

falling sky



Falling Sky

11 Personal Essays by ACES Students
Spring 2020

A 2020 ACES Publication (Volume 9 in the series)
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Foreword

As humble as I am to be writing here, I am also honored. The sky has always been a mystery to many of us. We all stare into it for particular reasons: whether it be during the day to see that tiny airplane that flew above our heads or at night to confirm whether there is actually a rabbit living on the moon. Our connection with the sky, the moon, and the stars guides us to a journey of finding ourselves. It is astonishing how little we knew when we were younger, but things change as we evolve into more experienced young adults.

As I go through each of your stories, I can't help but take notice of how similar we are yet so different. Our sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, friends, and teachers have shaped us into who we are today. At some point in our lives, we all go out to the wild places, stand under the sky, look up at the moon and the stars, and search for our answers. Personally, I have looked up at the sky and asked if it could cry with me on days that I felt lost or scared of the unknown journey.

It is such a relief to know that through our friends, peers, and mentors, we all have found answers in our falling skies. Yet, there is no end to struggle as life is progress. I hope we take our time falling. I hope we never stop searching for more answers to the things we have yet to know and meet. I hope we have our own angels to guide us through our trials. Even if we don't find the answers to our prayers in the shooting stars, I hope we do not give up. After all, our struggles took us here. With these thoughts in mind, let us begin our ACES Reader 2020. Once again, thank you for letting me be a part of it.

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May 2020*

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Falling Sky by Puja Khadka

One cold winter night long ago, the sky lit up as stars fell. Streaks of blinding light danced on the surface of the dark canopy. A view so breathtaking no dream could capture it.

Nepal is a land of mountains, hills and plains. A land of beauty dotted with fertile valleys. Budhanilkantha school, located in the capital city of Kathmandu, lies within one such valley. I lived in a residential school in the foothills of the Shivapuri for eight long years. For each two grades we advanced, we were placed into different dormitories and students from the same grade were shuffled into two different dormitories to encourage improvement through competition. We were pitted against each other throughout the year for trophies of academic excellence, sportsmanship and anything else that mattered. In addition, since we shared the same roof, with only a few walls dividing us, hostility did run free at times. Through

those shuffles, and in those exact dormitories, I found my second family. In those eight years, I made connections, new friends whom I can now call my sisters, and everlasting memories.

Late one evening on that day I hold so dear, I was looking at a notice on the dormitory board. It mentioned a meteor shower happening that night. Most students were just coming back from supper. Girls from each dormitory were making snide remarks to each other: one side bragged about winning a trophy while the other gloated about past achievements. But through those arguing adversaries, a swarm of students rushed by, scrambling to get into our dormitory and up the stairs. It was against the rules to go up to the roof after supper, and that made me curious—like many of the other students watching. We stuck our heads out of doors and windows, some only half-dressed in pajamas, wondering what all the commotion was. The original group continued to run upstairs with a growing number of students following, along with the teachers and wardens behind them. Since even the teachers were not stopping the students from breaking the rule, and were rushing with them instead, I could stave off my curiosity no longer. I joined the herd and followed.

A total of eighty girls lived in those two dormitories from our grade alone, and most of them were up on the roof, faces turned to the sky. A cold winter wind whooshed past me, making me shiver as I exited onto the jam-packed roof. The sky was cloudless, and the great black unknown was speckled with spots of light. But what should have been silent and stationary ended up being wild and wonderful.

The stars were dancing, some soaring up high, while some pulled themselves down, leaving a streak of white behind them.

In the cold, tiring night, I let out a shout, my voice becoming mist. In the middle of the crowd, I loosened my grip on my blanket and shouted again. By that time, all the other students had caught up to the situation and began shouting as well. Even our strict teachers and wardens chimed in. The cheering grew and laughter lifted the spirits of everyone on that roof. I had goosebumps, but not from the cold. No: it was from the vast amount of energy everybody had on that roof that night. Illuminating the night sky's farthest depths, the star-fall evaporated all feelings of rivalry. Students from neighboring dormitories, the same students that competed fiercely throughout the year for recognition, awards and validation, were now all singing and cheering, hands on each other's shoulders, with smiles aplenty. All our eyes were glued to the magnificent scenery laid bare in front of us. The heat of the stars from the farthest depths of space lit up a feeling of excitement and energy within us, that could make even the coldest of nights feel comfortable. And within that same warmth, we found ourselves lost.

But, as all good things must come to an end, we bid farewell to that beautiful dreamscape. Our laughs, shouts and cheers resonated around the school and beyond, prompting the principal to take direct action. All surrounding homes were disturbed and some even called the cops. To prevent the situation from escalating, the principal personally visited our dormitory and quieted us all down. We had to go back to our rooms. An hour had passed since I stepped on the roof, but I felt not

even a minute go by. With the principal himself present, the teachers ushered us all back to our respective dormitories. All students rushed out into the stairwell. I raced to my room and opened a math book, to make it look as if I had been studying all along. I sat there and waited for the principal, who was poking his head through every cubicle, to leave. After I was sure he had left, I quietly snuck out of my room and headed over to the opposite dormitory. My friends were already gathered together in one of their rooms. I looked at them and giggled.

The noise had died down and most students were already in their beds sleeping. But we hadn't finished talking and sharing—both about the excitement we had experienced and the scolding we had received. We talked and talked and had a hearty conversation until midnight, and as we parted to return to our separate rooms and dormitories, we all shared a hug to solidify the bond we had strengthened that night. The next night, sneers and smirks surfaced again, but one look at the motionless stars brought the memories back: the stars falling and all of us laughing. And for a split second when the memory persisted, our eyes locked, smiling, betraying our smirks and outward appearances. For the slightest moment, a shining glint graced our eyes that could rival the glow of the stars themselves.



Wildest Dream by Tooba Khalid

I grew up in a place called Pakistan where it is common for women to sew blankets. They don't like to buy blankets from the market. When I was five or six, I used to sit around with my mom and watch her enjoy making those blankets with her friends and my aunt. I loved to buy various types of cotton for my mom and even help her make blankets herself. But my experience of blanket-making was deeply affected when I had a wild dream which completely changed my perspective.

In the dream, my parents, siblings, aunt, her little daughter and myself were forced by demons to carry bundles of heavy cotton, fabric, and needles. We had been tasked with making blankets by sewing two or more pieces of fabric together. The needles we had been provided by the demons were thin and sharp, and every time

we sewed, they poked into the palms of our hands. I noticed blood dripping from our hands. There was a ditch underneath us and the water turned blood-red from our needle-poked hands. I was extremely anxious and so was everyone else. After making fabric blankets, everyone stuffed them with plenty of cotton. The demons' brutality was insane. We all were sitting there hour after hour, and we only got to eat one meal, which tasted excruciatingly salty and savory.

