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**Sample essays 2023**

**Columbia University**

**I Write David Sauvage**

**Please tell us something about yourself (approx. 500 words).**

Like I said, I'm inept. I don't tie my shoelaces. I don't understand seat belts. I can't change tires. I can't cook or fish or dance or sing or act or lie. I don't see how a plane can stay in the air or how it can land. I don't know how to paint or sculpt, and I can't take pictures unless the camera beeps. I'm about as practical as a socialist and as self-absorbed as, well, a writer.

I am a writer.

That means I sit alone for hours on end, eyes bloodshot with red coffee stains. It means I run my hand through my hair intellectually, fawning over the character I've just created. Pretty soon, there's sweat on my forehead (brow, if you prefer) and then on my fingers, then the keys. I rub my hands against my shorts. I push the chair back. I clap. I whisper an obscenity because I know I can get away with it. My eyes close. I think. I realize that the story must turn a certain way. Or I understand that the word "antisocial" is clearer than "misanthropic." I see something I hadn't seen before. My fingers twitch, and then it's there in front of me.I've written a story about a character who feels the need to bite his own thumb. I feel so enthusiastic about this awkward fiction that I needlessly decided to put the word "bite" in italics. Another character I own taps his spoon against a glass. I tried to have the rhythm of the story match the subtle tapping of a spoon against a glass. The character has to be able to breathe in his surroundings. He lives there, of course.

The "catch" to working with my own character creations is that the more fascinated I become with these imaginary people, the more indignant I can become towards real people. I can fall into the repetitive trap of feeling as if I could have created this teacher or that friend. As a result, I have heard people describe me as discourteous, ungrateful, and, condescending. When I make an attempt to change behaviors, it can often seem superficial, and I alienate people who matter to me.

But, when I find myself quiet and listening, nodding or shaking my head in agreement or in anger, when I find myself across a table from somebody who speaks authoritatively but openly, when I find myself at best challenged and at worst intimidated by a character who actually exists outside of my head, then the condescension, the rudeness, the writer's ego, disappear, and I become fascinated. I try to remember everything said, and everything I thought of at the time. I want to take the person home and describe him or her until I run out of ink. "Antisocial" truly is a better word than "misanthropic."

The characters in my writings are real to me also. I know them well. They stomp around in my head until I express them, and then they linger still. It is this lingering that convinces me over and over again that I am a writer. It is my love of the charactersand who they representthat convinces me that I could one day be an excellent writer.

**Waitlist Letter David Sauvage**

**Given that you are on the waitlist, why do you feel you should be granted admission? (As asked by my college counselor)**

Columbia is still my absolute, number one, pick-of-them-all college. I intend to hold my ground here on the wait-list. If a spot does indeed open up for me, I will immediately enroll.

Columbia matches me better than any other college. I alluded to three reasons for that on my application: the core curriculum, the creative writing program, and New York.

The core curriculum for me is about background. I'm set on being a writerif only an opinionated starving novelistand for that I need focus. I need to understand the history of Literature before I can claw my way in. I need to understand Literature in the context of Art, as a historical and philosophical concept, before I can build on that concept. And I need to be around peers who feel the same way.

Of course, all the while, I will continue writing. I'll be getting better and better, as the rule "Write what you know" encompasses more and more. It will be a painful but exciting process of sharpening and deleting, retreating and reforming, shaping and attacking. I badly want teachers who understand that process; in my experience, only the very best do.

Friends of mine and fans of Columbia often say that the academics alonethe core, the writing program, the language department, even the librarywould be intellectually fulfilling enough to draw me to the Everglades, if necessary. But I believe that the academics are in fact inextricably linked to New York, that the great books of the core curriculum were not written simply to be studied in the most obvious sense, but written to be tested. As you journey deeper back toward the roots of Western Civilization, toward the birth of Logic and Concept and Science and Art, you should journey outward to see its result, and to compare. What is literature if not a comparison, an analogy? Where is there a better place to make a comparison to, if not New York?

But it isn't the theater, the museums, or the coffee shops that draw me to Columbia. Nor is it merely the outstanding creative writing program and what I consider to be the best system of education in the countrythe core curriculum. What makes me care this much, what made me skip through all the packages that afternoon to open the letter you sent, what makes me harass my compassionate college counselor more than she would probably like, is the way all these elements come so nicely together, the way I feel as if each part of me will have its expression in New York, and inside the classrooms, and on the steps of the library, where I sat last November, colder than I can remember, knowing how much it mattered, knowing that Columbia was where I wanted to be. I still feel exactly that way.

Thank you so much for taking the time to consider my application and this overly long letter.

**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.

**The Evolving Passion Cindy Hong**

**Topic of your choice.**

The sweat trickling down my neck felt like the stickiness of a dinosaur's breath. My muscles tightened as author Michael Crichton revealed the extent of scientific advancement in today's world. The pages of Jurassic Park turned quickly in my hands. A young reader, I had picked up this book at age thirteen, expecting to be regaled by wildly imagined dinosaur tales. Instead,Jurassic Park offered a revelation on the biology of life with chapters on DNA, cloning, and the making of dinosaurs.

Life became more comprehensible in my thirteen-year-old mind. From Jurassic Park, I learned that each organism consists of genes entwined in strands of material called DNA. At a time when Dolly the Sheep was old news and genetically-engineered salmon were cost-effective, I knew that humans were becoming closer to understanding life on a molecular level. We nearly had all the How's -- the mechanics -- of life answered. But the Why's were still missing. Why does life exist as it is?

In search of the answers to this question, I took the biology courses offered at my middle school. However, every time a class embarked on the genetics unit, I found myself staring at the same image of Watson and Crick and their DNA model. It wasn't until high school when I met a teacher who was willing to grapple with the question of why life is how it is on planet earth. My teacher introduced me to the field of evolutionary biology and its experts, Richard Dawkins, Ernst Mayr, and above all, Charles Darwin. Perusing their texts late into many of my high school nights, I learned that the science of evolutionary biology had not yet been perfected.

It was easy for me to decide to study punctuated equilibrium, the idea that evolution occurs in short spurts of change, for my final paper in AP Biology junior year. Though I knew that the debate between those who believe that evolution occurs gradually and those who believe that change follows a pattern known as "punctuated equilibrium" was not ending in the near future, I was convinced that I would find a right answer after performing extensive research.

My extreme optimism soon gave way to realism. After months of reading works by different biologists, sifting through their elaborate metaphors to decipher the writers' true meanings, I came to the conclusion that there is no right answer. The best explanation may be that evolution occurs at a gradual pace with 10,000 year "spurts" of change, consisting of gradual change. Even so, I finished my paper with a sense of satisfaction. Like life itself, the evolution of organisms is complex and cannot be explained by one idea alone. Until now, I had neglected the biologists' main point: the search for explanation is a journey of compromises that ultimately leads to a greater understanding. The study of evolution is about life but also reflects life. Like my search to uncover the roots of life, both can be frustrating, leaving many questions unanswered; yet they are nevertheless rewarding and offer hope.

**Yeye Anonymous**

**Who has influenced you the most?**

Waking from calm dreamless sleep, I find intricately patterned welts on my skin, embedded by the woven bamboo mattress, the only reminders of the night. I descend from the bed and frown as my feet reach the cold and damp dirt floor. It rained early in the morning, silent, without warning, a commonly decided upon secret among the capricious gods. Curling up my toes, I toddle across the room to a wooden dresser, its top reaching slightly above my head. He stands there, immersed in brushing his teeth, as I watch, silently and barely noticed from below. He glances down quickly, without moving his head, makes his decision, and spits into the porcelain washing-bowl.

I would go to school with him today. I bite on my lower lip to hide a smile. Dressing quickly, I run outside and leap over a group of scattered brown and white chickens in the yard. I pick a small, immature tomato from the garden and begin to eat it as I wait by his bicycle. We journey down the only paved road of Majia Village. Unfastened on the back of his bicycle, I cling to his shirt and hold my legs out so that they stay free of the spokes. We turn into the school courtyard and he places the bicycle against a wall. Upon entering his classroom, rows and rows of students stand from their seats, turn toward the door and, in unison, salute their teacher, my grandfather.

When the Communists emerged in China, they failed to completely destroy the old order. My grandfather remained the domineering patriarch, unquestioned and proud. A cursing, self-righteous, incessant drinker, his family relations were shaky at best. I was born a girl in a new one-child society where, despite all talk of progress, boys were preferred. My grandfather demanded I be sent to the countryside where I would not have to officially exist. My mother refused and alone named me and registered me in my birth town of Shuangyashan by Siberian Russia. In 1988, my parents immigrated to America and I was to follow. The year before I left, I stayed with my grandfather, yeye, and my grandmother, nainai, in the little farming village that bears my name.

"Sit there," he points to a chair in the corner.

I walk proudly and slowly across the room and alight upon my appointed throne. I am after all the daughter of college-educated parents living in the mysterious and magnificent land of America, for which I will soon depart. I tell this self-servingly to a girl in the class, adding, "They have yellow hair in America. My hair, too, will become yellow." My intention was to invoke jealousy, which I assume identical to exaltation.

Yeye looks up from his desk and hears my grandiose speech, pulls me out of the room and slaps me on the cheek. "You are nothing," his harsh voice reverberates off the walls, "until you make yourself something." I am bewildered and angry and stare back fiercely, as he continues: "The moment you think yourself superior, they have already become one thousand times better." I look down at the ground. His features soften, his voice, subdued: "I am a poor farmer, and perhaps will never be greater. You can have everything. If the whole world disappears, that will be the only thing that matters to me."

At that moment, my grandfather, Ma Zhijiang, unyielding sovereign of the family, imperial descendant, survivor of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, dignified village elder, forsook all his pride and admitted to a four year old that he was less than what he'd hoped for. And all of this to tell her that his sole wish was for her to live well and humbly. In spite of yeye's temper, his preference for boys, the unchangeable things rooted in his nature and customs, I forgive him for what he told me that day.

**A Photo Shoot Anonymous**

**Write an essay about an influential person in your life.**

She's untouchable. Unless she gets really upset; that's when tears well up in her eyes. She was born with big eyes. People say that I have big eyes...until they meet her and then they stop saying it to me and start saying it to her. We used to have the same color hair, the same texture, the same type. Then she dyed hers. First it was black then red then purple. It's back to black with something called a "peek-a-boo patch" which I think is platinum blonde; I haven't seen her for a couple weeks so I can't be sure. She's always changing but she's still the same.

When she came home over winter break of course she brought her camera. The routine starts as she grabs mascara and sloppily puts it on me, messes up my hair and keeps it in place with hidden barrettes or bobby pins, then places tons of bright red blush on my cheeks. "It's too much!" I protest. "It's black and white film, it will hardly show up", she replies.

She tosses me my black dress, the one I wore to the semi-formal last year and I slip into it. The curtains are opened; whatever is on the windowsill is tossed on the carpet; the comforter on my bed is thrown on the floor along with the two pillows. The clicking begins. I stand, I sit, I tilt my head. "Tell me a story," she says. And so I begin. But what comes out of my mouth hardly matters at all; what matters is how it looks on camera.

Within fifteen minutes she's completed the thirty-six exposure roll of film that was loaded into the camera she got for her high school graduation. She leaves the room that I'm left to clean up. By the time the film stops automatically rewinding she's already downstairs. I go into the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. I look like a mess, someone who would definitely get some attention out in public. I wash my face and return to my sweatpants and t-shirt, hanging the dress up in my closet.

Sometimes I'll take some pictures of her, but they never come out as good as the ones she takes of me. She's a photography major in college; I'm just a high school art student. But I can't help the competition. She pushes me to strive to be something better. A better photographer, a better artist, a better person. Once she's gone I'll look through her photos from high school or her freshman year in college. I'll glance at the more than 3,000 digital pictures she has stored on our computer. The composition of each picture is perfect, the lighting is faultless. Her pictures reflect her natural talent, they appear to be effortless. I manually load the film into my grandfather's old camera. This time, I'm the photographer. But I always return to her pictures; I have a couple in mind as I set up the next shot.

She's my favorite teacher, my biggest inspiration. It's because of her that I have grown and developed not only as an artist but also as a person. My passion for photography branched off of hers. She has taught me how to see the world in a totally different way, whether it be through the lens of a camera or not. In a couple weeks maybe she'll send me a bad test strip or a messed up contact sheet of the pictures she took in the form of a post card. On the back she'll write something with a thick black sharpie, maybe one of our inside jokes. I'll turn it over to the front, not really recognizing the person in the pictures. I become what she makes me. But I'm happy to do it. After all, she is my sister.

**That Moment Anonymous**

**Write an essay which conveys to the reader a sense of who you are. Possible topics may include, but are not limited to, experiences which have shaped your life, the circumstances of your upbringing, your most meaningful intellectual achievement, the way you see the world-the people in it, events great and small, everyday life-or any personal theme which appeals to your imagination. Please remember that we are concerned not only with the substance of your prose but with your writing style as well. We prefer that you limit yourself to the space provided.**

There were only 10 minutes left until the big final. Time had stopped for me. I felt like entering into a totally different dimension. People were talking to me but I couldn't hear them, I scarcely sensed their material presence. I was starting to experience vibes that were gradually taking control of my body. Although I was familiar with these sensations, this time they were more intense, and I liked the feeling.

Somehow a sentence from my coach managed to pass this invisible barricade and reached my mind and in the most subtle way gave me the final boost: "You are the best."

The race began. I was so strong and I won, I won. I was national champion for the first time and it took me only 10 seconds to prove it.

People were cheering and calling my name. I was so happy that I couldn't do anything, I just stayed motionless and in that moment millions of thoughts crossed my mind. The feeling is just unbelievable and so hard to express in words, maybe impossible. Then I turned my eyes to the sky and thanked the divinity. After that I felt so peaceful and really started to express my elation.

This experience completely changed my life and also my future. I understood then how much I love running and equally how much I love winning. I realized that I am a winner and also that hard-work, perseverance and the desire to succeed are paying off in the most delightful way.

**An Unforgettable Summer Amit Momaya**

**Write about a memorable/significant experience.**

What came first, science or technology?" asked a tall and husky figure, who was dressed in an unbuttoned and rather threadbare lab coat. My initial response was science because I reasoned that technology was the application of science. An articulated voice from the back of the room, however, soon refuted this idea and devised a cogent argument in favor of technology. The professor then formulated a rebuttal to both of these perspectives, and eventually succeeded in placing everyone in a state of quandary. This discussion signaled the advent of the myriad thought-provoking and challenging issues and applications that would arise during the summer I spent at the Georgia Governor's Honors Program.

Competition for admission into the program was fierce, even fiercer once in the program. Competition of the latter, however, did not exist with one another as it had during the selection process but rather within one's self. The program held a weekly competition for the science majors in which the professors would present seemingly impossible tasks to be completed within a few hours. On the first few competitions, which included constructing a rubber band powered car out of a few sundry items, I did not fare very well and felt vexed by the restrictions. However, one of my friends helped me learn new ways of tackling problems. He helped me realize that not all materials need to be used. He helped me see that the most obvious idea will not always be the most successful. He helped me start planning before acting. In effect, he helped me crawl out of my suffocating, conventional shell and change my way of thinking.

The final competition proved to stretch my mind to its greatest capacity. We were assigned the task of building a boat concocted from some cardboard, two garbage bags, and a roll of duck tape. At first thought, this project did not seem challenging at all, that is, until I discovered that two students would have to sit inside the boat and race across the swimming pool. This competition drew together many of the skills I had acquired during that summer, one of them being teamwork, something I had not learned the true meaning of until that summer. At school, "teamwork" would simply imply breaking the assignment into fragmentary pieces and assigning them to each member of the group. The activities at the program, however, soon expunged that fallacy and showed me that true teamwork requires the collaboration and unification of simultaneous ideas. Each team member would contribute his or her thoughts to every element of the boat. Resourcefulness was another determining factor in this last competition, as only one roll of duck tape would be provided and simply a few hours to build. Everything would need to be planned out meticulously beforehand because, once started, new materials could not be used if construction was botched. Other factors such as creativity, motivation, concentration, and ingenuity, when mixed in the right proportions, would produce a peerless boat, which is exactly what my team accomplished.

Not only did I learn from other students, but also from the astute professors. They were some of the best in their profession, with a true passion for teaching and understanding each student's strengths and weaknesses. Personally, I learned to desist accepting formulas and theorems at face value. The professors supplied us with the facts, and we were the ones to go out and research the concepts and proofs behind them. These skills have surfaced rather quickly, such as on the second day of AP BC Calculus, when the teacher asked us to memorize a formula. I, however, first asked for the proof. The other students groaned upon hearing this, but I grinned, knowing that eight months from now, they were the ones who would be cramming this seemingly senseless formula into their head before the AP exam.

I could fill an immense number of pages continuing to delineate what I learned that summer, but, if there was one thing to sum up everything, it would be the Rubik's Cube. When I first encountered this bemusing puzzle, I began by turning the cubes in random configurations, waiting for something to appear. However, I soon discovered that this is exactly where I went wrong-that is, nothing in life simply emerges on its own for you; instead, you have to search for it, sometimes at greater depths than ever before. By the middle of the program, I began to organize my thoughts and preplan so my configurations would make sense. At the beginning of that summer, my mind was fettered inside the cube as I cursorily searched for meanings. Nonetheless, as the summer crept to an end, I learned to organize, revise, concentrate, and not only think ahead, but also think differently. When the program concluded, I knew that I was no longer inside the cube but outside it.

**Crap Anonymous**

**Tell us something about yourself.**

I love crap. I love bad novels and cheap clothes. I love dirty shoelaces and melted candles, junk earrings and instant coffee. It's about finding the beauty in everything. I find it in palms and tea leaves. I sense Pablo Neruda's sonnets in my coffee dregs, the sublime in street signs, the art in skillfully spilt milk. Every morning, in red beret and blue jeans, I sniff out the bizarre, the grotesque, the beautifully grotesque – a spiraling stack of Post-It notes, photos of transvestites, the horned slug on my lawn in November - life.

The beauty that I even exist is a fleeting grin of luck. In post-Mao China's universities, where my parents met, it was rare for anyone to go to college. They wax nostalgic about their Cultural Revolution, now working keyboards instead of farms. My parents embody human accomplishment and flaw: my dad can whistle; my mother makes great spareribs; neither enjoys cheese. Loving cheese is the hidden East-West divide, a fragile fence of cheddar marking the difference between two worlds. From my mother, I inherited my creativity, first manifested in sewing my own dolls since we could ill afford any. No regrets: I've been told Barbie is an oppressor of women.

At arm's length, my parents humor my love for writing and design, thinking it impractical. They try not to think of my gay rights work at all. My creativity is my liability, although I try not to forget as my mother has forgotten hers; it would mean a tragedy of unlearning how I love the way words taste. French is a heady swirl of tongue pronouncing aubergine and pamplemousse. I love writing words, lining them up in haphazard rows, turning a phrase, luxuriating in how they ring in my mouth as salty, sweet, umami. Words help me find the oblique connection, the absurd switchboard of the universe, how we are connected: me, you, six degrees. I am a mere two degrees from James Rosenquist, pop artist. I trawl thrift shop racks for the thrill of wearing clothes with someone else's name Sharpied on the tag.

