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**Sample essays 2023**

**Amherst College**

**It Doesn't Matter If You're Black Or White, Allison Toth**

**Describe a situation in your life that you considered to have been a life-changing experience. Include any negative or positive variables that were associated with this event. Essay must not exceed two pages in length.**

"Wow," I whispered to myself as I walked into the main doorway of my new high school. I walked through the endless hallways and questioned myself as to why my parents decided to move here, Wuerzburg, Germany, one of the alleged bad schools in the area. Why did they force me to leave my friends, home, and some of my best experiences? I had never before in my life seen as many different ethnic faces as I now would every day for the next four years. I acted very apprehensively that first week of school; I mean it's not every day that you meet someone whose father is the principal. What would people think of me? Before in my old school the ethnic majority was white and now, in a matter of one day I had become the minority. I had heard rumors and tales of alleged gangs in my new school. I believed what others had told me and prepared myself for the worst. First looks can be very deceiving. I found this out the hard way. This move was by far one of the best events that had ever taken place in my life. It taught me about ethnic diversity and allowed me to enrich my life with the friendships of different people around me.

I entered high school, to put it blatantly, scared. I didn't know what to expect. Would people see me only as the principal's daughter? At first I was labeled as a teacher's pet and a goody two shoes. Of course, I was upset about accusation but I failed to realize that I too stereotyped the faces I saw everyday. I kept a small profile to avoid any confrontation. This was my avoidance tactic. Where I came from before people congregated together as one. Color was not an issue. But here it was the opposite. These oppositions made me not want to do anything that I thought would put me in a position where I would have to defend myself.

Slowly I began to realize that moving here to Wuerzburg was actually something that was good. My original view of people and the world was confining. Now, as I walk down the halls I greet everybody with a friendly face. No matter who they are, how they look, or their reputation I befriend them. Playing sports such as volleyball and soccer allowed me to learn new attitudes and ideas from all sorts of people. Currently on my basketball team I am able to experience a whole new world of traditions with a group consisting mostly of African Americans.

Being in a school with over 600 students, 50% of them African American and 30% white allows me to communicate with people different than me. The experience has been an enriching one. Who would have ever thought that the once shy freshman was now a person encountering people and attitudes from every part of the globe? In these four years my personality has adjusted and changed into something that allows me to feel comfortable around any person and allows any person to feel comfortable around me. I feel that my personality not only has helped me to broaden my views about people but also has helped others that are still too scared to approach people other than their own race.

So far, I know that I am off to a great start. My education and attitude can only get better.

**From Negative to Positive (Or Positive to Negative?) The Lurid Confessions of a Member of Teeny Bopper Anonymous Janet Rosenbaum**

**Write on a topic of your choice.**

From Negative to Positive (Or Positive to Negative?) The lurid confessions of a member of Teeny-Bopper Anonymous

Wow. Wasn't I cool? Since this picture was taken, everything outside of myself - my appearance, my surroundings, even my superficial attitudes about life - has undergone a complete revolution. Contrasting me with that girl in the picture would be like comparing this picture with its negative; everything in this picture is now reversed, inside out.

Life started out fairly easy. Before middle school, I did what I wanted to do without regrets. If my friends wanted to do the same, company would be nice; if not, I would have just as much fun alone. Middle school changed things. Suddenly group dynamics became almost political, and social esteem, not self-esteem, became the key to happiness. Seventh grade, the time when this picture was taken, was the peak of social pressure in my life.

This picture epitomizes all of the elements that society had labelled as "important" for my peers and me, yet it also belies them through subtle clues.

For example, while I exude quite smugly what I think is maturity, the menagerie of stuffed animals and the "cutesy" picture of kittens are reminders of my immaturity.

The picture also reveals the things about myself that I'd thought were hidden away; my veneer of anti-intellectualism is belied by the often-used bookshelf and world map behind me. If I truly believed what I preached, my bookshelf would be tidy from disuse and pictures of some cretin teeny-bopper would adorn my wall.

Why do social pressures transform otherwise intelligent, creative children into lemmings? These influences to conform transcend the mere pressure of peers; they come from society as a whole. The media portray "teens" with a uniform image that tells them the way they "should" be.

A young consumer of modern entertainment (TV, movies, recent books) comes to think of the most prevalent image of "teens" as the norm.

The roles of young women in American culture are even narrower, as delineated by the following three tenets:

1. You must be trendy. Following current styles and fads is mandatory.

Additionally, the timeless rules still apply: make-up must be worn and legs must be shaven. (A careful observer might note that I am wearing blue (!) eye-shadow and blush and sport a few trendy styles: a hat, curled hair, and a T-shirt replete with pithy sayings.)

2. You must keep abreast of current events, not in the world abroad, but in your own parochial world. If you do not know in advance what everyone is wearing on Friday night or who is talking with whom, you are doomed to live alone eternally with only 13 cats for companionship.

3. Adults aren't cool. Always scowl in their presence. I was so convinced that I was living the ideal "teen" life that I had no time to think about things of true importance. Although I did homework, and did it well, I looked at school assignments as another chore to be done; I may as well tell them what they want to hear and get it over with, instead of actually thinking.

Thus, any intellectual activity that I engaged in did not permeate my consciousness. My journal from seventh grade is a continuous recitation of rumors, speculation, and other excerpts from the rather dull soap opera of seventh grade social life: proof that nothing besides this rather large mass of intellectual Spam squooshed around in my trendy blonde head for very long.

But then things changed: the advent of New Kids on the Block in eighth grade cleared this banality from my life. New Kids on the Block was an untalented group of kids assembled by a music producer for the express purpose of making money. Not only did I dare to be the only girl in my grade who didn't like them, I dared to despise them. I listened to my music and figured that matters of taste really shouldn't matter to my friends.

Wrong! Not only was I isolated from the stimulating debates about which one was cutest, but the giggles I unsuccessfully attempted to stifle certainly didn't add to my popularity. At the time, this isolation upset me greatly, but not enough to make me conform. The social vacuum in my life was replaced by ideas: books, newspapers, schoolwork, and in-class debates on subjects ranging from legalizing drugs to literature.

I summarized my feelings in my journal on November 29, 1989 when I wrote, "Let them laugh! I'd rather be an original nerd than a conformist follower."