Everyone was begging to escape and my heart cried to see my loved ones in pain. I heard shouts and screams. In the dream, this activity that I used to love, I now hated from the bottom of my heart. We all were surrounded by walls of thorns, which were filled with the world's weirdest species—like glass frogs, blue glaucuses, and many other species whose names I did not know. These species were eager to attack us whenever we tried to escape because of the way they were trained.

For an hour all of the demons went to a mandatory meeting and so did the weird species. That was when I had the best opportunity to save lives, but this unusual place that I was in had many different paths and I didn't know which was the right one to lead us out. Every time we touched a dark, cloudy wall, we burned our hands. We all kept walking and looking for a way to get outside. Suddenly, I saw spots of light but didn't know where they were coming from, so went closer. It was a man, or should I call it an angel, flying in the air. He had large white wings.

I asked, "Who are you?"

The angel replied, "I was sent to help you get outside to the life you desire."

I didn't know what to do. Should I trust him or not? Seeing him, I was reminded of a silly incident where my family and I were in the park one afternoon, enjoying the beautiful weather. I had been working on my karate and boxing with my cousin, teasing him. After a while, we all had a snack and I was loving my sweet and delicious slice of strawberry cheesecake, something the demons would never let me eat here. In the memory, a random, long-haired, strangely dressed guy ran toward us. I was ready to punch him to prevent him from harming my family, but as he got closer, I saw him change his direction. The angel standing in front of me waiting for my decision and the strangely dressed guy were the same to me: men I didn't trust, running towards me, coming at me, perhaps coming for me.

I needed to hurry up with my decision because the devils, done with their meeting, were now running toward us. I had no other choice but to trust that the angel was God's blessing, and I quickly helped everyone seat themselves on his huge white wings which took them away. In the end, I was left and couldn't get to those magical wings. One of the devils came back and caught me. My loved ones were free from this hell, but I was not.

As a punishment, I was thrown into a dark, separate room. From inside, I felt truly relaxed because I could not see my loved ones' crying faces. I had only myself to worry about and pity. The light of a swinging light bulb badly hurt my eyes, although I was happy because my loved ones were at last free. That room felt worse than any other violation I had experienced. It was covered not only with recognizable species but also with huge snakes. Life had never been this horrifying

for me. The snakes' forked tongues were moving toward me every second and causing my heart to beat wildly and my body to shake.

This is when I remembered how snakes love music, which gave me an idea. I started to sing, move, and dance on top of the snakes' heads. My goal was to reach the right corner window which led outside. While I was dancing and singing, I saw one of the snakes close his eyes and begin shaking his head. He seemed to be very much entertained by me. Luckily, he went close to the window while I was on top of his head. When he moved his head up, I saw a river underneath me, but I chose to jump anyway and release myself from this hell. This jump felt never-ending, and I could feel the freedom and happiness of no longer being controlled—that endless freedom that I always see in birds and imagine myself experiencing. In my dream, I could finally feel that.

This dream affected me so much that now whenever I see people sewing blankets, it reminds me of that horrible dream, and I have to lock myself in a room for an hour or so just to calm down. In those moments, it feels like someone is pulling me back into the dream, into those rooms with thorns and terrifying creatures that want to hurt me and my family. I don't want to experience that again. People might think it's strange that I have never gone back to my country since I came to the US. But one of the reasons is that I always see people sewing blankets there, and just the sight of it makes me fear for my and my family's safety. I wanted to move anywhere in the world where no one sewed any blankets.



Swallowed by the Darkness by Zaryab Khan

When I was young, around 12 years old, I used to be afraid of the dark. Whether it was the darkness in my room, or fetching the football from a dark corner of the garden when I was playing at night, I was just frightened of the dark. I even used to sleep with the lights turned on. It was only when my grandmother got me a blanket and told me that it would protect me from the dark that I finally let the darkness encompass my room. Before, in the darkness, my palms would sweat and the moment I would close my eyes, I would feel shivers at the thought of some unknown presence. Every time I would turn my back to the wall, I would imagine someone sneaking up behind me with a knife. I even had feelings of someone watching me through my bedroom window. I thought the dark was a conduit for all things frightening. So I would stay up all night

and wait for the sun to shed its light before I could close my eyes with my mind at ease.

One night, I was spending the night at my grandmother's house. I sat in my room and suddenly, the lights went out. My heartbeat quickened, my hands turned clammy and a scream caught in my throat. I ran for the window, the only source of light in my room, and I screamed for my grandmother. She rushed in, expecting the worst, and saw me shivering and sitting in the windowsill. She understood. She walked over to me, picked me off the windowsill and sat me on her lap and held me. She told me to look up at the stars that adorned the dark night sky. She told me that the night was something that should spark joy rather than scare us. She talked about the beauty of the night sky and how it was unmatched. And as I sat there with her, I couldn't help but feel a sense of calm wash over me and replace the fear and make it seem irrational. I understood that even if I couldn't completely overcome my fear, I could at least understand that there was beauty, even in the thing that had scared me most. And that moment stays with me to this day.

Now that she's gone, I still use her memory for comfort in times of despair, when the darkness threatens to take over. I am now twenty years old, and there are still times when I feel hopeless in the dark, and when that happens, I sit on my windowsill and look up at the night sky, the twinkling stars and the big, bright moon. I find myself reminiscing about the time my grandmother told me that when someone's soul leaves their body, it becomes stars—even though at the time, it was hard for me to believe that.

The night my grandmother taught me about light and dark reverberated through my life in magical ways. One night, the beach near my house called my name with its faint, salty smell and tranquility. It was as if I were being hypnotized by the sound of the waves crashing against the shore and the night sky dazzling against the water. I walked downstairs and outside my house—my safe zone—towards the loud roar of waves with curiosity about what lay out there in the sky in this darkest of hours. I felt the sand squish slowly through my toes. I had been to this beach during the day, when it was merely a place for recreation. I would swim, surf, fish and tan. But this beach wasn't the same at night. I continued walking down the shoreline and found myself slowly becoming dizzy from the wonder of the night sky. The sight of dark skies and blue water gushing towards me caused me to instinctively take a few steps backward. The darkness, the fear—it was still there. I sat down and stared at the sky: It was indigo, with lots of little shining dots. The stars were glittering like diamonds and sparkling, but they were not harsh to my eyes. It felt like the stars were looking back at me. I felt warmth. The same warmth I felt when my mom would feed me or when my dad would take me on a drive. It felt like home. The moon shimmered and its bright shadow glinted in the rolling water.