This summer, I wondered how I would calculate the speed of the 8:45 Metro North train to Grand Central from the angle of the raindrops. I traced their path, noting how I held a map of Beirut in my wrinkled palms and another of the London Underground in my knuckle creases. I am a zygote, a fetus, a child overcome with wanderlust. The train halts. The doors open. I need to interview all these people, pry their secrets from their jealous fists. I need less cynicism, more vulnerability. Instead of streaking, I smile at strangers. Both make you naked.

**Growing Up in an Interfaith Home Michael Wainwright**

**Describe a personal experience.**

Although I do not affiliate myself with any particular religion, I have been a Buddhist nun at temples and an altar server at Christian churches. I can chant the meditations of Buddha in Thai and Sanskrit and recite Catholic prayers in English and French. My exposure to both religions has helped me to become comfortable in discussing and teaching others about them. Growing up in a Buddhist household, my family would never fail to listen intently as I explained the commandments, life of Jesus, and so on. Likewise, my classmates often found topics such as the life of Buddha and the different commandments between monks and lay people fascinating. My mother was intent on providing me with religious education and ensured that I received some sort of it outside of the home, no matter which religion it was.

When I first entered kindergarten at the Roman Catholic parish of Saint Nicholas of Tolentine, I was too shy to tell anyone that I was not Catholic. Instead, a friend and I fabricated some information about myself so that I could fit in: I was baptized at Saint Matthew's Church on the same exact day that my brother, who is coincidentally also named Matthew, was born. My patron saint was Saint Rita, as it sounded similar to my nickname, Nita, and my godparents were written down in sloppy handwriting as "daddy’s boss" and "his wife." Surprisingly, this information went unquestioned.

All twelve years of my schooling have included Catholic religion classes as well as preparation and celebration of the sacraments. However, because I was not baptized, I was not permitted to celebrate the sacraments that my classmates did. During Reconciliation, I reminded my classmates of what to say and jeered at them as they did their penance, only because I did not have to do it. As one of the best lectors in my class, I read scripture at Mass yet was unable to receive Communion. In a sense, I was able to help with but never fully participate in the Catholic community. As my classmates celebrated Eucharist for the first time, they all told me how cool it was to finally eat what they called "that disgusting piece of cardboard." Feelings of curiosity arose in me - I wanted to eat the cardboard too!

Finally, in my junior year of high school, curiosity got the best of me. After more than five years of staying seated and watching my peers receive Communion, I decided to go up and receive it myself. Slowly making my way down the line, I noticed some students smiling at me. I completely forgot - almost the entire school knew that I was not baptized. As I approached the Eucharistic minister, I searched my brain for all of the information that I had gained from previous religion classes. With my right hand cupped over my left, I took the communion and said, "Amen." To my surprise, I remembered everything - except that the bread had to be eaten! As I stood in the middle of the ceremony holding the body of Christ, I realized my mistake and hurriedly shoved it into my mouth. The stories were true; it really does taste like cardboard! Despite this grand accomplishment, I couldn't help but recoil at its dry aftertaste.

Many of my teachers did not approve of what I did and lectured me afterwards, although I was able to explain to everyone why I decided to receive Communion without Baptism. Growing up surrounded in two completely different religions has helped me to see that a community is essential to any religion and, because both religions considered me to be a part of their community in some way, I did not want to be left out of either one. Although the vast amount of influence that I receive from both sources may sometimes conflict, it has helped me greatly in shaping my own beliefs and morals, as well as to critically evaluate everything I am told. Although some frown upon my participation in both religions, both are integral to my upbringing and definition of who I am; without either one, I would not be fully who I am today.

**An Astute Athlete Alexander Stephen Ciucci**

**Describe a hardship you have overcome.**

Midnight. I peel myself from my desk, feebly creeping towards the scale. Whispering a prayer of desperation, I step on, my exhausted heart racing, and the reading declares a death sentence: two pounds over. That’s one power bar, half a banana, a slice of turkey, and a modest glass of water, yet that, too, is three miles on a treadmill, bundled up in two pairs of sweat pants, a thick sweater, and my ski jacket. However, with trigonometry homework, an essay on the Song dynasty’s social advances, and a diagram of photosynthesis all to do before class, there’s no time for a workout. Still, with a wrestling match in fifteen hours, that weight simply must come off. Face to face with desolation and agony, I persevere, as I always have, never quitting, infallible. Through the hardships of being a wrestler and a scholar, I have learned lessons, gained insight, and bettered my own character, for what didn’t kill me, truly made me stronger.

The sport of wrestling has developed three potent traits of my personality: self-discipline, responsibility, and the ability to deal with failure. Limited entirely by how much I weighed, I ate well below sustenance and lived in a persistent state of hunger and dehydration. The abundance of nutrition at every tasty, delectable meal exacerbated my anguish, as I had to resist the temptation to nibble a snack, or sip some water. However, this mastery of my own subconscious demands has increased my stamina to persevere in any arduous situation. Also, wrestling has instilled in me a sense of responsibility to myself and others. My entire team depends on me making weight and supporting their struggles, as they are collectively doing the same for me. Through these sacrifices, I have learned to strive for success, yet setbacks inevitably delay my victory.

One tournament, I failed to weigh my designated 119 pounds (down from the off-season 140), so I spent ensuing two hours running in the snow, purging both weight and disappointment. Since then, I have accepted that inadequacy and ensured that I always achieve my goal. However, despite any driving motivation, there are always other limitations out of one’s control. Though my mind was unrelenting, my body could not withstand the burden, and my immune system was overcome by shingles (the sequel to chicken pox), and I was barred from competing for two weeks.

While committing so much to this sport, I have also prevailed academically, a combination that sets me apart from others. The intensity of wrestling and the enlightenment of education have allowed me to defy stereotypes of both the unsociable nerd and the ignorant jock. Fostering intelligence often neglects physical fitness, even general appearance, and such sociophobes may lack the interactive skills to function effectively in society. Conversely, an athlete’s dedication to a sport can overshadow his education, and he will have little motivation in life beyond the season championship. I continually excel in school, feeding my growing mind, while working towards victory. As a combination of both the determined athlete and the sharp intellectual, I have enhanced multiple aspects of my character, for there are few people of such a sharp mind with abs that are just as chiseled.

**Colors of Life Anonymous**

**Topic of Choice on the Common App.**

Yellow - one of the primary colors. It is one hue; it is a million hues. Pale yellow, the color of silt in China’s River of Life; saffron yellow, the color of Chinese sovereignty for two millennia; tanned yellow, the tint of my skin.

The first day of fourth grade in America, I felt as if I stepped into an aviary full of white birds who chattered in a tongue that I could not comprehend. I began to regret and even resent my parents’ decision in moving here – nothing’s the same! From the hue of their skins and eyes, to their gestures, speech, activities, and even clothes! And so I embarked on an arduous mission toward conformity. In the second week, wearing my first Gap outfit, I strutted into my homeroom, assured that my clothes would garner acceptance and new friends. Instead, come lunchtime, I wandered amongst the throngs waiting for an invitation that never came. Likewise, I remember frantically trying to translate the deluge of English around me, and in turn, haltingly reply.

Puberty splattered crimson pimples on my face and murky shadows on my confidence. My awkwardness intensified as my family, during our first six years in America, moved six times to three cities. But to lessen my parents’ worries, I often hid my frustration. After all their efforts for my happiness, how could I appear otherwise? They also continuously reminded me that indeed one could never change her color. Inversely, the diversity present in the world actually vivifies life.

It was as I settled into my skin that I finally saw beyond the visible colors, to glimpse the vibrancy within. Through clubs, sports, music, and even the simple gestures of caring and community, I began to blend in amongst the colors of my friends. Our conversations flowed easier, and our laughs freer. Through our camaraderie in difficult times or enjoyment in simply being together, their colors began to shift before my eyes - they themselves embodied unique hues, born of a million and one moments in life. By marveling their differences and sharing their similarities, I foster a stronger confidence in myself, assured in my abilities to adapt and thrive. I now heartily appreciate my itinerant years when I have witnessed the true beauty of diversity, embellished by the inimitable colors of life I have beheld along the way.

Striking as a lone color may be, the blending of colors is breathtaking. The harmony of colors inside myself and outside in my environment gives me life. I am one color, I am a million colors: I am the yellow of China, black of certain confidence, the red of dedicated passion, the blue of invariable peace, green of newborn imagination, the pink of brisk youth, the white of hope - a full palette. I dream not of a rainbow, but of a future. Wherever I may wander, I will never be lost.

**Ode to a Dictionary (with acknowledgment to Pablo Neruda)Anonymous**

**It was a general Common Application essay, without any specific question in mind.**

Ode to a Dictionary (with acknowledgment to Pablo Neruda)

You were a gift of language, given to me by my father eight years ago. My dad was traveling to Oxford that year to attend a lecture and asked if I wanted a present. Book-lover that I was, I had always thought Oxford was most famous for its Press, so I requested an English Dictionary. So, upon my father’s return from England, I received you – my first pocket dictionary.

You and I soon became close companions: as you would faithfully wait by my bedside table, allowing me to pry apart your pages to extract information, I would dutifully jot definitions into a notebook or even into the marginal perimeter of the novel itself. Lovingly, I marked new vocabulary with gentle blue dots to avoid overly tainting your pages.

Over the years, your paper has matured to a shade of papyrus. I confess that during this time I have not always been kind to you: a conspicuous greasy stain remains where my thumb has drawn its course along the side of your pages. Years of mistreatment have caused your spine to tear away from your jacket and I’ve tried to repair the injury, but now I must open you carefully, as though your secrets might be lost.

Dictionary, I’ve often lamented your dull precision. You pin utterly sublime words onto a slide, torturing confessions out of them until their iridescent glow is reduced to literal definitions. Months of abandon have been common: once I found a mite crawling across your dusty lines like a ghostly index finger.

It’s true that you have been used and abused, loved and neglected. I’ve tried replacing you with your online counterpart, but my eyes strain from the pixilated monitor and the plastic mouse feels strangely lifeless. You, on the other hand, nestle comfortably between my fingers. Peeling apart your delicate pages, I discover mysterious and exotic words burrowed in your core.

Dictionary, you are not an anachronistic grave. Pablo Neruda once described you as a ‘guard and keeper, hidden fire, droves of rubies.’ Your words are preserved, as fossilized ants in amber; channeled through a pen, their mysteries unlock and spread like leaves on the living tree of language. Pronouncing them, I savor your words in my mouth. Like precious stones, your words rest on my lips, or else I let them slash my tongue with their brilliant facets. When I close your covers, the most powerful instruments of human design rest in the palm of my hand. Perfect strangers with nothing in common, aside from their first letters and their tantalizing potential, are sealed between the closed kiss of your pages.

I look at you and wonder whether all the vocabulary I’ll need for my ambitious journey is contained between your covers. By the time I board the plane for university you’ll almost be a decade old, but I know, without a doubt, that you’ll be coming with me, snuggly tucked in the pocket of my carry-on luggage.

**Is the World Flat? Xu Shenjun**

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

“The world is flat.” When I was little, I never believed this line. I would always show off in class, proudly proclaiming: “The earth is a sphere!” But now, I see the line again, on the title of a book by Thomas Friedman—and, this time, I have no easy response.

When I was thirteen, my father gave me a world atlas. Immediately attracted to the curving coastlines and the curious shapes of the many different countries, I started my “world exploration”. Impressed by my growing knowledge, my classmates would often quiz me on facts about small countries with “funny names” like Lesotho in Africa or island countries like Vanuatu in the South Pacific. But I was not satisfied with knowing only the geographical features of these countries. I wanted to know more about their people, their history, and their culture. I dreamt of wine from southern France, the tasty barbeques of Buenos Aires, traditional dances such as the Adowa (Ghana) and Joget (Malaysia), and of one day seeing the magnificent Great Pyramids of Giza and the grandiose Taj Mahal.

Miraculously, I was soon able to begin realizing my dream. Only a year after receiving the atlas, I was privileged to meet talented peers from all over the world through the Young Masters Program concerning environmental issues. As leader of my Shanghai-based group, I presented our findings on the emission reduction in a coal-fired power plant in Shanghai at the Global Environmental Youth Convention (GEYC) in Dubai. While there, I was mesmerized by the luxurious lifestyle, the opulence and beauty of the Burj Al Arab and the manmade Palm Islands. However, I could not shake the feeling that the prosperity I saw contrasted sharply with the bare existence of neighboring countries, suffering under seemingly endless waves of ethnic clashes.

Meanwhile, since GEYC is an international conference, I met many friends from all corners of the world, including Cameroon and Turkey. My knowledge of world culture made it easy for me to strike up conversation with foreign friends. They were all surprised that I knew so much about their countries and appreciated my enthusiasm and respect. However, I was surprised that many of my new friends seemed to know little about China. So I used this opportunity to tell them about Chinese culture. I demonstrated the lion dance and showed them Chinese calligraphy. When I gave my new friends gifts of traditional Chinese knots and paper cuttings, everybody else wanted one. A girl from Sweden even kissed me when I presented her a big Chinese knot.

After my GEYC experience, I was invigorated. I felt that the links made between the different countries represented a strong and viable way to conquer some of the world’s most pressing and relevant problems. I believe it is my responsibility to cultivate these connections, so this year I led another delegation of students to participate in the Caretakers of Environment International Youth Convention in Hong Kong.

Now I find there is much more to the assertion that “the world is flat.” People who have read Friedman’s book will conclude that developments in technology and microeconomics are what allow individuals and small groups to compete in the world arena, thus flattening the world. But I have learned, through my travels, through my connections with the peers all around the world, that it is our place as world citizens that makes us all equal. Equality and communication are what make the world flat.

This is not to say that the world is already completely flat. When I look back into the enormous break between Dubai and the neighboring Iraq and into the gap between my thriving hometown of Shanghai and the remote mountain areas in China, I see that the underlying tectonic plates of the world are still sharp and rugged. Moreover, only emphasizing the cultural aspect in solving world problems is oversimplifying. Cultural understanding is the foundation upon which progress is built, but we need tools to do the building. Consequently, economics and technology are still indispensable in moving us forward. I hope to flatten the world through research and careful study of what pushes governments and companies toward development and progress. To create pathways through which understanding and knowledge can flow is my personal goal. Without aspiring to a greater collaboration of all cultures, we will forever be divided by the mountains and canyons of ethnocentrism and ignorance.

Many people today are hopeful that flattening the world will lead to equality for every world citizen. We have been given the task, and the advent of modern technology and economics has given us the tools. Yet, the future remains unknown, as the will to change the present situation may be tested by the inertia of human nature. The only question that remains—and it is certainly a big question, one that I have only just begun to address—is the following: are we brave enough to take the initiative to bridge the gap?

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**Artist - Me Anonymous**

**Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.**

Eyes fixed upon the image in front of her, brows slightly furrowed, the girl appeared to be lost in thought. While the others walked on after stopping briefly before the piece, she stood there with her feet glued to the spot. I watched the girl from behind one of the tall white grids on which dozens of frames were suspended in the cafeteria. My eyes traveled from her face to the painting she was looking at, and finally to the tiny card beside it: Title – Colors of Freedom; Media – watercolor and ink; Artist – me.

There hung the painting I had poured my heart into, my very own masterpiece. Smiling to myself, I couldn’t help but feel immensely proud, not because the piece was featured in the school’s senior art show but because I knew that it was entirely and uniquely my own, that I gave life to it and therefore, no matter where it went, it could never be taken from me.

I have loved art for as long as I can remember. My family’s old furniture and my father’s books were my first canvasses, to which the scribbles that cover these objects still attest. When other children abandoned their coloring books for Barbie dolls and baseball bats, I was the one always sitting inside during recess, letting my imagination run wild onto the pages of my sketchbook. As I grew older, immersing myself in the world of my own creation became the perfect antidote for a bad test score or a fight with a friend. Over the course of my life, art has become irretrievably a part of my identity.

For me, the most exhilarating thing about art is the process of creation. When I sat down to begin what was to become my featured piece in the show, I felt both eager and curious – knowing that the blank sheet before me would soon be transformed into something beautiful, yet not knowing what it would look like. My excitement grew as my pencil danced lightly over the roughness of the paper. Then, a moment of fearlessness, as the first streak of color shattered the pallor of the page. Experimentation ensued; sprinkling salt crystals onto wet paint yielded surprisingly satisfying results. The rest of the brushstrokes were laid down with care, threads of ink offered the finishing touch, and at last – something unlike anything else in the world: a portion of my soul, contained within an 11 by 18 sheet of paper, and on display for all to see.

At that thought, my mind snapped back to reality. To my surprise, another minute must have passed and the girl was still staring at my painting. “Hey, are you alright?” I walked over cautiously and asked.

“Yes,” the girl replied. “Are you the artist?” I nodded and noticed her now smiling mysteriously, not at me but at my painting, as if she knew something that I did not. “Thank you,” she said quietly, turned around and vanished into the crowd.

I was left there in the cafeteria, dumbfounded and speechless, surrounded by a multitude of other students yet feeling quite alone. I didn’t know who she was, if she was in my grade or even went to my school, for I never saw her again. I didn’t know what it was about my painting that had moved her or why she thanked me, for I never had the chance to ask. But what I did learn that day was this: my art wasn’t merely something that fulfilled my own passion; it had the capacity to touch the heart of a complete stranger. Art might begin from within, but it is the connection it makes with the outside world that is perhaps the most beautiful thing of all.

**Grandma's Clothes Anonymous**

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

What a familiar sight, I thought to myself as I subconsciously stopped to stare through the display window. A couple of mannequins were dressed in half-finished garments, surrounded by waves of colourful fabrics cascading down the table. Pools of thread scattered among oddly shaped buttons. And on the right side of the window – an old-fashioned Singer sewing machine. The same intricate golden patterns on the body, the same shiny black finish. Just like Grandma’s.

Grandma loved to sew. Most of all, she loved to make clothes for me, her only grandchild. I used to sit and watch her peddle on the machine for hours, her fingers deftly navigating the fabric under the needle, until I'd fall asleep to the humming lullaby. When I'd open my eyes again, Grandma would be there, smiling, holding up a fresh new skirt or blouse for me. It always fit perfectly, and I would run outside to show my friends my new outfit, proudly telling them that Grandma had made it, just for me.

At least that was how it was before I moved to the city.

I pulled my eyes away from the display. My heels clicked against the pavement as I continued on my way home, thinking back to the time when I was twelve. That was the year of our big move, the year I started middle school, and the year Grandma’s handiworks fell out of my favor. They were different from those my friends wore; the dresses and shirts I used to love made me feel like an outsider. Soon, I began inventing excuses to avoid dressing in the clothes Grandma made me: the winter was never cold enough to wear the striped wool sweater, the summer never hot enough for the flowered silk top. Not long after, Grandma stopped sewing. Not because she wanted to, but because her hands were no longer steady enough to draw the patterns, her eyes no longer sharp enough to thread the needles…

That night, I dragged out a large, dusty suitcase from under my bed. Inside, all the clothes that Grandma had made me lay in neatly folded stacks. I took them out, one by one, cautiously caressing the softness of the fabrics. I was once again filled with the wonder I experienced as a child. But only now did I understand the profoundness of the love that was sewn into each piece that lay before me, in every stitch, every fold, every button. I finally realized how Grandma must had felt when I no longer wanted to receive that love, and later, when she could no longer give it.

How foolish it was of me to not have seen it back then. I was ashamed that it had taken me so long to understand, but now that I finally did I realized not only Grandma’s kindness, but also the nature of love -- namely, that it is meant to be given, not hidden or kept within. Grandma had her way of giving it, and now I had mine. I knew that it was not too late; although Grandma’s clothes no longer fit me, the least I could do was to pass on the love that was in them to someone who would truly appreciate it.

