

Final Portfolio

ENGL 135: Creative Nonfiction

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Professor Funderburg
May 6th, 2019

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My recording at KWH was on Thursday, May 2nd, at 2pm

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Freewrite: Rubber Band

1/29/19

“Girls, you may *not* leave your hair down. Put it up.”

It was unfair. An outright injustice. I can remember my elementary school gym teacher standing over us and leering at the girls’ hair, eyeing the sheer volume and length of it all—flowing down our backs and frizzing along our hairlines and clouding our faces. She had her own hair perpetually tied up, and to somehow punish us for not thinking to do so before her class, she held out a plastic container of standard Officemax rubber bands. We had to reach in, grab a clammy piece of latex, and entwine it in the mass on our heads. But the worst part was getting them out. They would get stuck, often coming out with angry strands of our being, and more than once our eyes moistened with frustration and sharp pain as we pulled the rubber bands out along with considerable amounts of our hair.

Why were we so punished for the things we could not help? It was stressful, anticipating the moment when we had to tame and refine ourselves for the workout to follow. Until the unintelligible time came when the workout wasn’t just gym class, but every time I stepped outside of my house. Ashamed of the tangly, unruly mess of blackness that sat atop my head, I tried braiding, crimping, bobby pins, headbands, clips, oils, gels, creams— everything and anything that promised to tame it. My frantic attempts became part of getting ready every morning, and soon enough I wore the fear of judgement, along with all my clothes and hair accessories, to school. I was afraid of being gawked at or pointed out. I sought ways to alter my appearance with increasing desperation, until eventually, I enjoyed a small, fleeting hallelujah moment when my mom bought a flat iron. I remember the first time I used it; firmly stretching

out my long, sinusoidal curls, I pressed the clamp-like device to my hair and watched as the waves diffused into shiny, sleek straightness. I suppressed a long-awaited sigh of satisfaction: this was what everyone wanted, wasn't it? Finally, my ritual of self-consciousness could stop! I ran outside, excited that I no longer had to *care*, and went out for the day. When I came back, beaming at the weight that was seemingly lifted off my shoulders, I rushed to the bathroom mirror, where I was met with the ghastly return of my natural hair. The frizz stood on end, daring me to restrain it.

It did not take me long to realize that within a few hours, or at most a few days, my normal hair would emerge, no matter what I did to it. My hair was a statement within itself, obtrusively demanding of me to try harder, to push further to compromise its nature, but I could not. I could not fight with who I was. Maybe my hair was especially resilient, or maybe life just had a tendency to disrupt it, but either way, I could not fight it. Later, I figured out I wasn't supposed to. These circumstances, the fibers of our being that we cannot control, are not meant to contain us or hold us back, but tell the story of how we persist despite everything that we've fought along the way. They tell the story of how our past gave way to the present. My hair makes me resilient. My hair makes sure I know some things aren't meant to be restrained.

Childhood Obsessions Piece

Amar Chitra Kathas: The Comic Books That Tell My Stories

I started reading them as an elementary schooler. First, I was given a few; and after gorging them within hours, it became evident that I needed more. The slim, glossy booklets began to pile up on every flat surface in my room—cluttering my nightstand, desk, and entirely engulfing my small bookshelf. If you picked one up, it would strike you that, as children’s comic books go, these are beautiful. Each one has a completely different cover, telling another story: raven-haired women in shimmery saris walking through luscious gardens, idyllic kings and queens seated upon golden thrones presiding over noblemen in court, and fervent, muscular warriors charge into grisly scenes of battle. Indeed, the violence was unsparingly graphic, but for some reason, that never mattered to me. The ancient times would come alive in my hands as I flipped through pages that blurred the lines of history and mythology. I never knew what was real or what wasn’t, but it didn’t matter, because truth had no bearing over the scenes that sprang into life in my head. I could hear the impassioned commands of almighty kings, the thunder of war storming around me and metal clanging upon metal as enraged warriors fought to the death. And then there were the other stories, the ones that told of pacifist sages who were sought for their eternal, enduring wisdom, and the humble, ordinary townspeople whose piety was rewarded with acts of divinity. There were stories of humans who the ocean would part for, children who could lift mountains, little girls who became fierce warriors. I read dozens of the comic books, called Amar Chitra Kathas, with an insatiable longing to become part of them.

The history we learned in school did not include me. We read about white people, Native American people, black people, but not brown people—not *my* people. I remember wondering

what my own ancestors were doing centuries ago while American revolutionaries cried for independence, when democracy was established and slavery was abolished. I turned to these comic books to give me a world I was inherently part of. Maybe my ancestors were the citizens in the pictures walking through the bustling markets, the thriving townspeople who inhabited the glorious cities; maybe they worked in the cavernous, wildly ornate courts of royalty; maybe—and this one was a stretch, but still, I hoped—they had relations to the kings themselves, or embodied some reincarnation of the divine. Maybe I somehow had a place in these stories.

So I clung to my comic books with a kind of childish stubbornness, because they allowed me to belong somewhere. Otherwise, where else would I be grounded? To the modern day India that exists half a world away? To my grandparents, individuals who I hardly know because of the distance gaping between us? I was not raised to be religious, culturally devout, or bound to any sort of community, and yet I felt with overwhelming certainty that the Amar Chitra Kathas sang of a land that was my home. I considered this rich, majestic history of kings and queens and warriors to be my own.

Seminal Sartorial Piece

Property of A&Fitch

It was the first brand name I can remember buying: a thin Abercrombie sweater, won from the clearance section, was my victory for the day. A deep, royal blue, and bearing the words “Property of Abercrombie & Fitch,” I wore it to school proudly, thinking I had branded myself as more fashionable. My parents had always bought practical clothing, and my mother had an aptitude for haggling over prices, so usually the cheapest clothing always made its way to my closet. And for a while, I never really cared. It became impressed upon me, soon enough into middle school, though, that other people did. I pulled my reluctant mother through the dark store, with music blaring and wafts of perfume causing her to wrinkle her nose and purse her lips, her eyebrows rising higher as the prices grew more obscene. She kept moving through the racks of clothing until we reached the clearance section, where I saw the sweater—it wasn’t anything especially pretty or unique, but it boasted the brand name, loud and clear, on its front. That was all I needed. I finally felt like I had a place in the groups of girls whose every article of clothing featured a designer logo. And thus, the fashion obsession began: I was determined to buy all the brand name clothing I could at the cheapest prices I could find. So maybe I could play the part without having to pay the price for it.

But then I started feeling like I was wearing a different person than who I was. The frugal shopper who pounces on red-lined tags and discount aisles didn’t coincide with the teenager covered in designer attire. I am ashamed, now, of how much I desired brand names. I think of all the money I made my parents spend and can’t conceive how they put up with my demands.

It was shallow and materialistic, undoubtedly, and when I look at it now, the word “Property” stands out to me. How was I so willing to wear a shirt that named itself, and, transitively, its wearer, property? It felt more like the clothing owned me, not the other way around.

Revised seminal sartorial piece

Property of A&Fitch

Vested with stubborn fixation, I steered my mother towards the black shutters that enclosed my fashion dream: I was going to (convince my mother to) buy my first brand name clothing. My parents had always been practical shoppers, and my mother had an aptitude for haggling over prices, so usually the cheapest clothing made its way to my closet. For a while, I never really cared. But at twelve years old, I started to notice that other people did. Eyes glossed over me, as if I blended in with the dull lockers, and I was edged out of conversations with girls decked in designer logos. One of the “cool” girls, Nyah, once walked up to me after Algebra and scoffed, “Sonali, *what* are you wearing? Where are those from?”, eyeing my faded navy sweatpants, repulsed. Another girl, Shreya, dragged me to the bathroom with her as she fixed her hair; I watched, entranced, as she deliberately tucked her A&Fitch tee behind a braided belt and adjusted her immaculate braids so they splayed over her Juicy jacket. She noticed me watching and said, “You know, you could be pretty too, if you tried,” glancing at my baggy shirt over non-ripped Gap jeans. Soon enough, I wanted nothing less than to strut down the hallways of middle school as a “cool” sixth grader, just like everyone else.