So it was that a little less than a year after this picture was taken, its negative became closer to the truth; prominent lemming-like qualities faded into the shadows while hints of originality and intellect, previously buried in darkness, became illuminated.

**Most Influential Teacher Anonymous**

**Topic: Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.**

She was the toughest; she was the best. She was also the most influential teacher I have ever had. Ms. William, my sixth grade teacher, was never one to settle for second-best. As a demanding teacher, she hadn’t always been popular. In fact, my classmates and I used to grumble frequently about her stringent standards. However, by continually challenging us, Ms. William instilled in us an enduring passion for learning.

I remember my first day in her class. While most teachers started the year with fun activities, Ms. William jumped straight into academics. After taking the attendance, she promptly started our first unit: Forces.

She narrated to us the story of Newton and the apple tree, and asked us why things always fell toward the Earth. She asked us many other questions – questions about natural phenomena that I had never thought about before. “Why do we see lightning before we hear thunder? How can we measure the speed of a falling object?” We learnt never to take things for granted. “Always, always, always question what you see. Do you understand why it happens?”

At first, I had a hard time understanding many of the concepts, and often stayed after class to learn more. Once, when I doubted that objects of different mass fell with the same acceleration, Ms. William and I conducted our own experiment with a pendulum to prove the theory. Throughout the year, whenever there was a concept or theory I did not understand, Ms. William would encourage me to research or carry out an experiment by myself. Under her guidance, I entered In doing so, she not only taught me to become inquisitive about the world, and also gave me the tools to explore it.

Another gift that Ms. William gave me was an appreciation of literature. Before I met her, I had always stubbornly rejected as true literature any book that was not written by Enid Blyton. To me, there was nothing that could be better than the adventures of the Famous Five. But as the list of Enid Blyton “To Read” books grew shorter, I started hunting around for other novels to entertain me. I decided to take a look at the Reading List Ms. William had compiled. I still remember picking up Oliver Twist from the library shelf and looking at it skeptically. Today, I’m glad I had listened to Ms. William, for she not only introduced me to the world of Oliver and Fagin, but also that of Huckleberry Finn, Uncle Tom, the BFG, Lucy, Edmund, Susan and Peter. I remember coming to school early one morning, hardly able to contain my excitement, to tell Ms. William that I had finally finished all the books on her Reading List. She smiled in her usual way, and promptly gave me a second List.

Although it’s been six years since I last saw Ms. William, her legacy lives on even today. Every time I read a particularly interesting book, I’d record it in my Reading List. My hope is to one day visit her, and to show her my new Reading Lists. I want her to know how much she has helped me to grow, and how much she has inspired me.

Canadian poet and essayist Irving Layton wrote in his essay The Role of the Teacher that “It is usually from a gifted teacher that a child catches his first glimpse of harmony or wisdom and gets his first hint of the intellectual adventure which may engage him for the rest of his life.”

Ms. William was that teacher for me.

**Understanding Myself, Just a Little Better Ipsita Basu**

**''Stereotyped beliefs have the power to become self-fulfilling prophesies for behavior.''Elizabeth Aries, Professor of Psychology, Amherst CollegeFrom her book Men and Women in Interaction, Reconsidering the Differences**

Shouting, tantrums, chiding, infuriation; I scuttled back into my room and slammed the door to defy my parents exhortations and advice. What followed was the sulking and tears, complete with the customary introspection. I fashioned the introspection to my own convenience with the use of platitudinal notions; I was a teenager whom they did not understand because of the generation gap. After wallowing in some more self pity and tears, the big bag of chips and songs hosting themes of ‘isolation’, ‘angst’ and ‘ignorance’ seemed necessary. In attempt to stop the self-generated profuse tears, I tried some motivational talk which ended in consolation that it was okay to cry since I was a girl.

It had been a while since I had faced this situation.

Or rather, created it. Not that the short-lived introspection had helped sufficiently, it was more the effect of long drawn rumination. This was such a generic scenario. Emotions were supposed to be so individual, so personal yet this may as well have been the story of every teenager. Why were we all so similar?

No we weren’t; We were impelled to act similarly, to direct our thoughts in a certain way. It is actually expected that we didn’t understand our parents and choose to seek distance from them. Our parents had never chosen to question our retaliation. The talk about generation gap, teenage angst and empathetic music had buzzed so prevalently in our heads that it had become a part of us.

Then what about the 17 year old farmer’s daughter in Vietnam whose mother discussed her innermost sentiments while tying her hair into braids every evening? The gap in generation exists over there as well but where are the displays of defiance and being ‘emo’ which has conventionally become accepted in liberal societies? They are non-existent because we have aggravated these behavior patterns. I wondered whether man had steeped so deeply in stereotypes that it eclipsed his own personality or independence in behavior.

After all, every one of my actions on that day seemed ascribable to a stereotype. My recourse to junk food - the notion of comfort food. The music and self-pity was a ramification of the thought that my parents always insisted on overlooking my wishes. And finally, being a girl who is often looked upon as emotional and docile somehow legitimized more tears.

So does that mean psychological studies should not be exposed neither should characteristics be discussed because the very study will transcend into a belief and make it true? No it should, because understanding the very cause of our behavior helps to eradicate undesirable characteristics that our extrinsic to our own personality. I know because now that I understand this, I am able to look at stereotypes more objectively and act in a way that isolates their effect from my behavior. After imbibing that thought process, I have become more rational, disciplined, individualistic and possess more control over my emotions.

On the flipside, some stereotypes actually benefit us, like the stereotype that one’s race is good at sports. In that case, by treating the stereotype objectively, one can ensure that there is a self-enforcing benefit. Essentially, understanding the causes of our behavior enables more control over our thoughts and actions.

**Disparity Through My Windows Ipsita Basu**

**2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.**

The colors through the window become inconsequential, only the forms and their faces significant. Through the window of my hometown Kolkata, India I see a half naked child running around on the street. His face depicts childish levity and frolic but the swell of his belly betrays the daily struggle facing him. It speaks of abject poverty, of a hand to mouth existence where life constitutes begging or odd jobs to satisfy one’s basic physiological necessities. In contrariety, when I observe children of the same age in Singapore, the city where I have lived for the past 15 years, I see the same naïve smile, cherishing moments spent on one of his three pairs of roller blades.