My heart felt a little emptier yet also more full as I walked away from the downtown Salvation Army the next morning. I smiled to myself when I passed the display window with the old-fashioned Singer. Then, I flipped out my cell phone and dialed an almost forgotten number: it had been a long time since I had last talked to Grandma.

**Giving Me the Bricks Anonymous**

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

“Mom, I want to take the SAT.”

My mom lifted her eyes off the newspaper and looked at me suspiciously. “What on earth is the SAT?” I went on to explain it to her as she stared at me with increasing incredulity, as if I were no longer her daughter but an animal escaped from the zoo. After I had finished, she was still struggling to understand how I got the idea of going to an American university instead of attending one of the local Canadian schools.

I chuckled to myself. In many ways, my mom and dad are the very antithesis of typical Asian parenting. While other Asian parents are fretting about their sons and daughters getting accepted to top-tier American universities, mine are aware of what classes I am taking only at report card time. They have never pressured me to learn the piano or the violin, and I ended up the only Asian child I know of who does not play an instrument. I have never had a tutor, nor have I ever taken a single academic lesson outside of school. They have never forced me to take certain classes or participate in certain activities. I was never banned from the television so that I would do my homework. My parents have never sought to dictate my goals. They have never told me to become a doctor or lawyer or engineer.

Yet, somehow, I turned out to be the ideal Asian daughter – at least in the eyes of my parents’ friends. I may be completely tone deaf, but I have developed my own passion for visual art and have gained considerable mastery. I seek help or additional materials when I truly want to, using the resources available to me. Knowing where my interests lie, I am the one who decides what classes to take and what activities I will be passionate about. I manage my time effectively, prioritizing my tasks so that I know to finish my homework before watching television. I, not my parents, set my academic standards; I expect myself to do the best I possibly can.

So how did I become the person I am today? Certainly it was not my parents who made me this way. Or was it? The question came to me that day, a question I had never really asked myself before. But as soon as I began thinking, the answer became apparent: of course it was my parents. By giving me complete freedom to choose my own path, I have had to learn to make choices on my own, choices that reflect my dreams and aspirations. If I hadn't had to work to satiate my own curiosities and to meet my own expectations instead of my parents’, I would never have become the inquisitive, motivated, passionate individual I am today.

At that thought, I smiled a mysterious smile at my mom, enveloped her in a hug, and silently thanked her for giving me the bricks instead of paving my way.

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**Jerk Chicken Anonymous**

**Using the quotation below as a jumping off point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world:''Some questions cannot be answered./ They become familiar weights in the hand,/ Round stones pulled from the pocket, unyielding and cool.''1- Jane Hirshfield, poet, Princeton Class of 1973**

I prodded the chicken with my fork. The rest of the table was heatedly arguing about health care while I wondered how much longer the school fundraiser dinner would last. Then, an idle comment uttered by a boy I didn’t know made my head jerk up.

“…It’s all because of those Jewish bastards in Congress,” he finished.

Silence dropped like a hammer on a nail. I stared.

A friend glanced at me and said, “She’s Jewish, you know.”

I was paralyzed. Questions flickered through my mind. Chief among them was simply: “Why?”

Why intolerance? Why again?

My mouth moved. “You're the bastard, if you think that saying that is okay,” I said. My calm, forceful words surprised me. I felt like a marionette, lips and limbs moving at the whim of an outside force.

He flushed. “I wasn't insulting you.”

I went on a brief, terse rant, wondering all the while whose tongue was uttering my words. The boy stared at me, but wouldn’t apologize, and I stood and left the table. The hollow disdain in his eyes haunted me. Later that night, I reflected on his words.

I’ve always known that Jews are rare on the Eastern Shore. In elementary school, someone once asked me what a Jew was. The questions have evolved since then: What’s the story behind Passover? What makes Jews different from Christians? I love such questions. Thanks to my friends’ curiosity, I’ve learned more about Judaism myself than I might have otherwise; it’s the rarity of my religion that has helped make it precious to me. Being Jewish has become a core part of my persona, and I wouldn't trade that for all the simplicity in the world.

Over the years, I’ve seen prejudice in action and heard occasional insults. But when faced with such instances, my parents carried themselves with pride and self-assurance, and I took my cues from them. I learned how to deal with prejudice and moved on. Sometimes it hurt, especially when I discovered unsavory elements in people I liked. But I learned patience, tolerance, and empathy, and those lessons are easily worth a few bruises.

At the fundraiser dinner, it had been a while since I’d heard such blatant anti-Semitism. I was initially furious. But afterwards, my anger dimmed, to be joined by a sense of pride and gratitude. Yes, the boy was ignorant and spiteful, but he’d revealed some important things. I was proud of my quick response—though perhaps I hadn’t been civil, remaining silent would have been traitorous to myself and my faith. More importantly, I was proud of my companions. The next day, I learned that they’d had words with him, too, and that he’d stalked away after finding no sympathy.

Instances like the one at the school fundraiser dinner are consequences of living in the larger world; fully escaping prejudice is impossible. But more important is the way in which we approach such cases. I chose to focus on the support of my friends, the acceptance I witness every day, and the enrichment that comes from mingling cultures instead of on momentary glimpses of intolerance. My experiences as a minority on the Eastern Shore have taught me that the world is fundamentally a good place, and that it is my duty to continue to make it so. As a proud Jew, I will always promote understanding and denounce ignorance. And most importantly of all, I’ll do it alongside my many friends—Jew and gentile alike.

**Being good is commendable, but doing good is righteousAnonymous**

**What has shaped you into the person you are today?**

I have been raised since the early stages of my childhood to be a generous and morally sound individual. My parents persistently ingrained in me basic and fundamental Christian virtues: charity, humility, and selflessness. This value-oriented focus during my upbringing eventually crystallized into who I became as a young teenager. I was well-mannered, respectable, and strived to be as selfless as possible. But doesn’t virtually everyone strive to be a good person? My intentions were good, but my contributions were still limited. Looking back, it felt as if I were on cruise control, in desperate need of a stimulus of some sort to jolt me into action. Sure enough, that catalyst surfaced on a frigid fall night during my sophomore year of high school.

Zack McLeod was a junior and a teammate of mine on the varsity football team. Though athletics were a strong suit of his, they did not rate highly on his priority list. His true passion rested with his faith and his unrelenting love for people. Zack’s glowing face was constantly painted with an unmistakable smile. His wrists were always covered with bracelets that he had crafted with AIDS victims in Africa upon his annual visits there. He would constantly remind classmates and teammates that he loved them -- not ordinary words for a 17-year-old. Zack was no ordinary 17-year-old, though. His mere presence was enough to brighten up any classroom, lunch table, or locker room.

But on the fateful night of October 17, 2008, Zack collapsed on the football field. The field that served as a gridiron battleground quickly became the battleground where Zack lay unconscious and fighting for his life. He was flown to Massachusetts General Hospital, where he immediately underwent emergency brain surgery to alleviate the pressure. He had suffered an aneurysm, and it was later announced by the doctors that Zack had had a 10% chance of survival on the field that night.

When Zack finally awoke from his coma and was permitted visitors, I wasted no time in going to see him. The second that I entered the room and our eyes met, something snapped in me. The sensation was indescribable and overwhelming. It wasn’t set off by the disturbing fact that he was a mere shadow of his former self, having lost 80 pounds in addition to the power of speech and the use of his body from the neck down. On the contrary, it was actually a feeling of joy and comfort sparked by the sight of Zack’s reassuring and unmistakable smile.

Over the course of the year, I made it a point to visit Zack as much as possible. The more that I went, the more I developed a genuine desire to help him. I was no longer satisfied with being morally correct. I wanted to engage in some form of charitable outreach. I wanted to be like Zack. Since then, I have volunteered at multiple aid organizations, including the Challenger League, the Jimmy Fund, and the Buddy Walk. I formed a baseball team comprised of 11- and 12-year-olds to enter and compete in the Jimmy Fund Baseball League, which donates all earnings to the Jimmy Fund Association. Although that was a rewarding experience in its own right, the Jimmy Fund did not allow me to engage firsthand with the less fortunate. I wanted to become involved on a more personal level. I next volunteered to coach in the Challenger Division, a league that enables children with mental and physical disabilities to enjoy the game of baseball. I also helped to set up for the Buddy Walk, a festival designed to allow kids with Down syndrome to engage in playful activities throughout the day. My most rewarding charitable experience to date, however, came when I petitioned to let Dan Rej, a mentally disabled eighth-grader with an unparalleled passion for basketball, join the middle school recreational league. After completing all of those experiences, I can now confidently say that Zack has truly inspired me to become a better person by sparking my newfound enthusiasm for charity. His injury served as the catalyst in my transformation from a good person into a person who does good.

**I Call It Home Ayantu Regassa**

**Tell us about the world you come from.**

“I wanna go home!” I say as I sit on the kitchen floor watching my mother cook.

“What do you mean?” she asks, giving me a questioning look. “Ethiopia?”

“I don’t know.”

Home. For most people, the word can be easily defined as the place where they grew up or live now. By that definition, the house in which I have lived for the past seven years would be my home. The problem is, I often find myself saying, “I wanna go home,” while sitting in that very house. The other candidate is the place where I grew up, but that could be either of two places: my home country of Ethiopia or my adopted hometown of Westbrook, Maine. I cannot choose one over the other. For better or for worse, each has shaped the person I am today more than can be expressed in words. Ethiopia is the place where I experienced so many of my “firsts.” Maine is the place where I developed my individuality. At the same time, neither can truly be my home.

Though Ethiopia was my home at one point, it is no longer the same place I knew as a child because I am no longer that child. I can no longer relate to the culture the way I once did. As my sister often tells me, I have become “Americanized.”

On the other hand, I have never felt at home in Maine. The first memory I have of Maine is my first day visiting Reiche Elementary, the school I would be attending. I stood in front of a group of seven- and eight-year-old boys and girls. Every face was pointed at me, every pair of eyes wide and expectant. I grabbed the fabric of my mother’s skirt and buried my face into the side of her leg. These children were all so different. Every child had a skin color different from mine. Though I picked out a few familiar words, I could not understand what they were saying. I knew I didn’t belong there, but there was no chance of hopping on a plane and going back to Ethiopia. I knew that, and the thought terrified me. I had never felt as uncomfortable and uncertain as I did that day.

That day has stayed with me, along with the discomfort and uncertainty. Though the intensity of those feelings has faded, it has not gone away, and it is not likely to leave me soon. I cannot deny, however, that the environment Maine has provided has shaped me profoundly. Living in Maine has made me who I am today just as much as being born and raised in Ethiopia. Ethiopia gave me my cultural and family identity. Ethiopia is the place that comes to mind when I think of my family, since my entire extended family remains there. It is also the place that comes to mind when I think of my motivation, since I was raised in a culture that taught me to give one hundred percent at all times. Yet, the fact remains that I have lived in Maine for nearly ten years of my life. This environment has influenced me more than even I can comprehend. So, the question becomes: which of these places (if either) should I consider my home?

In all honesty, I cannot choose one physical place and give it the title of “home.” Instead, I elect to compose my own definition of home, a definition that does not force me to choose between the two places in which I grew up. My definition allows me to think of home as a place in my mind, a state of mind that enables me to remember my childhood years in Ethiopia and the opportunities given to me by living in the U.S. It has taken a long time to define what home means to me -- and even longer to find it -- but doing so has given me an amazing sense of hope and comfort. In my mind, it is a place where I can escape. It is a place from which I draw strength when life gets too hectic or when I am faced with challenges that seem too great to overcome. It is what I really mean -- what I have always meant -- when I say that I want to go home.

**An Intellectually Stimulating experience Anonymous**

**Describe an experience that you have had or a concept you have learned about that intellectually excites you. When answering this question, you may want to consider some of the following questions: Why does this topic excite you? How does it impact the way you or others experience the world? What questions do you continue to ponder about it? (750 word limit).**

I woke up that morning with a feeling of dread. As I raced down to the bus stop through the twilight of the early morning, I felt my heart palpitating with anticipation and worry. Every second that the bus brought me closer to New Haven, my fear grew more intense. Even as I swiped my keycard at the gates of Yale University’s Osborn Memorial Laboratory, apprehension of what I might find out in the minutes ahead overcame me. Eventually, after mustering my courage, I stepped into the cool air of the staging area; first donning my lab coat, then the gloves, then the goggles. Each move felt mechanical and automatic, like the motions of any other day. Yet today was different: today I would discover if my toil and trouble that I had poured into this experiment was truly worth it. My hands, ever steady through countless trials, now shook from simultaneous fear and excitement.

My heart plummeted as I opened the incubator. It appeared that my experiment had been a complete failure. I dreaded having to report my failure to my mentor; to my surprise, Dr. Davis was not in the least bit disappointed. He told me that often times, experiments may appear to be disasters, but that they still give us insights into the world around us. His goal, he said, was not to be always right; rather, he endeavoured to gain an understanding of the fundamental topics of science. My internship in Dr. Davis' lab gave me a greater understanding of “success,” not only in scientific research, but in life itself.

Science is a passion which is often frustrating before becoming rewarding. I had always wondered how viruses infect cells and survive the hostile conditions of the human body; though invisible to our eyes, viruses and humans interact in so many different ways. Though my laboratory work tested my patience and seemed useless at that time, it helped me answer those questions that I had pondered since my childhood, while granting some small insight into the workings of the world we inhabit. As my summer internship progressed, I conducted innumerable trials and poured countless hours of effort into my work in the attempt to discover something concrete. Two weeks after my first, less-than-successful experiment, I was able to determine how certain strains of viruses are able to evolve at the molecular level to attain higher survival rates.

My early experiments reminded me that I am not perfect. I can’t promise to cure cancer, fix the economy, or anything like that. What I can promise is that I will do my utmost to utilize whatever skills I have and have acquired, to the fullest of my ability. I want to engage in scientific research that expands the gamut of human knowledge, even if it is only a small contribution in the form of fundamental research. I revel in the true reward that comes from the thrill of discovery after the possible disappointment of failure. Results apart, scientists get involved in research for the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself.

I still wonder why my viruses could not survive under certain other conditions, but I learnt that innovation and discovery do not come from shirking away from the unknown, but rather from being a beacon of light in the darkness of ignorance. Like ancient explorers who charted the dark unknown for others to follow, I know that someday, some eager researchers will ask similar questions and utilize my work as the basis for their studies. I only hope that my contributions will help others as I continue upon my quest to help solve pressing medical problems that pervade the world around us.

**"A Beak, Be Jolly" Abhik Jolly**

**Personal Statement**

Abhik Basu Jolly…Abhik B. Jolly…A—

When I repeat a word over and over again, it detaches from its meaning—especially if the word is unusual. Like “kangaroo.” Or like “fork.” When I say fork over and over again, I start wondering, why is this called a “phorque?”

Abhik B. Jolly…A beak B. Jolly…Abhik B. jolly…A beak be jolly…

My name—unique as far as google knows (check for yourself)—is a signifier, a referential sound, which refers to me. My first name, Abhik, is Sanskrit for fearless. The origins of my surname, Jolly, are curious even to other Indians. As a middle name, my mother lent me her maiden name, Basu, a high-caste clan name, known more commonly in its anglicized form, Bose (as in Bose Sound Systems or the scientist Satyendra Nath Bose).

Sadly, I was hard pressed to appreciate the singular nature of my name while growing up on Long Island where Luke was considered to fringe the norm. Kids can be mean, but it was more personal insecurity than external abuse that troubled me. In ninth grade, I dreaded the first day of school. Sure enough, each teacher managed to mispronounce my name in an entirely unique way. I winced and corrected them while the class giggled behind me. (The only real tripping point is the silent h. With this knowledge, the pronunciation, at least to me, seems intuitive enough.)

Come tenth grade, I stopped bothering to correct them, thus renouncing authority over my own interpretation. To the world, I was a shape-shifting mush. I was whoever anyone else wanted me to be. To my parents, I was an excellent student. To my friends, I was a faux-rebellious ne’er-do-well. To my tenth grade health teacher, Ms. Kosiba, I was the bookish “Abink Jolly.” (It’s a mystery to me how she slipped an n in there, but I didn’t correct her.)

In his canonical essay “The Death of the Author,” critical theorist Roland Barthes states that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.” This dictum, a postmodern slogan, renders any work of art an organization of signs and symbols open to interpretation.

In some ways, I appreciate this openness to interpretation. I feel that it lends the world color. Admittedly, it gave me the critical license to find a subtext of Jean-Paul Sartre’s phenomenology in Shakespeare’s The Tempest, centuries before it was philosophized.

And moreover, if I considered the author’s opinion ultimate, I could not have opened Borges’ five-page story “Emma Zunz” into a fourteen-page critical essay, employing the thought of Derrida and Freud among others. And I certainly would not have won my school’s award for Best English Student last year for my creative critical essay writing in addition to my help and encouragement of others to “free their minds.” Yes, in many ways, I exploit and relish in my freedom to interpret.

However, I do believe that there is something to be said for the author’s opinion of his text, which is, after all, his text. Of course, I dearly value the ability to think creatively, but many things about my person are no longer up for interpretation.

Entering the John Dewey Academy, I realized that I could not be satisfied with myself without a solid core of honesty, integrity, and self-respect. Over the last two years, becoming a leader in the JDA community both inside and outside of the classroom, I have solidified into an upright human being, and, more importantly, I am proud of who I am. Never again will I compromise my own values for what I think others want from me, and never again will I sulk in the corner while a teacher mispronounces my name. My life is my text, and by being true to myself, I alone, as the author, have the final word on its interpretation.

**More Than Books Anonymous**

**Evaluate a signiﬁcant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.**

My childhood dreams were built beside a bookshelf. Sitting cross-legged on the library floor immersed in science fiction, I dreamt of time-traveling tesseracts, of machines intelligent enough to raise families, of lunar colonies equipped with modern plumbing capabilities. It’s been over seven years since then, but I still pass the hours beside a bookshelf, although this time, I’m the one filling it, one newly labeled book at a time.

Or at least that’s what I’m supposed to do. At times, the pressing urge to read overcomes common sense. My library “Volunteer” badge safely hidden in my pocket, I relive my childhood, desperately catching words as they leap off the pages only to materialize in my imagination as physical objects.

Fridays always carry the musty scent of worn book covers. Books silently cry out my name as I search for them, armed only with a hierarchy of dots and digits I’ve written in my heart. 100 for Plato, 200 for Islam, 300 for Odysseus… Fingers grown adept at handling fragility, I gently flip through the yellowing pages, scanning for signs of damage. A minute passes. Then another. Seeing no evident need for book repair, I cross out “TESSARO, KATHLEEN” off the inventory list with a Sharpie. The sharp odor of the marker jars me from the peaceful lull of work. Yet, a certain feeling of serenity remains.

Sometimes, when I'm working behind the circulation desk, I see the return flap open, a rush of sunlight, a book drop into the return tray, the briefest appearance of someone peering into the slit. The worried face of a mother. The weary face of a retiree. The stern face of a lawyer. Excited, I take a guess before looking at what was returned. A guide to parenting? A guide to gardening? Sherlock Holmes? And although I'm rarely right, I can at least smile at the fact that I'm not the only one with overdue fines.