Plastered with blown-up images of models garbed in the branded attire – or in some cases, sparsely covered in it (you could see more skin than cloth) – the Oxford Valley Abercrombie & Fitch department store always got a second glance from passerby. I internally oohed and aahed at the fashionable superiority exuded from the black-and-white, impatient-looking faces. My mother, however, with a disgruntled expression contorting her face, had to be pulled through the darkness. Her nose wrinkled as we stumbled through wafts of

perfume and she pursed her lips when the blaring music reached a thunderous climax. I would spot a cute outfit, flip over the price tag, and then hurriedly conceal it within the folds of fabric, so my mother wouldn't know I was considering buying something so expensive. Nonetheless, some of the "sale" signs – "50% off jeans – Now only \$50!" or "Buy 2 Jeans, Get One Free" or "Don't miss this steal! \$45 Tanks" – etched more disbelief into her face; her eyebrows climbed higher as the prices grew more obscene. I knew her patience was wearing thin, but I was still determined. I tugged her arm and led us to the narrow clearance section, where I hoped red lines and crossed-out initial prices offered some hope. The (slightly) more reasonable prices breathed a cool spell over my mother's tension, and sighing in relief, I went about performing price checks among the clearance rows. I always checked the price first, and then contemplated the clothing. Spotting "\$12.50" in red text, I pulled the sweater off its hanger. A deep, royal blue, thin, and most importantly, emblazoned with "Property of A&Fitch" in white fabric letters, it was exactly what I was looking for. Admittedly, it wasn't anything especially pretty or unique, but it boasted the brand name, loud and clear, on its front. That was all I needed.

I finally had a place among the girls whose every article of clothing featured a brand name. Nyah and Shreya nodded at my outfits in approval and – was it possible? – slight jealousy. "Where did you get that top? I really like it," Shreya told me, playing with the spaghetti straps poking out from my thin Hollister sweater. Little did she know, it only cost \$7.95 after clearance. And so began my obsession: I resolved to (convince my mother to) buy all the brand name clothing I could at the cheapest prices I could find. So maybe I could play the part without having to pay the price for it.

The double act continued into high school. I pretended that I cared about high-end clothing, when really I was only using it to spare myself from social isolation—I didn't want to be ridiculed by Nyah and Shreya. But I started feeling like I was wearing a different person than who I was. The frugal shopper who pounces on red-lined tags and discount aisles didn't coincide with the teenager sporting designer outfits. Shame filtered into my conscience as I gradually developed a self-awareness about all the money I made my parents spend. The semi-ridiculing, semi-joking comments from my dad that I dismissed before – "A crop top?? You paid *more* money for *less* clothing???" and "You could find the same quality Walmart jeans at \$10" – now made me think twice. It took me years to unlearn the way I was socialized to care about clothing.

I continue to wear my Abercrombie sweater, even now, because I don't want my parents' money to go to waste. When I look at it now, the word "Property" stands out to me. How was I so willing to wear a shirt that named itself, and, transitively, its wearer, property? It felt more like the clothing owned me, not the other way around.

Pass-Along Prompt

“Toothbrush”

He is South Indian. His family is Telugu, and his dad grew up in a village outside of Chennai. His grandparents died in tragic accidents, and his sister had leukemia when she was younger. His father is an underpaid software engineer, alone supporting the family. His father wants him to be happy, but also wants him to excel academically. His mother doesn't have a college degree and barely speaks English. She is a housewife. She tells him, in a heavy Telugu accent, to be happy and always pray to God. He's very religious, and wears a gold chain dedicated to a Hindu saint. He touches the idols in his dorm, head bent in prayer, before he leaves for any exam. He's the first person in his family to get into a good college, and all his cousins ask him for help writing their essays. He has to set an example. He wants to be rich and successful, so he can give back to his family and uplift his family village in India. He wants to be able to take his family on vacations. His parents can't know about us; they never will. He'll probably have an arranged marriage to a traditional Telugu girl.

My family are Gujarati Jains, and my parents left the wealthy neighborhoods of South Mumbai to pursue an education in America. My mother's grandfather was as an accountant for the regional king, before India gained independence. My paternal grandfather owned a trading company and studied chemical engineering at UT Austin. He died of cancer last year. My mom became the first woman in her family to pursue her career, and after getting her MBA became a Bloomberg product manager. We joke that she's the breadwinner in our family. My dad loves electrical engineering and became a professor at Penn. They're secular people, and always taught me to question things, which has made me an ardent atheist. They don't care who or if I date, but just want me to tell them the truth. They consider all new things a learning experience. They encourage me to think about success in terms of health and happiness.

North Indians and South Indians don't mix. In fact, the two different parts of India are like separate countries. My mom warns me that South Indians are ritualistic and conservative.

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A couple months ago he asked me to stay the night. I brought over a toothbrush to his room and it's stayed there since.

Superhero Piece

If I were a superhero, I would want to be able to shift shape.

There are plenty of people who want to do something good for the world. Small changes may add up over time, but can people really wait that long? The problems are endless—world hunger, refugee crises, global warming—and the solutions have already been formulated. Policy ideas already exist, and initiatives have already been suggested, so the question is, who really has the power to make drastic change? Too often, it's the corporate moghuls, corrupt politicians, and billionaire CEOs. Too often, it's the people who do not have the interests of everyone in mind. If I could be anyone, that would give me power over their power.

I would want to assume the form, appearance, and voice of another, and keep that identity for as long as I needed to. I would take the shape of Congressmen standing in the way of policies that are objectively doing good for the majority of our country's population. Of course, I would not want to entirely rob an individual of his or her identity, but merely borrow it for a while, in order to make positive change. Logistically, the individual whose identity I borrow then would have to be kept somewhere, or physically absent from their day-to-day activities.

I would need a team to coordinate these efforts, because it would be a careful, meticulous task of calculating exactly *who* has the most influence and can exert the most change. We would need a secret hideout, possibly where we also house those whose identity I'm possessing.

Another problem would be that even if I have adopted a person's appearance and voice, I have not adopted his or her personality and mannerisms. Thus, I would have to carefully study an individual before morphing into them.

People gain power through inheritance, money, and fame. The rampant inequality that already divides us is more than enough to keep power from those who truly deserve it, from those who would truly do good with it. Therefore, assuming the identities of those who have power is the most effective way to implement broad scale change.

What I Would Tell You If I Could

4/23/19

To Mr. Mazzeo

You are a dictator.

Ask anyone in band, or anyone who's had the misfortune of interacting with you, and they'll pause too long, and that silence is your answer. I had planned to stomp into your office and confront you about everything during my last semester of band, but I never mustered the courage. You scared me. That was your most effective tactic: fear. Every scathing criticism, belligerent glare, disgusted expression, and your overall, outright condemnation of anything or anyone less than excellent, has left a legacy that will certainly outlive you.

You've yelled at me about not getting my act together, shamed me for not getting a bathroom pass during rehearsal, and most of the time – and this is undeniably the worst feeling – you hardly look at me. Because I'm the clarinet player who only joined Symphonic (our school's best band) in my *last* year of high school, I don't care enough about music, or can't perform well enough for you to acknowledge my existence. You wince and grunt when my clarinet squeaks or I'm horrendously out-of-tune, but to you, I'm beyond hope. Anyone who doesn't devote every last second of his or her time to your regime is worthless to you.

I know about the freshman girl who dropped out of marching band because you gave her anxiety. I heard about the marching band players who have passed out from dehydration during camp, when you only allowed them two water breaks during eight hours of outdoor rehearsal—in the sweltering heat of late August. I've heard stall doors slam in desperation as humiliated marching band members fled to the bathroom in tears; you berated them for being weak, for lacking the grit to stand, backs straight and knees together, in the sun for hours on end.

I've seen my sister come home early from school because you called her into your office to reprimand her for not prioritizing music, for not choosing to pursue music as a career, for not making All-States as a freshman. I've seen my friends' faces redden as they stammered to justify why they couldn't make sure that high C sharp was in tune. Once, you made the entire band watch Lily, my friend who plays the oboe, try to play a tricky note in tune. I remember you standing over her with your arms crossed, disappointment and disbelief etched onto your face.

You think that by pushing us to our limits, you will unleash some great, unforeseen potential. But students cannot be pushed like that. You drove us beyond our capacities, thinking it would make us excellent. You wanted our fear of you to drive us to achieve the impossible. I'll tell you the truth that maybe sometimes nudges your conscience: too often, you push too hard.

When your back is turned, your cowering students sigh in relief and become human again. A palpable tension unwinds and the whisper, "Mazz isn't here," snakes through the band room, and soon I hear someone hesitantly chuckle, and others follow. Several students will pick up their instruments and improvise their latest jazz piece, pausing between solos, laughing, and blast an outrageously out-of-tune note. A couple woodwinds will pick up their delicate flutes and clarinets and sightread a classic they found online, or maybe a pop song from the radio.

Percussionists will crowd around the snare drum and bass, starting up a beat from something they'd composed at home. The music won't be anything like what you would want from us, precise and perfect, entirely adhering to your lifeless guidelines of the *maestro*, but infused with something that doesn't like to be constrained by rules. It's bouncy and uncaring and energetic, and it's what music is supposed to sound like—full of life.

I don't think fear produces great art. You might think that discipline and rigidity mold the most successful, but I'm convinced you're wrong. The regime you've established in the band room and out on the football field is not creating musicians. It's making people afraid to be musicians.