For me, this is one of the world’s biggest tragedies: unbearable starvation leads to death in one place and affluence necessitates the limitless squandering of money in another. In simple terms this is inequality, in economic terms, inequality of wealth and income distribution. The power of this term is in the fact that it highlights a multitude of underlying causes leading to this gap and the beauty of its solution is that it can be addressed at any level by absolutely anyone.

Inequality in income distribution is taking place due to a number of reasons. On a global scale, it is taking place because of preferential terms of trade and multi-national companies exploiting wage differentials due to which developing countries are not paid what the good or labour would be worth in a developed country. Within a country, the capital is in the hands of the rich and when they utilize it, the profits benefit only the rich, thus, never alleviating the poor from there deplorable condition. Illiteracy is one of the major causes of inequal income distribution because without education it is very difficult for people working in the primary sector or performing blue collar labour to improve their standard of living.

Inevitably, its solution would entail large scale governmental policies like progressive taxation and social benefits in addition to intervention by the WTO or IMF but every individual can play a part by simply donating small sums of money or uneaten food in their household to the soup kitchen. This situation manifests how every movement towards change starts from the grassroots level. Indeed, it is imperative that people understand this crisis and influence some redress because if an economic policies to encourage the same are implemented, they need to possess the support of the middle and affluent class.

When recently elected U.S. president Barack Obama spoke about wealth distribution in his presidential campaign, I stood up from my couch and applauded this sentiment. In fact, if the divide lessens, a lot of related factors will change. Crime rate and poverty levels will reduce, and health care for the lower class will improve.

Human rights have been integrated into the ideology of most countries as this is a basic pre-requisite for the development and advancement of the country. Using the same line of argument, do human rights not encompass the ‘right to life’ and ‘right to food’? The amalgamation between my cultural background and country of residence impels me to dwell on this problem and provide my contribution. When I volunteer at the Missionary of Charity Kolkata founded by Mother Teresa for a month every year, serving food and distributing clothes to the underprivileged gives me immense satisfaction.

I do not deny that there are a number of causes for unequal income distribution but they have to be eradicated, one at a time. One day, when I go back to my hometown or to any other neighborhood where there had been relative or absolute poverty, I do not want to see the ache in the eyes of the poor that I see now; I wish to see satisfaction, well-sustained satisfaction.

**An Imaginary Garden With Real Toads Anonymous**

**Choose one of the provided quotes and reflect on it. I chose the following quote: ''Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him.'' --Attributed to Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist and poet**

''Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him.''

--Attributed to Chinua Achebe, Nigerian novelist and poet

I’d like to beg to differ with Mr. Achebe. Art is not always man’s effort to create a different reality – or at least, it shouldn’t be. The best art isn’t an escape like a fairy tale or a beach novel. I think the best art makes us grapple with what we are – forcing us to come to terms with our imperfection as a species, as a nation, as an individual.

I can’t help but think of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, which exemplifies the kind of art I love best. Ellison’s novel, though written in a sort of surreal, experimental style to reflect the jazz music of the period, seeks to portray the black experience in pre-civil rights America with harsh realism. The unnamed narrator of the novel suffers from a kind of invisibility—society’s failure to recognize his humanity—for which the novel is named. He suffers extreme and grotesque violence at the hands of white authority figures. In a deeply disturbing scene, he and a group of other young black men are pitted against one another and forced to battle in a kind of cage fight for the entertainment of rich, white spectators. His namelessness is meant to symbolize his anonymity at the hands of his white oppressors, and at the same time the universality of his experience as a black man in America.

Ellison does not sugarcoat his novel with feel-good idealism. Ellison forces the contemporary reader to reflect on his own prejudices and injustices in his society – hopefully inspiring a positive change. This is what makes Ellison’s work so effective.

Likewise, artist Robert Rauschenberg challenges our assumptions about sex and private space in my favorite work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. His piece, Bed, is a well-worn quilt, pillow, and sheet splashed violently with paint of angry colors. The worn-in quilt suggests a much-loved, intimate, private space. But the paint, unnaturally and forcefully splattered, jolts us out of Rauchenberg’s serene homespace into a cold and unfamiliar place. To me, this stark juxtaposition suggests the scene of a rape—the ultimate violation of one’s privacy and tranquility. Rauschenberg forces us to grapple with sex and violence—a very real problem that still exists in America.

Books like Invisible Man and art like Rauschenberg’s “Bed” help us to reflect, as a society, on what we once were, what we are now, and what we will be. They’re created to help us remember, not forget. If we do forget and get lost in that dreamworld we create for ourselves to escape, we will never effect change in our imperfect world.

I much prefer this statement by Marianne Moore to Achebe’s quote: “Poetry is the art of creating imaginary gardens with real toads.” In other words, art does not craftily avoid the distasteful aspects of the human experience. In a beautiful way, it poses the problem to the viewer, the reader, or the listener. It’s our job to acknowledge that problem and effect a solution.

**The Storyteller Anne Mathews**

**A topic of your choice.**

I learned to write essays like prefabricated housing and sensible shoes—standardized, impeccable, identical. No flight of fancy dared disturb the military precision of my supporting arguments as they marched in brigades of four to five sentences, intent upon storming the fortress and seizing the A-plus as a trophy of war. Winning that war became so important that I forgot what drew me to books and poetry in the first place—not the letter grade, but the process of committing ideas to paper and the exhilaration of finally understanding.

The passion for storytelling that flourished through my younger years was battered by the onslaught of school and family responsibilities. It lay dormant until the night I read Jane Eyre for tenth grade English. Although my paper was due in two days, the book lay unopened on my desk, just another task on a seemingly endless list. I opened it expecting an indecipherable chain of subordinate clauses, but instead I found a heroine whose quiet grit and genuine self-respect made me want to know her. Her story absorbed me completely, transporting me the way that A Little Princess and Anne of Green Gables had in the time before all reading led to multiple-choice tests. It was like an old friend had come back to return something that I didn't remember losing.