When gray clouds gather, I love lying there alone on the sofa beside the window, watching the orchard trees bend in the wind, listening to the drizzling rain beat their quirky rhythms on the rooftop. The library is my shield against Thursday thunderstorms and Monday melancholies, and I can always find refuge when I seek it. Not surprisingly, I know all the librarians by face; when they wake me from my nap in the armchair behind the Mystery Section, their smiles are the first things I see.

In the clarity of such moments, I realize how I’ve lived the last four years of my life in a blur, rushing from orchestra rehearsals to debate tournaments, from English class to math club meetings. I’ve made good judgments, and I’ve made poor ones. I’ve experienced success, and I’ve also endured setbacks that almost convinced me to give it all up. But never, until this year, have I learned to slow down, to stop, to listen, to appreciate the small details in everyday life.

My early time spent with books deeply shaped my love of reading, and in some ways, I’m still the same ten-year-old kid who finishes a new novel overnight, who renews a hold just to reread a favorite book for the fifth time. Yet, after a year of volunteering at the library, I've never felt more attentive, more at peace, more alive. Those quiet moments alone, among both written and unwritten stories, have brought balance to my life and taught me to treasure every moment of it, especially as the last days of high school slowly slip away. After all, the stories that speak loudest to us sometimes don’t speak at all.

**"There Are Never Absolutes" Fiona Hsin-Yu Liao**

**Topic of your choice**

Beep.

Beeep. My mind begrudgingly detached itself from the safe nothingness of the subconscious, wondering, as any sane entity would, why it was waking up at 6:00 on a crisp Friday morning. A few confusing seconds later, as usual, I remembered: I needed this time for leisure reading. Relocating myself to the balcony, I opened The Art of War to page 89. “Know thyself, know thy enemy. A thousand battles, a thousand victories,” teaches Sun Tzu. As the first rays of the day slowly warmed Formosa, a disturbing thought struck me. How was I supposed to get through life’s thousand battles without knowing myself?

My life has always been a mélange of seemingly discordant interests; and at that moment, I was at a crossroads of different cultural identities. Thus, through the subtle chaos of self-discovery, I tried to make sense of my multiple facets by adhering to labels. I was the history zealot, the extrovert, the international student. Little did I know that by accepting these labels, I was rendering the other undefinable parts of myself null and void. However, recently I have begun to scratch the surface of the labels – tentatively, that is – and what I’m finding beneath is surprisingly empowering.

I have a profound passion for history and political science. The mere notion of exploring the triumphs, the suffering, and lessons we can learn from past generations induces in me a mixture of fascination and gratitude. Over this past summer, I devoured a book I have always wanted to read: Two Treatises on Government by John Locke. When I finished the magnum opus, I felt deeply enlightened by Locke’s political philosophies of contractualism and inalienable rights. Moreover, at school, I debate with my world history instructor on topics such as the inception of communism and whether veto power in the Security Council is justifiable. When complaints of AP U.S Government homework fill the classroom con fuoco, I stay quiet, engrossed in the teacher’s lesson about political efficacy in the era of Jacksonian democracy. However, deep down, I know there is more to me than the “history zealot” label. Science is also a persistent area of my interest and ability. Climate change in particular has helped me understand, through chemistry, the effects that individual actions can have over the rest of humanity. I once contemplated abandoning my interest in environmental science in order to focus solely on history and international relations, because in my mind, history and science were diametrically opposed. However, in recent months, it has dawned upon me that a student should not define him or herself by a single genre of interest. Not in one epiphanic moment, but gradually, I came to disregard my “social science” label. I realized I can also be a scientist, combining, and thereby even leveraging, my two passions. In our globalizing society, a love for both international relations and environmental science might just be what I need to make a difference.

I have always been an extrovert. At leadership programs, I am the first to introduce myself to strangers from all corners of the globe. When I was younger, I informed everyone that I would be the next Secretary-General. At times, I still do. At The Hague International Model UN, I was the one in the middle of the crowd successfully convincing other delegates that my resolution could deter Iran from building nuclear warheads. My interest in programs like MUN is born out of my desire to actively learn from those wiser than me and to help empower the less fortunate. Thus, I have also dedicated a significant portion of my life to community service. For example, I constructed houses for the impoverished in the Philippines and taught aboriginal Taiwanese children fundamental English. These activities require a raw eagerness to engage with other human beings; I do it with vim, enthusiasm, and most importantly, happiness. However, because of my gregarious disposition, most people don’t see the quiet, contemplative side of me; the Fiona who stares in the garden’s Koi pond for hours, ruminating how books like The Power of Now can claim to have discovered the secret to happiness, or the Fiona who finds solace in thunder because it embodies nature’s majestic and impersonal power. At two in the morning, wide-eyed, I ponder the meaning of my existence, wondering if the spirit lives on and if time really is an illusion. I scribble fiercely in my journal: are environmental sustainability and capitalism mutually exclusive? Is globalization causing an emotionally depleted society? My mind is filled with so many contemplations that I meditate often to bring peace to a restlessly inquisitive soul. I have realized that the label “extrovert” doesn’t do justice to the introspective self who is energized by solitude. I can be both an extrovert and introvert, and I am.

Having grown up in five countries, I’m at a loss for words when people ask me where I’m from. I usually start with “I was born in Taiwan, but eight months later moved to Tokyo, after that, Vancouver and then Bei-” only to realize the person’s countenance always slightly dazed. Realizing I could not do this to everyone, I resorted to simply saying “I’m an international citizen.” I am blessed to have experienced a variety of fascinating cultures, such as that of Hiroshima, Chicago, or Beijing. This unique upbringing has cultivated in me the global perspective needed to undertake the increasingly convoluted conflicts of the modern world. Instead of being averse to humanity’s differences, I value them highly; as Darwin pioneered, diversity is key to a society’s survival. However, I have frequently felt rootless, a grand oak with no radices. At GYLC last summer, after my Trinidadian friend proudly told me her heritage and inquired about mine, labeling myself as simply “international” just didn’t seem apt. “I’m from Taiwan,” I replied. At that moment, I felt a surge of pride and relief at having identified myself as Taiwanese. Thereafter, I have come to appreciate Taiwan for what it is – the island that I was born on and the island that welcomed me back with loving arms. Recently, I found an unsent letter I wrote to the president of Taiwan when I was 13. In it, I advised him to restructure the rigid education system in Taiwan. I realized how much I cared for the country all along. In retrospect, I am both Taiwanese and international, but with the establishment of this newfound root, the tree that is me can reach unprecedented heights. I can now achieve greater things in college and beyond.

I do not need absolutes to steer me through life. I have corrected the belief that labels help me attain clarity when trying to understand myself. If I have the courage to obliterate the labels and accept myself for who I am, fear of complexity naturally disappears and my other selves reemerge, steadily asserting their rights in my life, fortifying who I was before, and giving me confidence for the future. Historian and scientist. Extrovert and introvert. International and Taiwanese. Some of these might seem irreconcilable, but I am all of them. Without labels, I can still overcome the battles ahead. I closed Master Sun’s chef-d’oeuvre, smiled, and readied for the day ahead. In life there are never absolutes, except, of course, this one.

**Why Columbia? Fiona Hsin-Yu Liao**

**Please tell us what you find most appealing about Columbia and why.**

The future is made with vestiges of the past. This lesson was driven into me one day as I was reading about President of Taiwan Ma Ying-Jeou’s strategy of “No reunification, no independence and no war”. What impressed me about President’ Ma’s strategy, which has led to improved economic and political relations between China and Taiwan, is that he used lessons from the past to propel Taiwan citizens to new levels of prosperity. Only through the study of history and past human endeavors can society continue to push the limits of knowledge and sustain a humanity with, hopefully, fewer conflicts and catastrophes.

Columbia alone offers me the chance to participate in this future-making. First as an individual: only at Columbia could I receive the best possible education in history and foundational texts through the Core while being mentored into a global citizen ready to influence the world by avant-garde economist and Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz or former U.N Assistant Secretary-General Michael Doyle. Then as part of a larger society: only at Columbia could I delve into the past of the world by connecting mentally and psychologically with peers of all races and backgrounds while continuing to push into the future through internships at influential institutions such as Greenpeace or The New York Times.

And then there are those things in the middle that reinforce this past and future interrelationship. Only at Columbia could I have the chance – just a chance – to use wireless internet in a centuries old underground mining tunnel. Or the chance to stand in front of the Alma Mater, pretending to be Hamilton and thinking about grand dreams for the future of America’s economy while anticipating Obama’s next visit. Columbia is a crossroads of history and modernity. It is where the old meets new. Without this hybrid, nothing can be achieved. What I find most appealing about Columbia, thus, is the opportunity it offers me, through its extensive resources in regards to history and the new century, to realize my aspirations, my dream of using the past to solve conflicts in the present to push humanity into the future.

# 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.

**I Listen to Too Much Midwest Emo Wenting Tang**

**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.**

Some of my earliest and most vividly hazy memories involve riding in the backseat of an old Honda Civic. The seats were a stripey velour that stuck to the backs of my legs when the air conditioning stopped working, and the back window was lined with faded stuffed animals. Desperate for attention, I was constantly begging my parents for the Tic Tacs and spearmint gum that always seemed to fill the glove compartment. Whether it was over the faint hum of the car radio or over our sticky kitchen table, they were always immersed in some mysterious, adult conversation. I remember arranging alphabet magnets on the refrigerator; babbling nonsense and trying to join in. I remember the ginger soup my mother used to make and the stickiness of leftover rice on my spoon. I remember my parents holding my hands and swinging, flanking me on either side like they would never let go.

Then everything changed, and it came almost as abruptly as the way dishes would shatter on the floor when my father got angry. The movie adaptation of my life went from a dreamy, sun-kissed Sofia Coppola film to a Dario Argento horror (minus the gorgeous coloring).

Okay, that is definitely a bit of a hyperbole-good job self, way to exemplify the sad teen stereotype! If this was a movie, I would categorize it as more of a quirky coming of age teen dramedy, starring me, a confused young Chinese-American girl who is desperate to find herself amidst a blizzard of schoolwork and college applications. I would also cast Michael Cera as my (currently non-existent) love interest and compile a careful, but seemingly effortless soundtrack full of sad, lo-fi tunes.

But wait, I'm getting ahead of myself. Let us travel back to my childhood yet again. Everything was pretty idyllic for a while, but of course, it could not stay that way, or else this would be a boring movie. At this point, my family situation is very strained, and it has been for almost as long as I can remember. In fact, my father is yelling at my little brother as I type this. What a strange coincidence, except it is not because my father is yelling 80% of the time. As for my mother, she is not the stereotypical "Tiger Mom" (thank goodness), but she is also not the most understanding. When I was diagnosed with depression, she tried very hard to convince the doctor that it was a simple misunderstanding. These are very significant factors in my plans to attend college somewhere far, far away. Certainly, my intense teen angst is probably up there as well.But I've basically always known where I want to go, and I think even little 2nd grade Nancy somehow knew she would have to do well in school in order to make things happen. And even if she did not, she had pushy parents who made sure to remind her.

Present day me seems to have forgotten this principle a little, eschewing precious studying for those quintessential young adult experiences, as in working a part-time job at a fast fashion store, spending money I do not have, dancing in the front row at concerts, sneaking into frat parties, buying the largest fountain drink at gas stations, getting my nose pierced, and tattooing myself with a sewing needle and India ink. Très rebelle! Really, I've been hoping this will help me find myself or something, but maybe that's just not even possible and I need to stop over-analyzing everything in the moment. As the famed philosopher Miley Cyrus once stated, it's not about the supposed final product, "it's the climb."

**The Fundamentals of Who I Am and Who I Want to BeAnonymous**

**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 don't want to be a product of my environment. I want my environment to be a product of me.” (Jack Nicholson – The Departed)

When I was a child, my best friend was (wait for it) a stick.

It became an extension of my arm, a conduit for my imagination. Using it as saber, hockey stick, and countless other tools gave 7 year-old me control over a narrative far more compelling than any dinky car or action figure could offer. My thoughts exploded as I wielded it; desperate, whirling lunges could repel marauding invaders, a sweeping shot would win Pakistan the hockey World Cup. The stick was powerless until I gave it life, energy, and meaning, and playing with it awakened a desire to control my life's whole narrative, a desire that has resonated with me well beyond childhood. It offered an broad canvas where the richness of the narrative depended only on how my ideas shone through.

Creativity: As I gripped the stick in different ways, double-handed, laterally, and backwards, I created distinct personas. I had an extraordinary opportunity to experiment, weaving outlandish plotlines and character dynamics; each one had to be more daring than the last. I pictured myself as a warrior in battle, a statuesque warlock, and a hockey player with raw talent, all contexts driven purely by the verve of my ideas. Creative thinking seeped into other avenues of my life, too, helping me tackle real-world problems. After a bomb blast in my city, a group of my peers and I realized that an unconventional approach was needed to get desensitized Karachiites to truly donate in droves. Our solution: an independent, student-run play whose creative appeal led to considerable proceeds, creating a relief effort for families whose lives had been derailed. Building unity in the face of extreme violence was no easy task, but a small step brought much-needed optimism into the picture, giving my peers and me the ability to unleash our imaginations for positive change.

Simplicity: The stick is, in essence, a piece of everyday scenery. Its appearance is unimpressive, but it can be a powerful medium for expressing complex ideas and thoughts. This theme of resourcefulness is central to my effectiveness as a nationally ranked debater. On the debate floor, I can express advanced ideas with clarity, using the flow of rhetoric and analysis to create a compelling picture, persuading judges and audiences alike. As captain, I channel the strengths of my teammates, recognizing that a coherent narrative can only be created once disparate pieces are harmoniously brought together in efficient ways. I have journeyed to this position of respect, sometimes facing stiff competition and self-doubt but overcoming it all, and my narrative has come full circle.

But is my narrative meaningful?

As I go to school every morning, I cross paths with children who can only dream of an education and see that so many of my countrymen have been robbed of the right to control their own narratives. The people I brush shoulders with in Pakistan exist as pitiful ghost writers of their own stories, watching as forces beyond their control trample the promise of an original text. The challenge, as I continue my journey into the vast world of college and beyond, is to find ways to intertwine the narratives of those around me with mine – truly making my environment a product of *my*actions – and to bring about change in simple and creative ways.

**Trail of Breadcrumbs Chandranata Rekso Sosrodjojo**

**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.**

My eyes were greeted by the luminous glow of fluorescent lights and sterile white walls of Rumah Sakit Bunda (Bunda Hospital). This was a stark contrast to the escalating chaos and barbarity in the dilapidated Indonesian streets. In due time, the quagmire of rape and murder that pullulated the streets, spawned the notorious 1998 Indonesian Reformation. These white walls did not shelter me for long. I could not hide behind my own race. I was born a Chinese Indonesian, the ultimate scapegoat for the devastation to come. In 1998, this heated pocket of conflict finally burst, bludgeoning my homeland. Amidst death, life was thrust upon me in the form of a shrieking wrinkled baby girl, my sister. In an instant, if possible, the one-year-old me felt a moment of pure and raw happiness.

Almost half a decade later, the happiness I reveled in was dashed by so called 'disagreements'. The unfortunate differences between my parents had slowly ruptured their love. One cannot be a squabbling child in the midst of crossfire. It was not a premeditated decision but a necessity for me to then become my own parent. I was orphaned on that day. I was abandoned. I was thus obliged to be the father and mother to my sister and myself. I learned to become my own person, I had to. This was the 10-year-old me; tall and lanky, walking through the muddy aisles of the wet market, treading across the linoleum floors of school, wandering through life on my own.

I refused to succumb to the suppressed anger that infested my home. I refused to spew the same venom my parents have. I refused to take up the gauntlet of revenge upon my parents. I thus tamed the raging child within me to persevere and shoulder the responsibility of becoming a father to my little sister. This engendered a quiet strength that has become unique to my character and persona. I drew upon this strength to shelter my sister from my parent's blunders and fight for a future untainted by my past. In time, I too garnered the patience and capacity to forgive the flaws of my parents. By transforming my childlike mentality and adopting that of a father, I learned that forgiveness is a contribution from the soul and maturity of the mind is an ongoing journey.

Spurning my childhood and accelerating the process to adulthood was painful, but I was roused by the fear that my sister would be consumed by the same grief I faced. It took patience to have the small têtê-à-tête's with my sister, grasp the hair raising issues of a girl's adolescence and handle the nauseating "boy issues". Upon reflection, I realize perhaps my greatest achievement is my sister, her childhood is a product of my perseverance and struggle. As such my first decade of living has taught me my first life lesson; the difference between existing, surviving, and living. I existed in the silence and shadow of my parents' loveless marriage. I survived a broken home. I am now finally living.

Ultimately, I became the Hansel from my own Brothers Grimm's folktale. I was trapped in a gingerbread house, and was expected to be devoured by the witches and demons of my past. But I refused to stoop so low that my lips would kiss the grounds of my predestined fate, for it would mean my voice would forever be but vibrations through this earth. I thus followed the trail of breadcrumbs home. Although all there ever was, was a house. Not a home. But that is not where the story ends. The story ends when I build my own home on the tainted grounds where the hollowed house stood.

**The "Unsolvable" Cube Brandon Joshua Dixon**

**The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to do so. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)**

Wedding bells were ringing in the background, and my fingers were deftly picking their way through the Rubik's Cube concealed under my blazer. The last wedding I had attended was in fourth grade -- a bubble boy in a lavender suit**.**Today, my only role was to behold my two favorite teachers as they got married.

Except, I couldn't quite focus on their wedding. *Clack Clack Clack*went the cube as I spun through an algorithm that my Algebra teacher (the bride) had taught me. My mother bristled beside me, but I cared not for her disapproval. My Algebra teacher and her fiancé, my Physics teacher, had given me my first Rubik's Cube, and I was hell-bent on solving it.

They would often be the sponsors of my obsessions throughout my high school career. Before the Rubik's Cube, I had taken up YuGiOh cards. After school I would hike to their classrooms and play against upperclassmen duelists. At first I couldn't beat any of them, and my Physics teacher (whose seemingly vitriolic banter was aimed at trying to encourage my growth) reminded me of those defeats daily**.**It wasn't long before I was good enough with YuGiOh cards that I could defeat almost every other duelist in the school, except for one senior who brutally eviscerated me with her skills. Till this day I have never managed to beat her.

Eventually, my Physics teacher suggested that I try my hand at something else**.** He ducked into the storage room adjacent to his classroom and returned with a box full of dusty Rubik's cubes. He looked straight into my eyes and said "I bet you won't be able finish one of these," before thrusting the box into my hands. He knew that I relish the idea of a challenge and excel in instances when someone tells me I cannot accomplish a goal. "Bad bet," was my response.

So ensued months of interminable hours spent probing the cube, trying to coerce it into its solved position. I fumbled with it during meals, after studying, and while walking home from school. I surrendered myself to trying to solve the Rubik's Cube, but it seemed like no matter how many times I came close to solving it, I could never get the colors to fall into neat, orderly rows.

The morning of the wedding, I woke up determined to complete the cube before the ceremony ended. I snatched the cube off of my dresser and began to work, but no matter how furiously I tried to cajole the cube into solving itself, it continued to twist into infuriatingly random assortments of colors.

