice. To remember his native language carefully wrapped with the saris in suitcases. The biryani on the stove or my Indian middle name. Because even if I took him on a trip, brought him to our village, harvested the mangos and fried the fish, he couldn’t get past the introductions without judging.

The first time I got called a slur, it was chalked up to a joke. Model minority honeyed lies. It stung in my chest, pulled at my thick hair, whispered to my large eyes how I wasn’t welcome here. My chai and milk skin swirled, you’re not Indian enough to be offended.

It’s almost comedic how the mood shifts when you become enough. When sixteen years in the making of a mixed family and abandoned bilingual classes stop becoming defining factors of your identity. The poems I wrote in class taught India not by its cows and curry but through the history, hate crimes and hearth. And for a moment, I’m pronouncing the cities and foods with a little more sharpness and a singsong pitch of
someone who wants to be listened to. Each word rolled like roti and thick like honey in milk. Sewing together the pieces of culture for something treasurable. Because I happen to be Hasan-Minhaj-hilarious. It doesn't require me to mimic my uncles. I just need someone to hear my story.
In the Game

“Who are you?”

Hajime Hinata is looking at me. Make no mistake, he is a 2D character on a screen, but for some reason I feel like he can see me. Like the television is simply a window, and we’re standing on opposite sides.

I press the X button on my controller, but the dialogue doesn’t advance. He still stands there. Watching.

Glancing around the room to make sure no one else is there to hear me, I gulp. “Can you … see me?”

His sprite changes to one of affirmation. “Yes … you’re on the TV … in my room.” The line appears in a text box as he speaks.

My heart pounds in my ears. This has to be a trick, right? Something set up by the developers to make players think the fourth wall is being broken?

“You’re on mine,” I try replying, feeling slightly dumb for talking to a video game character.

The image on screen changes once again. Hajime’s hand is pressed up against the glass. “What … is this?”

I put down my controller. As if in a trance, I stand, walking up to the TV and overlapping my hand with his. As soon as my palm touches the screen, I get the sensation of being pulled. Violently, I’m whisked off my feet. White light envelops my vision and I’m …

I’m …

I hit the floor with a thud, eyes shut to brace for the impact. I open them slowly. The room I’m in — it’s not my room. I hastily push myself to my feet. No. No, it can’t be.

“Hey!”
That voice came from the TV, didn't it? I start to move toward it, then freeze. I know what's happened. It seems impossible, it must be impossible, but there's no other answer.

If I'm right, that means —

“Hey! Are you there? You’re in there, right?”

“Hajime?” I manage to say. I’m shaking. He’s there. He’s on the screen, but he’s not in the game anymore.

I am.
Say It

Five
Mom restarts the song again and hums along. The familiar, melancholy tune fills the air.

“Luna,” she whispers, lifting me into her lap. “Do you hear it?”

I nod and twist my fingers together as Mom sways to the melody. It makes me sad. The notes burrow under my skin and lunge for my heart.

It’s better to say too much than never to say what you need to say again.

“Good,” Mom sighs. “But do you actually hear it?”


Mom chuckles quietly and rocks me back and forth until my eyes drift shut. I hear the song in my dreams.

Seventeen

“Luna,” Mom snaps, her grip tightening around the steering wheel, irritation straining her voice. “The answer is no.”

I roll my eyes and let out a bitter laugh. “Why not?”

“Because I said so!”

The engine revs as the car speeds along the highway, and I want to slam on the brakes and freeze this moment. The moment where I first realized that I’m able to hate my mom with the kind of hate that fizzles in my veins and makes me want to explode. White, hot rage slithers up my neck and burns my cheeks.

“That’s not fair!” I yell, baring my teeth.
Her head swivels towards me for a brief second, manic gleaming in her eyes. “You can’t go, and that’s final. First off, it’s not safe. Who knows what kinds of illegal things will be there?”

I clench my fists and dig my nails into my palms. “You’re crazy. It’s a party.”

“Second,” Mom continues and waves a hand in my direction, “this isn’t like you. Your grades have been slipping —”

“I had one C!”

“— and you’re becoming someone different, and I don’t like the new you, and honestly, I don’t think you —”

I flick on the radio and dial the volume to the max so I don’t have to listen to her anymore.

It’s better to say too much than never to say what you need to say again.

Mom narrows her eyes at me but finally clamps her mouth shut. She shakes her head at me slowly, and my heart hammers in my stomach with rancor and animosity and … and regret. I swallow over the sudden lump in my throat.

Lately, our conversations have been a stroll across thin, thin ice. One misstep and we’ll both fall through, drowning in that freezing water.

The chorus of the song blares loudly, and I squeeze my eyes shut at the words. Say what you need to say.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, but she doesn’t hear me over the music.

Eighteen

Mom wipes her brow and sets down the last box next to my bed. “Well, that’s everything.”

I nod and bite my lip, gazing around my new dorm room. It’s bare, with white walls, two desks and two beds. It’s not home at all. It’s utterly terrifying.

“You okay, Luna?” Mom asks, tilting her head.

My hands shake as I sit down on my mattress. “Yes,” I lie and force a smile, “I’m good.”

A year ago, the only thing I wanted was to leave home and be in control of my own life, but now that the moment’s actually here, I don’t think I can breathe.

She arches an eyebrow. “You sure?”
No, I want to scream, I’m falling apart, and petrified that I won’t be happy here, and I don’t want you to leave. Not yet. Not yet.

