Sample essays —Pomona college 12 pieces (6 out of 14)

**The House of Cards Came Crashing**

**David McDevitt**

**C. There are limitations to what grades, scores, and recommendations can tell us about any applicant. We ask you to write a personal essay that will help us to know you better. In the past, candidates have written about their families, intellectual and extracurricular interests, ethnicity or culture, school and community events to which they have had strong reactions, people who have influenced them, significant experiences, personal aspirations, or topics that spring entirely from their imaginations. There is no "correct" response. Write about what matters to you, and you are bound to convey a strong sense of who you are.**

Just as the plane landed, I closed The Fountainhead interrupting Ayn Rand's famous courtroom speech. Everything Rand wrote about, from individualism to selfishness, all made sense. As I stepped foot into the dreary airport, I knew I wasn't in Scottsdale anymore. Being my first time below the equator, I was quite eager to visit Rio di Janeiro. A young man greeted my family and offered to drive us to our hotel for 60 real, roughly $18. I could tell our driver was sharp. He had a calculating look to him, but still had a gregariousness that made me feel comfortable; I thought to myself that he probably could have been quite wealthy if he lived in the United States. My father haggled down to 45 real and we hopped in the cab. At the time, I didn't think about how the driver could use the money we haggled away from him. After all, we live in a capitalistic world. As we drove into the congested city, I began to see tall skyscrapers, surrounded by tarpaper structures. The structures appeared as if a gust of wind would send them floating away. Our driver told us that the structures were called 'favelas.' Homeless people began squatting on government land and constructing houses with driftwood, old bricks and plywood scraps. What I found most incredible was that most of the people who live in the favelas are working class. Visiting impoverished neighborhoods was a sobering experience. Ayn Rand's idealistic views to which I had taken a liking, weren't so crisp and clear anymore.

After visiting South America, I realized that there is more to life than climbing the corporate ladder or becoming a high priced attorney. That's not to say that those are poor goals, but devoting one's entire life to that cause does seem quite trivial on a global scale. I want to use my fortunes to help those who weren't given an equal chance. Thinking of our taxi driver, I now understand how random life can be. How would I act if I were born in a slum or in a third world country? Would I be attending school or would I be working to survive? Our driver was just as bright as anyone I know. How would his life be different if he were born in Manhattan? It's quite possible I would work for him later in life. While the United States is developing into a meritocracy, many parts of the world have remained stagnant, leaving diligent members of society impoverished. Through this first-hand experience, I acquired a stronger sense of social responsibility and duty to those in need.

My life has insofar been quite privileged. My parents have provided everything I've ever needed to pursue my education, and there is nothing for which I am more grateful. But being appreciative doesn't better the condition of anyone else. My trip to Brazil was a personal call to action. The juxtaposition of my condition with that of the people living favelas displayed the serious inequity in the world. Visiting the slums of South America washed away my naive belief in Ayn Rand's philosophy of working for the individual. But it also brought my views to equilibrium. I will never feel guilty about earning a generous living. I also know that while it may be selfless, which is the pitfall of Randian philosophy, I cannot ignore the problems facing the world. I strongly believe in Rand's notion that a principle of all cultures should be justice; in essence, you earn what you deserve. Nobody deserves to be born into a life without hope. While a class system without lucid walls may always exist, I can only strive to provide hope for people less privileged.

**The Fall of Icarus and the Rise of Spirit**

**Silvia Lu**

**Describe a book, play, composition, poem, scientific discovery, technical achievement, myth, historic event or work of art that has inspired and intrigued you. You can assume we are familiar with the plot and details; instead, tell us what it means for you personally.**

A single pair of legs, kicking up from the ocean. Kicking up from the far right corner of a pleasant landscape depicting what may be the most tranquil morning in the history of pleasant landscapes. And there, the legs - added as almost an afterthought to the scheme of things - a splash unnoticed by the shepherd and his roly poly sheep or the farmer making even rows in the field.