As the ceremony started, my attempts became more frantic. Eventually, I diverted my eyes completely and focused on the cube. I probably would have grappled with it right through the end of the wedding, had it not been for an interruption by my senior rival. She sat down next to me, plucked the cube from my fingers, twisted one row into place and then solved the Cube within 30 seconds of elegant finger work. She gave me an amused smirk and slapped a note into my hand. When I glanced at it, I saw that it was from my Physics teacher, telling me that he had deliberately sabotaged the cubes so that they would be unsolvable, regardless of if I used the correct algorithms. He had purposefully given me an unreachable goal, simply to see if I would give up.

"Sometimes the odds are stacked against you. But with that amount of perseverance you might just find a way to win even when it seems impossible," said my Physics teacher after pulling me aside the next day. Life is full of potentially insurmountable challenges. My experience with the "seemingly unsolvable" Rubik's Cube galvanized my drive to tackle the impossibilities in life and transform them into opportunities, to face the barriers that only hard work can overcome.

**Why Economics? Anonymous**

**For applicants to Columbia College, please tell us what from your current and past experiences (either academic or personal) attracts you specifically to the field or fields of study that you noted in the Member Questions section. If you are currently undecided, please write about any field or fields in which you may have an interest at this time. (300 words or less)**

“TZX Corp will buy Tyler’s store in a cash for stock transaction. Consider external economic factors and anti-trust regulations.”

Cases like these at the DECA International Career Development Conference pushed me beyond my comfort zone, and helped me uncover my love for business strategy. I believe that studying Economics with Business Management at Columbia is the next step in developing my interests towards a career that serves society.

Since my freshman year, I’ve nurtured a hobby for refurbishing and selling smartphones. While my interest started off technical, I slowly realized I was more excited by profitability ratios, calculating costs, and making sales than I was by repairing hardware. In addition, I participated in the National Economics Challenge, applying principles of macro and microeconomics to solve real-life scenarios. My team placed first in the Wild Card competition and advanced to nationals, placing 12th in the U.S. I’ve taken the initiative to self-study Coursera courses in corporate finance, financial accounting, and marketing; I’m currently taking operations management.

Economics can help us better understand the world we live in, providing a lens through which we can visualize solutions to seemingly insurmountable issues. I aim to become an entrepreneur who uses economics to combat social problems. Development and welfare economics are two areas that interest me: I’m fascinated by how governments promote economic development through health, education, and workplace conditions and how welfare economics can quantify benefits to society using social welfare functions. Through Economics and Business Management at Columbia, I’ll be better equipped to analyze social issues and to alleviate social problems.

Einstein mused that given an hour to save the world, he would spend 55 minutes studying the problem. As a future economist, I will use the discipline of economics to develop a better grasp of problems before attempting to create solutions.

**I Wonder About Meatballs 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.**

*Grind the spices in the molcajete. Taste the gritty texture on your tongue.*

"No, mija," my grandmother says as she shows me how to mash the cumin, garlic, onions, and tomatillo. She is in Michigan for the summer, and I think she is homesick. After all, she spends most of her time cooking traditional Mexican dishes that remind her of home. The dishes are not ones I typically associate with Mexico, but, then again, I have not lived there in fourteen years.

Sometimes my grandma asks me to cook with her. We make *albóndigas* or meatballs and smash the spices in the molcajete. My grandma sighs a little when she sees it is relatively unused; she explains that the remaining traces of other salsas made in the molcajete give the food a unique flavor.

*Put some milk in a bowl. Add bread and let it soak in the milk. This will make the albóndigas soft and sturdy.*

When I was little, my mother wrapped quesadillas in tinfoil for my lunch. I ate these quietly and carefully, trying to attract the least amount of attention possible. I desperately asked my mother to pack a PB&J sandwich instead.

My mother refused to buy peanut butter. She braided my hair into two tight pigtails and taught me to read in Spanish. I watched jealously as the other kids began reading Junie B. Jones, and I stubbornly resisted the Spanish vowels.

Guests to my house were greeted by vibrant colors, tinga, and my mother's broken English. I felt myself cringe when she messed up a verb conjugation, and I watched with horror as the guests bit into a tostada.

*Integrate the herbs and spices into the beef. Roll the beef into small, even balls.*

Now my grandmother is humming along to Los Panchos. Her hands are strong and fierce as she smashes the spices together. I can see that she is comforted by the rich smell that is filling the kitchen.

I try to follow her instructions because I want to bond with her. She will return to Mexico soon, and I will not have her hands to guide me. I want to remember the recipe so I can recreate the rich odor that my body is instinctively pulled towards, even as my mind disagrees.

Mostly I just watch her graceful movements. She cooks with a steady rhythm; I have not seen gracefulness like hers except when I watch my mother dance and see the way she is able to sway her hips. I want so badly to have that innate sense of rhythm. My mother once tried to teach me cumbia, but I was too foolish and embarrassed to learn.

*Bite down and taste the tomatillo in the meatballs. Do not forget it's there.*

I am gulping down the albóndigas while Los Panchos play Spanish guitar riffs. The albóndigas are bold, zesty, and delicious. To me, they speak to the distinct Mexican flavor my grandmother transmits into her food. It is a flavor I have tried to ignore for many years. But it is delicious, and I eat voraciously. I am undeniably Mexican, and, for once, I am proud of this. For years my mother tried to show me how important my culture was, but I was too afraid to listen. Now I have tasted Mexico in the albóndigas and have felt it in my grandmother's strong hands. I will continue to dig for my once buried Latin spirit. I will place it on the stove and let it cook, watching the edges crisp and ripen. I will not forget the chile.

**Hooked on Teaching Rebekka Anne Strom**

**The Statement of Purpose should be 2-3 pages in length, double-spaced. It should describe your academic and professional background, plans for graduate school, your professional goals, and how and why you are a good fit for the program. It should be tailored to this college and your specific program of interest.**

A week after New Year’s in 2011, the cherry blossom tree outside my apartment’s living room erupted in pink and my best friend died. Two weeks later, I stared into the eyes of seventeen eager 9-year-olds in my first classroom. By the end of the semester, my fingertips were stained with paint from every color of the rainbow, complementing the crimson blisters that settled themselves on the backs of both heels. Measuring cups, silly string, and yo-yos were strategically situated on my desk chair. That winter, I declared myself an English and Spanish double major at Oglethorpe University. Settled in the worn gray chair in the Registrar’s Office, I was flooded by the incredible possibility—which everyone has, but few use—to create for the better.

Since serving as a fourth-grade Language Arts teacher in my sophomore year, I have become “hooked” on education. In the classroom, I aim to create an engaging and challenging environment that fosters communication and collaboration. In an academic realm conventionally ensnared by standardized testing, I am the teacher who, reminded by my grandfather’s love of humorous delight, regularly DJs “dance breaks” when the material gets tedious, cooks homemade pizza to introduce angles and symmetry, emcees American Idol competitions to teach state capitals, and invites students to present topics on the “Strom Stream” – from a Shakespearean monologue to how *Ninjago* Legos simulate the Battle of Bunker Hill.

I believe that the Teachers College at Columbia University is the ideal setting for pursing my Master’s in the Teaching of English; after all, the Teachers College encourages work that negotiates multicultural boundaries within urban settings, recognizing that each student learns differently. Within Columbia’s English Education program, I would seek to study under Dr. Sheridan Blau, to promote critical thinking and visual literacy by constructing effective dialogic and imaginative processes within the context of literature and composition. Like my research on storytelling in a digital age for Harvard University’s Project Zero conference, Dr. Blau’s work illustrates how to foster inferential comprehension within diverse learning environments, validating the idea that a shift in emphasis from explicit to implicit instruction and assessment validates the value of quality communication and, thus, seeks to meet the pivotal challenges of today. Because I emphasize children’s literature as a method for curriculum-based assessments, Dr. John Henry Brown’s analysis on the Teaching of Reading Instruction within the scope of theoretical and pedagogical principles also fascinates me. Finally, by building upon the research of my independent study thesis *To Instruct and Delight: A Historical Survey of 18th and 19th Century English Didactic Children’s Literature*, I would like to further explore how to best reach an adolescent audience via the written word, creating an emphasis on the relationship between texts and readerships. Therefore, Dr. Ruth Vinz’s research on the synergistic relationship between cultural relevance and linguistic responsiveness within secondary education is a facet I would like to study in relation to literacy and language acquisition in high-needs schools.

Throughout my graduate journey, I aim to earn a Master’s in the Teaching of English. During my time as a student teacher in a classroom with 70% of students diagnosed with learning challenges, I recognized firsthand that every student learns differently; thus, the curriculum—relevant, problem-based, and interdisciplinary—should be presented with a variety of “multiple intelligences” in mind. Thus, I seek to design methods of developmental reading strategies to implement organizational techniques in earlier grades that impact future literary capacities. Building upon my experience in Curriculum Development in the lower and middle grades, I will research how 21st century practices can increase accuracy in fluency and comprehension at appropriate and extending grade levels. Additionally, I hope to research how a “new world of children” in England and the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries is starkly relevant to today’s instruction; such an inquiry could be conducted even—or especially—under the guise of “amusement.” Indeed, learning *should* be fun! From exploring areas within literature, I would like to effectively incorporate classic texts in my future classrooms and therefore, and aim to understand the progression of children’s literature as a genre and as a pedagogical method for Curriculum-Based Assessments within the context of oral fluency, reading comprehension, and grade-level proclivity. During my time in graduate school, my overarching objective will challenge me to most effectively reach adolescent audiences with the delight of the written word via literary techniques, grammatical styles, and the development of characters, plots, and themes. To that end, I aim to be a teacher who encourages her students to treat writing as a craft rather than simply as another box to check on a college transcript.

Education, then, is more than a hobby, a chosen discipline, or merely a line on my résumé; rather, this decision tests my intellectual stamina while providing an outlet to give back to my community and make a mark on my world. Indeed, I feel called to be an educator, inspiring students to recognize the meaningful relevancy of English prose, novels, and research. From William Blake’s juxtaposition and Shakespeare’s unmatched wit to Jane Austen’s social criticism and Geoffrey Chaucer’s endearing colloquialism, I hope to equip students with confidence in literature, instilling a lifelong zeal for the written word. Energized by the desire to succeed, I chose to follow what I love to do, seizing the limit of happiness, meaning, and fulfillment every day. C.S. Lewis said, “The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles, but to irrigate deserts.” I believe that education should equip students to be culturally, linguistically, and cognitively prepared to thrive in our ever-changing society. As a teacher, I will inspire my students to take an active role in their own learning, systematically redesigning the objectives of “typical” education to encompass meaning, relevancy, and resolution in the twenty-first century. If accepted into the Teachers College at Columbia University, I aim to utilize this instructional schema to its fullest potential, challenging my students to achieve excellence in the classroom—and in life.

**Taking a Handicap in Hand 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.**

I sat quietly at my desk on the morning of September 4th, 2005, steeling myself for my first day of second grade. Thus far, I had managed to deflect my classmates’ earnest conversation attempts, and my seeming indifference made them wonder about this new student. The teacher finally claimed the attention of my classmates and, one by one, they stated their names, their favorite foods, and their favorite animals. Soon, the moment I had been dreading arrived, and all eyes were on me.

“My n-n-name’s An-n-nita.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my teacher’s lips curve into a smile, and my classmates exchange looks of amusement. They probably attributed this first disfluency to nerves. However, after I spent the next several minutes struggling through ‘P-p-izza’ and ‘D-d-ogs,’ their looks of amusement turned to confusion. My secret exposed and my heart pounding, I finished my introduction.

Because my stutter was at its worst when I was young girl, these classroom scenes were as frequent as they were awful. Each time I raised my hand in class, I risked mangling words as simple as my own name. My teachers and the school administration did their best to protect me from my classmates, but to what extent? My peers’ snide glances and whispered mimicry were things that the administration could do nothing about.

I have particular difficulty pronouncing hard consonants; the toughest are words containing ‘N’s, ‘L’s, ‘P’s and ‘D’s. To most children, these letters are punctuated sounds strung together to form emphatic conversation. To me, these letters are obstacles, uncomfortably and incessantly lodged in my throat. In my speech therapy classes, I could fluently recite the texts my counselor set before me. But this confidence deserted me in front of my peers. They teased me mercilessly, calling me ‘retarded’ and regaling me with choruses of “An-n-nita”s as I walked in and out of the lunchroom. As a young girl I was silent, not by choice, but from fear of ridicule. Though my thoughts were colorful and bold, they were censored by something within me that I thought I couldn’t control.

When I was twelve years old, my dad, from whom I inherited my stuttering, hoisted me into his arms and said that just because I had a different way of speaking did not mean that I should be ashamed. He explained that my desperation to hide my stuttering only further reinforced it. By embracing my uniqueness, I could challenge others to accept me as well. As to my intelligence, he said something that has inspired me ever since:

“Retarded? No. In fact, stutterers are intelligent because their thoughts come faster than their lips can move.”

I was so galvanized by his words that I resolved to either rid myself of my speech impediment, or finally accept it as part of my identity: a quirk of the “An-n-nita” that I strive to be. I developed a love of language and vocabulary, using both as means to survival. I read voraciously because I wanted to so expand my vocabulary that I could replace a word I was having trouble saying with a new and more powerful one. Eventually, my love of words fostered a love of writing. Indeed, writing is a seamless method of expressing myself, in that I can connect with others without uttering a word. Though my stutter has vastly diminished, I still find solace in writing, and continue to let it speak for me.

To paraphrase James Baldwin, the things that hurt one most often help one most. I came into the United States as a six year old girl who hid behind her stutter and struggled to find her voice. Today, however, I can proudly say that stuttering has enriched my life. By taking my handicap in hand, I have learned how to find value in my voice and in myself.

**My Hair Is My Culture Isaiah Hines**

**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 *never* forget a bad haircut. In my experience, a bad haircut can only be described as a humiliating, disturbing, and devastating experience that assuredly leaves me with a deep sense of being wronged. While I recognize how melodramatic that is, for me, my hair is a lot more than just dead skin cells and fibrous proteins. It’s my preferred method of self-expression, a cultural connector, an art form, a security blanket, an affirmation of my blackness, and so much more. It’s an integral piece of my racial identity, an identity that’s been particularly difficult yet vital to preserve in the predominantly white community I've grown up in. Unfortunately, I wasn’t always aware of the tremendous power of Black hair and what that means to me, and it’s taken me a lot of bad haircuts to see it.

Throughout my life, I’ve had more disastrous trims than I care to admit; an unfortunate fact that I attribute in part to Vermont's lack of barbers who are able to cut hair like my own. With a Black population struggling to exceed one percent, it’s not surprising that Vermont’s hairstylists tend to be thoroughly confused when it comes to Black hair. However, one of my most recent botched cuts occurred not in Vermont but rather in a foreign country of similar racial homogeneity. While studying abroad in Germany this summer, I received the worst haircut of my life.

Admittedly, I knew the risks of trusting an unfamiliar barber with my hair. But for whatever reason, I did it anyway. I’ll never forget how I felt following that first—and last—German haircut. Indignant and ashamed, I hurried home to my host family. I struggled to explain my displeasure in German, feeling even more embarrassed when I couldn’t recall the word for “haircut”. Disappointingly, but not surprisingly, they told me that I was overreacting, that it was just hair, and that it would grow back. Needless to say, I was distraught.

What my host family didn’t understand was the essential role that hair plays in my Black identity and culture. Black hair has long been misunderstood, and yet, it’s something that means so much to Black folks everywhere, myself included. Although the German barber meant no harm, he had inadvertently committed an offense that’s nearly unforgivable in the world of Black hair. Not long ago, I would have felt silly for being so upset over a bad haircut, but by then, I was fully aware of the role that my hair plays in my black identity and I knew my feelings were justified.

In retrospect, my middle school experience was filled with bad haircuts. However, at the time, I couldn’t articulate my feelings about those experiences like I can now. At that point in my life, I was just beginning to understand my racial identity and how my hair fits into it. As I got older, I began to pay more attention to my hair, and more attention to the quality of my haircuts. In my struggle to find space for myself and my hair, I shaved my head out of frustration. I figured if I couldn’t find a barber that treated my hair with respect, I’d simply cut it myself.

Essentially, haircuts have been my way of gaining control and claiming my hair as my own. They’ve allowed me to navigate my racial identity independently and authentically. Perhaps that’s why bad haircuts tend to be particularly memorable. Due to the connection between my hair and my Blackness, it’s easy for me to see a botched haircut as an attack on my racial identity. However, no bad haircut could get me feel something other than pride for the curls and kinks that make me who I am. With each haircut, good or bad, I feel more connected to my truest and most authentic Black self.

**Passing the Torch Nannette Boakye**

**Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.**

“It is your turn” were the four words that I, at age 12, feared would be uttered from my mother’s lips. I knew that is was only a matter of time until my mother would send me off to the Dome Market, my local market in Ghana, to purchase the “foodstuffs” that were needed for our household. It was only a matter of time before I would enter womanhood.

I paced back and forth on the vast area of land where the market would be held on Sunday to prepare myself for my “test.” The terrain seemed endless when vacated of the thousands of merchants who carried metal basins filled with goods on their heads to their tables, where they loudly bargained and bartered with the townspeople. I looked down at the ground and found thousands of different shoe imprints, all left from the thousands of people who had gathered here last weekend, but luckily I had memorized my mother’s steps from years of following her through the market every Sunday.

I paid close attention to the way she always inspected the “foodstuffs” at each table before proceeding the bargain with the vendor to get a better deal. It was enthralling to watch my mother never go over budget each week and sometimes return home with more money than she had the previous week. In Ghanaian society, this skill made a woman a woman.

On Sunday, she passed me the torch as she handed me a list of items and a wallet with the grocery money. With my mother’s blessing, I anxiously headed off to the market, knowing that I must return with all the items on the list and some change. When I finally reached the edge of the market, I could not turn back, and my inability to succumb to fear overpowered my doubts. I made my way to my mother’s most loyal market sellers and was commended for shopping on my own at such a young age. My mission was completed in two hours, but my mother would be the judge of whether I had passed my “test.”

Although the bags I lifted home were heavy, I walked with ease, not only because I had met the goal, but also because I had found confidence in myself. In my own way, I had found what it meant to be a woman. Being a woman was more than being a good bargainer at the market; it was about the ability to take on a new challenge, and to find the inner confidence and resilience to meet the task at hand. To be strong, independent, and risk-taking for the sake of yourself, or even for your household, was to become a woman.

When I got home, my mother congratulated me on successfully completing my “test.” I had not only proven to her, but also to myself that I was ready to embark on my journey of maturity.

**Developing an App Nannette Boakye**

**What single activity listed in the activity section of your Common Application are you most proud of and why? (150 words or less)**

As a selected participant for the Medical and Education Perspectives program at Johns Hopkins University, I was given the opportunity to put my passion for medicine into practice. With support from a fellow classmate and a current Biomedical Engineering student, I created a user friendly mobile phone application that informed the user whether or not a given mole was cancerous based on its asymmetry, border, color, and diameter. I was amazed by the simplicity of app, as users could receive lifesaving results at the tips of their fingers from just uploading a photo to the application. I walked away with positive feedback from entrepreneurs, doctors, and graduate students; just as importantly, I made a medical contribution to society, one which serves as an early contribution in my prospective medical career path.