Looking at the shadow of the moon in the water, I saw a star shining brighter than the others. It was sparkling in the water as though it wanted me to look at it. It stood out. It was bigger in size, and brighter too. Deep down, I knew it was my grandmother. That moment was when I realized that my grandma was right about souls becoming stars. A tear rolled down my face as I thought about how much I

missed my grandma, yet also realized that she was above me, smiling and staring at me, giving me a sign that she was happy that I was able to come out in the dark by myself. I wiped my tears and noticed something strange: something so bright rushing down the sky, as if it were going to make an explosion in the water. It was a shooting star. I closed my eyes quickly before it made its way to the water and made a wish. I wished that I'd see my grandma one more time, hug her and tell her how much I loved her, as I never got the chance to do that when she was alive. I wished to see her smile and feel her soft, old hands. I wished to be with her, listen to her while she told me stories about her childhood. I just wished to see her. I opened my eyes and the shooting star had disappeared. Yet my grandma was there, right above me, smiling and shining brightly.

I heard my mom calling out my name in a tone that made me realize she was panicking. I heard her call out once again and I knew it was time to go back to my house. I looked at the sky and made a promise to my grandma that I would return to see her in the sky every night. I ran towards my house and saw my mom looking for me wearing no shoes and only a sweater. It was freezing that night. My mom asked me what I was doing out there, and I told her about everything that happened and how I had seen grandma in the sky. She smiled and asked me to go back to bed. I walked back to my room, afraid of the dark, but not as much this time. I lay down in my bed and stared out the window at the stars, and rested. I was asleep before I knew it. I woke up early in the morning thinking all of that was a dream, but I soon realized it wasn't. Then I slipped back into sleep and another dream rose up before

my eyes. I dreamt about my grandma: I dreamt that I was in heaven and I could hear my grandma cheerfully laughing and calling out my name. I went searching for her, screaming “grandma, grandma,” but I could only hear her. I was crying out loud and desperate to see her but I couldn’t, and it was frustrating. Then my grandma spoke. She spoke about how happy and proud she was of me. The dream was short and I wished it hadn’t been so short, so I could spend more time with my grandma.

That night at the beach, with the beautiful, bright stars in the sky, and the moon that guided me and showed me a way through the dark, changed my life forever. It was a reminder for me to always hold onto the light whenever it got dark, instead of being afraid of it. Looking up at the sky, all I saw were dreams and hope that my future would be just as bright as the constellation above me. I knew for myself that even though my grandma wasn’t around, she was always looking upon me, protecting me from the monsters I created in my head and guiding me in ways I never knew. I know now that I am always going to have a part of her in me.



Wild Overturn by Ramiz Khudoyorov

Eighteen friends and I planned a trip to the Poconos over the second week of summer. The sunny, hot weather was calling our names, and we looked forward to the late-night parties filled with all sorts of entertainment. I woke up early in the morning, eight o'clock, a day before we headed out to the Poconos. I went shopping with six other friends and my older brother, who is also part of the same friend group. As we headed into the store, everyone with a cart in their hands, we were all acting foolish but getting that list checked. We bought drinks, fruit, utensils, meat, spices, pastry, and everything else needed for a great time. I headed home with some of the shopping bags, as did everyone else. The day passed quickly; in the blink of an eye, it was already late at night, with a cool breeze and shining stars in the dark blue sky. No sleep was coming my way because

of the excitement flowing through me for the day ahead. So I got up and packed my clothes, grabbing everything needed for a week, and finally I went to sleep.

Riding towards the Poconos, we played loud music, and settled into a comfortable dynamic throughout the entire ride. However, I felt very uneasy, as if something bad were going to happen. Everybody was just really happy—and that’s what scared me. My grandma once said, “Remember never to take happiness for granted, because sorrow follows happiness.” My friends and I loved having fun and being happy. I was telling myself not to worry because everything would go perfectly fine—at least that’s what I hoped.

We reached our destination, a big house we had rented. I stepped into the house, three floors and a backyard with a big pool. Everything we had ever wished for was in the house: TVs, pool tables, couches, a little jacuzzi in the basement and a ping-pong table. I was very hungry, as were all my friends, so we lit some coal and started a mini BBQ. The smell of the meat was brewing throughout the entire house and the backyard. Delicious BBQ started off light with some thinly cut strips of beef, well-seasoned and spicy. My friend Fedya was our grill chef and head chef. He was pretty good at cooking. So he took control of the grill and let nobody near it, except me and my brother. Naim and Wizzy started cleaning corn and vegetables, Shakhzod and Jake got the skewers cleaned and ready. The rest of our friends, too many to name, were getting the tables ready. There was bright yellow corn, with little burnt marks, burning hot, the juices bursting from each little corn kernel. Sweet juice from the corn ripped open our appetites, and we were still hungry. I seasoned the nice

two-inch steaks and marinated the little cubed cuts for kebabs. My brother stacked them colorfully with some veggies on skewers, let them rest for some time, then Fedya started cooking. While that cooked, some of us played pool, some of us cracked open some beer. There was this round thing in the backyard with couches around it. We guessed it was there to make some fire and chill around, so we did exactly that after the BBQ.

As the sun set, many mysteries came along with the darkness. I had no clue that my friend Wizzy had signed up for a race later that night. He came to the States seven years ago, not much of a scholar but an amazing person. He was very wise, except when he was feeling the adrenaline rush of driving fast cars and racing. I knew he was a good driver with a fast car, an SRT. But for some reason, I felt very uneasy about that race.

But I pushed my fears down and we went to the grounds. An empty road between the woods, it was very quiet until the crowd came. Lots of other amazing cars were there. The two cars that caught my attention were the Mustang Shelby GT350 and the Nissan GT-R (R35). These were beasts of that arena. However, there was another car, a Toyota Supra (fourth generation), that really struck me. The production of these models and cars had been stopped in 2002. The car itself was a beauty, but the owner had made some manual changes himself, making it a complete buster.

Two hours after we arrived at the race, the sun had fully set and it got very calm—a sudden change. Quietness filled the atmosphere, except for the roaring of

the engines. *Three, two, one* and the race started, tires smoked the road and they drove away, both at the same pace and with steady control. Minutes later, my friend got the lead, and the unfortunate happened right after that. Some sort of animal jumped in front of the car. Wizzy lost control and swerved off the road. Nothing could save him from crashing at that point, not even the brakes. My heart popped out of my chest and all my thoughts went blank. I ran to the car along with others. The front of the car was wrinkled like it was just a piece of paper. My friend was inside, unconscious, bleeding and suffering. His entire body was covered with blood. He was the one hurt but we all could feel the pain just from looking. As we were carefully pulling him out from the car window, he woke up and screamed in agony as if he were being tortured. My hands and legs were trembling from the fear of losing a dear friend. We got him out of the car and rushed him to the nearest hospital, where twenty-five people waited for his recovery in that little hallway.