But if I say that, she’ll worry over me and hesitate to leave, and I’ll turn into a crying, blubbering mess and beg her not to leave me here. I need her to rip the Band-Aid off of my heart and walk out.

“One hundred percent,” I answer, gazing at the ground, the unfamiliar walls and empty desk — anywhere but her eyes.

Leave. She needs to leave before I break down.

“Alright,” Mom says in a tight voice, with a fragile grin painted on her face and glassy eyes. She spreads her arms wide. “Give me a hug goodbye, then.”

I press my lips together and stand on unsteady feet, crossing the room. The moment her arms close in around me, the overwhelming terror and trepidation vanish, replaced by a sudden burst of happiness and comfort and love. Her warmth seeps into me and melts away my walls, and I shudder.

Mom squeezes me tightly. “Call if you need anything. Anything, Luna, okay? Day or night.”

“I will,” I murmur, unsaid words building in my chest.

Her phone rings and her ringtone cleaves us apart as she pulls out her phone. 

Say what you need to say.

I open my mouth. “Mom —”

She glances up at me as the song stops abruptly, eyes accepting and sincere, fingers twisting around the phone.

The door cracks open and a girl waltzes in, gripping a large box.

She flashes me a grin and offers me a hand, balancing the box on her hip. “Hey! I’m your roommate, Kasey.”

“I’m Luna.” I jam my hand into hers and peek urgently at Mom, who claps her hands together.

“I gotta head out, or I’ll miss my flight.” She wiggles her fingers at me and steps toward the doorway. “Remember, call me if you need anything.”

“Mm-hm,” I reply and swallow my complaints when she disappears out the door.
Twenty-five

Mom’s voice crinkles through the line, static infiltrating her words. “I’m so sorry, Luna.”

I sniffle and toss another tissue into the overflowing trash. “I-I just d-don’t understand. He didn’t g-give any explanation.” I pause and inhale a shaky breath, choking down another sob. “He just walked out. After four years. Four years, Mom.”

“I know, honey.”

“Why?” I hate how my voice cracks, and how I’ve been stuck in bed for days, and how my heart feels like a sledgehammer shattered it into a million little pieces that can never fit back together.

“I don’t know.” Mom sighs, her breath hitting the receiver. “I wish I could take away your pain.”

I shut my eyes. Me too.

“And then I wish I could go find him and beat him up,” she adds.

A smile tugs at my cheeks. That old tune pops into my mind for the third time today. Say what you need to say.

“I just wish that you were here,” I whisper, “and I could give you a hug.”

She’s silent for a moment, then, “Well, you’re flying out to see me next month, right?”

“Right.”

“And until then, here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to eat a carton of ice cream and watch a sad movie, then you’re going to realize how stupid he is and get back on your feet.” Her words come out in a gentle flurry. “You’re going to realize that you’re strong enough to make it through this, okay?”

A slight weight lifts off of my chest, and I start to nod, then remember that she can’t see me. “Okay.”

“Good.” She exhales loudly. “Good. And one more thing, Luna?”

My phone beeps with an incoming call. “Sorry, Mom, Kasey’s calling. Talk later?”

Thirty-two

“She’s adorable,” Mom coos, clutching Scarlett in her arms.
“I know.” I grin and cock my head. Scarlett lets out a gurgle, and my heart seizes. “So, how’s it feel to be a grandma?”

Mom gazes down at Scarlett with an intense look that I’ve only ever noticed when she’s staring at me. “It’s wonderful,” she whispers, eyes burning.

She hums a quiet tune as Scarlett’s eyes flutter shut and her breathing evens out. I join in, our voices melding into one harmonious note.

Say what you need to say.

There are so many things I need to say. So many things I’ve realized lately, about all the times that she was right, and I was stupid. About the answers she’s always had, and the opportunities I’ve missed out on.

I settle on something simple. “Thank you, Mom.”

“For what?” She tears her gaze away from Scarlett.

“For everything.”

**Forty-five**

“How’s Scarlett?” Mom asks.

I squeeze the phone with white knuckles and sigh. Down the hall, Scarlett slams her door and lets out a frustrated yelp.

Mom chuckles. “Ah, yes, I remember those days.”

“How did you get through them?” I groan, massaging my head to prevent an oncoming headache.

“Do you remember how you were at that age?”

“Vaguely,” I mumble, flashing back to hazy days of cold shoulders and muffled arguments. “I wasn’t too bad.”

“Ha!” A light laugh leaves her lips. “You had your bad days, too.”

“Not as bad as this.”

“Oh, honey, you were worse.”

“Wonderful.” I pace across the room and press my lips together. “So, what do I do?”

“Talk to her. Navigate the minefield. Play her the song.”

“The song?” I frown, then realize a heartbeat later what she means. “Oh. That song.”
“Say what you need to say,” Mom advises.

Scarlett screams again, and I wince, the phone nearly slipping from my clammy hands.

I sigh. “Alright.”

“Good luck, Lun.”

“Thanks, Mom.” That song suddenly echoes in my head, the melody pushing words past my lips. “I love you, Mom. And you should know — I loved you on the good days, and the bad days, and everything in between.”

“I know,” Mom replies, and I can almost hear the smile in her voice. “And I loved you on all the days, too, because loving you is the easiest thing I’ve ever had to do.”

And I finally get it, as I end the call and blast the song from my phone and start to talk to Scarlett.

I finally hear the song.

I finally say what I need to say.
Scenes
The Other Side

EXT. HOSPITAL GARDEN - DAY

Jackson is waiting for Ruby, constantly glancing at the door. Ruby exits the building, arms wrapped around herself, eyes glued to the floor. She looks distressed. Jackson is concerned, and speed-walks over to her.