A Reading by Morgan Parker

The lights are bright and focused towards the podium, where Morgan Parker takes the stage. The introduction delivered by the woman before created a sobering visual of a very serious artist, but Morgan Parker is young and vibrant, cracking jokes as she flips through her book. Her laugh is deep and infectious, filling the room up with a kind of inexplicable warmth.

I'll confess: I have never had the best relationship with poetry. To me, this form of literature has always seemed esoteric; there are very few pieces that I am able to connect with. It's all or nothing—either I completely understand what a line means, or I am lost. Similarly, while I was listening to Parker today, there were certain lines that jumped out at me, while I could not begin to comprehend others. For example, in the poem, “All They Want Is My Pussy, My Money, And My Blood,” the line “they are hunting me” stood out, poignantly describing the moment when she feels enclosed and sought out by her “demons.” For the speaker, these “demons” were white men, seemingly entrapping her wherever she went, or the history that seems to weigh down upon her, or the implication that comes with the color of her skin. I was able to relate to this line, but then in other pieces, where Parker talks about what it is like walking into a bar being “black in America,” I cannot share her experience. In a way, many of the moments she includes felt niche, and I noticed that much of the audience was comprised of African American females, who nodded along, “mmhing” and snapping their fingers. There were other moments, though, that also struck me as particularly accessible: “every wish is an ice cube I swallow whole” and “my body is an argument that I did not start.” I know what it's like to feel like I've taken on too much; to feel the slivers of my dream trickle down, but never dissolving the ideal itself. When she sees her own body as having an inherent implication, I was able to

relate to her sentiment, being a woman of color myself. Overall, though, even the moments with which I could not personally relate captured a scene, or told a story, or framed an emotion, that nonetheless illuminated an experience, bringing me into the speaker's life.

The craft of Parker's language stunned me with its indelible preciseness; she has a uncanny ability to sum up an experience with a mere word or phrase. She called Barack Obama a "starving chameleon," unable to connect with his "brothers and sisters." Those two words encompassed her perception of the president as ambivalent and indirect, unable to clearly and definitively side with his people. Another sentence evoked a painful, sobering conciliation with history: "When my teacher talks about slaves, I become a slave." Her language allowed me to feel the sheer weight of the history that can weigh one down, influencing and shaping one's life even when it happened centuries ago. Through this poem, I achieved a sort of distance from myself and the confines of my own mind to examine what it means to have a history that colors one's reality: that sometimes a past that one was never part of can speak volumes to one's present—and sometimes, because of a past one cannot control, one does not get to be a complete person. A person can become skewed towards being defined by a weight that he or she never asked for. I wondered, how much say do we get in determining who we are, independently of the history and background that infiltrates our consciousness? How much of who we are is genuine, and how much is contrived by the inevitable? The reading today was about a black woman's experience of a world that has a preconceived notion of black women— about the pain and regret and tiredness and fleeting joy of being a black woman in America. These questions lingered in my mind as Parker concluded her final piece to a long applause from the audience. She joked,

laughing and grinning at us, and I couldn't help but wonder if she had found a silver lining to this realization herself.

First Draft of Long Piece 1

2/9/19

A Mistake of Birth

It is my first day in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The car jerks to a stop, tires digging into the mud. I push open the car door and step outside onto the soil of my native Gujarat, where my grandparents hailed from nearly a century ago. The air is damp, and my clothes cling to me with sweat. And yet, because I risk contracting malaria, dengue fever, or a number of other life-threatening diseases, I stand in the mugginess wearing jeans and long sleeves. Around me, sprawled across maybe fifty square feet, are huts propped up by bamboo sticks and coated in mud. Men in white shirts with grizzled, matted hair, women wearing simple, traditional saris covering their heads, and children in ragged, stained clothes stood around us, staring at the car that has pulled up into their village. I swallow, a little nervous. Even though I had fought with my mother to be here, waiting and wondering every day since I left India two years ago when I would come back for another volunteer trip, I am a little scared: what if I couldn't handle it?

The villagers stare at us with confusion and uncertainty, unsure what to make of us. The camera in my hand feels bulky and awkward, and although I had chosen to document the trip myself I still wanted to stow it away. Something feels wrong about capturing snippets of their lives—I am afraid that their circumstances would speak more through a photograph than their identity. I don't want to portray them as poor or helpless—starved, malnourished, and gaunt as they are. No, I am here to capture a different angle.

I can't tell you exactly when I began to resent myself, but it began around when I was in tenth grade. I hated the fact that I was privileged and capable and had bought into a rat race for who could be smarter. I was only called "exceptional" or "gifted" because I had the privilege to be; my identity was a result of a mistake of birth. All of my "success" so far was in fact a product of my circumstances. I was no longer able to focus on grades and competition and meaningless accomplishments, when in reality, the world was suffering. A seed of bitterness planted itself deep inside of me, and I no longer believed anything I was told.

The reason I saw the world like this was because I had just begun to open my eyes. I traveled to Mumbai, India in the winter of 2015, and again in 2016, and I could no longer unsee poverty: children knocking on car windows while traffic lights beamed red, haggard girls my age toting naked toddlers, skeletal boys working like adults to survive the night. I would close my eyes to sleep, and there they would be, staring at me, in my air-conditioned apartment with food and comfort and my beck and call. They blamed me, I knew, for what I had and what I could not help. And I couldn't do anything about it. I felt trapped in an educational system and societal expectation to excel, but now, being part of this system felt unconscionable. I could not longer focus on making it to the top when it felt like I was leaving too many people behind—who's to say that the mistake of birth would not have allotted me their fate? I couldn't stand it; I couldn't stand the terrace of the eight million dollar flat my relatives bought because below the stunning skyline lay a maze of slums; I couldn't stand the expensive restaurants and fancy parties that my family in India constantly took me to; I couldn't stand my hometown in Pennsylvania—the small, quaint town that insulated me from reality. And so I receded into a tiny, dark, shell of my being,

filtering the world I saw with cynicism that guised my deep, continual agony. On top of that, I was guilty, because what right did *I* have to not be happy, to despair?

I was sometimes drawn out by pieces of reality that acknowledged social injustice—activist TED talks, my volunteer work, my books. But the only real cure was India. I needed to be around the slums, the villages, the children. Only they could redeem my state of mind and forgive my guilt. The first time I went to India to volunteer, in the summer of 2016, I felt whole for the first time. But when I came back, I felt like I had left pieces of myself behind. I fell into depression again: how could I ever help people who lived half a world away? How could I ever be a part of their reality if my life, my education, and my home was here? I waited, with a painful, overwrought necessity, to go back.

And I finally did, in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, two years later.

We are here to give the villagers solar panels to power stoves and lights. This is my second volunteer trip, the first one where I traveled outside of my parents' city of Mumbai to our native Gujarat. My uncle and aunt manage a nonprofit based in Mumbai, but they have recently begun to focus on villages, where rural poverty takes you back to places that the developed world would convince you don't exist—girls don't go to school, children are married by the age of twelve, men farm in fields that are too often withered by drought.

It's hard to read this and not pity the villagers, but that's exactly why I had flown halfway across the world to *not* do—because I had learned the hard way that pity and despair only lead to cynicism. I wanted to come back from this trip with a silver lining; somehow, I wanted to be

optimistic about poverty. Impossible as it seemed, I forced myself to see the villagers not for their circumstances, but for their identity.

I walk over to where everyone is sitting down together, on a large blanket in front of some chairs where my aunt and uncle were sitting. They gesture for me to sit down with them, but something about accepting the chair while the villagers sat on the ground below felt wrong. So I stand in the corner, pretending to hold up the camera and find a good angle, when really I am just trying to shy away from the attention. My uncle calls for me to take photos, which I attempt to do discreetly. As I am adjusting the camera lens, I hear some giggling and a small scuffle draws my attention to the corner of the gathering. A girl, around ten years old, is playfully pushing another girl who was a few years younger – presumably her sister – towards me, and the smaller child is vigorously resisting. They look at me with budding curiosity, eyeing the camera in my hands. I smile at them shyly, and they smile back. Feeling more confident, I hold up my camera and took a picture of them. Their faces break into a massive grin, and now even more children are staring at our exchange, giggling and nudging each other and pointing to me holding the camera. Smiling wider than before, I step back a little, away from the solar panel distribution, and three or four girls follow me. I chortle to myself, and seeing my amusement reciprocated, the girls come closer to me, pointing to themselves and then at my camera, saying “Didi, didi,” meaning “sister.” I take another photo of them and they jump with glee, crowding around me to see the camera screen. At this point, there is no more distance between us, and they clutch my shoulders and nestle their faces around my head, trying to get a better view. More and more kids come over, posing for me and hugging each other, dragging over their siblings and toothily grinning at the camera. They love seeing themselves on the tiny screen of the digital

camera, so I pull out my phone to take photos that they could easily see afterwards. I started taking selfies, and now there are nearly a dozen kids, ranging from toddlers to teenagers, scrambling to find a place in the pictures. I can't stop laughing and smiling, feeling the happiest I could ever remember. Any heaviness or hesitation I harbored before is gone, replaced by a swelling, irrevocable warmth that radiates from the children.