The air was filled with despair as we all prayed to our own gods. All we felt was dark sorrow; All we could hear was the ticking of a clock on the white wall, and the heavy breathing of everyone waiting. Nurses rushed in and out of the emergency room. Every time the doors opened, we'd hold our hearts tight. Hours of trembling fear overcame us from the inside out. The two big doors finally opened and we all rushed to the doctors hoping for a good answer. The doctor said, "Everything went fine. He had minor injuries and nerve damage in his hand and he lost a lot of blood, but we are doing our best so do not worry." The only thing that calmed us down were these words coming from the doctor. *I could never bear losing a close friend like*

him, I thought, and I was thanking everything in this world that God didn't take him from me or anyone else. Every human fears one thing more than all others, and that's death. I fear death too—not my own, but the deaths of those whom I hold dear. Ever since then, I've wished that a wild day such as that one will never happen again.



Silent Night by Adailed Marshall

It was on December 22, 2012 that the world was expected to go into chaos and disappear. In that year, the Maya calendar ended, and people assumed that the world would end as well. December 22nd, 2012 was the main focus of every conversation—at least in my neighborhood. During that time, I lived in a rural area in Cuba. My hometown was small, and so was my neighborhood. Living there was great because of the peacefulness, the spacious houses, and because everyone knew each other. However, living in such a small town also had its downsides: gossip. I remember my friend Danilo, who I grew up with, being scared due to the gossip about the world ending. No one knew precisely how the world would end, but they assumed that a big tsunami wave would wipe out every city, and some others thought that an earthquake would destroy Earth,

and even that God was going to come that day. I still recall my fear, tension, anger, and heavy heart at the thought of what might happen. On top of everything else, that anticipated day was my birthday. As a Christian, I knew it was impossible and absurd for the world to end; still, what can you expect from an eleven-year-old girl?

December arrived, and the fated day was getting closer and closer. I remember confessing my sins every night just in case something happened. Every day when I woke up, I would go to my old patio and from the back door, I would look at the sky and exclaim, "The birds are singing, the sun is out. The trees seem happy, and I can breathe. I am glad that I am still alive!" And that was my routine for 22 consecutive days. I desperately needed that routine to combat my feeling that the world was turning its back on me. Why my birthday? Why was the calendar ending on *my* birthday? Why did it have to be December 22, 2012?

As the days went by, the fear of not being able to make it to 12 years old magnified. The days passed quickly, and in the blink of an eye, it was already December 21st. Throughout that entire night, I felt this uncertainty: *what's next?* December 22nd was a couple of hours away, and there was no indication of a catastrophe. Before any storm, birds would always fly away; however, this time, it was peaceful and quiet. No sound, no mysterious elements in the sky, and no birds flying around. In fact, the night was gorgeous. It even seemed as if she had dressed up just for me. She was wearing a beautiful dark dress, covered by stars with a big yellow jewel in the center—the moon.

As I admired the night and witnessed such wonder, I was not alone, and that night was prettier because my mom, my brother, and my sister were all there, as well as some other neighbors. We sat on the sidewalk of my neighbor's house, where there was no obstacle between the sky and us. We sat under the shiny moon, a full moon as bright as a chandelier. I remember that night being deep like the bottom of the sea. Such sky was a mystery to me, it was overflowing with secrets that only a mighty, powerful God would be able to understand. Although it was a black night, it was not empty: stars were everywhere, just like the freckles on a face. The only difference was that those freckles were full of different colors. Looking at the sky was like wandering around a dark ocean, where the stars were shiny colored fish, and the moon the lighthouse.

It started getting late, and we went to sleep. But I woke up early, just as the morning was arriving—purple lights were peeping through the darkness, announcing a new day. While the sun was rising, the colors red, orange, pink, yellow, and blue were saying hello to nature. It felt like someone had opened the door to a dark room, and suddenly every corner was visible. The trees, the birds, and the flowers were finally distinguishable to me, as if I had regained my sight after being blind. Looking at the morning was like contemplating a painting, where each color is placed so as to make the others come to life. Even though the night was leaving, and the stars were its followers, the moon stayed. She had no purpose at that time—there was no darkness to make her shine. Colorful clouds were the new stars, and

the blue sky had taken over, and a palm tree was tattooed on the sun. The rooster began to sing as usual. This time, that song, that poem, meant life and happiness.

No disaster happened, no earthquake, and no tsunami. However, there was a birthday to celebrate. I was alive, and God had given me a new opportunity. Even if I doubted, he kept me safe. As I look back, I can vividly see all of them, singing “Happy Birthday,” with smiles on their faces: my aunt, my grandma, and my mom. I was happy, probably the happiest person in the world—it was my birthday, and everyone I cared about was with me. Just like the stars had accompanied the dark sky, I had my family with me. Throughout the day, nothing happened. It was a calm day, and a beautiful one.

As the years have passed by, I’ve had calm and quiet birthdays. Yet I have never been given a better present than the one I was given by mother nature: a silent night—a night to remember. I have not forgotten that night, and I think I never will. I have stared at the sky, traveled back to Cuba, and tried witnessing something similar, but there is no resemblance. That night was a gift from heaven.



A Hike to a Private Paradise by Victoria Romão Nóbrega

Hiking was supposed to be easy. Just go up the mountain and then down and you get to the place you want to go. Right? Wrong! When people talk about hiking, they don't tell you the truth. They don't tell you that you need a specific type of shoe, tons of water, or 300-factor sunscreen.

When my friend Breno convinced me and my friend Lara to go on a 30-minute hike to a secret beach in Arraial, a small city close to Rio de Janeiro, he didn't mention any of those things. I thought, "It will be fine! Just put on my bikini, some shorts, a lil' bit of sunscreen and some flip-flops and I'm good to go."

On the marked day, I woke up early and I had to almost set the house on fire to wake up Lara to be on time. I had a quick breakfast and went to the meeting point. Of course, Breno was late. You can never trust a surfer to be on time to meet you.

Finally, he appeared with his huge board and waved at us. We walked towards him. "Alright this might not be so hard!" I thought. He was wearing flip-flops and holding a big board, so I thought it must be a really light hike.

We got to the edge of the stairs, a long set that led to the hike. "Okay, I've gone up these stairs a couple of times, that will be fine." The next thing I knew, I was breathing heavily, my lungs were burning and my legs were shaking. In addition to all that, the skin on the soles of my feet felt like it was about to come off. "Bad, terrible, idiotic idea of coming with flip-flops," I berated myself. Half of my bottle of water was already gone, and we still had the trip back.

At last we got to the end of the stairs. I was about to drop dead, but I made it. Then the universe looked at me and said, "Nah, you still have to go through these woods, Victoria!" Was I freaking out? YES! Nature is not my forte and now I was not only scared, but also mad.