JACKSON
Are you okay?

Ruby looks up at him, eyes full of emotion.

RUBY
It ... It’s Chris ...  

JACKSON
Oh my God, is he okay? What happened?

RUBY
He — he — Dr. Di Filippo says —

Ruby’s eyes fill with tears. She blinks them away. She turns away from Jackson.

JACKSON
Ruby?

Ruby looks up at him.

RUBY
He needs surgery. Dr. Di Filippo is going to try to resect the entire tumor.

JACKSON
Oh my God. Are you okay?
RUBY
I — I’m fine ...

JACKSON
Ruby, you’re not fine. You’re falling apart, I can see it in your eyes.

RUBY
I said I’m fine, Jackson!

JACKSON
I know you, Ruby. You’re not fine. Why won’t you talk to me? I’m here for you.

RUBY
Just drop it, Jackson!

JACKSON
Ruby, talk to me.

RUBY
No! This isn’t about me!

JACKSON
Of course it is!

RUBY
I need to be there for my family!

JACKSON
And I need to be here for you! Why is it so hard for you to let me in? What are you afraid of?

RUBY
You don’t understand!

JACKSON
I don’t understand? I’ve lived in this hospital my whole damn life! I’ve been poked and prodded more times than you can frickin’ count, and I don’t understand?

RUBY
I know you have! But you haven’t been on the other side!
JACKSON
Other side? You mean the side where I don’t have a few months to live? The side where I’m free to have ambitions and dreams? The side where I can frickin’ go outside and not have to look at the same gray walls and smell the same stupid clean smell every frickin’ hour of every frickin’ day?

RUBY
No, stupid! I mean the side where my life has been riddled with worry and fear since the moment my brother was diagnosed, and I have to hide it so I don’t scare him more than he already is! I mean the side where I was isolated for my entire life! The side where I had to give up my frickin’ childhood and give up my frickin’ ambitions and dreams so that I could be here for my brother! I spend my life in these stupid waiting rooms waiting for my damn life to begin! You always say no one understands. Not your father, not the nurses. But I do. And they do too. I do because I’m here, because I’ve seen the same things written all over my brother’s face. I’ve been here with him through it all. So don’t tell me I don’t understand.

Jackson runs a hand over his head, frustrated.

JACKSON
If you believe in fate, why can’t you believe in us?

RUBY
The romantic side of me wants to. The romantic side of me wants to fall in love with you fast and hard. But the practical side of me keeps reminding me that I’m only going to be hurt. I can’t take any more loss. I can’t be tossed left and right at every turn and I most definitely cannot focus on you when my brother needs me. I want to let myself love you. But I can’t.

Ruby walks away. Jackson lets her. He turns around and punches the wall.
The Purpose of a Vaccine

Why do I have to give my life up just to help someone?! I mean, I didn’t sign up for this! I just want to go back to my safe space in the lab, just hanging out with my other friends as we listen in on the doctors’ gossip. The smell of chemicals as the scientists try to find out what’s causing this whole pandemic. And just knowing that somewhere in a drawer of a lab, you are the solution.

And then today, a nurse just opened up the drawer and took all of my friends and me out! She sucked us into little bottles with sharp pointy things on the end, and then we were shipped off into a truck! Just like that! I didn’t even get to say goodbye to my old drawer!

By then, my friends and I figured out where we were going. We instantly knew we were going to help someone. This was the moment we’ve been waiting for our whole lives! Our purpose. It’s why we were made!

But I started having second thoughts. I didn’t want to be injected into someone, and blindly have to go fight off a virus! I wasn’t done with my life as a vaccine! I deserve to go back in my drawer, with all my friends, and just wait it out till the next global pandemic. But I was tied down in a little bottle. How was I supposed to get out of there?

So I waited. Till we came upon our destination. It was a HUGE stadium! Filled with a long line of cars, piling up for miles! A bunch of people with lab coats on, and blue cloth around their mouths and noses, came to unpack the truck. I was carried out and placed on a table. My friends were there too, except they were all cheering, “WE GET TO HELP SOMEONE!”

No, no, no! I don’t wanna help anyone! I want to just go home! I’m not done with my life yet.

“We’re going home!” my friends shout as the nurse picks them up. I watch from the sidelines as one by one, they disappear into the arms of the people in the cars. I can’t
believe they’re forcing me to do this. The nurse picks me up next, but I feel nothing. I have no choice anymore. I’m powerless.

A fragile old man rolls down his window in front of me. He hands a slip of paper to the nurse and pulls up his sleeve to prepare for me. I look in the eyes of the man. Fear spreads across them and he bites his lip in distress.

And then suddenly, I understand why my friends said they were going home. It was to help these people — this old man. I was going to help him live. And that’s a gift that I can’t just throw away. So I gathered all my might and finally knew my purpose. I was going to help this man. Because I am a vaccine. And it’s what I do. And with that, the nurse picked me up, and off I went.
Joanna Zeng, age 15

In this superhero movie, Quinn is a shapeshifter and Zadra has superstrength.

Prison Scene

INT. PRISON

QUINN, the superhero, reaches ZADRA, the villain, in her cell. QUINN gently puts the tray of food in her hands onto the ground and nudges it toward ZADRA through the bars.

QUINN

Hey, Zadra.

ZADRA doesn't look at her. She glares at the wall. QUINN can see the bruises on ZADRA’s face.