I can't tell you what it's like to feel at home thousands of miles away from home, to be fulfilled by children who have nothing, literally nothing, except the raw innocence of their youth. Most of them are not hardened yet by poverty; they don't yet see life as a burden. I see the difference between them and their parents, whose shoulders hunched over and eyes cast downward. But something about the children fills me up with light and hope and releases me from my guilt. I look at them and don't see impoverished children, or worn adults, but people who bear a resilience and tenacity that enables them to fight despite having nothing. They are not defined by the circumstances they were born into—the mistake of birth has not diminished their humanity.

It struck me, then, that if these villagers were not defined by poverty, that I don't have to be defined by privilege.

It's my first night in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. I sleep on a cot next to my uncle and aunt. My mouth can't keep from contorting into a smile, even in the dark when no one is watching. For the first time as I go to sleep, I'm not in denial. I grin into my pillow, and when I close my eyes, all I see is the laughing kids. I feel the pressure of their excited bodies squirming around mine, shoving their elated faces in front of the camera, excited to finally be seen.

Second Draft of Me, Myself & I

An Accident of Birth

MUMBAI, INDIA

December 2015

My grandparents' car slowed to a stop outside of the luxury building I stepped out of a minute ago. Inside, the cold air felt heavenly—outside, the blazing humidity had drawn sweat from my pores within seconds—and I was glad to be swathed in air-conditioning once again. The driver pulled out of the parking garage and halted at the intersection, signaling to turn right. The road he would turn onto led to my grandparents' apartment in South Mumbai, India. I was still smiling from the afternoon I had spent with my little cousins—I don't have any young siblings, so I rarely spend time with younger kids. A knock on the car door window startled me from my reverie. A boy, around twelve, stood outside. He was younger than me, but appeared to be twice as old; his hair was not dark, but grayish, from the dust, I suspected. He gestured to me with cupped hands, then pointed to his mouth as if to eat. *Didi, didi, khana*, he said: sister, sister, food. I instinctively pulled my purse towards me and shuffled through the contents, but I didn't have any money. I looked at him, trying to convey with my expression that I didn't have anything to give him. He either didn't understand me or wasn't convinced; he continued to hold up his palms and motion to his mouth, now pleading "please, please." I could only stare at him, helpless, hoping that he would figure out I couldn't do anything. It occurred to me, then, that he suspected I *must* have something to give—I had come out of Imperial, the most expensive apartment building in Mumbai. I was seated in a car driven by someone else, so I had to be part of the upper class to be able to hire a driver. Time stretched out and what was probably minutes felt

like hours. At some point, I painfully, shamefully, turned away. Maybe then he would understand. But it only made him more persistent; he called out “Didi” louder, saying something about how he hadn’t eaten yet that day. Each word was like a fish hook that he cast into me, snagging my insides and conscience, weighing down my heart until it felt like a bowling ball that sank towards my feet. I was drowning in guilt. I wanted to strip off my clothing, hand him my purse, give him whatever I had, but I knew the driver in front would stop me. I wanted to face him again and say with my eyes that I was *sorry*. I could see him, from the corner of my eye, his face growing less earnest and more broken. He must have thought I was heartless. I *felt* heartless. The traffic light finally switched to green, and the car lurched right. Knowing that the boy wasn’t looking at me anymore—I couldn’t bear to look at him helplessly again—I peered through the back window and saw dirt swirling around him. His face had hardened from that open, pleading vulnerability I had first seen; he was used to this. He trailed off to the traffic light, cars speeding past him and showering him with more dust, waiting for it to turn red again.

YARDLEY, PENNSYLVANIA

Throughout High School (2015-2018)

I travel to Mumbai, India, once every couple of years to visit my family. Nearly all of my extended family is concentrated in this city, although a few of us are scattered across the globe. The coastal city is regarded as the New York City of India, home to millions of people ranging from billionaires in towering skyscrapers to the lower class residents of Dharavi slums. A second home to me, I have always loved Mumbai’s thick, humid air, bustling streets, lively shops and markets, blending aromas of mouth-watering street food, relentless monsoons, and the blustery

seaside. But over the past few years, since I became a high schooler, I no longer left India wistful and bittersweet, the warmth of my family lingering; instead, I was consumed by a sinking helplessness. Previously, until the age of 15, I'd always experienced temporary sadness when I saw poverty, but now I was wrought with the guilt of having privilege.

I can't count or remember how many times I have seen homeless people knock on car windows— there have been haggard girls my age toting naked toddlers, skeletal boys, their faces ashen from the dust and dirt, and hunched, bony elderly with gnarled hands clutching makeshift canes. On other occasions, as our car glided down twilight streets illuminated by the glittering Mumbai horizon, I saw the cardboard homes and ragged cloth that families draped over themselves and huddled to sleep on the dirt roads. Once, I stood on a terrace of the luxury apartment my uncle had just bought, momentarily tempted to admire the spectacular view of the city spread before me, but then I looked down and saw a maze of slums shoved under the dazzling skyline. It felt like there was always some physical barrier that removed or isolated me from poverty.

But the traffic light incidents are particularly memorable to me, somehow imprinted in my mind. I think it's because in those moments, the differences between me and the person outside are the most glaring, yet we are just inches away from each other. The interaction humanizes both of us. The physical barrier between us incites a stark contrast; on the inside, I am cool, cushioned, clean, and on the outside, he or she stands in the midst of heat, dirt roads, and polluted air spewing from the traffic. And every time the light blinks green and our car pulls away, the fish hooks never disentangle themselves from me. Not when I've entered my grandparents' home or even when the plane to Philadelphia takes off. No, they're still there,

notched firmly into my consciousness, pulling me back and down. When I go to sleep, they pry my eyes open and I see kids' faces in the darkness, swirling in and out of the black nothingness just as the dust shrouded their faces when the car pulled away.

I realized, as a sophomore in high school, that I could never unsee what I had seen in Mumbai. I couldn't push it away or ignore it, the way it seemed my family in India could. I couldn't just *accept* that people I had seen were starving, homeless, begging. Moreover, I couldn't accept that I lived in an upper middle class, quaint, suburban town, entirely removed from the sights halfway across the world. And subconsciously, my constant awareness began to influence me. Previously a devoted student, I became an impatient learner, searching for any relevance in my education to what I had seen. The derivative equations and net force diagrams in front of me blurred into faces, marring my educational interest with guilt. Why was I indulging myself with knowledge? I became more frugal and introverted, refraining from shopping or socializing because I felt doing so was predicated on privilege. When I *did* spend money, every time I handed over my parents' cash or swiped a card a sharp burst of guilt coursed through me. I didn't want to utilize or attain anything that I knew they could not; I asked myself, what right did I have to enjoy the privileges handed down to me when others were forced to suffer from the poverty handed down to them?

I perched on the brink of boiling self-hatred. I hated that I was privileged and capable and had bought into a rat race for who could be smarter. I was only called "exceptional" or "gifted" because I had the privilege to be; my identity was a result of an accident of birth, and all of my "success" so far was in fact a product of my circumstances. I could no longer focus on grades and competition and meaningless accomplishments, when in reality, people were

suffering. A seed of bitterness planted itself deep inside of me, and I no longer believed anything I was told. I felt trapped in an educational system and societal expectation to excel, but now, being part of this system felt unconscionable. I could no longer aspire to make it to the top when it felt like I was leaving people behind—who's to say that the accident of birth would not have allotted me their fate?

And so I receded into a tiny, dark, shell of my being, filtering the world I saw with cynicism that guised my deep, continual agony. Of course, I was even more guilty because what right did *I* have to not be happy, to despair?

The fish hooks hauled my mind back to India time and time again, and there I was, once again, looking into the pleading face of the twelve-year-old boy. What made the recollection worse was that I now recognized the desperation in his eyes—it mirrored my own. My desperation to help, to escape the trappings of my privileged, shielded life, to transport myself back to that moment, to that street, and have given him everything I had. In the moment, the barrier between us was so tangible, but after many miles and months it struck me, as I recalled these children outside the car window, that *I could have been them*. It was just an accident. All of sudden, my life became shaped not by what I thought was my only reality, but what had, by chance, *not* become my reality. Maybe my privilege meant that I could do something about poverty. Shirking my circumstances wasn't going to help anyone; but embracing them and using them could.

The notion of using my privilege, instead of being ashamed of it, gradually formalized my dedication to volunteering. I stopped punishing myself for what I could not help.