**My Interests Michelle Anna Brier**

**For applicants to Columbia College, please tell us what from your current and past experiences (either academic or personal) attracts you specifically to the field or fields of study that you noted in the Member Questions section. If you are currently undecided, please write about any field or fields in which you may have an interest at this time.**

For as long as I can remember, the concept of currency and the exchange of goods and services has always fascinated me. Growing up, I observed cashiers nonchalantly letting people walk away with goods in exchange for nothing more than a swipe of a plastic card. I saw how only a few pieces of green paper could be exchanged for tangible, useful products. Being intrinsically a part of the economy myself, I found it natural to wonder at systems of production, distribution, and consumption -- how did this whole system work? What I found particularly fascinating about economics was the breadth of the field: economics may be applied to finance but also to business, government, politics, and social institutions. When I interned for an investment banker over the summer at Blaylock Beal Van, LLC, I observed firsthand the impact of the economy on the financial world.

Growing up in a politically involved and opinionated family, I also developed an appreciation for politics early on. I often found myself debating political issues eagerly with friends and family, sharing links to interesting articles, and laughing at political satire shows. My participation in Irvington High School’s “We the People” team solidified this appreciation of politics and government as I had to completely immerse myself in the political science field in order to succeed in competitions.

As I began to discern worldly applications of my interests, I discovered an enjoyment of economics in that it could be combined with other interests, particularly political science. Columbia’s combined major options, such as “Economics - Political Science,” allow me to bring together different, but related, interests for a more personally fitting major based on experiences that have shaped who I am today.

**Flipping the Boat Anonymous**

**The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

Your world seems to fall here. Air so cold and fingers so numb, you would barely know when it happened. But you do. As your grip slips, it takes only seconds before you realize. Gravity unforgivingly pulls you from your scull and into the frigid grasp of the river. Enveloped by waves, time stands still. Weeks of progress rowing were diluted with one careless mistake. Some people rocked the boat, and I flipped it. The truth is, that rationale made my failure easier to digest. Failure was something that demanded my justification, commanded my thoughts, and seized my progress. It imprisoned my freedom, and freed my fears. It disgusted me. Floating to the surface, these buoyant thoughts remained; How would I free myself? As my double’s partner and I speed back to the dock in my coach’s launch, a deluge of emotion surfaces. Is it anger? Frustration? Disappointment? Denial? Refusing to incarcerate these feelings, I let them flow naturally. Slowly a bolder, more novel concept surfaces, Acceptance. I deal with an uncomfortable reality; I flipped the boat. Half-expecting the walls of my psyche to come crashing down, I noticeably wince. Nothing happens. After the numbing pain of the cold has departed, these questions still float within me. Standing on the dock, I appreciate the weight of the waves. They charge forward to an unmarked destination, without fear of the unknown. Trusting the current, they invest themselves fully into the now. Why can’t I be like them? But then, I notice a backsplash. And then another. Can the seemingly uniform power and majesty of a river current experience resistance? Even nature engages in momentary power struggles with that which battles progress. So why show fear in doing the same? Here is where I did flip the boat. A fear of the unknown no longer confines me. That day, I had flipped the boat on my personality and ignited a side of myself that now burns for adventure and mastery of an unknown world.Progress came slowly, but those opaque waters could never regain the power they once had. As my oars found confidence in gliding over waves, so did I. I found myself coming 2nd in the novice 4x state championship. I found myself rowing in varsity races. I found myself because I learned that failure is not something to dread. Failure is a learning experience. It does not imprison, but rather liberates. Opening to an endless corridor of possibility, failure is the only key to finding success, to reaching my dreams.As what is distant approaches, I cannot help but feel my old psyche creeping, fear of failure stalking. But I refuse to allow vulnerabilities to keep me from the future. Pursuing dreams and aspirations that differ from the norm is not someone else’s destiny; it is mine. The world is constantly redefined by those who know their fear, and allow it to propel the future. It evolves on the backs of those who encourage exploration into the murkier waters, those who are glad to flip the boat.

**My Next Four Years Adekunle Balogun**

**Why Columbia?**

Rolling a suitcase through the Morning Heights gates with a backpack slung over my shoulder, the view ahead of me is bright. Through College Walk, undergraduate students pace past me to catch the subway on 116th St. The breeze from their stride, reveals not haste, but eagerness to see what a new city internship has to offer. As I look to my left, I see students, sprawled across the steps of Low Library in passionate conversation. I overhear their plans to engineer solutions for Columbia design contests -- plans to save the world. Climbing the steps towards Alma Mater, I stare into the face of wisdom. For the next four years, I will be engaged and motivated by a group of people as passionate for change in the world as I am. This is my vision.

While Columbia challenges its student body to exercise its education, it feeds a community where the students compel each other to relentlessly pursue answers to global questions. As students do research in the medical center or work for social progress through clubs, they represent the university’s innovative culture. The ethos of Columbia is that of a school where students never concede defeat, taking initiative to engage any opportunity that crosses their path. Students and faculty alike work in harmony to apply their talents, motivated by nothing except an intrinsic passion for progress.

Walking through Morning Heights gates, I discovered the real texture of Columbia, home to a group of people who engage themselves with the problems around them and work tirelessly in pursuit of their answers. At Columbia, we never stop pacing, we never stop planning, and we never stop staring because opportunity does not wait -- not for a second.

**A Sticky Problem Raymond Zhu**

**What aspect of the Columbia community, outside of the classroom, would you most want to impact and why? (150 words or less)**

A few years ago, I discovered that Columbia University was having a small crisis. Students were stealing large quantities of Nutella, which Columbia had just begun offering in John Jay. Surveys attempting to solve the problem were largely useless, and student publications blew the incident out of proportion. Naturally, as a member of student government and of the youth mentorship program of city government, I itched to look for a solution as I had done so many times before with my school’s student council. As a representative, I worked with faculty and students alike to solve problems concerning lack of funding, school event logistics, as well as to mobilize the student body. At Columbia, I would use my experience working with not only school officials but also city and state governments to find the best solutions to the problems I find, whether they concern hazelnut spread or not.

**Making Space for My Muse Anonymous**

**Please write a letter to your roommate.**

Dear roommate,

Don’t be afraid if you hear noises at night. It’s probably just my muse going out for a walk. I know, she’s really loud. But she never listens to me when I tell her to keep it down.

And she’ll be back in the morning, so please make room for her. She’s greedy and takes up a lot of space. She’s really annoying and she’s also a lot like a rabbit. If you don’t pet her and give her enough attention, she’ll die. Maybe it’s for the best.

Why do I put up with her? She’s my muse. Without her….I don’t know how I’d live. My writing would be absolutely crap, and..I don’t know how I’d live.

What’s I’m trying to say is that right now she has gone to the fridge to get us snacks and that’s why I’m so incoherent in explaining what I mean. Oh good, she’s back. With guac.

My muse is like a lovable golden retriever. Long golden locks. Big brown eyes. A smile as bright as the stars. A smile that can light up all of Palo Alto and cure cancer and -

Sorry. She took over the keyboard for a few seconds, while I was distracted by my guac. Do you see what I have to put up with?

I’m just kidding. She’s the inspiration for my stories and she is the reason I create and she’s amazing. Can’t cure cancer, but amazing nevertheless.

I apologize in advance.

**Quadrilingual Anonymous**

**Discuss a department you're interested in.**

I am quadrilingual. Sure, it sounds fancy, but as a biracial child of two immigrants, being quadrilingual feels natural to me. English. My mother tongue. No explanation required. As an infant my mom would teach me words by holding up a ball and saying, “Ball, qui, bala.” I’d learn Chinese and Greek for the next seventeen years. The fourth language came in seventh grade, when I started learning French.

Languages are fascinating to me because there are so many little intricacies within a language that just aren’t so easily translated into another. You’d think to “poser un lapin” in French would mean to ask a rabbit a question. But no. It means to stand someone up. Or how about the fact that when Greeks say the English expression “it’s all Greek to me,” they say, “Eisai san na you miles Kinezika,” which translates to “it’s like you’re talking to me in Chinese.” And then in Chinese, there’s actually no real word for “yes.” There’s she de, which translates more to “it is so,” and there’s dui which translates more to “that’s correct.” But there’s no word that actually means yes. And the closest translation I’ve found to a more colloquial “yeah” is a grunt of affirmation, similar to cutting the American “uhuh” in two and using the first half.

Thus as a lover of both writing and languages, it is no accident that I’m drawn to Cornell’s Comparative Literature department, which will allow me to directly apply my knowledge of languages to analyzing literature. Classes such as COML 4367 and COML 3985 will allow me to study literature in the context of the language it was originally written in. In an increasingly globally-interconnected society, I think it’s important to study literature as it was originally intended to be read, so that we can explore similarities while still appreciating the linguistic differences that make writing across cultures so unique.

**Tempo Giusto Anonymous**

**Write about an experience which changed your views on something. Common application essay prompt - 2016**

I glared at the plastic contraption before me and tried one last time to summon any telekinesis powers.

Nope. Nothing. The device’s arm stubbornly oscillated at a regular pace, like a mocking tongue across a palate. I sighed dejectedly and shut the piano’s cover. At seven, I was partial to the dramatic.

The Metronome. Causer of anguish from the day it arrived from the Jumeirah Centre. It first coldly informed me that my playing was too fast and erratic, lagging obstinately behind. Later, it declared that I wasn’t playing fast enough; my notes were falling over themselves, struggling to keep up. It paid no heed to my attempts to will it to match my fingers, and my teachers’ faces grew longer the more I practiced.

The word ‘Gifted’ is thrown around unsparingly amongst the Indian diaspora. Seeing the remotest competence in a child, adults are quick to brand them as one of God’s chosen and immediately set them to work, lest the world should lose out on such prodigious talent.

That unforgiving object spared no punches in proclaiming that I lacked such talents and that pursuing music was therefore futile. I had seen Gifts firsthand; when certain older students performed at the Embassy Concerts, they weren’t just playing.They were delivering pieces of musical tradition to the audience and inviting them to marvel. They were never bogged down with the technicalities of beat regularity. I became increasingly frustrated; had I done anything in previous lives to condemn me to this state of un-Giftedness? Which of the 330 million Hindu deities allotted Gift quotas? What exactly was their reasoning behind allowing such glaring disparities in Giftedness levels?

In one of my fits of angst, I started to explore the metronome mechanism. The device was completely analog and therefore alien and fascinating. I spent half an hour fiddling; I observed how winding the key shifted a gear and compressed a spring. Sliding the weight adjusted the speed at which the lower end of the arm oscillated past the teeth of the primary gear, making a click every time it struck a tooth.

Somewhere, I had a lightbulb – or perhaps flickering-to-life tube light - moment. I had taken apart what I had built up to be the vessel of my fury and found absolutely no hint of an animus. This was nothing but an inanimate tool, whose sole purpose was to help me to identify my mistakes in my endeavor to improve.

Later, I sat down on the piano stool and instead of willing the metronome to keep up with me, I set to a slower tempo and practiced from there. I took its admonitions with, if not appreciation, acceptance. And quite magically, my teachers’ faces grew shorter and shorter, as did mine. I thought of my metronome in quite unexpected situations - and gradually realized that there was so much beyond ‘Giftedness’.

My loss of a debate in class wasn’t brutal disclosure of my lack of speaking Gifts; it was an opportunity to appreciate and to learn from the winners. Struggling with an orchestra piece wasn’t a cue to self-indulgently ponder why others had cartilage structures more suited to playing the flute; it was a message that I needed to practice third-octave runs. I took everything as a lesson and focused on my process of improvement. As I moved up through the music ensemble ranks at my school, I eagerly took notes from everyone. I even joined activities where my lack of Giftedness was more than apparent, like Yoga and Dance, and enjoyed them immensely.

With everything I did, I challenged the idea that Giftedness was purely innate, and that endeavors were worthless unless you were bestowed with it. It’s bizarre to attribute so much to a plastic object, but it taught me something valuable - those who succeed and thrive have simply been scolded by their metronomes countless times.

**The Core of Columbia Anonymous**

**Please tell us what you value most about Columbia and why.**

I find the Core irresistible. No, not just the famous Core Curriculum, though Columbia's central philosophy excites me as much as it does for so many others. I'm referring to The Columbia Organisation of Rising Entrepreneurs, which would allow me to work on start-ups with a diverse group of young people, united by our similar passions for technology. Then, with these same people, I would attend meetings for the Gadfly Magazine come a more reflective hour of the evening. To those who still believe in and reach for a better world, there is nowhere more welcoming than the intellectual oasis Columbia creates with its culture of '21st century ambition built upon humanity’s past insights'.  
  
Here, the spring of knowledge never dries because when disciplines constantly extend and challenge each other, students constantly discover unexpected parallels and generative conflicts. I could, for example, compare the academic approach of “Lit Hum” in Freshman year, to that of “BUSI UN3702 Venturing to Change the World” in Sophomore year. My horizons would be broadened when the ideas of Professor Mercer, whose articles on teaching the “Oresteia” in prison transformed my view of Queen Clytemnestra, meet those of Professor Albert, whose recorded discussions on quantum mechanics first showed a thirteen-year-old me the overlap between physics and philosophy.  
  
Then NYC, as the world's most aesthetic tech scene, is the desert sky above, offering me the freedom to explore the promises and pitfalls of merging art and entrepreneurship. From Jeff Koons’ exhibition of Greco-Roman art distorted for modern audiences at the Gagosion Gallery, to the annual Meet Magento Conference on e-commerce. From Aire Ancient Baths to the traveling Museum of Interesting Things. The Five Boroughs of NYC, just like the four requirements of the Core, represent an oasis for past and future worlds to learn from one another.

**My Journey through HAM Radio 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.**

It was uncomfortably hot, when we climbed the last bend of the mountain; another 25 minutes added to the 2 hour drive from base camp- an excruciating journey. I was leading an expedition in Almora, a rugged terrain known for its dangerous, steep slopes. Far below, I saw the village – Bansoli, disconnected from the mainland, an insular existence. And if, perchance, a flood struck as it often did in these areas, the inhabitants would need to flee… or be swept away. I dismissed this macabre thought from my mind. After all it wouldn’t happen, as I was there to fix it.

Upon reaching the school we were aiming for, we were greeted by an early prayer, followed by announcements, ending with the recitation of the thought of the day. The principal introduced us all to the premises that boasted four dilapidated rooms offering education to 250 students. We were then invited to breakfast on fruit as the principal bemoaned the several calamities this village had endured, the latest being the recent Uttarakhand floods. Yet the villagers were loath to leave their birth place. He took us outside, pointing out the ravaged houses and destroyed vegetation. Some people had died, victims to the wrath of nature. Had they possessed a mode of communication, this could have been circumvented. I had chosen the right place. HAM Radio could help them.

As I entered the class, I was engulfed by white dust from chalk scratching on slates. The students sat in three sections, divided by level – 8th, 9th and 10th. The teacher, a tall thin man, welcomed me smiling broadly, relinquishing his place. The students gazed at me wonderingly. Deja vu- the math meetings I took at school re-surfaced. I realized that these students were not unlike us, except that they lacked our privilege and our insulation from the elements.

Thus, I began my talk, educating the class on surviving natural disasters. I explained the relevance of HAM Radio in today’s world, despite the proliferation of mobile phones. It costs a mere $0.1 for international and $0.04 per day for domestic contacts. It also works as a stand-alone, independent of mobile towers that are often rendered inoperable by natural calamities.

HAM Radio is a hobby marginalized by most due to the sheer rigor of the course that aspiring “Hams” have to complete to acquire the necessary license. They have to devote countless hours to learning the operation of a radio, and setting the rest of the equipment, all of which entail dedication. Thereafter, they have to extend themselves to interest an audience that normally holds the device redundant in relation to mobile phones. For me, HAM Radio combines my love for physics and Engineering with my desire to serve the community. It fulfills my passion to apply my knowledge and skills to raise awareness about an existing technology in society. Being the In-Charge of HAM Radio in school, I felt responsible to increase awareness in places affiliated with my school. This was definitely a start.

As I was about to leave the room, a faint voice called out. A young student, probably in grade 8, beamed at me. Ramesh introduced himself and then went on to tell me about his parents, how they had died during the Uttrakhand floods, unable to communicate their situation, ultimately succumbing to hunger. Had they known about HAM Radio, he said, they would surely have survived. The burden of holding the family together was now his. “I can’t thank you enough Sir, for introducing me to HAM Radio,” he said, in Hindi “I will work hard and will be licensed. Perhaps, one day, it would save my village and my family. Have a safe journey!” I left the room proud and smiling. I had been successful in my mission.

**Columbia - My Dream Anonymous**

**Please tell us what you value most about Columbia and why.**

I discovered the philosopher dormant in me when introduced to TOK in grade 11, where we learned about the means of acquiring knowledge. Both science and philosophy, as I realized, aim to unravel the basis of our existence. String theory proves its premise through math and experimentation, while philosophy advocates a non-STEM, yet structured and critical approach towards the same objective. The Core would aid my own relevant explorations making me self-aware and respectful of diverse perspectives and would develop me in areas besides my major: Mechanical Engineering, sculpting me into a leader of the coming generation.

Here I would develop my interests beyond my major. I would love to read Shakespeare’s King Lear attending Professor Janet Lee’s lectures or enlighten myself with Athena’s Blessing on the Parthenon and Greek Culture in the Low Library. I imagine myself in Lerner Hall, absorbed in soft piano music, discussing Plato’s “Republic” or Dante’s “Inferno”. I anticipate visiting the Museum of Metropolitan Art, viewing ‘Persistence of Memory’ and pondering over the transient nature of time with a cogent scientific understanding through Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, reminding me, yet again, that science cannot be studied in isolation.

Columbia would indulge my passion in dramatics; hopefully I’ll be cast in the annual Varsity play; it would enable me to pursue HAM Radio and possibly save lives during calamities. I can imagine myself teaching Math to the underprivileged at the Weekly Math Club meeting; discussing an article for the Columbia Daily Spectator with my frat members or marching with fellow Columbians on the Annual Take Back the Night.

It is the journey that matters and not the destination. From the First Year March from Lerner’s Hall to screaming on Sundays preceding the finals, I’d exult at continuing my journey at Columbia University, NYC.

**Columbia Engineering - why FU? Anonymous**

**For applicants to The Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science, please tell us what from your current and past experiences (either academic or personal) attracts you specifically to the field or fields of study that you noted in the Member Questions section.**

One afternoon, I bought a cheap Lego kit off the street. The bright colored blocks fitted naturally, forming a miniature Qutub-Minar, leaning like the real one. That marked a life-long marriage between me and Mechanical Engineering.

My interest increased when, in class, my teacher explained a Heat Engine using a Drinking Bird model, the red liquid rhythmically rising in its body with each bob.The toy cars unveiled their secrets on examining their gears. Similar examples revealed themselves as I studied Mechanics in Physics, and Industrial-chemistry in Chemistry. Online Courses took me beyond my IB course, as I learnt of Astronomy and Number-Theory.

Mechanical engineering formed a major part of all my internships. Seatech, Rajkot, exposed me to the overhauling of marine engines, revealing their intricate functioning. My internship with Atul Auto, at Rajkot, demanded first-hand resolutions to manufacturing process problems, such as reflexively redirecting the gas-flow to contain leakage from ruptured pipes.

Such a research project introduced me to interdisciplinary study in Engineering, as I investigated the efficiency of Solar Bottle lights as a cheap alternative for light bulbs. My ongoing research on truss bridge structuring revealed key aspects of design and analysis of structures. My chemistry exploration on Heavy-Metal Ion Removal amplified necessary skills for fieldwork.Developing an EEG module for the 12th International Science Conference introduced me to Electronics and Robotics. Leading the school math-club, I learnt to apply vectors to real-life situations such as aligning staircases to avoid overhead collision.