QUINN

I hope you’re doing okay.

More silence.

QUINN

I … uh … I got your favorite. One slice of pineapple pizza.

ZADRA finally looks at the tray, smiling a bit.

ZADRA

You remembered.

QUINN

I still think it’s an abomination.

ZADRA

It’s an improvement from the rotten fruit I usually get. What, did you sneak this past the prison guards or something?

QUINN

Something like that.

(pauses)
How are you?

ZADRA's smile disappears. She glares back at the wall.

ZADRA
As good as I can be stuck inside a cell, being treated like the criminal I apparently am.

QUINN
Zadra …

ZADRA (grumbling)
The person I thought was my best friend put me in here. Not that I want to see her anyway. She didn’t even show up to visit until now.

QUINN
Hey, that’s not fair! I did what I had to do!

ZADRA
Not fair? Who’s inside of this stupid cell, you or me?

QUINN
Zadra, please —

ZADRA jumps out at QUINN, her fingers gripping the bars.

ZADRA
You wanna know what they did to me, Quinn? Huh? You wanna know what they did to me because of you?

QUINN
Please stop …

ZADRA
They stuck one of their stupid needles inside my body and took away my strength! I don’t even know what that stuff was! Then they stuck me inside this cell and chained me to the ground. You wanna know what they did next?

QUINN
Stop it —
ZADRA
They beat me! Powers, fists, it didn’t matter. They knew I couldn’t fight back.

QUINN
STOP! JUST STOP!
(pauses)
They wouldn’t do that.

ZADRA
You calling me a liar?

QUINN
Well, ARE you lying?

ZADRA
What do I even have to lose?

ZADRA flops her limp arm at QUINN. QUINN looks away.

ZADRA
You know the worst thing about it? When I looked into their eyes ... I knew. They didn’t just beat me up because I was dangerous. They beat me up because they ENJOYED it. They had FUN. They LOVED it.

QUINN
I ...

ZADRA
These are the people you work with, Quinn. I don’t care if you care or not. At least now you know they aren’t the “shiny superheroes” you think they are.

QUINN
I ... I don’t believe you. You’re just messing with me.
(pauses, about to cry)
Don’t expect me to visit from now on.

QUINN shakes her head, then storms off.
Nonfiction
Morgan McIntosh, age 16

This essay was written as part of the Ofrenda Community Project, a collaboration with the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County. The inspiration piece was a Mickey Mouse miniature and Disneyland pin.

Grassy Hilltops and Garlic Knots

I’ve been in lockdown for over a year, and it’s easy to feel like I’m living *Groundhog Day* over and over. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, LACMA events have been closed until further notice. During these challenging times, it’s important to remember the little things we took for granted — such as going to the movies, visiting friends and enjoying delicious food at restaurants. However, something that calms me is thinking back to nostalgic memories like my time at the museum, when my only worry was whether or not the pizza parlor would be out of garlic knots. Such resonating memories simmer in my mind now and then, reminding me of the many joys in life — the little things that deserve utmost appreciation.

When I was younger, my family and I would take a trip to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) every Friday afternoon with family and friends. With picnic baskets packed in the car, my parents would pick up my sister and me immediately after school, when I was eager to meet my friends on the lawn outside the museum and welcome a day of fun.

Going to LACMA on Friday was a particularly special day, because the museum would host a live jazz band, food trucks and games on the outskirts of the museum. People danced to the gentle tunes that tickled their ears while visiting the various food stations, where fresh meals and drinks awaited them. On the grassy lawns and hills surrounding the museum, my friends and I would wander off and explore the land like curious explorers blazing a trail in new places, rediscovering new things like we’d never seen them before. We’d climb the animal statues and stand on our very tippy-toes to balance ourselves on the curbs of the sidewalk that followed the various museum exhibits, documenting every step as if we were narrators in a nature documentary. From there, we’d race to the grassy hilltops, rolling down and giggling as our skin grew itchy, but we didn’t care.
Amid all of that thrill and joy, here’s my favorite part: Tired from exploration and exercise, my friends and I would race back to my family’s picnic area, murmuring soft “excuse me”s and “sorry!”s as we scampered around others’ blankets and picnics and across the grass to reach our spot. I’d nonchalantly squeak to my father, “I’m a little hungry … pizza doesn’t sound too bad right at this moment,” while innocently rubbing my belly as a pure smile spread across my face. He would laugh, and, playing oblivious, pull out a rolled twenty from his front pocket. “Alright, but get some extra bread rolls, will ya?” he’d chuckle as I grasped the money from his hands.

My friends and I, beaming in success, would race down to the local pizza parlor, ordering the classic: two pepperoni pizzas, garlic knots with marinara sauce, and extra parmesan cheese, please. Although the walk was a little ways, the food was always worth it. The steaming assortment of Italian cuisine wafted through the air — an enticing odor that left stomachs growling and mouths drooling. The mozzarella cheese melted in our mouths, leaving my friends and I competing for the last slice of pizza.

However, as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. With our stomachs stuffed, the jazz band quieting down, and food trucks closing their windows, I knew it was time to depart. I’d wave goodbye to my friends, taking a longing look at the famous row of lights — the Urban Light sculpture — that marks LACMA and illuminates the evening sky. Although I had to leave a day of exploration, excitement and thrill, I knew that I would once again taste that savory pizza and rediscover familiar land in a couple days’ time — and that gave me solace. That gave me peace.
Audrey Sioeng, age 16

This essay was written as part of the Ofrenda Community Project, a collaboration with the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County. The inspiration object was the Chinese Hanging Bells — an embodiment of Chinese culture and science, and a testament to the wisdom of Chinese people.