AHMEDABAD, GUJARAT

August 2018

The car jerks to a stop and tires dig into the mud. I push open the car door and step outside onto the soil of my native Gujarat. Despite the mugginess, I'm wearing jeans and long sleeves, to avoid the possibility of contracting malaria from the clouds of hovering mosquitos. Around me, huts propped up by bamboo sticks and coated in mud are sprawled across maybe fifty square feet. Men in white shirts with grizzled, matted hair, women wearing simple, traditional saris covering their heads, and children in ragged, stained clothes stood around us, staring at the car that has pulled into their village.

We – my aunt and uncle – are here to distribute solar panels to the villagers, so that they can power their stoves and lights. This is my second volunteer trip, the first one where I traveled outside of my parents' city of Mumbai to our native Gujarat. Rishi Uncle and Rutu manage a nonprofit based in Mumbai, but they have recently begun to focus on villages, where rural poverty takes you back to places that we in America cannot imagine exist—girls don't go to school, children are married by the age of twelve, men farm in fields that are too often withered by drought.

It's hard to read this and not pity the villagers, but that's exactly why I had flown halfway across the world to *not* do—because I had learned the hard way that pity and despair only lead to cynicism. I wanted to come back from this trip with a silver lining; somehow, I wanted to be optimistic about poverty. Impossible as it seemed, I forced myself to see the villagers not for their circumstances, but for their identity.

My uncle calls for me to take photos, which I attempt to do discreetly. As I am adjusting the camera lens, I hear some giggling and a small scuffle draws my attention to the edge of the gathering. A girl, around ten years old, is playfully pushing another girl a few years younger – presumably her sister – towards me, and the smaller child is vigorously resisting. They look at me with budding curiosity, eyeing the camera in my hands. I smile at them shyly, and they smile back. Feeling more confident, I hold up my camera and take a picture of them. Their faces break into a massive grin, and now even more children are staring at our exchange, nudging each other and pointing to me holding the camera. Smiling wider than before, I step back a little, away from the solar panel distribution, and three or four girls follow me. The girls clambered over to me, pointing to themselves and then at my camera, giggling “*Didi, didi.*” I take another photo of them and they jump with glee, bodies squirming and crowding around me to see the camera screen. At this point, there is no more distance between us. They clutch my shoulders and nestle their faces around my head, scrambling to find a place in the pictures. Nearly a dozen more kids—from toddlers to teenagers—come over, posing for me and hugging each other, dragging over their siblings and toothily grinning at the camera.

Our laughter mingles together in the thick air, as if we were one.

Long piece 2, Draft 1

Cultural Awareness

I remember when I worked at the local Indian Garden restaurant, I was told to serve iced water to the non-Indian customers and reserve non-iced water for Indians. The owner instructed me to treat the Desi families to authentic *gulab jamuns*, and serve mango pudding to others. I can hear the excitement that filters into my dad's tone when we enter a Subway or Dunkin' Donuts—"they're all Patels"—and he can converse with the cashier in his native Gujarati. I can picture the warmth and amusement that lights up my parents' faces when our Indian family friends show up to gatherings at typical "Indian Standard Time," or at least two hours late, my dad heartily joked. I recognize the accent that edges into my parents' voices as they ease into comfortable banter with the late arrivals. It isn't something I can identify completely—maybe it's the lessened creasing in my mom's forehead, the slight settling of her shoulders, her uncontrollable spurts of laughter that mingle together with the other aunties', or my dad's deep, bottomless laughter when his eyes scrunch up, the wide-eyed silly faces he makes at my sister and I— and the best way I can describe it is a subtle openness that emerges when we get together with our Indian family friends, or run into someone with an Indian accent. I recognized it early on that my family and I have certain expectations for Indian people. We draw distinctions between people who are like us and people who are not, entirely unintentionally and subconsciously. With the former, we make brown jokes unabashed, laugh deeper and longer, greet people in our language. How could you blame my parents, immigrants who sometimes missed home? How could you blame us, the gangly, awkward brown kids who prank-called random phone numbers in a terribly exaggerated accent about ordering some chicken biryani?

You couldn't. No one could blame us, because how we act and who we gravitate towards is natural. Being with other Indians makes us feel warmer, closer, and more rooted in our community.

The harsh truth, though, of our behavior, and scores of other minorities, is that we are practicing cultural racism. We harbor different expectations for different people, depending on their race and ethnicity—in this case, towards Indians and non-Indians. Of course, for us, we're just having a good time with fellow Desis, but our selectivity borders on exclusivity.

I read somewhere that minorities are the most racist, and I've realized that's because *we have to be*. We often default to being with others like us, to gain a sense of community in a country so far away from our or our parents' home. And these experiences influenced my glimpse into the melting pot—rather than blended, it appeared to hold a clear, water-based broth, in which chunks of various ethnicities bobbed up and down and sometimes collided with each other, but never mixed. So if the wave of progressiveness that has characterized our political era was supposed to breed diversity, it felt like the blending of those colors didn't reach me. Instead, I observed people becoming more assertive of their own minority group, fighting for space in the limelight—I began to perceive groups to be more separate as they grew more assertive, distinguished, and different. One need only look at the secularized groups that Penn has, like the South Asian Society.

I assumed—wrongly, of course—that other minorities felt the same way, too.

I first spoke with fabric artist Betty Leacraft over the phone, a week before we met in person. She began to tell me about her work, why she worked in the places she did, the

recognition she achieved, and then about twenty minutes into the conversation, she mentioned something along the lines of “and as a woman of color yourself, I’m sure you know what I mean.” I blinked and straightened abruptly. Her words involved me, somehow, in her story. I had never been grouped with another minority group.

Usually I was pigeonholed into: brown skin equals brown girl equals nerdy academic equals Bollywood fanatic. But being associated with other minorities? Somehow, a narrative had formed in my mind that if you didn’t assert and set yourself apart, you would fall into the obscure depths of the generic umbrella term, minorities. But in that moment, an older African American woman, whose maternal grandfather hailed from Guyana in South America, was connecting with me, an eighteen-year-old second generation Indian girl. I had always been wary of commenting or blending with other minorities, for fear of misinterpreting their narrative; I feared the backlash I’d face from identifying with others who were too different and conflating someone else’s struggle with my own.

But Ms. Leacraft made me part of her conversation. She asked me about my roots in India, and we spend at least fifteen minutes talking about my family’s religion. Somehow, she’d heard of Jainism and even knew our dietary practices. I felt my face lighting up and my voice warming the same way I’d observed in my parents, but I felt like my reaction was more intense. This time, someone who couldn’t possibly be expected to know my mother tongue or be familiar with my culture *was*. And that took me by surprise in the best way possible. Ms. Leacraft confessed her love for Indian food and raved about the samosas and pakoras at Dana Mandi, contending that it was the best Indian food she’s eaten. She anticipated that I was vegetarian, too,

because of being a Jain, and that recognition made me feel understood in a way I'd never imagined.

About a week later, we met in person at the Community Education Center, a worn building where Ms. Leacraft flipped through a binder of her artwork and showed me her banners that were on display in the institution's dance studio. They were long and originally white, but the dyes she and others had used flowed into each other in patterns across the cloth, so although you could see some of the individuals hues themselves, they overlapped with new shades borne by the blended colors. Ms. Leacraft also spread out a banner that was made in an art class she taught for a Latino Substance Abuse Program for males. She recalled her first class with them, where she had brought a salsa music CD and researched Puerto Rican deities that they could pattern onto their art (all of the men happened to be Puerto Rican).

"They appreciated that," she remembered. When someone tries to be culturally aware, she told me, people see that and love it and it makes a connection. The banner they made glittered with different imprints of animals and symbols from Puerto Rican culture.

She flipped further through the binder and paused on a paragraph of text encased in a sheet protector. It read: "Therapist's Observations." Ms. Leacraft explained to me that it was a report of the impact she's had on a incarcerated individuals in Camden. After a few months of her workshop with them, the therapist noted that "her sensitivity to the participants' experience" and "her high degree of cultural awareness...served to ease participants' anxiety and increase group cohesion," ultimately "the first concrete record of...recovery" for many participants. I was struck by how her cultural awareness was able to change the course of rehabilitation for the inmates.

I left our first meeting with my mind reeling from the variety of Ms. Leacraft's many projects, but moreover, our interaction had impressed upon me that maybe I was completely wrong to accept the inevitable separation of cultures: perhaps instead of a group or individual's outward assertion of their minority status, the exchange and understanding of another's culture is what brings meaning to their culture.

Ms. Leacraft and I met again at the International House—a fitting location, I might add—on Thursday, March 14th. She talked about how she makes it her business to find a detail that can connect her to another individual. Ms. Leacraft recalled a recent experience to explain this to me:

‘When I get into my Uber, and I heard this man's African accent, I asked him where he was from, and he said ‘Nigeria.’ And I asked him, ‘Are you Yoruba? Ibo?’” Pleased, the surprised driver exclaimed, “How do you know about all of that?”