We had no other choice, so we walked into the woods and honestly, I just wanted to run through them as fast as I could.

"I'm thirsty," I thought, so I got my bottle and it was the last sip of water that I had. I decided to drink it. "When we come back, I'll just manage the lack of water," I thought.

The woods were really thick and they made me claustrophobic. I forgot to mention that I have a pre-existing asthma condition. So, halfway through the hike, my lungs were burning, my brain was hurting and I couldn't think straight. My friends started to get worried about me. "I'm fine! I can do this!" I kept saying. What I was

actually thinking was, "I'm dying, I wanna give up right now." But I couldn't give up. I had gotten this far and I wasn't going to give up without at least a glimpse of the beach.

And then the woods were over, and I finally saw it: The different shades of blue of the sea, from a very dense, dark blue to a blue as light as crystal, were just breathtaking. It was probably the most beautiful beach I had ever seen. The sand was so white that it reflected the sun.

But my happiness ended as fast as it came. I looked down and there was a long staircase that we had to get down to get to the beach. I was dehydrated, exhausted, and so hot that I thought that when the water touched my skin, I would go into thermal shock.

We got to the end of the stairs, and that was when the first blow came. To get to the sand, we had to pass over a big, slippery rock surrounded by water that came up to my ankle. The water was so freezing cold that my legs tingled.

Finally, we got to the sand and it was the complete opposite of the water: it was so hot that it burned. But I didn't care. I was so hypnotized by the sea that I couldn't move.

At some point, I decided to go for a swim. I got up and walked slowly towards the ocean. The sound of the waves was loud, even though their motion was calm, giving me a sensation of peace. I slowly walked into the water and it was freezing! I thought about giving up. It was really cold and I was paralyzed and I couldn't move. I looked down and there was a school of fish swimming in perfect synchrony very close to me. I decided that it was either that moment or never. I dove in.

I had the strange feeling, "This is what dying of hypothermia must feel like!" I was completely frozen, from head to toe. I couldn't move my arms or my legs and I started sinking down. Slowly, I saw the surface disappearing and I got so scared. Somehow, I found the strength to come up to the surface. When my head was out, I felt that warm, cozy breeze of summer, and with my body still in that freezing water, I felt perfect.

That was the moment where everything that I had been through, the lack of water, blisters on my feet and the loss of breath, was worth it. Everything was perfect at that place, for that moment.

As I floated there calmly in the sea, I saw a few people coming down the stairs. They were about to have the same experience that I had and I was excited for them. I just stood there watching the surfers, the few people, and I felt freedom that I haven't felt in a very long while.



A Sky Hides Mysteries by Cecile Maxi

Lying down on an empty lot across from my house, I had a clear view of the dark sky full of stars, when it started drizzling. Around me were my neighbors, most of whom I did not know, but that night, we became friends. Looking at the sky, you might have thought that the day preceding it had been beautiful, with no trace of trauma. If a day could be reversed, starting at night and ending with the sunrise, nobody would have thought that our lives would have been changed in only 35 seconds by an earthquake.

January 12, 2010 was a sunny Tuesday, a normal day at school in Haiti with regular classes like any other day. I was in the 4th grade. That day in class, most of the students were daydreaming and looking through the windows instead of paying attention to the teacher. Around 3 in the afternoon, I was already home, ready to

finish my homework and start playing. Growing up, I always had many cousins living with us, which meant the house was never too quiet. On that day, there were six of us: my two brothers, three cousins and me. As kids, we always wanted to play, so we had to do our chores and homework early.

Around 4 PM, almost everyone was done with their homework and lessons. My cousins and I were sitting on a balcony on the second floor playing games and joking around, looking at the cloudless blue sky. Leaves on the trees were dancing in the wind, and if we looked up for a long time, we could see birds flying. Everything felt like it was okay.

But in one moment, everything became unrecognizable: no more singing birds, no blue sky; instead, there were tremors that were shaking everything around—including us. In front of the balcony where we were sitting, there was a tree a few meters away. I had the impression that I could have reached out and touched one of its branches because the balcony was actually moving towards it. At first, none of us knew what was happening; it was the first time we were living through something like this. I can still remember the fear on my older cousin's face: he had those big eyes that say it all. My first thought was that it was the bank destroying the house because we hadn't paid the mortgage, but probably just because, at that age, I spent too much time watching television.

Since we were children, our first reflex was to run back inside the house—not a good idea during an earthquake, but we didn't know that at the time. I remember feeling like I was in a really bad flash mob where everything, including

the furniture, was moving and shaking with no rhythm. Everyone—my grandma, brothers and cousins—was doing something different: My grandma was on her knees calling out to Jesus; my little brother, two years old at that time, wouldn't stop crying; in fact, many of us were crying because of the fear. In my head, I had this vision of the stairs moving right to left and left to right, like some nauseating attraction at Coney Island, which I had visited the year before. I felt like all this was going on for much more than a minute because everything was happening so slowly. It was the slowest 35 seconds of my life.

For a minute after the earthquake, I didn't know how to react. I felt lost. As a child, my house was a safe place. But at that moment, I didn't know if I should stay inside or go outside: Go outside where anything could happen, or stay inside where it's known to be dangerous during an earthquake? Neither of these choices was tempting. My grandma eventually made us leave the house in a rush because she didn't want us to be crushed under rubble if there was another earthquake, but when I glanced back, the house still looked the same to me: no big cracks that would make me feel unsafe, no big hole in the roof. Only a minute before, everything had been okay, and the house wasn't shaking. But taking the risk of staying inside just because it looked the same was not a good idea because we didn't know when the ground would start shaking again and the house would fall on our heads. Outside, I looked up and everything was completely different: the sky was full of smoke like a powder bomb had gone off, the streets were completely empty, and there were no sounds, which was highly unusual for my neighborhood.

Once we got outside, my brothers, cousins and I wanted to talk to our parents. We tried calling them on my grandma's phone, uncle and auntie—everyone who lived with us—but there was no signal. We couldn't find them. We were scared and didn't know if our parents were still alive. My grandma did her best to console us. We spent around two hours in the streets in front of our house, talking, playing. All around us, houses were destroyed like old cars, some of them down to the ground, and trees were lying bent or broken. After a couple of minutes, out of nowhere, many of my neighbors came to stand with us in the middle of the street like it was a neighborhood reunion. Everyone began talking about their experiences, and how they felt about the earthquake. They described what they had seen from their windows and what they thought it was. Our stories were similar: They had seen trees that were moving back and forth, houses falling down, and the sky turning gray. For everyone, it was scary and traumatic.