Silken Red String and Sunshine

long noodles: longevity

It’s Chinese New Year, and we ring in new beginnings with smiles as my grandma lifts noodles up, up, up, as high as her head. Deeply inhale the kitchen, her kitchen, scents wafting with the hope she will live as long as these golden noodles symbolize. The cameras go off and one day this spontaneous picture of Mà (grandmother), face split into a rare smile, will be worth our collective weight in the egg rolls only she seems able to perfect. Watching the incense smoke rise, we follow Gong (grandfather) to pray to our ancestors for protection and many more new years and birthdays with 紅包’s (hohng bah-OW), eagerly chattering about how much our youngest cousins have grown and how my dad plans to grow his beard until Christmas to be Santa.

dragon beard candy: street market royalty

Midnight, and our little enclave of 西安 (shee-AHN) is afire with warm dragon’s breath and the scent of sugar and scorpion skewers. Our eyes gobble new delicacies as puffs of cotton candy float past our heads and sesame permeates the night. The tents are alive and at the center we see two men push and pull at dragon beard candy, 拉, 拉, 拉 (lah, lah, lah). It tastes sweetly nutty, my mom tells me, and I can only imagine how many gods must sleep on these pillows of candy floss, watching as the blown sugar animals play in these streets.

jelly cups: bamboo friends

We’ve bought the same jelly cups from Costco for as long as I can remember. On forest green lunch tables, we unzip our lunch bags and look around at everyone else’s, despite the fact that there is, but a few feet away, a sign that says, “DON’T SHARE YOUR FOOD.”
That would go against our nature and the bustling economy of lunchtime. My best friend produces a jar of brown seeds with a seam etched through the middle of the tiny droplets. Golden medallion wish seeds spill into her palm, and at fifty seeds we will free our friend and become the fun-loving Pokémon we were last year. Except we won't, because by that time we'll be much more interested in gossiping on the jungle gym and figuring out how to swing three people on two swings. Someone at some point called the invasive plants by our waiting bench “moon flowers,” and to this day I don't know their name.

one yuan popsicles: The Great Wall of China

When my parents wanted us to see how far our roots go down, we traveled to China, the land of umbrella hats and one-yuan popsicles. We drank in the brief moments of damp shade in the dragon's every turn. The people of the Middle Kingdom did not always love their wall. It’s no wonder people can see it from space — many people sacrificed their lives to build it. There are bodies in the brick, driven to the ground, labor and hopes edifying through the ages. We sweat on their sweat and we suck on popsicle sticks long after the cool relief is gone. We chase my brother’s back — it seems that he has always been one step ahead. I may be older, but I always wanted to be a one-yuan popsicle: sweet, sought-after, sticky. Perhaps I've read too many books, but I have always craved the thought of leaving a legacy. It never occurred to me that all that was ever left of the popsicles was a wooden stick. Is that all I aspire to become?

xiao long bao: waiting with koi

I loved jacaranda trees before I knew their name. A part of me fancies that this part of Arcadia is mine, and mine alone. The purple of their petals, though, I can't be sure: Is my favorite color less mine if it was my mom’s first? We sit on concrete benches, and I pretend there's koi in the stream by the sparse bunches of bamboo. We wait for hours in front of Din Tai Fung — I’ve spent a number of weeks watching the people on display pinching meat into dough through grubby windows. My sister got a concussion here once, on the handicap rails. And the back table was always ours, though I miss the days when I didn't know how much the bill the adults fought for was — the 小龍包 (shee-OW lohng bah-OW) tasted better that way. The restaurant, with their koi and dumplings, left that building behind and with it, me and my glasses of condensation, paper umbrellas and chopstick guides.

osmanthus wine: starless nights

I’ve eaten 饅頭 (mahn TOW), but it tastes best at four in the morning with osmanthus wine, peach blossoms in my hair and a basket full of ripe 批杷 (pee PAH). I cry chrysanthemum petals as I learn how to fall into these starless nights, curled up in the snug corner of my mom’s mattress, eyes transfixed on the Chinese drama. I smile for
their happiness, admire their jade pins, and envy the way their hearts crack and shatter into shards of colored glass. I plunge into their stories with reckless abandon until it’s over, when the reality ends and bends and I can only wish in my moonlit bedroom with the ashes of an eternal, ten-mile love poem. A world, a redemption, lies in the strings of the 古箏 (goo juhng) and 二胡 (ehr HOO) brimming with untamed rebellion and forgetful lotus water. I will never understand how they can make ink flow like deliberate, roaring rivers, to be drunk on eloquent Chinese, famished for the illustrious ambrosia on bamboo scrolls and unfinished 國畫 (GOO-aw HOO-aw). I promise myself that one day I will be married in red.

instant ramen: stormy days

It is a shame that not all days are made of silken red string, embroidered with mandarin ducks and sunshine. Rain clouds press behind my eyes. I sit there for some while, a nearby glass half full. My mom used to have a small blue china cup but I can’t recall where she left it. Thirsty, I lick the briny broth from my chopsticks. Sonder* tastes of tender steam and MSG broth. Petrichor** reeks of fresh breath and formless strokes of gray, blankets feeling more like my forgotten homemade forts — safety hazards of precarious pillows and strategically placed mattresses that I used to hide out in at times like these. Tear-stained windows remind me of slipping memory, and I get lost in the noodles. I grasp them with my chopsticks and they whisper, 加油！(tsee-au yoh), as I smile, content, into the soup. My ancestors toast a round of tea and their overturned cups (washed for free in the rain!) chime in the wind.