Ms. Leacraft had asked him what ethnic he was part of. She looked at me, turning herself around a little more in the chair to face me, and said, “It is my *job* to know because *I live here*, in America. It's my duty to know.” For reasons and circumstances beyond her time and control, Ms. Leacraft's ancestors were brought from Nigeria. She doesn't know which tribe or sect. “I don't know my ethnicity,” Ms. Leacraft admitted. So she tries to find it through others.

Inspired by her unabating openness and boundless interests across global cultures, I felt compelled to share Ms. Leacraft's passion for uncovering the world. I don't want my culture to be a wall but a bridge to other, different, people. Today, I think that cultural assertion often produces cultural cliques, but the concept of cultural awareness challenges this default grouping.

I pictured what we must look like from above, the African American woman clad nearly entirely in purple and the bespeckled Indian girl chatting about getting pakoras together one day at Dana Mandi. Our stories were not the same, and neither were our families' struggles, histories, or heritage, but we had found something in common. Several things, in fact—our vegetarianism, passion for social justice, desire to take photos. “There’s a common thread,” Ms. Leacraft remarks, “that you can find anywhere, with anyone. That’s what’s so special about our world.”

Long piece 2, draft 2

A Common Thread

When I worked as a waitress at the local Indian Garden restaurant, I was told to serve iced water to the non-Indian customers and reserve non-iced water for Indians. Nestled in the suburban, mostly white township of Yardley, Pennsylvania, Indian Garden is one of two Indian restaurants in the community, and some Indian families treat it like a haven, an escape to home where they can douse their food in fresh lemon juice and request multiple plates of onion-chili salads and order the “Indian hot” entrees that are actually Indian hot. The owner instructed me to treat the Desi families to *gulab jamuns* and serve mango pudding to everyone else.

Excitement filters into my dad’s tone when we enter a Subway or Dunkin’ Donuts—“they’re all Patels!”—and he can converse with the cashier in his native Gujarati. We’ve never met before, but they greet us like we’re family. The workers always give us extra munchkins or a free cookie, smiling affectionately at us.

Warmth and amusement light up my parents’ faces when our Indian friends show up to gatherings at typical “Indian Standard Time,” or at least two hours late. My parents’ accents crescendo as they banter with the late arrivals. An openness emanates from their presence, gradually changing our behavior: it’s the lessened creasing in Mom’s forehead, the slight settling of her shoulders, her uncontrollable giggling mingling together with the other aunties’, or Dad’s deep, bottomless laughter when his eyes scrunch up, the wide-eyed silly faces he makes at my sister and me.

I recognized early on that my family and I have certain expectations for Indians. We draw distinctions, unintentionally and subconsciously, between people who are like us and people who

are not. With the former, we make brown jokes unabashed, smile deeper and longer, and greet people in our language. How can you blame my parents, immigrants who sometimes missed home? How can you blame us, the gangly, awkward brown kids who prank-called random phone numbers in exaggerated accents about ordering some chicken biryani? You can't, because how we act and who we gravitate towards is natural. Being with other Indians makes us feel warmer, closer, and more anchored.

But examined in another vein, my family's preferences could be described differently and carry a negative undertone. We harbor different expectations for different people, depending on their race and ethnicity—in this case, towards Indians and non-Indians. I've wondered if the harsh truth of our behavior is that we are practicing a cultural form of racism. That is, does the degree of the difference with which we treat "our own," as opposed to everyone else, constitute prejudice? Over the past few years, I've begun to experience a twinge of discomfort whenever I or my family make that immediate connection with our fellow Desis—does our selectivity border on exclusivity?

How much of this cultural prejudice is within my control? I was born in a mostly white community, and throughout my life, grasped for the rare interactions when I didn't feel like a minority. I read somewhere that minorities are the most racist, but I've realized that's because *I have to be*. I default to being with others like myself in order to gain a sense of community. In high school, it was easy for me to observe, and hastily conclude, that people default to surrounding themselves with those similar to them. And what incentive did we have to transgress our own social circles and cultural spheres, if we were more comfortable within them?

These experiences influenced my glimpse into the melting pot—rather than blended, it appeared to containing a watery broth with chunks of various ethnicities bobbing up and down—sometimes colliding, but never blending.

During my time at Penn—which, admittedly, has been a meager semester and a half— I have encountered both clearly defined cultural circles, such as the advocacy groups for minority students, as well as individuals who seek to blur these lines. One of these individuals, fabric and mixed-media artist Betty Leacraft, has challenged me to extend more curiosity towards others and find a common thread across cultural spheres.

Ms. Leacraft has made me wonder if I have more control than I think: if I want to be part of the melting pot, maybe I have to look beyond those I consider my “own” community.

I first spoke with Betty Leacraft over the phone, a week before we met in person. She spoke in a slow, deep voice, and began to tell me about her work—why she worked in the places she did, the recognition she’s achieved. She’s worked as a substitute teacher in schools, taught art classes for incarcerated individuals in Camden, and been involved in a substance abuse program. She focuses on serving underprivileged communities by teaching art and facilitating textile projects in numerous institutions devoted to this cause in the Tri-state area. Her pieces are also inspired by African tradition and history—one of her art quilts was displayed in a South African exhibit dedicated to Nelson Mandela.

About twenty minutes into the conversation, she mentioned something along the lines of “and as a woman of color yourself, I’m sure you know what I mean.” I blinked and straightened abruptly. Her words involved me, somehow, in her story. She had grouped me with herself.

Usually I am pigeonholed into: brown skin equals brown girl equals nerdy academic equals Bollywood fanatic. But being associated with other groups, minority or otherwise? In that moment, an older African American woman, whose maternal grandfather hailed from Guyana, was connecting with me, an eighteen-year-old second -gen Indian girl.

Ms. Leacraft made me part of her conversation. She asked about my roots in India, and we spent at least fifteen minutes talking about my family's religion. She'd heard of Jainism and even knew our dietary practices. My face lit up and my voice warmed up the same way my parents' did, but this time, the connection felt more intense. This time, someone who I didn't expect to have heard of my mother tongue or be familiar with my culture *was*. Ms. Leacraft professed her love for Indian food and raved about the samosas and pakoras at Dana Mandi, contending that it was some of the best Indian food she's eaten. She asked if I was vegetarian, knowing I am a Jain—a recognition that made me feel understood—and we found that we both are. She started telling me about her work in prisons, and I felt something inside of me expanding. I eagerly told her that I, too, am passionate about reentry work, and just like that, we had something else in common.

About a week later, we met in person at the Community Education Center, a worn building on Lancaster Avenue. Aside from her gray pants, Ms. Leacraft was covered in purple: her head was wrapped in the same color as her sweater, and around her shoulders she wore a pinkish-purple scarf. She took me upstairs to see the banners she'd made to decorate the center's dance studio. One entire wall of the studio, across from the mirrors, comprised of five or six floor-to-ceiling windows. Between each window hung a banner, and the tie-dyed aesthetic splashed an array of color throughout the sunlit studio. None were the same, yet they all

channelled warmth and personality into the bright, large room. The dyes flowed into each other in wavelike patterns across the cloth, so although you could see individual hues, they overlapped with new shades borne by the blended colors. Some were darker than others, with daring purples melting into mellow green and rich turquoise. Others featured rows of rambunctious pinks and magentas contrasting with neon yellow. A couple had ringlike patterns around the corners that made the border resemble a photo frame. The patterns were not consistent across each banner, but each individual cloth was remarkably symmetric.

Back on the first floor, we sat down in a room lined with tables and chalkboards. Ms. Leacraft pulled out a hefty, four-inch-thick binder stuffed with photos, pamphlets, and reports about her work. She slowly flipped through, telling me about exhibitions that have featured her pieces and the work she does for underserved communities.

Ms. Leacraft also spread out a banner made in an art class she'd taught in the 1990s at the Girard Medical Center Torrae de la Raza for the Latino Substance Abuse Program. She recalled her first class, where she'd brought a salsa music CD and, upon finding out that the men were Puerto Rican, she researched Puerto Rican deities that they could pattern onto their art.

"They appreciated that," she remembered. When someone tries to be culturally aware, she said, people recognize that and it makes a difference. The banner glittered with different imprints—frogs, lizards, and wide-eyed faces—from Puerto Rican culture. Patches of yellow spotted with green highlighted the figures of animals and symbols.

She paused on a paragraph of text encased in a sheet protector, entitled "Therapist's Observations." Ms. Leacraft explained that it was a report on her class at the substance abuse program, and it was particularly important to her because it documented her impact. After a few

months of her workshop with them, the medical center's therapist noted that Ms. Leacraft's "sensitivity to the participants' experience" and "her high degree of cultural awareness...served to ease participants' anxiety and increase group cohesion," which was ultimately "the first concrete record of...recovery" for many participants. I was struck by how her cultural awareness, combined with her passion for teaching art, was able to change the course of their rehabilitation.