We didn't see how fast the time was passing because everybody was talking, praying and singing gospel songs. Around 6:30 or 7 PM, my mom finally came home. We were so happy to see her that we didn't notice she was in pain until later that night, while she was explaining how she got out of her office: Since the office was on the second floor, she tried to exit while the ground was still shaking, but she fell twice. It wasn't a big injury, but her hips hurt for 14 days after the earthquake. At the time, I really thought she would have been paralyzed because of that, and by her facial expression, I could tell that that was one of her fears, too, which made me even

more scared. Nowadays, she walks and runs and I think that she's blessed and lucky to still be able to do all of that without any pain.

Later that night, my dad and everyone else who lived with us started to come back. The streets were empty, with only a few cars, so they hadn't been able to make it home earlier.

That night, I went "camping" for the first time. It was a beautiful night. The sky was dark blue and full of stars, and the moon was shining on us. We slept in an empty lot across from my house, opening blankets and covers on the ground so we could sleep on them. I was excited about the idea, but the moment I lay down, I wanted to be in my bed. I was scared of the dark that night, and I remember not sleeping with my parents, but instead with all t my cousins and my aunt. One moment, we were looking at a sky full of stars and the next, it started drizzling. But that didn't stop us singing or sleeping outside, because that day nothing would have made us go inside to sleep.

That earthquake changed my ideas about a lot of things. A lot of people I know lost a friend or a family member and I realized that we don't know the amount of time we have with someone, so the best we can do is to enjoy the moments that we do pass with each other, whether it's curled up with lots of family under a blanket in a parking lot looking up at the stars, or simply hugging each other with relief and gratitude when it's been a long, long time.



My Wild Place by Sally Diallo

On a Saturday in July, my friend Casey texted me and asked if I wanted to go hiking with him and our other friend, Malik. Believe it or not, I actually didn't have any knowledge whatsoever of hiking. I knew it involved mountains, but I think everyone knows this basic detail. I think my cluelessness actually made me even more excited to go. I responded, "Yes, of course. What time are we meeting and where?" Casey responded, "On Monday, 8 am, at Hanging Rock Trail." Hanging Rock Trail was an hour away from my house in North Carolina. I was so confused as to why we had to meet up so early considering the fact that it was summer. I mean, who likes to wake up early during summer? It all made sense later on, though. I went to bed at 4 am on that Monday even though I had to be awake in two hours. Malik came to my house so we could travel together and meet Casey. That day marked my first hiking adventure and my adjusting to an unfamiliar place.

I started to panic when we arrived at the trail because it looked as if we were in the middle of nowhere. However, I enjoyed the smell of the surrounding chestnut oaks and hemlock in their dry soil. The place seemed like a wild forest except the atmosphere felt a bit safer. Not much, but at least enough so that I wasn't afraid of being eaten by some deadly animals. There were a number of fellow hikers dressed casually like us in shorts, t-shirts, and sneakers dusted with dirt from the trails, many hauling hiking packs. Being surrounded by people who looked like me in an unknown environment made me feel less lonely. There was also the sound of toddlers shrieking in excitement along with comparatively calm dogs. We took a map with us just in case and we proceeded to follow a trail. I came to realize the purpose of meeting super early: after we walked for ten minutes, I started to feel really exhausted. It was not the amount of time we had been walking; rather, it was the fact that the steps were getting steeper as we went. The path was normal at the beginning, but after the first set of stairs, it became harder to catch my breath. I started to feel the weight of my whole body. It was almost as though gravity was pulling me down. Think of climbing but your hands are not part of the process. I had to stoop to balance myself. We took at least twenty breaks because I couldn't walk anymore. At some point, my friends started walking ahead and leaving me behind. That is what I get for going with two guys who are perfectly fit and used to this torture.

About an hour into this excruciating climb, we finally reached the top of the Hanging Rock. The view was absolutely beautiful; there was nothing around except an enormous cliff of silver gray rock, the light blue sky, and beautiful flowers of all colors. I don't know what kind of flowers they were; I do remember they had fresh blueberries on top of them. I had never felt this happy in my life to reach a destination. I ran up close to

the edge of the cliff and sat peacefully on a rock, with a relaxed expression. Meanwhile, Malik and Casey found a place under the rock which looked like a cave. As time passed by, my worrying brain kicked in and I started to wonder what would happen if I fell from the edge. Ironically, Casey started mentioning stories of people who had died from hiking not long ago.

Although this dark thought was looming over the atmosphere, the wind was very refreshing and a dog was hanging out around us, which made our experience ten times better. The dog was very pretty, with white fur and crystal blue eyes. Casey and Malik kept trying to persuade me to come under the rock with them, but of course I refused. I was feeling way too relaxed to even be thinking about getting up. Also, who wants to sit around with spiders under a rock? After we spent about forty minutes relaxing, we continued our adventure. It became harder to go forward because the next two places we wanted to visit took longer than the first one. As we trekked, I started to lose the feeling in my legs. At one point, a deer suddenly appeared. Malik and I did not notice the deer at first. It was Casey who pointed it out. It was a white-tailed fawn with beautiful, shining, dark eyes. The deer did not notice us but I managed to take at least seven pictures of it. I looked down at my phone to see how the pictures turned out, and I was disappointed at the quality. By the time I looked up to take better ones, the deer was gone.

We walked further and came across our second destination, which was a lake. The lake was expansive, and the color of the water was a deep, dark blue. We took off some of our clothes to swim but the water looked very dirty up close. Casey swam the most while Malik and I just put our feet in the water. Malik and I are the pickiest in the group: if something is not clean or does not benefit us or our wellbeing, we stay away from it as

much as possible. Casey is always the most adventurous one. The water felt pretty cold; I tried not to go past my ankles while Casey went fully into the lake up to his neck. After we swam for a while, a long, dark snake appeared from the left side of Casey's ankle. Casey saw it and calmly said, "There is a snake in the water." I wondered how he could be so calm considering the fact that it was a terrifying snake. We took our belongings and ran extremely fast. I'm pretty certain I was running the fastest. I never thought I'd be running from a snake in my life. Barefoot, we walked to our last destination.

The walk to the last destination was not so bad because by then, I was used to the walking and used to losing the feeling in my legs. There was a slow-moving waterfall at the end of our walk. It was surrounded by dark brown rocks and lots of tall, green trees. We climbed up the rocks the best we could to be at the top of the waterfall. It was slippery and I almost fell many times. But at the same time, it was very fun. We played around with each other and took lots of pictures.

From this wild yet beautiful experience, we went to a nice restaurant to treat ourselves. I do not remember where we went to eat, we just needed some food in our systems after walking long miles to reach these nice destinations. Hiking is pleasurable and mysterious; it teaches you perseverance because you suffer to get to this unknown side that is beautiful. I enjoyed seeing nature from a high angle and coming across different kinds of animals on each path. I would definitely do it again to gain a different experience I might have missed the first time.