In Pieter Bruegel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" I find a strange sort of inspiration and motivation; a call to action and compassion - ironically from a painting that could stand as the greatest conception of indifference in the history of art. I remember the first viewing; a sweeping glance that yielded only a mild reaction towards yet another typical renaissance painting. Then, a halfhearted examination of the title. Searching, searching for Icarus - and then finding him. Once mirth at the clever placement passed, I was filled with an unsettling feeling. Something, something about the painting was bothersome and continued to be so long after the slides had been put away.

Then, it hit me. A young boy, a boy who had flown with the birds and nearly touched Apollo's chariot, had fallen. A young boy had just plummeted to his death. He must have cried out before slicing into the dark waters and that splash must have been audible to every figure in the painting - and yet how everything turns away.

An accurate judgment on the nature of society centuries ago, the message is still applicable yet. The tragedies of others are nothing more than background noise for our daily lives - and we have willed it so. We advert our gaze from the ringing bells of the Salvation Army outside the store we enter for the purpose of buying goods that cater to more a want than a need. We change the channel on World Vision and Feed the Children programs, choosing glamorized sitcoms over the imploring eyes of a starving child. We avoid the evening news because "it's just too depressing," or worse yet, because we just don't care. We have taken to putting on an armor of apathy everyday to shield us from anything that might deter from our paths of self interest.

This is the reality.

This, I reject.

I refuse to accept apathy as protection from emotional disturbance. To me, the painting suggested the demon I have sought to banish with everything that I do. I teach to see my students excited to be playing Scrabble - not even realizing they are learning. The Junior State of America is founded on the assumption that there are adolescents who question the established and who seek to voice their opinion. Theater is all tears and screams and laughing and everything to every extreme. Yearbook documents a year with the mindset that the memories created do matter. Because everything does. I seek not to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders - one would collapse. But, I do seek to understand and to inspire. I have found my purpose in caring, in wanting to care. For so long my greatest fear was simply that nobody else would. That one day, I would awaken to find that like the painting, everyone had turned away.

After all, worse than hate or disdain is indifference. Our ability to feel is what makes us human. We are weak, we are vulnerable. We are supposed to be affected by pain - that is how we are made. So often now we allow machines and technology to dictate our schedules and thoughts, lending a sterile efficiency that has turned us into productive automatons. By allowing our minds to deny what our hearts recognize as truth is the mark not of progression, but regression. We are only able to maintain that facade of indifference so people look. My art, my voice, my words can tell the world, it is about one person. It is about every person. I can make them care.

**Rebuilding the Bubble**

**Anonymous**

**Open Essay Question**

When I was a little kid I used to carry around notebooks which I filled with hundreds of stories ranging in length from a single, whimsical sentence to pages and pages of fantasy. Every hour of the day, there were countless images and ideas running through my head. I remember writing down my stories while riding in cars, while walking down the street, while sitting through another day of second-grade math. My parents couldn't stop bragging about my creativity, and my third-grade teacher signed my yearbook with, "I'm waiting for your first novel." And then, somewhere along the way, I lost it. My mind grew up, and my colorful, crazy inner world was taken over by training in that purely adult skill: Logic. I started thinking, "Nah, rabbits can't dance." Gradually I turned away from creative writing, and after a few years, when I stopped to look for my imagination, it seemed to be lost.

Children look at the world with a certain clarity missing in adults. Children don't censor or second-guess themselves, and are thus able to express their ideas more purely. When they write stories, they don't worry about infusing each word with deep multiple meanings, and often come closer to expressing what is truly going on inside their mind. After re-reading some of my old stories, I've come to realize that my ease of expression was founded in my lack of self-consciousness about the English language. I was entirely unconcerned with grammar, with topic sentences and supporting paragraphs, and yet my ideas shone through in spite of -- or perhaps because of -- my unawareness of the science of writing. Language, if wielded with too much calculation, can be extremely limiting. Thoughts don't naturally come in coherent sentences; words are just a common ground that people have invented to make communication easier. A lot of pure meaning is lost in the translation of an image or idea into words. We all assume that language is such an innate part of us, but it's not, not really.