Glossary:

紅包 hóng bāos /hohng bah-OW/ — red envelopes
西安 Xi’an /shee-AHN/ — a city in China
拉 lā /lah/ — pull
小龍包 xiǎo lóng bāo /shee-OW lohng bah-OW/ — pork dumplings with soup inside
饅頭 mán tou /mahn TOW/ — steamed bread
枇杷 pí pá /pee PAH/ — loquat, a small round fruit
古箏 gǔ zhēng /goo juhng/ — a type of zither with 21, 25 or 26 strings that are plucked
二胡 èr hú /ehr HOO/ — a two-stringed bowed instrument, sometimes called the Chinese violin
國畫 guó huà /GOO-aw HOO-aw/ — a traditional chinese painting
加油 jiā yóu /tsee-au yoh / — add oil (a cheer)

*Sonder: The realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own
**Petrichor: A pleasant smell that frequently accompanies the first rain after a long period of warm, dry weather
Becoming Alive

There was one moment.

One night.

From another’s point of view, I was simply biking. But to me, I was flying.

The dark street was penetrated by a single lamp, whose light was weak but still there. I sped past it, feeling the spark inside me being kindled. It grew and grew until it broke out of me in the form of a scream.

It was raw and real, and with that scream, I let out everything that had been sitting inside of me, chained to my heart. I am me. I am here. And that’s all that mattered.

For once, I wasn’t just not-dead. I felt alive.
Songs
Sunny Days

Verse
When the clouds have all rolled away
From yesterday
The rain is long gone
Yet your love lingers on
In my head today

Like finding a flower in my yard
And how I don’t have to
Walk very far
to find little things
That bring me joy

But your voice
It echos and stays
In my head

Chorus
Like the sun’s rays
Through blades of grass
On sunny days

Mmm, hhhmmmm, never felt so serene
The grass is always green
On sunny days

Verse
Not a cloud of gray
You’re not so far away
No not today
You’re in my embrace
On sunny days

Annalisa D’Emilia, age 15

This song is about being free from mental seclusion, having mental clarity, and finding hope and love.
My thoughts are clear,
Yet my head's in the clouds
Among the airplanes
On sunny days
Maria Galstyan, age 16

This song is about the fear of growing up and not knowing who you want to be — something that I’ve struggled with and seen others struggle with as well.

When They Step Up

*Verse*
It’s the supposed age of innocence
Yet she’s told to get a bit of competence
Because the world won’t tolerate it
If you’re anything but what they created

She’s climbing up a twisted ladder
Tryna climb up the steps that matter
But what if she’s too young to climb
What if she’s wasting her time

*Chorus*
I hope that she sees
That not everyone must
Follow the same cluster of steps

I hope that she sees
That she still has time to decide
What she must do when she steps up
Piper Miller, age 15

This song was inspired by the Opportunity rover on Mars.

Opportunity

Verse
Once a small girl set her feet on a planet
Of mystery and red ancient stone
Gifted the name Opportunity
Sent out to find answers in the unknown
The first couple nights she would talk to the stars
Who were closer and brighter and kinder on Mars
She asked how they felt living out in the sky
They said, "Up here it's stagnant. We need room to fly"

Chorus
Fly, fly and search for answers,
The void is a choir and we are its dancers
We dance and we dance through the starry expanse
And the galaxy of colors puts us in a trance
Hannah Robison, age 22 (alum)

At the WriteGirl songwriting workshop, singer-songwriter Tiffany Red played a loop she was working on in our breakout room and it inspired a visual in my head.

As You Were Before

**Verse**
You and me walk down the street
Talk about your tiresome week
New job, new place, new things that you do
And me saying that I’m happy for you

And though it’s true, I’m also scared
That maybe one day I won’t be there
To walk with you through all of the tides
That all the changes will just bring goodbyes

**Chorus**
It’s funny how there are seasons in life
All controlled by when we change our minds
Can I be with you through all of yours?
When you don’t wanna be the same as you were before
Let me be by your side forever more
When you don’t wanna be the same as you were before
Victoria Rosales, age 16

I snuck out to a fair with one of my friends and we felt extra cool about it because it was a school night – ohhhh #rebel. This is kind of an upbeat song about being stupid with your friends and getting into fun trouble.

Midnight Fair

Verse
Sneaking out to midnight fairs,
Teenage spirit in the air
Neon lights, they shake us down
You can't wait to leave this town

Pre-chorus
Stepping onto roller-coasters
You were terrified to ride
I'd be the worst, teasing you
Screaming, “We’re all gonna die”
Translate your poem into another language and then translate it back to English — see what changes.

Speak your words out loud. That’s another form of editing. You will hear what you need to change.

Show AND tell.

Show what you feel — don’t just tell what you see.

If you’re experiencing writer’s block, try writing some fan fiction!
What can only YOU write? 🙌

Write what you want—and make it YOURS. ❄️

Write what brings joy to your soul. ☀️

Avoid clichés you didn’t create yourself. 👀

Don’t write for your audience. 👍

Write the emotion that’s under what’s on the surface. Go deeper like you’re diving into the dark sea. 🌅

Fluffy slippers and a warm cup of tea will give you a safe feeling and allow you to go more deeply into the work. 🥛
Threads

After every workshop, we ask the WriteGirl community to share something they liked, loved or learned at the event. Here is some of what they said this season:

“I love how we are connected despite quarantine.”