In Columbia I can advance my Mechanical Engineering knowledge and pursue my passion for Theater and HAM. Fu’s stellar facilities, under the guidance of Professor Sunil Agrawal, will help me design advanced AIs, while researching Nano-Materials as possible substitutes for Fossil Fuels under Professor Hone. Fu at Columbia would train me to become a leader of tomorrow’s world advancing interdisciplinary scientific research.

**Crooked Anonymous**

**Why do you want to join the College of Dental Medicine at Columbia?**

I watched Dion walk slowly into my classroom for her first tutoring session. She held her hands clamped tightly over her mouth, dropping them only to introduce herself, and then immediately bringing them back up to cover her face as before.

If I were pressed to pinpoint a moment in time when my interest in dentistry was born, it was on the day that I met Dion. When I began undergraduate studies at Duke University in the fall of 2007, dentistry was not my focus. I aspired to help save the planet: "one tree at a time." Encouraged by my earlier research experience in environmental and materials science, I chose to pursue dual degrees in civil engineering and environmental policy.

My perspective on the study of environmental science shifted­ from trees to humans­ in the spring of my first year at Duke when I attended a seminar given by Doctor Marie ­Lynn Miranda, founding director of the Children's Environmental Health Initiative (CEHI). At the core of Dr. Miranda's presentation was a discussion of children's special vulnerabilities to environmental contaminants, especially in minority and low income populations. Dr. Miranda demonstrated clear ties between congenital deformities in children and the sinister toxins that are so pervasive in much of our food, water and air­ remnants of industrial and agricultural chemicals used to "improve" the quality of our lives. I came away from that talk with the reinforced understanding that, not only did our environment need protection from us, but that we had created a toxic environment from which we needed protection. CEHI was taking substantial steps­ one kid at a time­ toward protecting children from those environmental hazards and I wanted to be a part of that process. I joined CEHI as a research assistant and volunteered as a community liaison via Project Child, a CEHI subsidiary. In my capacity as a research assistant, I gathered and analyzed data reflecting dietary patterns in young mothers, pregnant women, and children in the Durham community. Through Project Child, I tutored high­risk children in after­school programs and educated local families about environmental hazards that could affect their children's health.

I began at Project Child on a Monday in early February of 2008. Dion was my first student. She was a shy child with sad brown eyes and possessed of a wisdom well beyond her eight years. Just a few days before Dion's arrival at Project Child, I had spoken to her mother at a community meeting about enrolling her children into the tutoring program ­­ she was initially reluctant to do so. It took some convincing, but to my delight, all three were enrolled and ready to learn.

Dion and her family had immigrated to the United States from Guyana six weeks earlier. She was born with a cleft palate and had undergone surgical repair during the first year of her life. She barely survived a serious post­surgical infection and, as a result, her mother, fearing that she would lose her child, refused to bring her back to the clinic for further treatment. Now, almost eight years later, Dion was still suffering the consequences of that decision. Her teeth were badly misaligned and her speech was difficult to understand. Her mother's remorse was evident whenever she spoke of her daughter's condition.

I tutored Dion and her siblings twice weekly over the next three years and came to know the family well. And so, in June 2008 when Dion's mom told me that she made contact with the Duke Cleft and Craniofacial Team, I was elated.

Following her initial evaluation, Dion began regular sessions with an orthodontist and speech therapist in July.

When I graduated from Duke in May, Dion had been undergoing treatment for almost three years. During that time I was privileged to witness the positive changes, slow but sure, in her appearance, speech,and confidence. I was truly inspired by what I saw and made the decision that, although I was graduating with a degree in engineering, I would someday pursue a career in dentistry.

With my goal in sight, I have studied and trained for 3 years to learn about each of the different aspects and specialties of dentistry. I have kept an open mind throughout dental school, but I have come to realize that what inspired me to strive for a career in dentistry now interests me more than ever. My aspiration is to become a orthodontist dedicating myself to the compassionate care of my patients and to bringing about positive change in their lives. I have been striving for the opportunity to give a young girl like Dion a different path in life by changing her appearance and speech, ultimately giving her the confidence to succeed no matter what she chooses to do.

**Why Neuroscience Anonymous**

**For applicants to Columbia College, please tell us what from your current and past experiences (either academic or personal) attracts you specifically to the field or fields of study that you noted in the Member Questions section (300 words or less).**

I don’t know how exactly I fell in love with neuroscience, just that “The Brain!” was my favorite episode of Bill Nye, that I’d invariably perk my ears up during sleepy car rides whenever I heard neuroscience being discussed on NPR, and that I’d huddle next to my mother’s computer as she watched neuroscience-related continuing education videos.

I can pinpoint, however, the day I decided I wanted to be a neuroscientist. I was eleven years old, listening to Science Friday’s Ira Flatow interview a neuroscience researcher who could, quite literally, read minds. She would put participants in an FMRI machine, show them an image, and based on the activity in their brain, identify which picture they were looking at. Listening, I wanted desperately to be a part of this science that sounded so much like magic. So I did what anyone would do and I begged my mother for an FMRI as my birthday present.

The answer, of course, was no, but my passion for neuroscience remained. I longed to understand this field, at once so unfathomably undiscovered and so fundamentally applicable to everyday experience. In the next six years, I learned everything I could about the brain, about the axons, dendrites and neurotransmitters that create the mind. Eventually, I got my MRI, participating in three brain studies myself. I read article after article about neuroscience and referenced them incessantly. To me, everything seemed related to the brain.

Last summer, when I landed my first gig working in a neuroscience lab, I helped to pilot a study using real-time FMRI, the same “mind-reading” technology that captivated me years earlier. Even now that I can understand the computational modeling behind it, name each neural network it measures, and see just how it “reads” the mind, it still feels like magic.

**A Fulfilling Life Endeavor Anonymous**

**If you are applying to Columbia College, tell us what from your current and past experiences (either academic or personal) attracts you specifically to the field or fields of study that you noted in the Member Questions section. If you are currently undecided, please write about any field or fields in which you may have an interest at this time. (300 words or less)**

“¡No podemos, mi amor!” Recently, while visiting my abuela, she told me she couldn’t afford to buy me my favorite caramelo. Growing up, I spent most of my summers with her in Argentina. On our walks back from the farmers market, we would always stop by a kiosko to buy Rhodesias. On this day, she couldn’t afford it. President Macri’s policies had made things like candy too expensive.

Around that same time, Trump was saying: “They’re bringing drugs. They’re criminals. They’re rapists.”

His words stung. My parents aren’t criminals. They immigrated to this country to live the American Dream. Under Trump’s policies, this would have been impossible. At age 17, my dad fled Uruguay before finishing high school. He had to learn a new language and worked two low-wage jobs to survive. He is now a small business owner who serves hundreds of people in our community, and has inspired dozens more including myself along the way. This makes him a champion, not a criminal.

In 2016, during one of the events I organized for the Hillary campaign, all the attendees were asked why the campaign meant so much to them. After a quick “raise your hand if…” poll, I realized that 30 out of the 32 teenagers in my living room that evening have immigrant parents or they themselves are immigrants. It made me realize that I wasn’t only fighting for my parents. I was also fighting for my community as a whole and mobilizing my peers in this collective fight.

Whether in Argentina, or in America, a politician’s decisions affect our everyday lives. In being civically engaged, I am able to advocate for those who feel politically disenfranchised. This is what a career in politics allows me to do. I cannot think of a more fulfilling life endeavor.

**A Family Recipe Vielka Ebadan**

**We are interested in knowing more about you and the context in which you have grown up, formed your aspirations, and accomplished your academic successes. Please describe the factors and challenges that have most shaped your personal life and aspirations. How have these factors helped you to grow?**

The circumstances surrounding my family are defined by an absence of choice. At age 11 my *abuelita* dropped out of school to begin working as a full-time maid, a job she didn’t choose to have but had to have in order to support her family. At age 27 my mother was raped and impregnated with me, a lifetime subscription she didn’t sign up for but undertook. At age 34 my *tío* would be woken up at 2 A.M. to chauffeur for a cocaine trafficker, a situation that he--with a gun pointed to his head--was forced to stay in.

Although we were overpowered, on Fridays we felt empowered!

Carrying a candle with my tiny, trembling hands, I illuminated the figures of my family members greeting each other after a week apart. Power outages were frequent in the Dominican Republic, but not even the darkness could disrupt a Friday Dinner: the one meal each week when my family, scattered throughout the week by work and circumstance, reunited in the kitchen of my grandmother’s two-bedroom townhouse.

“*Pon la mesa,* *mija.*”

“Set the table, my daughter,” my mother instructed me.

Reverently, I spread the hand-woven tablecloth over the wooden table constructed by my tío. I set a vase of flowers, nurtured by my *abuelita*, in the center of the table. The table was finally ready to hold the meal we had been eagerly anticipating for weeks: pizza.

Pizza was a rarity at family dinners. Its exceptional presence that night in September of 2005 helped to introduce an equally exceptional chapter in my life: my mother and I immigrating to the United States. From the moment the tangy tomato sauce, spicy chorizo, and stringy cheese danced a culinary bachata in my mouth, my new life had begun. My mother and I had finally made it.

Throughout my childhood, as my family would sit around the dinner table, I heard various stories of neighbors who moved to this magical land of opportunity and excitement: a place with well-paying jobs, less crime, fair government. I pictured the existence of a “New York”, an area that required no candles and instead was adorned by endless city lights. I heard that in America, freedom of choice was guaranteed--but not for my mom and me. At the end of a long day, I was no longer greeted by the smells of my grandmother’s garden: oregano, paprika, and cilantro fusing together to create the scent I recognized as home. Instead, my mother often came home after a grueling day of work with a pizza. Once a delicacy in my Dominican home, pizza had now become a recurrent American meal: our only meal.

I soon learned that there exists a cultural dichotomy within pizza. In America, pizza is simple; it is not a symbol of luxury. Pizza can be found anywhere: airports, city streets, at your door after a spur-of-the-moment phone call. Yet, every time I’m offered a slice of pizza, I’m reminded of the sacrifice my family made for me. I’m reminded of my mother and our nonexistent relationship, a hardship necessary to ensure our financial stability. I’m reminded of my *abuelita*, who sacrificed her reading time as a child to devote hours scraping someone else’s floor so that I could one day pursue my passion for reading articles on Mayan history. I remember that what has become commonplace for me is a luxury for someone else, and that I should never take even a slice of pizza for granted.

1,397 miles away from my *abuelita’s* house, I feel connected to my family and my heritage in the kitchen. When I get frustrated because I can’t knead the dough correctly, I think of my tío, who spent days in the blistering sun perfecting a modest 54-by-54 table that would become a place of connection. When I can’t spread the herb-infused tomato sauce in an even layer over the dough, I imagine the hand-woven tablecloth my mother so delicately unfolded so that it could embrace each corner of my uncle’s table. When the cheese I sprinkle in circular formations across the scarlet sauce is too clumpy, I recall on my *abuelita’s* intricate flowers, lovingly sprinkled with water each day simply to bring beauty to her kitchen. With each imperfect moment spent in the kitchen, I’m reminded of my family’s choice to create their own story through diligence and purpose.

Pizza reminds me that I’m a reflection of my heritage, my sense of gratitude untainted by my assimilation into American culture. As a first-generation immigrant, I now have the choice to create my own recipe, my own story, my own legacy: an overflowing cup of the grit, dedication, and selflessness I learned as a child in the Dominican Republic, coupled with the heaping tablespoon of lessons I learn in America.

**In My Studio Vielka Ebadan**

**Tell us about a concept, theory, or topic you have explored simply because it sparked your intellectual curiosity. Why do you find it intriguing? How do you want to further explore it?**

My backyard is my studio, and the lush, green grass is my stool.

*C.*

With one powerful strum, my surroundings come to life: a gust of wind emerges; birds sing in harmony; dandelions dance in unison to my tune, frolicking through the sky. As I sway my head to the music that I create with my fingers, my mind begins to wonder, as if it too is dancing to my beat.

*C with an f# in the bass.*

The moment I play this chord my world, my concerto, pauses. My mind shifts from a state of wonder to a state of inquiry: why does the “C” chord that I’ve just played sound nothing like the beautiful, crisp “C” I played moments before? With my guitar in hand and my witch-like nails subconsciously strumming the strings as I contemplate the mistake I’ve just made, I come to the realization that I am no longer making sound—I am making noise.

If it weren’t for my failure to imitate jazzmasters like Pat Metheny by improvising, I would have never been made aware of the relationship between two polar opposite worlds: numerology and music. Numbers establish the relationship between space and music. It was through this concept that Pythagoras configured a musical system based on ratios, stating that musical intervals are determined by the pitch and distance between notes, and in guitar, these intervals are contained within the fret numbers. Astoundingly, I realize that the f# that I’ve added to that C chord sounds dissonant not because of a misunderstanding of Pythagorean musical ratios, but because I failed to realize that numbers lie at the heart of creation, and in order to create my own sound, I must understand and embrace numbers.

With this knowledge, I combine whatever frets possible: f# second fret with tremolo, g third fret hammered-on, c natural eighth fret pulled-off. When I merge my musical and numerical worlds, I make sound: my own sound that connects me to my surroundings.

I used to avoid musical theory, viewing it as another doctrine that I had to adhere to; but with numbers, I break the conventions of Western standards of music: no longer am I wary about the twelve-tone equal temperament norm that wants to confine my artistic ability into a shortsighted, picket-fenced backyard, and no longer am I going to limit myself to notes contained within an interval. At the end of the day, music theory isn’t going to direct my improvisations--only the fret numbers on my guitar will.

My curiosity for music and numbers transcends these two worlds, and the lessons I’ve learned from this bond have taught me how two abstract, disparate concepts can be so intertwined. Whether as a late-night talk show host interviewing controversial subjects or as a university professor asking the philosophical questions no one wants to answer, I am constantly striving to bring together different worlds, perspectives, and opinions together in unison and harmony.

**Storytime Vielka Ebadan**

**Please tell us what from your current and past experiences (either academic or personal) attracts you specifically to the Columbia College field or fields of study that you noted above. If you are currently undecided, please write about any field or fields in which you may have an interest at this time.**

When my great-grandmother was on her deathbed, I heard her speak for the first time. Through her shaking words and glittering gaze, she transported me to her teenage years. Describing living during the era of Rafael Trujillo, a time of harmful, racist policymaking, she showed me a lost side of history: her history.

My great-grandmother was a high school dropout, and at the age of fourteen she became a seamstress, starting her own sole-proprietorship and joining a community of indigenous women. However, even as I found my eyes buried between the covers of books that sought to recount this time in the Dominican Republic, I didn’t hear about the women like my great-grandmother, the uneducated, and the impoverished class who worked with their hands for a living. I didn’t hear about the indigenous women who, amidst fervent bigotry, ached to preserve a part of their culture. Where were their stories?

The narrations of the elderly have opened a portal of discovery for me, a world of untold stories that must be heard. Stories such as these have the power to draw an individual narrative in a broader landscape. It is in that pursuit that I wish to study sociology alongside public policy. To find the intersection between individuals, communities, and countries at large, sociology shows us how experiences and conditions affect a person, and, by seeing a populous as a diverse set of people, meaningfully policy can be applied.

**Humanity of a Face Katherine Lee**

**Common App Personal Statement**

My pencil sketches of human head sculptures filled countless pads of paper. Desperately, I tried to recreate in each face the intangible aspects of emotion that continuously eluded me. I drew faces over and over, telling myself that with more practice, I could eventually master it. I had to: if every head I drew seemed mask-like and dead, I couldn’t call myself an artist. Portraiture is a prerequisite.

There is something ineffable about the human face, a quality I never seemed able to capture.

I learned the formula for drawing faces; I dutifully practiced breaking the head in half with a thin line, using that demarcation for the bottom half of the eyes. In the space between the eyes and the tip of the chin, I always found the midway point, dedicating it to the small groove of skin between the nose and mouth. Beyond these basic measurements, I had also learned the ideal percentage of the eye to be filled by the iris, the precise angle at which the lips ought to curve, and the specific shape of the nostrils. As I assembled my carefully sketched pieces into a face, however, the technique that went into each feature faded. My disappointing faces lay inanimate on the paper. Why?

I knew that the recipe for drawing faces was well-tested and reliable. My pencil face drawings were meticulously sketched, and technically precise. Still, as my art teacher noted, “...they all look a little…”

“Flat?” I asked, frowning at my sketchbook.

“Kind of,” he said slowly, paging through the dozens of portraits I’d attempted. “I think what you need to do is forget the formula. Remember: art is more than a snapshot of real life. Art needs to be better.”

My teacher gave me Nicolai Fechin portraits to emulate, and I trained myself to identify the focus points of emotion on the face. On Fechin’s portrait of a little girl, I saw how the tiniest bend in her eyebrow conveyed disapproval. On his portrait of an African woman, hope radiated from the slightest upturn of her lips. The happiness of a man with a moustache, meanwhile, was obvious from the asymmetrical crinkles around his eyes.I noticed that these portraits strayed from the formula: the nostrils were slimmer, and the iris filled less than 75% of the eye, contrary to the formula that was carved into my memory.

A realization hit me: irregularities create expression, and that, in turn, imparts the emotion of a face. Endlessly measuring and practicing individual facial features was futile if what I hoped to show were the dimensions of feelings and experiences etched into skin and muscle and bone. As I learned to allow imperfection in a portrait, I also began to understand what art really was: a simultaneous thrust against rigid rules and a venture into what life might look like if those rules didn’t exist.

The most beloved artists were rule-breakers: Van Gogh, with his intense color and visible brushstrokes, was considered reckless and raucous, anathema to the Academy. During Van Gogh’s time, Biblical paintings lined the walls of museums, but he painted haunting self-portraits and childishly exuberant landscapes, ignoring innumerable baby Jesuses and casting aside scenes of battling angels.

I thought of Van Gogh as I began to synonymize portraiture with the absence of rules. Humans have constructed countless methodologies and rules to organize the world. Still, the most central aspects of humanity – love, fear, hope, suffering, virtue, patience – are emotional; none of these qualities can be captured in a theory or an equation. The beauty of a face is often thought to be its proximity to symmetry, a concept that pleases the eye. But true beauty is earned – by experience and history.

Life wears on us, and renders us imperfect, even damaged. In capturing this damage and its subsequent healing, I finally learned how to portray the ineffable humanity of a face.

**How Grief Helped Me Recognize My Vulnerability Anonymous**

**Common App Essay—Describe an obstacle or challenge and how you overcame it.**

I search “how to grieve properly” in the naive but hopeful belief Google knows the answer. An article tells me “broken crayons still color.” This strikes me as not only condescending but false. I am in pain and I am healing, but I am not broken. My father’s death does not define me; I control what defines me. I have always liked having control. But it took losing control to recognize its limitations.

Throughout high school, I wanted to be the girl who did it all: academics, ballet, extracurriculars, and eight hours of sleep. So I controlled what traits I put on display. I could, with some sleep deprivation and Quizlet-making, manipulate my grades to serve as a tangible means of control. I brandished novels like *Jane Eyre* around my English teacher and spent hours studying pages of notes to impress my history teacher in class the next morning. I created an environmental club, accepted the role of yearbook editor, and ran for Student Body President all to prove I wasn’t just a good student— I was perfect. I attempted to do it all while appearing charming, hardworking, and in control.