Since then, I have reclaimed my identity as a reader, a writer, and a seeker. I’m the girl who loves history for its shadowy personages and bare-bones story lines ripe for retelling. After watching Elizabeth: The Golden Age one too many times, my best friend and I would exchange in-character letters as Elizabeth I and Mary, painting speculative pictures in intricate prose and sealing them with candle wax. Crossing over to contemporary fiction challenges me differently by forcing me to make familiar happenings new and engaging. No matter the genre, writing is important to me because it is both a source of escape and a source of insight. Although some of my work makes me cringe when I reread it, I keep writing because the little people who populate my imagination torment me if confined.

When I read, I take surreptitious glances between the lines, looking for the moments that go beyond being poignant and become profound. Although I'm apt to let details fly by me in my daily life, novels invite me to sit down and reflect. A good book goes beyond the surface and asks the tough questions, pushing me to explore the narrow side streets and secluded window seats of my own mind. When I use fiction as a tool to understand the world beyond myself, it becomes the tour guide who shares a local's perspective on a strange and exciting city. The best deal in the travel industry is hidden at the secondhand bookstore—enlightenment for ninety-five cents, no vaccinations required.

I am grateful to have rediscovered the joy in reading and writing for my own fulfillment. I may never be a Kafka or an Austen, but I'll remain a storyteller and a keen observer, always running off down roads less traveled in the pursuit of some glimmer of truth.

**The Balcony Anonymous**

**Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?**

This is the balcony that extends into infinite dimensions. Inside: paintings and the smell of dusk. Lined against the tiled walls are canvases both void and filled. A soft light overhead. There is something extremely calming about occupying this platform, transforming it into surreal dimensions. In the studio I am expanding both into my mind space and the concrete space of my artwork.

Very often, a friend would read my poetry, view my paintings, and ask:*what was your inspiration? What draws it all together?*

I am never really sure how to answer. To be honest, I have never found any conceptual disparity between visual art and the written form. My urge to create, or express, is like letting out a breath of air. And by creating art, I am able to crystallize that exhalation and preserve it forever. When I paint, language and brushstrokes coalesce into the same motive: to translate my cognitive abstractions into concrete expressions. To tentatively let you into my mind space, this is the trance-like state I fall into when creating: the sky is a stretch of watercolor spreading into little streams, telegraph poles streamlining my ideas into electric currents, reverberating into houses; electric wires gone loose. And beside the overarching landscape, materializes the side portrait of my mother. The silhouette of a slender arm, then the shoulder's precise curvature.

Some people say that art is cathartic. That statement is only half-true. In the very beginning, creating each artwork is like wrestling forever with an unknown contender who seems to come from the realm of artistic perfection. Even when my artwork is finally polished and displayed under the glowing light of art exhibitions, I am not lost in the applause. Interlaced with each brushstroke and each nuance of color is the memory of a self-limitation I've been able to conquer. Thus, out of all the artworks I've ever made, the ones I value the most are not necessarily the most aesthetically successful, but are the ones in which, like a war hero, I battled through to claim victory. In those rare, precious moments, when transfixed by the wild waltz of my imagination, I would feel as if I've reached the apex of divinity. Existing in between the initial concept and the unclaimed, unchartered space of the blank canvas, I've never stopped believing that a secret awaits--perhaps the truth to the wholeness of life, the interconnected beauty of the entire cosmos.

The balcony door opens: I step away from its light, covered in paint. But I do not hurry to wash the colors off my skin. Instead, I let these chaotic remnants of my arduous creations stay, because after hours upon hours inching towards an artistic ideal, my body becomes at one with these brushstrokes, and I am no longer alone.

**Music Anonymous**

**Topic of your choice.**

Another failed sports season passed: no hits, no touchdowns. I entered 6th grade with my dreams of becoming a jock squashed. Then my parents informed me that I was enrolling in band. Still clinging to my ESPN hopes, I warned my parents that taking band would be social suicide. In the end, I entered school with a new trumpet, expecting the worst.

Luckily, my prediction was wrong. Music transformed the way I understand myself and helped me understand the world.

As a teenage boy, I can naturally have a hard time expressing my emotions. Music helps me recognize my feelings and gives me an outlet for them. I remember the first time I played Holst’s “Planets Suite.” During the famous Jupiter ballad section, I felt a rush of indescribable vitality. I was initially intrigued by the mesmerizing strum of the harp, and then was lost in the powerful tone of the trumpet. I felt tension building and layers of depth adding up until the final release on a joyous open chord. I was surprised by my goosebumps and moist eyes. Music had released my bottled-up inspirations.

As I studied more, I came to value the connection between music and social change. Each is a tool that helps me better understand the other. For example, the 4th movement of Shostakovich’s “7th Symphony” starts with a mood of foreboding and fear, but suddenly transitions to a "happily ever after" ending. This shift was puzzling to me at first, but when I considered Shostakovich’s need to express the anguish and resilience of the Soviet people, combined with Stalin's strict monitoring of his music, I saw that the ending was fitting. Understanding history gives meaning to music, and understanding music makes history real for me.

Much as music has advanced from simple Gregorian chant to Mahler's complex, emotional compositions, I have evolved from a resistant student to a dedicated music aficionado. Music is for me a punching bag, a journal, and a teacher. Although I gave up my dreams of being a star athlete, I have gained a better reality as a musician.

**Filling the Gap James Min**

**“Stereotyped beliefs have the power to become self-fulfilling prophesies for behavior.”**

I stir fried the noodles, steamed the broccoli, pulled pie out of the oven, and set the table. My younger brother Roy put down the forks. We both sat down, and Roy took the first bite. He chewed for a few seconds, looked up at me, and gave me a thumbs up. I sighed in relief; this was the first time he had actually seemed to enjoy my food.

Believing at first that cooking was “unmanly,” I had resisted cooking of any kind for the longest time. So, when I finally had to cook, it had been horrendous at first. It was a bit of a vicious cycle, in fact: I never cooked, so I never made good food, so I never cooked. This belief that I had held for cooking could have kept me from ever cooking. My brother, instead of enjoying home-cooked meals, could have been on a steady diet of takeout Chinese food, microwaveable chicken wings, and never-rotting burgers. My harmful conception of “manliness” could have caused my younger brother a host of health problems in the future; in hindsight, my seemingly innocuous belief suddenly seemed malicious.