I left our first meeting reeling from the variety of Ms. Leacraft's many projects, and also disillusioned. Maybe I was wrong to accept the inevitable separation of cultures. Perhaps the exchange and understanding of another's culture is what brings meaning to one's own.

Ms. Leacraft and I met again two weeks later at the International House on Chestnut Street, an institution that provides housing to foreign students visiting Philly. It was a fitting location, I thought. She talked about how she makes it her business to find a detail that can connect her to another individual. Ms. Leacraft recalled an earlier experience:

"When I got into my Uber, and I heard this man's African accent, I asked him where he was from, and he said 'Nigeria.' And I asked him, 'Are you Yoruba? Ibo?'" The surprised driver exclaimed, "How do you know about all of that?"

Ms. Leacraft looked at me, her light eyes beaming more intensely, turned in her chair to fully face me

"It is my *job* to know because *I live here*, in America. It's my duty to know." Ms. Leacraft only knows that her maternal grandfather originated from Buxton, Guyana, and the paternal side of her family lived in America. She doesn't know the specifics of her roots. "I don't know my ethnicity," Ms. Leacraft said, so she tries to find it through others.

Inspired by her unabated openness and boundless interest in culture, I feel compelled to share Ms. Leacraft's passion for uncovering the world. I want my culture to be a bridge, not a wall.

In the midst of our three interactions, I remembered something that the Mexican filmmaker, Guillermo del Toro, once said: "The greatest thing...art does...is to erase the lines in the sand. We should continue doing that when the world tells us to make them deeper." Those lines divide us because they bound us to "our own," keeping us from accepting and being accepted by other cultures. Erasing a line creates a bridge to a new culture.

To me, that's what Ms. Leacraft does. She blurs the lines by finding what she calls "a common thread."

What must we look like from above, the African American woman clad in a purple turtleneck and dangling hoop earrings and the bespeckled Indian girl chatting about getting pakoras together at Dana Mandi? Our stories were not the same, and neither were our families' struggles, histories, or heritage, but we had found something—several things, in fact— in common.

Optional Revise: Long Piece 1

An Accident of Birth

MUMBAI, INDIA

December 2015

The driver slowed to a stop by the pavement. I stepped outside of the luxury building and into my grandparents' car, where the cold air felt heavenly—outside, the blazing humidity had drawn sweat from my pores within seconds—and I was glad to be swathed in air-conditioning once again. Sunder, the driver, pulled out of the parking garage and halted at the intersection, signaling to turn right. The road he would turn onto led to my grandparents' apartment in South Mumbai, India. I was still smiling from the afternoon I had spent playing with my little cousins. As a fifteen-year-old with a thirteen-year-old sister in America, far away from the rest of our family, I rarely spend time with younger kids.

A knock on the car door window startled me from my reverie. A boy, around twelve, was looking at me beseechingly, his nose almost pressing against the glass. He was younger than me, but appeared to be twice as old; his hair was not dark, but grayish, from the dust, I suspected. His gestured to me with cupped hands, then pointed to his mouth as if to eat. *Didi, didi, khana*, he said: *sister, sister, food*. I pulled my purse towards me and shuffled through the contents, but I didn't have any money. I turned to him with guilt, trying to convey with my expression that I didn't have anything to give. He either didn't understand or wasn't convinced; he continued to hold up his palms and motion to his mouth, pleading in Hindi: *please, just a little bit to fill my stomach*. He probably thought I *must* have something to give—I had come out of Imperial, the most expensive apartment building in Mumbai. I was seated in a car driven by someone else, so I

had to be part of the upper class. Time stretched out and what was probably seconds felt like hours. I eventually turned away, but that only made him more persistent; he called out *Didi* louder, adding that he hadn't eaten yet that day. Each plea was like a fish hook cast into me, snagging my insides and conscience and ripping out my heart. I wanted to strip off my clothing and hand him my purse, giving him whatever I had, but I knew Sunder would stop me. I wanted to face the boy again and say with my eyes that I was sorry. I could see him, from the corner of my eye, his face growing less earnest and more broken. He must have thought I was heartless—I felt heartless. The traffic light finally blinked green, and the car lurched right. I peered through the back window and saw tendrils of exhaustion fumes and dirt swirling around him. He wasn't looking at me anymore. His face had hardened from the raw desperation and vulnerability I had first seen; he was used to this. He trailed off to the traffic light, cars speeding past him and showering him with more dust, waiting for it to turn red again.

YARDLEY, PENNSYLVANIA

High School Years (2015-2018)

I have traveled to Mumbai, India, once every couple of years to visit my family. Nearly all of my extended family is concentrated in this city, although a few of us are scattered across the globe. The coastal city is regarded as the New York City of India, and is home to millions, ranging from billionaires in towering skyscrapers to the lower class residents of the Dharavi slums. A second home to me, I have always loved Mumbai's thick, humid air, the bustling streets and lively shops, the relentless monsoons and blustery seaside, and most of all, the street markets, or *bazaars*, where blending aromas of creamy sweets, roasted nuts, grilled corn, and a

number of spicy mixes called *chaats* never fail to make my mouth water. But over the past few years, since I started high school, I no longer left India wistful and bittersweet, the warmth of my family lingering; instead, I was consumed by a sinking helplessness. Until the age of 15, I'd always experienced temporary sadness when I saw poverty, but now I was wrought with the guilt of my own privilege.

I can't count how many times I have seen beggars knock on car windows— haggard girls my age toting naked toddlers, skeletal boys, their faces weary and ashen from malnutrition, and hunched, bony elderly with gnarled hands clutching makeshift canes. On other occasions, as our car glided down twilight streets illuminated by the glittering Mumbai horizon, I saw families huddle together under makeshift cardboard homes and grungy tarps as they prepared to sleep on the dirt roads.

Sometimes it's convenient to ignore poverty or not think about it when one can say “those” people, or “that” part of town—when physical distance and barriers insulate one from poverty. I can recall the traffic light incidents with shocking clarity because in those moments, we, the beggar and the passenger, are just inches away from each other. There's no way to dehumanize the person on the other side of the glass; no amount of wealth, prestige, or poverty is capable of widening the distance between us. Staring into each other's eyes, each can see the other's raw emotion—desperation, frustration, hope, sorrow, and guilt. A human sees a human. And yet, the reality is that the glass barrier between us draws a line between two different worlds; on the inside, I am cool, cushioned, and clean, and on the outside, he or she stands in the midst of heat, dirt roads, and polluted air spewing from the traffic. Every time the light switches to green and our car pulls away, the fish hooks never relinquish their hold of me. Not when I've

retreated to South Mumbai or even when the plane to Philadelphia takes off. No, they're still there, notched firmly into my conscience, pulling me back to that moment when I should have done something, back to those who I should have helped.

As a sophomore in high school, I realized I could never unsee what I had seen in Mumbai. I couldn't push it away or ignore it. I couldn't accept that people were starving, homeless, and begging. I couldn't accept that I lived in an upper middle class, quaint, suburban town, entirely removed from what I had seen halfway across the world. Previously an extremely devoted student, I became an impatient learner, searching for any relevance in my education to what I had seen. The derivative equations and net force diagrams in front of me blurred into faces, shading my intellectual curiosity with guilt. What was the point of gaining more knowledge if I couldn't help anyone with it? I became more frugal and introverted, refraining from shopping or socializing because I felt doing so flaunted my privilege. I didn't want to indulge myself with anything that I knew others could not afford. I asked myself, what right did I have to enjoy the privileges handed down to me when others were forced to suffer from the poverty handed down to them?

I began to resent myself for having an identity that was predicated on privilege—all of my “success” so far was in fact a product of my circumstances. I was only called “exceptional” or “gifted” in school because I had the chance to be; I was only capable of excelling because I didn't have to worry about going hungry at night; I was only able to shop or read books or binge Netflix, all of the things I enjoyed doing, because I was born with privilege. An accident of birth, I realized, and a random allocation of privilege, had largely determined who I was.

This realization did not bode well for me. Effectively shattering my reality, I had trouble focusing on grades, competition, and meaningless accomplishments, because in the real world, as I constantly reminded myself, people were suffering. I felt trapped by the educational system and societal expectation to excel, but now, being part of this system felt unconscionable. Embittered by standards that proved to be superficial, I began to question everything and believe nothing. I could no longer aspire to make it to the top when it felt like I was leaving people behind—what if the accident of birth had allotted me their fate?

And so I receded into a tiny, dark, shell of my being, filtering the world I saw with cynicism that guised my deep, continual agony. Of course, I felt more guilty because what right did *I* have to not be happy, to despair?