Perhaps it's not so with everyone -- I can't pretend to know what's going on inside other people's heads -- but my thoughts simply don't come in word format. I don't think in verbs and prepositions. My ideas, when they come, bubble up inside my head as bright, round, colorful pictures that are nearly impossible for me to describe. After those first few years of easy expression, it's become very difficult for me to put my creative ideas into writing, because it frustrates me that I have these beautiful pictures and emotions floating around inside my head that don't convey themselves readily onto paper. For me, words can get in the way of writing.

In high school, being a good analytic writer is considered far more important than being able to write a beautiful, imaginative story. Over the past several years, I've worked hard at becoming a good analytic writer, yet my attempts at creative writing have been few and far between. I remember one story in particular, a creative assignment on The Scarlet Letter. I was reading the final chapter of the novel when I jumped up off my bed, and ran to my desk to jot down a single sentence. It described -- badly -- an image that had just come into my head, an image of a young girl staring out the window of her apartment building, watching a woman standing in the glow of a streetlamp with hail stiffening her carefully-done hair. The words that I wrote at the time, however, did not describe the image in my mind. The story was horrible. I remember selecting each word carefully, loading each sentence with multiple meanings and terrible self-consciousness. What I realized then was that it wasn't that I didn't have the ideas; I just couldn't find a natural way to word them. I was trying to imitate people I considered "great" writers: Austen, Hawthorne, Ginsburg. What I hadn't yet found was my own method of expression.

Recently I've started writing stories again. I've been allowing myself to simply write down what comes into my head, sentence after sentence, without concerning myself with semantics and form. And, at last, here it is again: my imagination! When I allow myself to find my own way through my head, without concerning myself with how others might view my writing, I am at last able to tap into that imagination which, I now realize, has been there all along.

Perhaps imagination emerges only when the mind isn't being stifled by facts and rules, but when it is roaming and questioning and discovering new ideas, as it does during childhood. This year, more so than ever, my classes are making me think, and my teachers are giving me the freedom to develop my own ideas about what I'm studying. I've found that my class discussions overflow into my phone conversations with my friends, and are explored at the dinner table with my family. Every day I find myself questioning different things about my life, sparking my imagination and urging me to write. At last, I'm beginning to understand that there is a place for imagination alongside those "writing rules" I've learned, and I think I'm finally learning how to put the two together.

**Thinking Globally Angela**

**Viti Beckon**

**A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.**

Recently, my family unearthed a home video on an old Beta tape from when I was three years old. In the video, I was sitting on my dad's lap with a globe in front of me, and he was asking me to point out different countries. "Where's Vanuatu?" or "Which one is Fiji?" he would ask me. Sure enough, there I was, pointing to the little island nations. Undoubtedly I promptly forgot their locations after learning them, because I certainly don't remember them now. But looking at that tape reminded of some of the unusual aspects of my childhood.

My father made sure that we learned about the most obscure societies, and vociferously denounced mainstream American culture. His theory was, if it's what everyone else thinks, it must be wrong. I can't remember a time when he was not constantly telling us how much better the Chinese do this, how much better the Russians do that, or how much more polite the Japanese are.

My sisters and I did not immediately appreciate my dad's cosmopolitan view of the world. Like most little kids we just wanted to fit in; we enjoyed eating at McDonald's and listening to pop music, not eating somewhere "interesting" (which invariably meant trying something we could not identify) and listening to Global Beat on NPR. However, our dreams of being normal were not to be realized. When I was five, we moved to Okinawa for two years so my father could do his post-doctoral research on the birds of the Ryukyu Islands. With barely two weeks notice, we had to give up all that had become normal for us and move to a place where we stood out so much that people on the streets came up to ask if we had dyed our hair and if they could take pictures with us. Even in this foreign environment where we longed for home, my father still did not allow us anything familiar or mainstream. There are lots of American restaurants in Japan, but of course we were not allowed to patronize these purveyors of Western culture. We had to eat at the tiniest mom-and-pop places my dad could find.