This little idea, planted in my head unconsciously, was something I had never interrogated. It became clear to me that I make a lot of assumptions that simply go unquestioned; these assumptions dictate what actions I ought to take. I was essentially a captive of beliefs that society had imprinted on me. Due to my recognition that many of my beliefs are actually not mine, but society’s, I have begun questioning the root of the norms I take for granted. It is difficult to root out which thoughts I have developed and which thoughts were the product of living in America, but I know one thing: I enjoy cooking. And I don’t care what society says.

# Redefining My Purpose Through Slam PoetryAnonymous

**Describe the world you come from; for example, your family, clubs, school, community, city, or town. How has that world shaped your dreams and aspirations?**

The stage lights burst open, blinding and white. I trembled. I was at the citywide poetry slam, Verselandia, about to perform in front of hundreds.

Earlier in the month, I had qualified through my high school’s contest, which I had signed up for because, “Hey, there might be free cookies!” (There were not.) At the time, I didn’t know much about spoken word artistry except from street performers (this was downtown Portland, after all). But I practiced in front of my mirror, my friends, and my faithful stuffed animals. Ultimately, I placed first at school.

At Verselandia, I watched others deliver lyrics about abuse, racism, and feminism. A few talked about their LGBTQ+ identities; one addressed bisexual erasure, which I could personally relate to. Slowly, I realized that writing didn’t serve just as a cathartic outlet; it could startle others into empathy and create awareness. When my turn came, I delivered lines like “Your heritage is more than an exotic enigma.” Afterwards, several of my Chinese-American classmates told me they could relate. I realized that my writing had the power to give these experiences visibility, which in turn might help erase damaging yet common preconceptions about my ethnicity.

As a Portland Youth Poet Ambassador, I have opportunities to not only promote creative writing, but also advocate for social equality. This is the narrative I live. Through poetry, I want to depict not only a narrative from a person of color, but also a narrative of a queer person of color--a perspective too often neglected the media, but too important for me ever to remain silent.

**What I Learned from Synchronized SwimmingAnonymous**

**Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

When I was ten months old, I grabbed onto the coffee table and hauled myself up, arms shaking, fists clenched, knees wobbling; ten minutes later, much to my parents’ dismay, I was sprinting around the house, choppy bangs flapping in the wind like sails. When I was 17 months old, my grandmother wondered how such a short and round child could invariably evade her grasp. And when I was three years old, I decided that my toddler brother would become my (somewhat limp) wrestling partner. It then dawned on my parents that I had both too much energy and a predisposition to trip over nothing, a dangerous combination under any circumstances. Apparently, I needed some way to expel my extra vigor while also not becoming a safety liability. And so, at the age of six, I joined my local synchronized swimming team.

The first few years in the sport were uncomfortable, as I seemed to have no rhythm or natural understanding of how to contort my body into any graceful positions. Were it not for my logic-defying natural buoyancy, I would have been even more of a safety hazard. I was shy and awkward, and I couldn’t seem to understand what I needed to convey to the judges. My lack of emotional connectivity was so rigid that my teammates had to resort to screaming the word “underwear” at me in an attempt to get me to smile. For years, my struggles against any show of vulnerability persisted both in and out of the pool, with teachers and coaches alike commenting “good work, but would love to see more engagement.”

In synchronized swimming, engagement with the audience is the heart of the sport. It represents the pursuit towards finally convincing others that no, my lungs are not on fire, no, I can’t feel the sixty-seven bobby pins stuck straight into my scalp, and yes, I’m perfectly fine, thank you very much. It is the art of displaying all the complexities of movement of any gymnast or dancer while also actively trying not to drown. Bit by bit, the intricacies of the sport started to break down this emotional wall I had built up. The sensation of music flowing around me, the feeling of cool water against my skin, the sight of my teammates’ faces, all helped me realize the full extent of my perseverance and emotion. Looking back on my years of training, I realize that the important things about synchronized swimming for me were not just the sport itself. It became the lens through which I now see the world, and the basis for my continued maturation.

Growing up with the sport as such an intrinsic part of my development, I learned to apply the lessons from each practice to my life outside the pool. My permanent bruises from getting kicked in the shins by my teammates cultivated my ability to work with others. Pushing myself to kick a little harder and reach a little farther on every lap taught me about the importance of determination. My desire to help others developed through mentoring the younger girls on the team, and later presented itself in my volunteering and community service work. Placing 11th at a competition that selected the top 10 girls for the U.S. National Team taught me how to handle failure, and how to turn a devastating situation into a poignant and educational one. The next year, hearing the lushness of the national anthem as we won gold for the U.S., I realized that my earlier heartbreak had actually motivated me to work harder towards my dreams. For me, synchronized swimming isn’t about the glittery swimsuits and dramatic makeup. It’s about the lifelong friendships formed, the resolution and drive that are enriched from each practice, and, when the going gets tough, the ability to grit your teeth and smile in the face of everything else.

**The Art of Translation Evelyn Wan**

**“Translation is the art of bridging cultures. It’s about interpreting the essence of a text, transporting its rhythms and becoming intimate with its meaning…Translation, however, doesn’t only occur across languages: mentally putting any idea into words is an act of translation; so is composing a symphony, doing business in the global market, understanding the roots of terrorism. No citizen, especially today, can exist in isolation – that is, untranslated.” Ilan Stavans, Professor of Latin American and Latino Culture, Amherst College, Robert Croll ’16 and Cedric Duquene ’15, from “Interpreting Terras Irradient,” Amherst Magazine, Spring 2015.**

Pools of gold and crimson flooded the front gates, masked by a heavily saturated mist, infused with the scent of crisp cinnamon apples and a warm underlying accent of rich gravy. We were still a week from Thanksgiving, but the vibrant, multi-colored bulbs that had begun to illuminate our neighborhood streets had already ushered in the first signs of holiday cheer. I approached the school building, eyes barely adjusted to the darkness. The sky was blanketed in hues of grey accompanied by the early chilly winds, in anticipation of Winter’s slumber.

It was Share the Harvest, a volunteer event designed to feed the hungry, give back to the community, and shed light on the positive of the world. Every year, my school would take part in this program, inviting organizations to educate and spread warmth, and help struggling families put food on the table. My club, Hands-In, was fortunate enough to join this effort and have the comfort of the school library to give away sustainable products, and stress the gravity of knowledge. We aimed to open their eyes to the impact that their individual understanding could bring and to their ability to shape the future.