“I loved getting new, beautiful words!”

“I explored my inner bravery and talked a lot today — thanks for bringing out my loud writer side! :)

“I really loved how we got to see real actors acting out scenes that people in this Zoom created!! Wow :D”

“Everyone’s lyrics are so heartfelt and beautiful!
This event is a wave of inspiration!”
“I loved learning that editing doesn’t mean a work is bad — it’s an opportunity for a work to become groundbreaking.”

“It makes me so unbelievably happy to be a part of such a wonderful and inspiring group.”

“I loved how much knowledge these songwriters have inherited in their lives, and I love how I have their knowledge now.”

“I really loved learning that we are not just one talent. We can be both Olympians and writers.”
About WriteGirl

WriteGirl is a nationally recognized writing and mentoring organization that helps underserved Los Angeles teens discover and express their creative voices. The WriteGirl mission is to promote creativity and self-expression to empower girls within a community of women writers. WriteGirl seeks to raise up the voices of underrepresented and/or vulnerable youth, including Black, Latinx, Asian/Pacific Islander, Indigenous, nonbinary, LGBTQIA+, anyone with disabilities, and many others who are part of the community we serve. Our events, training and curriculum reflect our commitment to multiculturalism, equity, diversity, inclusion, access, anti-bias, antidiscrimination and antiracism.

- **SUCCESS:** WriteGirl has maintained a 19-year, 100% success rate of guiding its Core Mentoring Program seniors to graduate from high school and enroll in college, many with scholarships and as the first in their families to do so.
- **HISTORY AND POPULATION SERVED:** Founded in 2001, the WriteGirl organization serves 500 youth annually (ages 13–18), primarily low-income BIPOC teens and teens who identify as being part of the LGBTQIA+ community.
- **VOLUNTEERS:** More than 300 well-trained, committed professional writer volunteers mentor teens in poetry, fiction, songwriting, journalism, screenwriting and more.
- **RECOGNITION:** WriteGirl received the 2013 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award, presented by Michelle Obama. In 2020, WriteGirl and Executive Director Keren Taylor received the Los Angeles Times Innovator’s Award, “recognizing WriteGirl’s contributions to the community in promoting literacy, creativity and self-expression to empower girls.”
- **FISCAL SPONSOR:** WriteGirl is a project of Community Partners, a 501(c)(3) organization, tax ID #95-4302067, which serves as its fiscal sponsor.
**Programs:** WriteGirl serves teens through two main programs. (All programming is currently presented online in response to COVID-19.)

1) **The WriteGirl Core Mentoring Program** provides out-of-school creative writing workshops, one-on-one mentoring by professional women writers, publications and leadership development activities to more than 300 under-resourced teen girls and nonbinary youth.

- WriteGirl currently provides monthly 90-minute online creative writing workshops via Zoom, attended by an average of 200 mentees, alumnae, mentors and volunteers.
- Workshops explore poetry, memoir/creative nonfiction, journalism, screenwriting, songwriting, fiction, comedy and more.
- Workshops feature special guest presentations, the WriteGirl Soapbox (a platform for girls’ self-expression), “Hello Hangouts,” writing breakouts, one-on-one mentoring sessions, self-care segments, video, live broadcasts, music and a variety of interactive writing “experiments.”
- More than 130 teens are matched with their own writing mentor. WriteGirl mentoring relationships often last throughout the duration of a girl’s participation in the program, and often continue long after the girl has gone on to college. WriteGirl mentors are recruited through a variety of organizations and complete two full days of training in order to prepare them to be effective WriteGirl mentors.
- Workshops and mentoring sessions are interactive and challenging, often incorporating music, audio-visual elements, posters, photos, objects from nature and even scents. This multi-sensory approach to engaging writing curriculum is a hallmark of WriteGirl.
The Core Mentoring Program also includes initiatives for juniors, seniors and alums:

- **Bold Futures** provides in-depth college entrance guidance to WriteGirl high school juniors and seniors, and career-focused support and resources for 100 program alumnae who are college students and recent college graduates.
- **Bold Leaders** offers a one-year leadership development program for 11th grade WriteGirl participants.

2) **The WriteGirl Bold Ink Writers Program** provides creative writing workshops to approximately 200 co-ed youth, including pregnant, parenting, teens who are incarcerated and/or system-impacted at alternative schools, juvenile detention facilities and community centers.

As a founding member of the Arts for Healing and Justice Network (AHJN), WriteGirl provides a significant amount of programming in partnership with AHJN, the LA County Probation Department, LA County Department of Arts and Culture, Los Angeles County Child Protective Services, and Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health.

Weekly creative writing workshops are currently being presented at Central Juvenile Hall in Los Angeles and Long Beach Juvenile Day Reporting Center.

**Population Served:**

- Each year, WriteGirl serves 500 teens, ages 13–18, and approximately 100 program alumnae who are college students and recent college grads (18–24).
- Teen participants attend more than 175 Los Angeles-area high schools, with a large concentration residing in high-density, low-income communities that include South Los Angeles, Inglewood, Koreatown, Mid-City and Highland Park, and other areas that suffer from a significant lack of resources.
- Many WriteGirl teens are from immigrant families in which English is not the primary language. Many have poor reading and writing abilities and limited access to resources for academic improvement and college enrollment.
- We estimate that 95% of WriteGirl teens are from low- to moderate-income families.
Publications:

- WriteGirl publishes poetry, prose, scenes and songs written by our teens and has published 37 anthologies, booklets and chapbooks.
- WriteGirl’s 15 Core Mentoring Program anthologies have received 96 book awards and positive reviews from Los Angeles Times Book Review, The Writer, Kirkus, School Library Journal and more.
- WriteGirl teens’ creative work is published frequently on the WriteGirl Blog, and many other publications and social media channels.