Through it all, my dad never stopped telling us how wonderful Japan was and what a great experience this was. Eventually, I actually started believing it. I attended local schools and made friends despite language and cultural differences. What was once foreign and scary became comfortable and sometimes even enjoyable. At the age of five I was probably not conscious of it, but Japan and my father's incessant glorification of Eastern cultures helped me form a mind that is remarkably open to other cultures.

As I have grown older, I have learned to think critically about my dad's pronouncements, and to understand that he was prone to exaggeration, whether for the sake of argument or to counter prevailing cultural chauvinism. I learned to take everything my dad said with a grain of salt, but there was almost always some truth to his tirades. The Japanese really are more polite than we are, not to mention the fact that they make better cars. If I had taken everything my father said at face value, I would have seen nothing but the flaws in American culture and the good points of Asian culture. Obviously, there are good and bad aspects in both, and avoiding looking at the whole picture leaves one with a sort of tunnel vision that is not open-minded at all.

While my childhood experiences made me particularly sensitive to and appreciative of other cultures, they failed to make me equally aware of the importance of open-mindedness within our own culture. I confess I was guilty of a similar sort of tunnel vision, but on a micro scale. In part as a result of living in a liberal college town, I assumed for a long time that being open-minded and being liberal were the same thing. I knew in the back of my mind that conservatives existed, but to me they were only this vague, non-specific entity that I assumed dwelt somewhere in "middle America." I did not have to deal with them, and thus assumed that they held their beliefs only because of ignorance. A lot of Davisites share that opinion. Liberals, myself included, often criticize conservatives for not being open-minded. But by not trying to understand the other side and instead simply writing it off as being "wrong," I made myself just as closed-minded as the most Bible-thumping of moral conservatives.

My father taught me how to be accepting and welcoming of other cultures, but I had to teach myself how to be accepting of my own culture. The perspective I share is no doubt a little bit that of the little girl pointing to the island nations on the globe, but it is also that of the Davisite who is no longer afraid to encounter differing opinions.

**From Humble Beginnings**

**Anonymous**

**Open-ended**

My father has always told me that education can break down many barriers, whether they are class, racial, or religious. For this reason my father has made it a priority for me and my sister to attend well established private schools. This education has come at a heavy price to my father. As a truant officer, he has had to work extremely long hours in some of the toughest areas of Los Angeles.

I know there have been great accomplishments made over the last forty years concerning social and racial equality. My father and grandfather would have never been able to attend my high school, Pilgrim School. However, attending Pilgrim School has opened my eyes to the continuing inequalities in society. My school claims to be one of the most diverse schools in Los Angeles; however, I am the only African American student in four of my classes. Many of my friends drive new cars, while I could not even get my drivers license because my family could not spare the money. While many of my classmates drive home to neighborhoods like Hancock Park (a very ritzy part of Los Angeles), I must go home to Gardena, often taking an hour and a half to get home on public transportation.

During these long rides home I pass through many desperately poor areas of town. I know that most children living in these poverty stricken areas do not have the opportunity to attend a school like mine. These students are attending public schools that are under funded, overcrowded and mismanaged. These schools are the reoccurrence of Ringgold Colored High School in modern times. I know that if my father had not sacrificed and worked for me, then I would be one of those children attending these schools facing greater challenges and obstacles.

Because of the struggles and accomplishments of my father and grandfather I am proud to carry on their legacy of self empowerment and achievement. My grandfather wanted his heirs to be able to live in a society free from prejudice with equal opportunities for all. I see the influence of my grandfather in society and live my life as an extension of his work. One way that I would like to carry on this legacy is through education. I want to give back to the community through medical research and discovery. This is my dream, to help ailing patients and to contribute to the welfare of future generations.