I can't remember exactly when I started to change, but I know that volunteering was, and is, my saving grace. My awareness of social injustice and poverty naturally led me to volunteer, and after my sophomore year I spent time editing a newsletter for a criminal justice coalition in Philadelphia. I interacted with fiercely determined and compassionate individuals; gradually, these moments chipped at my cynical resolve. Maybe it was when my supervisor at the Reentry Coalition (for incarcerated individuals) smiled at me knowingly and said, "When you get started in this work, you'll never stop," or when I met my social justice hero, human rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson, and he signed a copy of his book for me "To Sonali—With hope," or my favorite moment in his TED talk when Rosa Parks told him, "This work is gonna make you tired, tired, tired. That's why you have to be brave, brave, brave." Maybe Mr. Stevenson once felt just like me, hopeless and defeated. Maybe reality is painful, if I choose to truly absorb it, and being hopeful is the hardest part. It started to hit me that feeling guilty wasn't going to help anyone; I

wondered if maybe my privilege meant I could *do* something about injustice. I tried to stop punishing myself for what I could not help.

As junior year ended, my cynicism began to erode, with inklings of hope and determination hesitantly taking its place. Volunteering helped me become hopeful, but I wasn't exactly sure what to be hopeful about. The problem was that there was still an "us" and "them" in my mind, the privileged and the underprivileged, and I couldn't figure out how to reconcile the two. If transported back to the moment with the pleading twelve-year-old boy, maybe now I wouldn't be guilty, but I would still feel helpless. What does it mean to be universally human when the very standards of living aren't universal? It was unrealistic to hope for a world that is completely free of suffering, where no children ever have to knock on car windows. How was it possible for me to view poverty both realistically *and* optimistically?

AHMEDABAD, GUJARAT

August 2018

The car jerked to a stop and sunk slightly into the dense mud. I pushed open the car door and stepped outside onto the soggy soil of my native Gujarat—my grandparents' birthplace. Despite the mugginess, I was wearing jeans and long sleeves to avoid contracting malaria from the clouds of hovering mosquitos. I was with my uncle and aunt, Rishi Uncle and Rutu, the founders of Sparsh Trust, a nonprofit centered in Mumbai. We were there to distribute solar panels to the villagers so they can power their stoves and lights. Rishi Uncle and Rutu (she says she's too young to be called an aunt) had recently begun to focus on villages, where rural poverty takes you places that can seem unfathomable to the developed world—girls don't go to school,

children are married by the age of twelve, clean water is hard to come by. Around me, huts propped up by bamboo sticks and coated in mud sprawled across maybe fifty square feet, forming a small settlement neighbored by glistening fields. Men in white shirts with grizzled, matted hair, women wearing simple, traditional saris, and children in ragged, stained clothes stood around us, staring at the car that had pulled into their village.

It was hard to look around and not pity the villagers, and not be overcome by hopelessness, but the purpose of my trip to India that summer was to explore hopefulness. The best way to be hopeful, Rishi Uncle and Rutu taught me, was to realize that “every smile counts.” Maybe the village we were visiting today won’t get clean water for another 10 years, and maybe the children won’t all become educated for another 50 years, and maybe their homes won’t be able to withstand the heavy rains for another century, but at least today, they can heat their food. At least today, the few children who attend school can study at night. Rishi Uncle advised me against quantifying acts of good:

“Say you have brought 100 pieces of candy to a village. And you get to give 100 children a piece of candy. And then, another child comes up to you, asking you for a piece, but you only had 100 pieces of candy. Even if you got to feed 100 children, you’ll be upset that you couldn’t feed the 101st. So you have to be happy with whatever little you can do.” That’s how he’s optimistic about poverty—he takes pride in the problems he can solve. He encouraged me to focus my hopefulness on certain goals in order to remain optimistic.

His words echoed in my head as I walked towards the center of the village with him and Rutu, where the solar panel distribution would take place. For the first time, I immersed myself in poverty and consciously rejected the instinct to feel inconsequential. I realized that the reason

I had felt helpless before, as I had stared into the eyes of the begging twelve-year-old-boy, was because I was seeing him for his circumstances and nothing more. To me, he had been a starving, malnourished boy. But that's not all he was, and that's not all the villagers were. Part of not feeling inconsequential meant seeing the villagers for more than their circumstances, for more than the accident of birth—if I didn't want my identity to be defined by my privilege, why should I define them by poverty? I challenged myself to connect with the villagers and search for something constant that united me with them.

My uncle called for me to take photos, which I attempted to do discreetly. As I adjusted the camera lens, I heard giggles and a small scuffle drew my attention to the edge of the gathering. A girl, around ten, was playfully pushing another girl—a few years younger and presumably her sister—towards me, and the smaller child was vigorously resisting. They looked at me with budding curiosity, eyeing the camera in my hands. I smiled at them shyly, and they smiled back. Feeling more confident, I held up the camera and snapped a photo. Their faces broke into massive grins, and then more children stared at our exchange, nudging each other and pointing at the camera. Smiling wider than before, I stepped back a little, away from the distribution, and three or four girls followed. They danced over to me, pointing to themselves and then at my camera, chanting, *Didi, didi*. I took another photo and they jumped with glee, bodies squirming and crowding around me to see the camera screen. At that point, there was no more distance between us. They clutched my shoulders and nestled their faces around my head, scrambling to find a place in the pictures. I started taking selfies, so that they could see their own faces better, and their excitement grew exponentially when I recorded a video. Two girls asked

me to take a video of them and then adorably waved to themselves on my phone screen when I played it.

An older woman, her hair covered in purplish blue cloth, called out to me, *Ben, ben*, meaning sister (*Didi* means older sister; *Ben* generally means sister), and took my arm, leading Rutu and I to the back of a hut, where a small infant was being rocked in straw basket. Rutu translates the woman's Gujarati for me, saying that the baby was just ten days old and the woman's granddaughter. The woman grinned with gusto, picking up her baby proudly and beaming at the camera. The other women of the village joined her, taking turns holding the child and smiling broadly at me. I tried to sit down with Rutu on the hammock, but to no avail; nearly a dozen more kids—from toddlers to teenagers—pulled me away to take more photos. They posed and hugged each other, dragging over their siblings who toothily grinned at the camera. Our laughter mingled together in the thick air, as if we were one.

Rishi Uncle and Rutu called for me; it was time to leave. A girl with crooked front teeth, maybe eight years old, tugged at my shirt. “Kyare pacha avaso?” she asked: “When will you come back?” I look down at her, at the children starting to notice I was leaving, at the other onlookers, mothers and fathers and grandparents, and felt an irrevocable closeness to them. Our worlds were different, our lives were different, and yet the moments we shared together uplifted me. I'd figured it out, the constant I was looking for—it was so simple and clear that I had overlooked it: humanity.

Poverty is humanizing—it strips humans down to who they are minus the wealth and status. Though poverty was hard for me to internalize as an external onlooker, because I was saddened that a poor person doesn't have what I did, I had been focusing on differences instead

of the similarities. The villagers and I did not know each other, but in the past few hours we had laughed together, eaten together, and taken selfies together. Simply being humans, individuals regardless of what we were born with, bares our compassion. Poverty affirms our mutual humanity. I was going to remember this place, I thought—and not with sadness. With hope.

I looked down at her, smiling: “Jaladi hum kari sakum chum.” *As soon as I can.*

Semester Growth

I surprised myself by deciding to write about some pretty difficult things that I've internally wrestled with for a while. My first long piece was really hard to articulate, because it captured the change in my thoughts over four years, especially the tumultuous nature of them. This proved difficult, especially when I realized that I hadn't completely come to terms with everything myself. However, I think that writing about such deeply personal topics has exposed my writing for both its strengths and weaknesses. For example, my primary focus over the course of this semester has been to show and not tell. I've worked on accompanying a lot of my emotionally charged, powerful statements with appropriate scene setting, so I don't overwhelm the reader, and also to provide bits that help orient the piece. I think that I improved in this regard when I wrote my second long piece, in which I tried to lead with sensory descriptions and then follow with impassioned statements.

My other biggest challenge with writing these long, personal pieces is that what I write is almost always never what I want someone to read. In other words, it takes me so much "word-vomit" to reach the content that I really wanted to include. Sometimes I have to sift through paragraphs and pages for the message that I actually care about. I struggle with judging what is imperative for the piece and what isn't, and discerning what the piece is lacking—I always forget that the "I" on the page isn't me, with my experiences to refer to. I often leave out details, especially personal ones, that I think are obvious but are necessary for the reader. Choice of detail remains to be another one of my struggles as a writer, but I hope that with the concision I tried to employ in my latest free writes and in my second long piece, that my work shows some, if marginal, improvement.

Overall, I think that showing and not telling, choice and inclusion of detail, as well as concision, are my biggest challenges, and that only by working through and producing more will I be able to significantly improve in those respects. I have tried to demonstrate improvement in my recent revisions, especially the second long piece revision and the first long piece optional revision. I'm proudest of my ability to be ambitious with my writing—daring to capture with words the experiences that still puzzle me to this day.