The Day of Happiness by Coumba Bah

One Friday during the cold season in my home country, Mali, was a special day for me and for my friends. On this particular day, the weather was cozy; it felt like it was going to rain before the sun came out. Seeing the sun shining, coming out little by little, I could feel the wind shaking the trees and creating a sound that made me relax and free my mind like heaven on earth. Still, it was a cold day at school. Little did we know that after the morning session, our principal would tell us to stay at home for the rest of the day instead of returning for the afternoon session on account of the rain, giving my friends and I the opportunity to hang out together, and feel the freshness of the air for the first time during the cold season.

Early that Friday, before the sky had even awoken, I was listening to the cries of roosters. A few people were walking to the shop to buy bread, while my sister and I

were in our usual spot, sitting on a rock under the tree next to the shop, waiting for our friends to arrive so we could all walk to school together. Every Friday, we would take turns buying six little fresh bread rolls for us all to eat during our journey. We would laugh, talk about school and homework, mock our teachers, and recount the news on TV or movies we had all watched the previous night. We would share everything that occupied our minds before getting to school. We would pass many people sitting in front of their doors on Fridays since many did not work that day but instead went to the mosque for Friday prayers. But on this particular day, as we passed by houses, we noticed people standing in front of their doors with their necks craned back, admiring the weather. "I thought I was the only one enjoying this beautiful sky," I said, and we all laughed. As we continued on to school, we heard sharp, unusual sounds, and as we looked up to the sky, we saw a group of white and grey birds which we had never seen before, all flying together in a V shape. My friend Djes said, "It is not always possible to get this wonderful day." We all tilted our heads upward again as we continued the 30-minute walk toward the mountain where our school was.

At school before class started, we played jump rope, chatted with each other, watched other children playing, and gazed at the teachers sitting on benches. I could see everybody was enjoying the cold, fresh, sunny day. But later that day, during class, I noticed a drop of water fall from the sky; that was when we knew it was going to rain. Our school principal announced through the speaker, "Everyone is allowed to go home because of the weather and for the second session NO CLASS." Then everyone started to run out of their classrooms, shouting for joy. My friends and I met together and left the school as early as we could before we got wet; we stayed at one of my friends'

houses for the rest of the day. On our way to my friend's house, we saw the workers and heard the sounds of their tools under the rain, working on cars and motorcycles.

When we arrived at my friend's house, we immediately took off our book bags, washed our hands and ate one of my favorite foods: rice over chicken. After eating, we went to my friend's backyard to study and finish the rest of our schoolwork. After work, we started the fun part: we played music, danced, chatted and watched TV. It was raining, but it didn't matter. "This is the happiest day of my life," my sister said. "Mine too," I replied.

I learned that day that no matter the problems you have, no matter the situation you are facing, you must try to enjoy the day. Make the day yours and take the opportunity to remember that day and treasure it, because you may never know when a day like this will come again. Be grateful for having that enjoyable time, even if it is just an hour during a rainy day in the cold season.



A Wild Place by Marco Kushta

Sometimes we seem to forget what is wild or amazing because these things tend to become common with time. Even flying across continents in a trip under twenty-four hours used to be amazing years ago, but now it's only commonplace. Each of us has a different definition of something wild, and this is mine: I am in New York City, on the first steps of the stairway to my own life, and in spite of all the doubts that surround me, I am working hard to reach as high as I can. This is the "Wild Place" where I currently am.

So for me, being in New York, studying and looking to succeed on my own is wild. I am here, in a completely new environment, transitioning from my old self to a new me, learning to survive on my own. Back at home, my mother did all my chores for me, and it never occurred to me that it was my duty to do them on my own.

When I would come home, I expected to have fresh clean clothes, ironed out and carefully put in my wardrobe; I looked hungrily forward to a warm, home-cooked meal—or if not, then I would expect a fully filled fridge. I would take it for granted that the house would be clean, even if I had nothing to do with the process. I know that some of my peers in my hometown are now living in their own apartments, having made the move away from their comfortable family homes, but to me, that isn't the complete package. In Albania, family is the foundation, and so even in their own apartments, my peers have somewhere to fall back to in a worst-case scenario.

I had the choice to stay comfortable at home, to have somewhere to fall back to; to stay in an environment where I would surely have managed to find a good job and sustain my life to some extent. Instead, I wanted to try something beyond that; I wanted to see if I could succeed and I wanted to see how high I would be able to go. I studied for half a year from the beginning of 2018, took multiple exams, got accepted into universities in different countries, and flew to another corner of the world to start my own life. And not just any corner: I came to New York City, one of the most known cities on Earth, with numerous opportunities for me to achieve what would have been unimaginable for me back home.

Living on my own has forced me to understand that a meal, clean clothes, and a well-stocked fridge are not a given, and I have to create these circumstances myself. I am doing laundry, cleaning and cooking, going grocery shopping and thinking constantly about how to manage what time I have left efficiently. For example, I can't just cook whatever I like to cook every day. In order to save money

and time, I cook a beef stew using a method my mother taught me in Albania. Going grocery shopping every time before I cook was a chore at first, but now I almost enjoy it. For my Albanian stew, I always buy two onions, three to four tomatoes, two carrots, peas, bell peppers and, of course, beef. After I've prepared all the ingredients, I start cooking. I take out the biggest pot I have, pour in some olive oil and start by putting in the beef strips I cut earlier. Then I go for the onions, which have made me cry several times. The bell peppers, peas and carrots are next, followed by the tomatoes and a whole lot of water. It takes a while to cook. At times, I've even failed, but when I do get it right, it's a nice dish that saves me time and money. These are the things I have to think about now. Unlike my peers back home, a safety net doesn't exist anymore. If I fail, I will have to go back home with my tail between my legs, knowing that I wasn't good enough.

I have left behind my past and am looking into the future with a single goal to overcome doubts and challenges and prevail. I am gradually learning to adapt to this new lifestyle, where support is limited and I have to manage everything on my own. I am striving to better myself, attempting to become more efficient, smart, and responsible. I now understand that I can accomplish my goals if I set my eyes on them and work hard to get them. And I have found out that, actually, I am not alone: I can learn a lot from the people around me here. At the same time, I know things some people don't. I have learned from my peers at school that I can ask for support or even ask questions to professors, which wasn't so convenient or acceptable in Albania. And my peers can learn from me that what they get here, in the US, is not

always a given elsewhere—like the ability to ask questions without fear and expect an answer. But although I am using the pronoun “I” a lot, I am not the only one who is trying to achieve or has achieved this accomplishment. That’s what I say to myself every time I find myself complaining about my “difficulties,” when I am at work on a Saturday and I want to spend that time sitting on the couch watching TV. That’s when I force myself to remember that there are millions now, and there have been many more international students before, who have left their homes to enter a new country with their eyes set on securing a good life for themselves. I would say it took me quite a while to cash in that reality check and truly understand what I and many others are doing and what we can ultimately gain from it.