Partnerships and Community Involvement:

- WriteGirl plays an important role in the greater Los Angeles arts landscape by helping underserved and primarily BIPOC teens, including trans and nonbinary youth, develop a creative voice, and providing a platform for them to share their writing with a wider audience through publication and public readings of their creative work.
- Creative partners in the community include the Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County, The Huntington, The Autry Museum, Hello Sunshine, LACMA, LAX, Amazon, Skylight Books, the LA Times Festival of Books, FOX-TV, the office of Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, Sony Music Publishing, Ovation TV, the Foothill Transit Authority, the Pasadena Festival of Women Authors and the Los Angeles County Office of Education.

WriteGirl Impact/Outcomes:

- WriteGirl has a 19-year, 100% college admission rate for Core Mentoring Program seniors.
- WriteGirl’s positive community helps teens develop a creative voice, solid communication skills and confidence as demonstrated in surveys and focus
groups with our mentees. We make a long-term commitment to our teens, and many of our mentoring relationships last throughout a girl's 4–5 year participation in the program.

- WriteGirl not only supports teens as they work toward high school graduation, but continues to support its alumnae in their educational and creative pursuits through their college years and beyond.
- Many WriteGirl teens are published writers and accomplished public speakers even before graduating from high school.
- Our alumnae are graduating from college and entering careers in education, law, healthcare, social service, media and the arts. A profile of alum Jamilah Mena follows this section. In the meantime, here are a few more alum highlights:
  - WriteGirl alumna and Harvard graduate **Amanda Gorman** performed her poem “The Hill We Climb” at the 2021 U.S. Presidential Inauguration. She shares her poetry about feminism, race and social activism throughout the country and will publish three books of poetry this year.
  - Filmmaker **Jeanine Daniels** recently launched her own production company and received the 2019–2020 Humanitas New Voices prize.
  - In 2020, award-winning poet and founding editor of La Piscucha Magazine **Janel Pineda** published a poetry chapbook and received a Master’s in Creative Writing and Education at Goldsmiths, University of London, as a Marshall Scholar.
  - **Melina Zuniga**, MD, graduated from Spelman College-Atlanta and the Morehouse School of Medicine. She recently completed her residency in Psych/Med at Tulane University and is a doctor in New Orleans.
  - **Sara Kimura** is a Pepperdine University graduate and Author Liaison for a Los Angeles publishing company. She has returned to WriteGirl as a weekly mentor.
The WriteGirl Approach

Our approach is unique to us. We learn from other youth development theories and approaches, but we remain firm and clear in our unique approach in mentoring and guiding youth, which has generated positive outcomes for thousands of young people.

We always allow youth to write whatever they want to write, without judgment, but we present activities that deliberately focus on positive character traits, uplifting experiences and hopeful futures. Our curriculum and activities focus on positive, uplifting themes and prompts.

We follow a philosophy of “asset-building” that helps strengthen youth based on positive traits they already have, as well as re-framing to help them see aspects of themselves that they might not have recognized as assets.

We see the long-term benefit of having youth experience our program as consistently and completely positive. Trust and vulnerability is built over time in such a specifically supportive environment.

We are always conscious of not re-traumatizing youth who have been through extremely traumatic experiences. It is not a goal of ours to foster self-expression in and of itself. We see self-expression as something we very carefully direct and lead, with a focus on positivity, hope, possibility, identity, belonging, etc., to promote healing, confidence and communication skills. We understand how self-expression, unguided, without any parameters, lacks the guidance and direction that critically at-risk youth need at this time in their lives.
Selected Honors/Awards:

2020    The L.A. Time’s Innovator’s Award presented to Keren Taylor and WriteGirl
2017    HALO Award/The Carl & Roberta Deutsch Foundation
2017    Arts & Sciences Cities of Distinction Award, The Phi Beta Kappa Society
2016    The Creative Economy innOVATION Grant Award
2014    Keren Taylor, CNN Hero Designation
2013    National Arts & Humanities Youth Program Award, presented by Michelle Obama
2010    California Nonprofit of the Year and Medal of Service
2010    Humanitas Philanthropy Prize for Work Empowering Writers

Recent Media Coverage:

- Finding magic in mentorship: How one CNN Hero inspired thousands of young women to write their own success stories
- The Hollywood Reporter: Amanda Gorman Honored at WriteGirl Gala: “Never Underestimate the Power of a Girl and Her Pen”
- FOX Entertainment Women’s History Month anthem with poem by WriteGirl alum
- Hollywood Reporter: Amanda Gorman Was Mentored by a “Positive Community of Women Writers” Before Her Inaugural Moment
- LA Weekly: The Words of Women
- NBC4: DC Teams Up With WriteGirl to Inspire the Next Generation of Comic Book Writers
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Check out our blog: writegirl.org/blog

Like us on Facebook: facebook.com/WriteGirlOrganization

Follow us on Goodreads: goodreads.com/WriteGirlLA

Follow us on Instagram: instagram.com/WriteGirlLA
“This is such a safe space, the safest I’ve ever felt — like a warm blanket on a cool day, or a perfect poem from the pen of a powerful girl.”

– a WriteGirl teen