I founded Hands-In as an outlet to raise awareness and create change. Be it through the hosting of an environmental convention, the integration of composting within my school, or even the simple act of giving away free gardening kits to the unfortunate; these interactions are what lead to breakthroughs and advancements. Like gardening, knowledge can be given and used to grow a forest, but not even a flower can grow if no one is willing to provide the world with any seeds. New discoveries are constantly being made, but these findings won’t make a difference if they fail to reach the rest of the world. As someone who was fortunate enough to attain knowledge, I have a responsibility to to uphold my role as a translator and supply as many seeds as I can. By giving others the tools to pave their own path, they can in turn spread their own seeds, providing others with what was once provided for them.

**Art 101 Anonymous**

**Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

For me the world can have a strangely retentive quality, in which certain places represent the nerve points of my past. When I think of my childhood, I think of the room where I took art lessons, where I first met my art teacher. I see a floral carpet thick with charcoal dust, every surface cluttered by plastic boxes of ancient paint. There is a rotating corkboard cocooned in student work. Nothing on it ever seemed to be removed. Once, I patiently peeled the drawings back, and uncovered a beautiful yellowed sketch of wrinkled denim jeans from 1987, tacked right against the cork. The sketch held a secret.

I could have been six or twelve or fifteen in that memory, so many were the years I spent there. In that place, the air edged with hypnotising turpentine, I always waited for my art teacher’s calm, dry hands to guide mine. She would deftly salvage old castles, traceries of leaves, and subtle hues of skin from my own crude renditions. Ms. Zhuang, my childhood idol, wore a cardigan, tortoiseshell glasses. For Christmas one year, she bought me a 48 set of Derwent colour pencils that I wore to nubs. Once I saw her stumble out of the art room to cry quietly on the phone, for a reason I never found out. I loved her. I hated prawns. But when she gave me cold and rubbery prawn dumplings I ate them unflinchingly, with a stoicism my mother later commended on the car ride home. When I was seven, I told Ms. Zhuang I wanted to be a teacher – just like her. She had smiled for my sake. By the time I understood what that smile really meant, I was sixteen and I had been nursing small dreams – debating, poetry, literature, and politics. These held me in a constant spine-tingling euphoria of adrenaline and belief. My biggest dream, though, was America. I pored over university websites with the moony self- consciousness of a girl with a crush, the seriousness of a girl in love.

I understood why Ms. Zhuang wanted me to study medicine in Melbourne. She understood why I didn’t. She had chosen the art room, but it had a mortgage. She had chosen Australia, but it was thousands of kilometres from her family. I babbled desperately, working for any kind of encouragement from her, my voice slowly, ineffectually trickling to a silence. When she finally spoke, she was gentle. “Look,” she said. “Look how much I’ve lost by trying to follow my dreams. I wanted to be a great artist, now I teach art to children! Don’t you know you will fail? Don't try to go to America.” I felt raw with hurt. If she echoed my most deeply-held doubts, was it the truth? She thought I was not good enough. She thought she was not good enough. I was more heartbroken by the latter. Though she considered herself a failure, I could never think of her that way. What was greatness? She was my soul’s pivot – she had led me by the hand to Matisse, Picasso, and Velazquez.

If someone can inspire that kind of joy and devotion, that is enough, no matter what happens. The sketch I had discovered that day was my teacher’s drawing, from 1987, before her art room and her dream had become cluttered with children. The truth is that I still am afraid of failure, of rejection. But beyond that, I know that I cannot live a life in which I look back, and wonder on what could have been. Nothing is absolute. Why should I fear disappointment? The drawing was exquisite, buried as it was. In all our years together, Ms. Zhuang taught me something: when given the gift of inspiration, one can swallow their fears, just like prawn dumplings.

**Finding Christmas Anonymous**

**Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

I woke up at six that morning. My mom had left an hour earlier to work her two full-time jobs. It was a routine weekend; surrounding me was our ramshackle apartment decorated with sparse furniture, a Hindu temple in the corner, and a telephone I used to call my mom with when I was afraid. This day, however, was different. This was the day: Christmas.

My mom and I arrived in the United States as refugees from Nepal. We moved across the country until we finally found a home in Colorado. It was amidst the frigid air and festive decorations that Christmas became an enchanted time for me.

I didn’t know what Christmas entailed; I listened only to the parts I wanted to hear, and those parts were dominated by the word “presents.” While my elementary school peers brought homemade cuisine to lunch, wore luxurious light-up shoes, and engaged in an assortment of lavish activities, I led a life of free cafeteria meals, hand-me-downs, and the company of mundane apartment walls. To me, “presents” signified more than gifts. Santa’s presents offered me a way to leave my rigid, unstable home life behind for one day and finally feel like a carefree child.

Three months before celebrating my first real Christmas, I found a magnificent three foot tall, worn, plastic tree by our apartment trash bins. I carried it home, washed it off, and showed my skeptical mother. It was our tree, my tree. My incredibly unsanitary, bona fide Christmas miracle. On December 24th, 2004 I plugged in my Christmas tree, laid out dollar-store cookies, and went to sleep filled with anticipation.

6:00am, December 25th, 2004. I ran out of bed and raced to the tree. The cookies were still intact . . . maybe Santa was on a diet? I turned the corner and stared underneath my tree. Empty.

Confused, I looked around. As the tears gathered in my eyes, I called my mom.“Nanu?” she said.I broke down. Through sobs I explained the events of the morning. Silence ensued.“Mamu?”Her voice cracked. Speaking through tears, she explained what no seven-year-old wants to hear: Santa is not real. “Nanu, it’s different for us…”My mom started apologizing to me. Our conversation stretched beyond the nonexistence of Santa; it was an unspoken talk about the struggle we faced to simply survive, about all that we didn’t have, and never would. My mom’s voice radiated hurt, for she knew she could not give me my dreamed storybook childhood. I had no choice but to face the truth and learn to cope, for Santa did not exist.

That night, my mom came home with a cake decorated with a Santa figurine and frosted holiday decorations. It wasn’t my illusioned fantasy, but it was enough.