I believe that every person has a “wild place” where they have been, where they will be, or where some of them currently are right now. Its definition is very subjective and different for everyone, depending on experience and especially perspective. I am currently in a wild place, standing in my apartment, stirring my mother’s stew, from my own point of view.



Blue by Luis Angel Reyes

The Dominican Republic, a warm and loving land, is paradise. I lived there for 15 years. I loved my daily routine, in my beautiful home which was on the banks of a small town, surrounded by trees and flowers that each morning gave me a sense of freedom and peace. Every day at eight o'clock, I would wake up, brush my teeth and take a cold shower. Then I would go to the kitchen, greet my mother and father, eat breakfast and head out to school. I was not very interested in school at the time. I remember the school's walls were yellow and green and I always thought that this combination of colors did not coordinate. So I just sat in the back of class waiting for everything to end so I could go play back at my garden at home. Every afternoon at 12:30 pm, my father would come pick me up in his car; the car always smelled like lemon. When I was back in the house, my

mother would have delicious food waiting for us and it always smelled lovely. I would wash my hands and eat. Then, my mom would help me do my homework and make me read. I loved reading with her because she always gave me the best stories. After I finished, I could play all afternoon until I could no longer. I ran all over the garden, feeling the cool breeze and the blue sky above me, completely clear without any clouds. The last thing I could have imagined was that very soon this was all going to change.

As fast as day turns to night, I remember the Saturday morning when my dad called me to the table and said, "We're going on an adventure to Disney." As a thirteen-year-old boy, this was a dream come true.

The days came and went, until, on June 1st, 2014 at 4 am, we got on the plane. The plane took off. I felt fear, but at the same time, a great emotion ran through my whole body. Tickles and laughs came out of my mouth. From the sky, my island looked huge and beautiful, and full of colors, but mainly green because of the abundance of plants. However, you could also see millions of houses. Additionally, there were small cars that looked like toys and people that looked like ants. Up in the clouds, it was just peace; the clouds looked fluffy and conveyed a sense of tranquility.

The plane landed in Orlando, Florida. Never in my life had I seen such a big city, with so many colors and residents. We went to stay at my aunt's house, with her annoying children: Tomas, at the time thirteen, Nicolas twelve, and of course Camila, who was ten years old. I still resent all of them because from the first day,

they always made pointless comments about the LGBTQ+ community, just like their homophobic mother. She had taught them all about being disrespectful to others.

For my thirteen-year-old self, not having come out of the closet yet, that house became like a living hell. Those kids messed with me a lot: they used to chase me and call me horrible names, such as "fag" and "little girl." Today, those words do not have an impact on me in the same way, but five years ago, there was nothing that could lower my self-esteem like those words. What hurt me the most was that their discriminatory comments were only because of my so-called feminine behavior. However, I did not want to ruin my parents' vacations because of nonsense like that. As a result, every time I got mad at them, I would leave the house to go to the garden and picture my old home and garden back in DR. During these difficult moments, I looked at the sky and told myself that everything was going to be fine. As the days passed by, I would count the days to go back home. I knew that I lived under the same sky, that this blue clearness watched over me here *and* at home, and that when I finally did return to DR, everything would be in place.

At the end of the summer, I went home, and everything was indeed as I left it. The roses were bright and striking with an intense red, which filled me with peace. The wind caressed my head as I ran through the garden towards the main door. I knew that I would not have to deal with those people again in a long time.

That summer, thanks to my aunt and her children, I learned that I was stronger than I thought. I was sure that in this world I would meet more people with the same closed mentality as them, but I was not afraid. I had already survived the

very ugly experience of being rejected by my own family. Today, I no longer have my garden, but I have the memories engraved in my mind and heart, and just thinking about it sends me back to that magical place where I came out to be happy and where the surrounding plants and the light of the sky played with me. The place where I felt far from blue.

Afterword

Dear ACES Freshmen,

Congratulations on completing your first year at the ACES Program, where you feel like you're back in high school highlighting and making notes. At the same time, you have just finished what I like to call "becoming an independent student." You start to become independent by making the right choice of which word or phrase to eliminate from an essay to make it three pages instead of seven. You got accepted to SJC, but you also got accepted into a unique group that will give you the necessary resources to thrive. Among those, time-management and the beauty of practice to become a master in the writing process.

Related to the writing process and process in general, I want to share with you a piece of my Valedictorian application essay:

I have had practice, I am a work in progress. Like a mosaic; I contain multiple squares, tiles that fit together. The main one—being an immigrant. Learning English as an ACES student forced me to write and rewrite towards a structured whole. Sometimes, I made mistakes twice or three times, but eventually, the highlighting with yellow, blue, and green markers taught me to understand the basic units of an essay. Flying away from the Dominican Republic also allowed me to rediscover my passion for dancing. Repeatedly writing choreography combinations, two counts of eight within my tiny apartment, revealed that growth is incremental. Perfection comes in pieces; it does not happen overnight.

The art of practice, at ACES and in dance, instilled in me the beauty of process, of being present and grounded.

Seniors,

Certainly, we have been significantly impacted by the pandemic, especially by not knowing what our graduation ceremony is going to look like. I know we wish and hope to walk onstage, receive our diplomas, and take our family pictures. Nothing can take the place of an on-the-ground ceremony, nor the celebration after the ceremony. And really, there's nothing I can say to make this harsh reality go away.

However, I do think it is our responsibility to remember the reasons why we might not have a graduation ceremony, at least for now. As young individuals who immigrated to the US, there's no one who understands more deeply how important it is to be empathetic to the suffering of others and to be realistic in times where unity is the most important concept to be applied in our daily lives.

We have placed a significant effort on learning a second language and conjugating verbs, and on trying to comprehend why in English the word "right" means to make a right turn; you're "right" by saying that; and it's a human right to be free. After knowing how disciplined and dedicated we are, I can rest assured how particularly strong and likely to overcome challenges my ACES family is.

Somewhere shortly, I hope to throw up our caps and put away our gowns to go eat at a restaurant with our loved ones and celebrate all day long.

And with it, throw away and leave behind these desperate and ugly times.

To conclude, valedictorian in Latin is valedicere, which means “farewell,” or “to say goodbye,” to say “adios,” and I hope this adios can soon take place in a hall, waiting in line to enter our graduation ceremony.

*Amarfi Collado '20
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May 2020*