While my childhood lacked immediate gratification or childish magic, it was supplied with the notion that working hard would eventually payoff. My background is my backbone; it molded who I am today. I learned to find ways around barriers; I grew up knowing that wasting opportunities would render my struggles insignificant. I coped with my harsh surroundings by developing a sarcastic, humorous personality. I valued every moment I experienced. My successes arose from the failures I combat, for my failures have shaped my identity to adapt to any obstacle I may face in the future.

When I think of what lies ahead, I get the same butterflies I got when I thought about Christmas. My childhood was filled with uncertainty and disappointment, but it was also marked by resilience, hope, and an unequivocal excitement about the future. One day, I will create my own Christmas, and keep the idea of Santa alive for as long as I can. As I cross the threshold to adulthood, I know that while Santa may not exist, my real life North Pole is out there, waiting to be discovered.

**Student Newspaper in Every Middle School Anonymous**

**Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.**

It was already 6 PM, and I walked across the classroom, wary of the many fingers tapping away at their keyboards, their mouse clicks, their resizing and editing articles, photos, and captions. It was the day before the newspaper production deadline, and my team of middle schoolers had worked tirelessly on their articles and layouts. Just before we hit send, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of pride. Student Newspaper in Every Middle School project began as an impossible dream. The ubiquity of fake news is undermining our democracy and our First Amendment right. I believe that my project can undermine the spread of fake news by educating young students to become better consumers of news.

Determined, I began my journey to achieve my dream. I was naive to think that merely sending “email presentation” to local middle school principals will be sufficient to convince them to start a newspaper with me. I was dead wrong. Out of 43 emails sent, I received exactly "0" interest. Out of desperation, I started calling schools one by one. Another valuable lesson learned - principals don’t answer phone calls. Six schools picked up my call, but only Principal Lauer of Young Oak Kim Academy (YOKA), a Los Angeles Unified School District middle school, called me back. I implored the reluctant Principal for a chance to explain my plan, and was elated when he agreed to meet me. It was my only shot.

I felt like a person on a hopeless mission when I first walked the halls of YOKA. “What am I doing here? I don’t have to do this,” I kept mumbling to myself. A receptionist told me to wait as he had a meeting. Some twenty agonizing minutes passed before smiling Principal Lauer walked out to greet me. Remarkably, he read my presentation and told me that he had been trying to the same thing. Just like that, I became an advisor to YOKA’s student newspaper. School bureaucracy quickly dampened my short-lived elation. As a minor, I couldn’t advise students on my own. So, the school had to assign a teacher. But, no one wanted the extra work, so I had to go around and convince teachers of the project’s merits one by one. I was overjoyed in tears when Ms. Ramos agreed to co-advise. Problems never ended. I envisioned 30+ Energizer Bunnies to welcome me to first class. Instead, I got two bored students, wondering aloud "why they had to be there?" I was demoralized. But, I had expended too much effort and convinced too many people to quit. All dreams start small and humble, and I had to accept the fact that my dream was no exception. I learned another undeniable truth - that getting an “idea” turned out to be the easiest step.

In comparison, executing that “idea” was excruciatingly more difficult. Convincing conflicted individuals to work for a common goal was impossibly challenging. I needed to be resilient, but I was always prepared to fail as well. I stumbled on to a “tipping point.” I told my staff that the feature article’s “star” will be them. The new “celebrity” status was enticing enough to get them enthusiastic. I took the cue from their metamorphosis and started promising “stardom” to other students. Encouraging narcissism through flattery worked as seven more students enthusiastically joined. Our goal was simple, “tell accurate stories about students, the ‘stars’ of our paper.” The “YOKA Times” was successfully launched last year and I am proud to be working with two more schools this year. It was 6:30 PM, and we finally finished our first issue.

“High five everyone! We did it,” my students and I were overjoyed. I held the “YOKA Times” in my hands, smiling at the team who worked so hard to make this happen.

**Distortion Runze Liu**

**Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?**

I was shocked by the sound of my own voice.

Having recorded myself, I excitedly pressed play, expecting to validate an acoustic theory I had just read about in physics textbook. As sound travels faster through bone than air, I expected a difference, and I was ready to identify any tiny change.

Sound flew from the recorder. Was this how others heard my voice? The sound was different: higher, tinnier, childish, and foreign.

Stumped and panicked, I felt like a magician had stolen my real voice, and inserted someone else’s. If voice was one example of my self-perception, what about appearance? Or speech? Or endeavors? Was the image in others’ eyes as distinctively different as the sound of my voice in others’ ears?

"I didn’t think you’d like electronic music,” said one of my roommates, as she looked through my playlists. I tried to understand her surprise. Due to my ten years of training in classical piano, I didn’t seem like someone who would enjoy this “unpalatable” music genre. Nevertheless, I listen to dubstep and trap in my spare time. To me, electronic music, with its timbral complexity, embodies the sound of the future and infinite variations. Through synthesis and tweaks, the combination of timbres and beats perfectly capture any mood or ambience.

Although I love the infinities of Bach’s Goldberg variations, it would be fair to say that electronic music brings out more in me. My roommate did a double-take when I told her that these loops aren’t just for leisure, but for learning material and inspiration as I try to become an electronic music composer. Taking online courses, experimenting with MIDI and DAW, co-hosting an online music community for over 700 amateurs and professionals across the country, my love for electronic music, though largely remaining unnoticed by many, is unwavering and unflinching.

“How can I be as fierce as you are in crossfire? “, asked one debate club junior months ago. I smiled, wondering how I had contributed to this misunderstanding. During my first few debates, I did fake aggression. I spoke as loud as I could, prepared suffocating questions. But as I accumulated experience, I realized that debate had made me more accommodating to all opinions. Reason, not volume, is what matters. I learned to think for my opponents, addressing key issues which they failed to articulate. I learned that the majority of disagreements are rooted in different definitions, and that progress can only be made through agreements. I appreciated that junior’s perception of me, as it helped me reflect on my growth.

If these chasms between how I view myself and how others view me arise from my unknown efforts and personal growth, I can’t understand another frequent comment: “You’re not very girly.” I know they really mean it academically, as there is a “proper” way for girls to behave everywhere, including academics. Thanks to this, many girls at my school have stopped pursuing STEM. Women researchers and scientists are outliers—at the conference where I presented last summer; there were only four females out of thirty presenters, not atypical of today’s academia. To help combat this, I plan to invite alumna to share their STEM stories and hold weekly workshops. This campaign will be my concern in the years ahead.

Voices contain messages that can be misunderstood by the listeners, and it is the misunderstood ones, the “distorted ones,” which have urged me to reflect on my endeavors thus far. But if I was getting it right and my memory didn’t fail me, what I heard in that recording at ten years old was a quote from a book I had grabbed. “What would you do if you weren’t afraid?” The ten-year-old back then was immersed in a tremendous moment which started a journey of inquiry. Reaching out to figure out who I really am, embracing all answers, but staying critical, with courage and perseverance.

**My Corner of the World James Muimi Kiura**

**why do you accepted the college admission offer**

From my upbringing in Northern Ireland, a small corner of the world, I’ve learnt that it’s possible to catch pneumonia and get sunburnt in the course of one afternoon, so I always over pack. So too have I discovered that “I’ll pop the kettle on” is a sufficient emotional response when confronted with most situations.

Northern Ireland has had, as most know, a troubled history – so troubled, we simply call it ‘The Troubles’. During this time, individually and collectively as a nation, we suffered. It was assumed that no lasting solution would ever be found and most gave up trying, with stalled talks becoming a perennial disappointment. Yet a renewed, focused and determined effort was made by the British, Irish and American Governments to bring about peace, which was finally achieved through the Good Friday Agreement. It was signed in 1997, a few months after my birth.

My generation is the first generation of peace – it’s all we’ve known, and thankfully ‘The Troubles’ for us is merely a scarring reminder of what came before. We have so much to thank the tireless efforts of diplomats for, for without their commitment the change witnessed in the 18 years subsequent would be unimaginable. Twenty years ago, who could have foreseen Martin McGuiness paying tribute to the late Ian Paisley as “a friend?” While there are still sizeable problems in our political system, the distance we’ve come shows the good that diplomacy, politics, compromise and a will to succeed can do – and it is this, more than anything else, which has shaped the path I want to follow at College and my career beyond.

There are so many places in the world in a similarly bad or worse condition that are consigned to the ‘Can’t Help Box’ – a damning view of our pessimism about the capacity for change. I’ve grown up seeing the work it takes to heal places scarred by division and violence, but can personally attest that it’s worth it. With that in mind, as I came to realize what it took for where I live to achieve peace it taught me always to persevere – that if people tell you something is “unachievable” it is only so by the standards they set for themselves, so I always tried to work harder and aim higher than everyone else. I don’t want to be bound by what others determine to be “too difficult.” So I’ve thrown myself in. I’ve worked with MLAs and MPs on education reform, got involved with organizations and campaigns like the UK Youth Parliament that encourage activism and social progress, even founding my own to try and engage other young people in issues affecting them. My determination to do all of this, and my optimism that change can be brought about, is fuelled by my background in Northern Ireland. Life here has also taught me to value of friendship and cooperation.

For years, the metaphorical and physical walls placed between Protestants and Catholics hindered understanding, friendship, and community. It is only when we understand each other that we can begin to overcome our problems together. I was blessed to grow up with the influence of my Granny, who always pushed me to meet people from “the other side”, and I am proud to have been part of so many projects that promote the importance of tolerance, understanding and friendship across historic divisions. It may seem foolish to be proud of a background in a place infamous for bomb scares and paramilitary violence, but I am. My experiences here have shown me what’s important in life: determination, resilience, optimism, passion and having “a bit of ‘craic” (a uniquely Northern Irish type of fun). I wouldn’t change my background for the world.

**Intergenerational Trauma in our Narrative Lives Mikayah Monique Parsons**

**Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

*I’m going to talk to you about my experience being mute.* I erased the line, feeling immense anger as I toiled over the right way to tell my story without sounding fraudulent or, worse, inept. The task should have been a simple one, talking about some life-altering event, but I found myself floundering, suddenly incapable of a task so seemingly blatant. You would think the loss of voice would constitute a story worth telling. The more I wrote, however, the less sincere I felt.

I tried again. *I’m going to talk to you about my experience being mute.* I threw my pencil at the wall, proceeded to blush profusely with embarrassment, apologized to the pencil, and tried again. *I’m going to–.*

I groaned into my pillow, pulling my journal from beneath and flipping through the pages to find some form of inspiration. Creative writing evoked in me a sense of comfort and security to turn to in times of need. I was able to assume the name of someone other than myself while still taking on my own identity.

I laughed as I coursed through page after page of word vomit and stream-of-consciousness thoughts. The reason I had gone mute in the first place was my fear of my own mind. My community had always been astoundingly supportive of me and my endeavors, but there was a certain taboo around being black and smart in my home. I remember being made fun of for the way that I talked, for listening to “white” music, and, the one I found most jarring of all, for struggling with mental health. As I recalled these things, my mother's expression appeared to me in my mind, disappointment as fresh in my memory as it had been in that moment. Losing my mother was a traumatizing experience, one made more horrifying as I realized the detachment had been her choice.

Choice. That’s what it all came down to. She felt as though I wanted to leave because she wasn’t enough. I didn’t explain to her how, when left to my thoughts, my mind became a place that terrified me. It's easy to hide from the monsters under your bed by going to sleep. Anxiety haunts you even in your nightmares.

It may even be strong enough to strip you of your voice.

I returned my thoughts to the piece of paper in front of me. *Being mute was not as harsh an experience as it may seem. It was a period of self-reflection. While being mute, I discovered the place I felt most at home: the piles of books stacked on my desk--many for school, many for leisure. It was in the English language and the function of words and what they could create. My mind became increasingly obsessed with stories and their structure.*

I tapped my chin in thought. *That would do.*

*To the little girl reading this, with your brown skin and "white girl talk," do not be afraid of that which challenges you. Take every challenge in stride with the knowledge that you will pull through. Let everything you go through be a testament to your strength and the lengths at which your mind can venture. We choose which thoughts we give power to; sometimes the power just gets misplaced. Don’t let that discourage you. When we finally get past whatever we once failed to see through, we see our minds become beautiful things built for beautiful experiences. This applies to you, too.*

I bit my lip, staring at the various college paraphernalia on my wall.

*Yes, that would do.*