With a high degree of internal conflict, I felt myself becoming the overachieving golden girl I had envisioned. I can’t say I didn’t enjoy the image I formed. But I projected a single dimension of myself. No one saw the rash, the stupid, the out of control and not at all put together side of me. I bottled up the exhaustion of attaining five hours of sleep, the pressure to receive the highest grades in my class, and the stress of deviating from the persona I had invented. In my efforts to control how people perceive me, I allowed others’ perception to control me. I covered up the cracks.And there were always cracks. But when my dad died, my image shattered. I lost the source of control I took for granted. At his funeral, I wanted so desperately for people to point and say, “How resilient! She hasn’t shed a tear!” I wrote his eulogy and busied myself in ACT prep, ballet, and extracurriculars in the weeks after all to prove I wasn’t just okay—I was great.

And this wasn’t unwarranted. Upon seeing familiar faces their smiles dropped to pitiful frowns, their arms closed around me, and they whispered, “How are you doing?” I was no longer the prowling lioness. I was a desperate gazelle, shaking on willowed legs, and no one could see me otherwise. I feared his death would take away the control I spent years culminating. I could not see how my controlled image could coexist with that of a grieving daughter. So I rejected vulnerability. Against my own will, I revealed another dimension—that of someone lacking control and struggling. I accepted help—whether that be pans of baked mac and cheese or grief counseling. Months after his death, I take pleasure in this. I have become more human in the process. I cannot control how others perceive me, and I cannot always be the golden girl. The cracks in my identity are what make me whole. I do not have complete control, but I am not totally lacking it. Sometimes I am a wounded gazelle, but sometimes I am a prowling lioness.

My father’s death does not define me— it is a part of me. In grief, I accepted the complexity of my identity. I’ve always considered myself strong. But with a prior lack of adversity, I could never prove it. Now, I know. Not because I have control, but because I don’t always need it. Not because I am okay, but because I will be. I am a daughter, a student, a dancer, and a human being. I am the sum of all my parts. I am not broken; I am resilient.

**People-Watching Audrey Pettit**

**What fields are you interested in pursuing while at Columbia?**

My mom loves people-watching. Every time we step inside a downtown café she insists on sitting by the windows.

I initially deemed the hobby strange and senseless, but people-watching has taught me to look outside myself—to witness the pigtailed toddler stomping in her polka-dot raincoat, the adults speed-walking in black suits, or the twenty-something lovebirds gesticulating excitedly. Watching passersby, I peer into the lives of strangers.

The more I watch, the more they look like dancers on a stage or protagonists in their own narrative. I fell in love with English and dance for the same reason I people-watch: connecting with others. Columbia College would allow me to explore this passion by utilizing its high-ranking English and Dance programs. Both mediums force me to re-engage in a world I often take for granted.

I was originally drawn to tutus and pointe shoes, but my love for dance has transcended the superficial. The universal language of dance allows me to communicate ideas through movement. The thoughts I can’t articulate find their home in the shapes I make and the way I move. In parallel, reading about Jane Eyre’s isolation and writing about my father’s death allows me to gain a better understanding of myself and those around me. Literature humanizes the injustices that bombard us daily—making victims real and breathing rather than death tolls and statistics. I’ve written about issues like immigration and choreographed pieces about environmental destruction, but Columbia’s English and Dance majors would allow me to communicate with a broader spectrum.

Whether I’m transporting the audience into another world when I perform the Snow Queen pas de deux or receiving clarity from Mary Oliver’s poetry, I’m hearing and telling stories. When I dance, read, and write, I connect with strangers. In the process, I become a little more human.

**Growth Anonymous**

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

Every full moon, my family would make offerings to our deceased ancestors. As the eldest son of the eldest son, I am given the distinct honour of having my name be the first called when praying to our ancestors. Even though I was younger than my cousins, my grandparents revered me more as I was to carry on the Phan bloodline. As a young child, I revelled in the extra attention and thought about how great it would be that my son would have the same privilege.

As I got older, things started to change. In elementary school, I would swoon with the girls over pictures of Justin Timberlake. Even though I was the only boy, I thought it was a normal bonding experience with my female classmates. It was not until I was 15 that I noticed I was blushing around SungWoo. I would get butterflies in my stomach whenever I was around him; when SungWoo started to consume my thoughts, I knew I was gay.

While thoughts of SungWoo brought happiness, I was worried about having my secret revealed. I was scared of my family’s reaction and feared that they would send me to some institution to get this “mental” disorder fixed. I replayed in my mind the image of my father with his buried brows and sunken lips telling me how disappointed he was in me for dashing his dreams and bringing shame to the family’s name. I could also see my grandmother praying to our ancestors to forgive this abomination. This even led me to think about marrying a girl, living a heteronormative existence and giving the Phan family a male heir.

Before I could think about the future, I had to worry about the present. To compensate for my father’s looming disappointment, I worked extremely hard to make him proud by excelling at every subject and being the top student at my school. I also tried out for sports and made the volleyball team to show him that I could be like other boys. Off the court, I always wore the peppiest boys clothing. Yet, I was happiest at night when I am able to shed this false façade. Looking in the mirror, I see a pale and scrawny naked figure staring back at me. Like my body which cannot be changed, I have come to accept and love my sexual identity.

While living this daily lie, the few places where I could be true to myself is through the arts, both visual and performing. Within the visual arts, I love how my charcoal pencil allows me to express the sensuality of the male figure from the muscular chest to the strong hands to the flaccid male anatomical features. On stage, I find myself at ease playing the part of the distraught Shakespearean characters who lead double lives. Through my portrayal of Olivia in *Twelfth Night*or my portraits, I am screaming to the world that I am attracted to men. Yet, all they see are the artistic merits of my works and performances.

Given the stigma against homosexuality in Singapore and in my family, I am still not ready to share my secret. However, with each passing day, I know that my fears and anxiety will soon dissipate as I attend college in America, a community that will look past my sexual orientation and accept me. Knowing the stigma of hiding in the closet, I will work with other closeted LGBTQ individuals to make it easier for them to express their true self. With the confidence of coming out in America, I hope to then come back to Vietnam and kneel in front of my ancestors’ altars with my adopted son and hear their spirits tell me that they love me for who I am.

**More Than the 'MathSter' Shankar Mutneja**

**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 once believed my extraordinary skill with numbers would take me to great heights and greater happiness. I was wrong.

Numbers- quantitative indicators, widely believed to factor the quality of one’s life - galvanized significant achievements, but until recently impeded the emergence of my humane side. At 7, invited to display my abilities at a private school, I stood onstage, the cynosure of all eyes. The anchor rattled off a lengthy problem set to which I correctly responded ”9873293” well before the calculator could. I cultivated this talent crouched in cramped rooms, experimenting with the abacus, convinced that proficiency with operating abacus’s primary-hued beads would imbue exceptional numeracy. I started processing number sequences with surety and speed, and then at accelerated paces, sans the device, merely by moving my hands in the air as though working the beads. This earned me the moniker, “MathSter.”

Sweeping through state and national competitions, I entered the international arena. I come from a small town, Jalalabad, near the India-Pakistan border. Seeing my extraordinary skills, my father encouraged me, and I cleared the exam to study at India’s finest boarding school. Suddenly, I was cast amongst peers stellar in academia and athletics; yet, my competitive spirit, honed in countless abacus competitions, prevailed and I strove to improve in both, finally winning several awards. While my exceptional talent won me accolades, it impeded my Emotional Quotient, retarding the ‘fifth dimension’, including intuition and emotions. Admittedly, winning awards was thrilling. But where was the sense of inner fulfilment and contentment? It took one assignment to bridge this lacuna.

One day, my seniors seconded me for a community-service learning project. We arrived at a shanty home in a vermin-infested slum colony without power or light. We intended installing solar lighting that I had designed in physics lab, drawing from the original Litre of Light concept, to weather the Indian monsoon. I commenced operations- the first was up and running. I went on to install lights in 50 homes by sunset.. Finally, grimy and tired, walking towards the bus returning us to school, I was halted by an elderly woman in ragged dress, hands joined in gratitude. She touched my head in benediction, smiled toothlessly, and said: *Shukriya*(thank you). Her smile seemed to light the hillside. I felt a deep sense of accomplishment that eluded me even when I won my first international Math award. I was jubilant! I knew then that I would continue serving community. Unfortunately, there were problems with the lights- they performed sporadically; either the recipients handled them wrong or the electrical circuit was faulty. My usual remedial protocols - collecting data on the circuit’s power, humidity and other potential factors affecting performance - led nowhere. I faced a conundrum: though committed, I could not deploy my ‘mathematical gift’ for resolve. Something was missing. It struck me whilst conversing with a user: the bulbs were bug infested. The epiphany - my de facto number-based approach in conjunction with a people-based - human approach brought resolve. I’d found the fifth dimension - ‘collaboration’.

Discussing with slum dwellers their problems built empathy and developed my understanding of their actual needs: I could now work with them to derive real, sustainable solutions. Gradually, numbers started losing their overarching importance, and my competitive streak softened. Now, though pursuing academic excellence, I strike a balance between success and community impact. In my final year at school, as the Community Outreach Secretary, I coordinate 20 community outreach projects including drug rehabilitation and solar lighting. The Uttarakhand Sustainable Development Festival nominated me for their Change Maker’s Award, and Society magazine for 'Young Achiever's Award'. Importantly, I’ve connected with my softer, empathetic self and found contentment while helping uplift the underserved. Today, though focused on academia, I’ll ever be a committed change agent, working on the combination of these two seemingly polar activities and hopefully, make this world a better place, with my numerical and humanitarian inputs!

# Failing While Baling Anonymous

## The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

The first time I tried to bale hay was a colossal failure. I walked into the job with the naive feeling of “Oh, this will be easy” and that it would earn me some gas money. I came home my first day smelling like sweat and Alpaca dung, and so coated in mud and hay that my mother made me wait in the driveway until she could hose me off with a garden hose from a safe distance upwind. I reeked so badly that when my parents finally let me in, my sister dove into her room and shut her door, announcing, “I will not come out until you have the entire house fumigated”. Even my dog, no stranger to the smell of manure, gave me a wide berth.

Additionally, I was the most tired I have ever been - my limbs felt encased in granite. I had also been foolish enough to wear shorts, which allowed microscopic bits of hay inside my clothing. Hay rash is a topic too repulsive to describe in an admissions essay, but suffice to say, I learned my lesson. Upon emerging from the shower, my hands so raw I could barely open the door, I flopped into bed, and reflected on my day.

Despite all of the sweat and hard labor, nothing I did went right. Haybales I bound burst, spraying fifty pounds of alfalfa hay all over me and the rickety trailer I was riding on. I stacked the bales unevenly, so that they repeatedly spilled off the trailer into the field. If there’s anything worse than being covered in hay, it’s being covered in hay that has been dropped in mud and goose poop. I did this all before the eyes of Rick, the profane, obdurate farmer who had hayed this land for fifty years, who could not believe that anyone could be so utterly incompetent, and who let that be known in no uncertain terms. When I finished, and inquired whether he would need me again, he said “I’ll call you if I need you.” Since we had only finished a quarter of the field I knew he would need someone, and the knowledge that I was being replaced despite my hard work was a hard pill to swallow.

Apparently Rick was unable to find anyone else, because he called me a week later, asking if I could come back. To the surprise of everyone including myself, I accepted. I could not explain why at the time: my first time had been a disaster, and my parents thought I was nuts for wanting to go back. I eventually figured out the reason; it was my desire to earn Rick’s respect. Something about the look of disdain in his eyes when he told me that “most kids don’t come back” to hay a second time ignited a passion within me.

This was a man whose respect had to be earned through sweat and hard work - the coin of the Granite State farmer. Before I went, I made sure to wear long pants tucked into my boots to avoid hay rash, and read A Guide to Stacking Haybales on a Trailer at haytalk.com. The second time I finished baling I was still dirty and still smelled like a pigsty, but I saw a look of growing respect in his eyes and walked home standing a little taller. When I finally put hay bale number 750 in the loft, I could tell from the firmness of his handshake that I had earned his respect, and that simple fact meant the world to me.

# Chasing the Sun Anonymous

## COMMON APPLICATION PROMPT 1: 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.

In the corner of my room sits my grandfather’s diary: soft, well-worn, and cracked. The first entry, written in English, is dated “June 1st, 1970,” in the halting, elaborate script of a man accustomed to Bengali. The last entry, dated “November 31st, 2010,” is exactly a month before his death. The diary chronicles the life of a man—the refugee, the revolutionary, the poet—who gave me the name that’s come to define who I am.

My grandfather’s first brush with rootlessness was during Partition. Born in Bangladesh, Partition forced him to flee westward to India. Hounded in his native Bangladesh for being Hindu, and spurned in India for being Bangladeshi, my grandfather lived a life of continual reinvention, formatting himself to fit an alien environment. He spent the better portion of his life searching, not for material wealth, but for a sense of security—something more intransient than gold. In his diary, he often wrote about the sun, fascinated by its passage from East to West. Its regularity reassured him that something moving westward could still find a place in the universe. He collected watches, just to hear a predictable tick against his wrist every second. But perhaps my grandfather’s search for constancy best manifested itself in the name he gave me: Ketan.

My first name is an invariable source of phonetic grief for most people; honestly, I don’t blame them. I’ve pronounced my name as “Keaton” for as long as I can remember, and I introduce myself to people as “Ketan—like Michael Keaton?” It’s a name that’s been heavily anglicized, something that’s stamped out the traces of Easternism inherent in the way it’s spelled and adopted the linguistic conventions of a nation thousands of miles to the west. It doesn’t sound like it should. It’s spelled like an Indian name, and pronounced like a traditionally American one. In it lies the sense of belonging my grandfather had craved his entire life—the feeling of having a name roll comfortably off a foreign tongue.

The central irony of my name is the enduring dichotomy between its meaning and its nature. “Ketan” means home, hearth. Yet, its rejection of conventional notions of home and hearth are what make it mine; my name has escaped the domestic confines of its culture of origin and evolved into something wholly new. As a second-generation Indian-American growing up in a country where the majority of the populace looks nothing like me, my name’s ambiguity is a blessing. My name finds its roots in its rootlessness—my grandfather, uprooted time and time again, made sure that I’d be able to plant myself anywhere I wished.

It’s this sense of connection that’s made it possible for me to appreciate so much about the world. I’m intimately acquainted with a sense of belonging, thanks to my name, yet I’m also familiar with being an outsider, owing to the history behind my name. Roots—the way people interact with their various backgrounds—fascinate me. I’m defined by the crisis that shaped the trajectory of my grandfather’s life, the crisis that gave me my name. My namesake isn’t a person, an event, or an idea. It’s an innate human desire to feel accepted, to find a home. Belonging has played a central role in my life. Belonging to a vibrant, thriving immigrant community; belonging to a nation of passionate youth ready to take back their country; belonging to myself, but also to everyone around me. My identity, like my name, is multifaceted. It stretches to fit its environment, and assimilates what it can along the way.

If you’d told my grandfather, decades ago, that one day his grandson would apply to American colleges, he’d have laughed, called you insane—yet here I stand, living his American dream and chasing the sun he’d always dreamt of catching.

# "I Have to Speak Up" Paulyn Annor

## Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

I have to speak up and say something. No, I don’t.

These were the thoughts that battled in my mind as I sat still in my chair. The spacious classroom seemed suddenly like a restrictive cage. For two days in homeroom, the entire school was discussing President Trump’s recent termination of the DACA program and the impacts of the termination on the 800,000 DACA recipients in the country. The student voices that were spitting ruthless and charged words like “illegal alien” and “undeserving” into the tense air were beginning to dissolve as I inhaled sharply and fiddled with my hands underneath my desk.

Don’t cry. Girl, I promise if you start crying…

“Paulyn?” the voice of my teacher, Ms. Taylor, snapped me out of my trance. “What are your thoughts? You’ve been quiet over the past few days,” she inquired. The moment I heard those words, tears streamed down my face; I rushed to the front of the room and with trembling hands grabbed the sandpaper that was supposedly tissue. As I tried to gather my thoughts and slow my ragged breathing, Ms.Taylor scrambled behind me and placed her hand on my back. I felt fifteen pairs of eyes boring into my back and suffocating silence rang like church bells in my ears, causing my sobs to intensify while I darted out of the classroom into the vacant hallway.

I am an undocumented immigrant from Accra, Ghana who entered the United States on August 13, 2009. In August 2019, as I matriculate into college, I will also be celebrating my ten-year anniversary in this nation. This is an important milestone because my parents brought my brother and me here to get a better education and I will be fulfilling their dream in August. In my years of residing in America, I have been described as an outstanding student and a leader in academic atmospheres, yet I never understood the confidence that people have in my “leadership skills” because I have always lived in fear. When I was eight, my parents told me to never disclose to anyone that I am not a U.S. citizen, and I abided by this rule like one of the Ten Commandments for years.

I always knew that being undocumented meant that I would not have access to many of the academic opportunities my peers have and that I would have to prove myself not only as a young black woman but also as an immigrant. Despite this knowledge, it still stings when I am unable to reap the benefits of my hard work by attending prestigious academic programs or obtaining after-school jobs like many of my peers do. At the beginning of my junior year, I faced an unprecedented fear that I was not going to be able to attend college and achieve the personal and financial dreams I had for my own future. This was spurred by not only a xenophobic administration that targets and alienates undocumented immigrants but also by the apathy and ignorance that some of my peers expressed. Many of the students who made crude remarks were genuinely unaware of the hopelessness that many undocumented people feel.

During that moment in homeroom, I finally acknowledged this fear that has been suppressed within me. Acknowledging this fear revealed that I had let trepidation inhibit me from utilizing opportunities that arose to share my story with those who are not cognizant of the strength of undocumented immigrants. Now, when my mind is struck with fear, I tell myself: I have to speak up and say something.

# What Governs the Evolution of a Society? Anonymous

## Why do you plan on pursuing your indicated major?

There’s a wall near my grandparents’ home in Kolkata that’s stood for decades. Spray-painted on it, in carmine-colored dye, is an enormous hammer and sickle, a reminder of the Communist Party’s stranglehold over the area’s regional politics for generations. I’ve always found it intriguing that the wall still stands while other traces of Kolkata’s past have been mercilessly stamped out. What governs the evolution of a society? It’s a question that demands incredibly nuanced thinking.

I’m fascinated by the ways history and society intersect in complex and often messy ways. Just look at countries like Senegal and India, which have remained at the center of a global struggle for ideological dominance. Caught between two hemispheres with diametric views, Eastern nations often suffer from what’s sometimes called a colonial hangover. This preoccupation with the West leads to untenable levels of brain drain and a heavy economic reliance on remittances and foreign direct investments, which in turn fuel populist sentiment domestically. Everything we see is derived from the tangled network of political and interpersonal relationships that we’re all part of.

A political science degree from Columbia offers some invaluable insights into the foreign and domestic machinery that drives our society. Having studied French for the past six years, I’m excited by the prospect of being able to make informed judgments about the effects of public-private partnerships and vocational training in Francophone Africa. As an Indian-American, the chance to analyze the effects of India’s latest nationalist wave is critical to my understanding of my background. As someone passionate about domestic reform, the ability to examine policy effectively is critical. While studying Political Science can help me meaningfully analyze the world around me, it also affords me the opportunity to discover exactly where and how I fit into our community, both global and domestic.

# Cherry Blossoms Anonymous

## Why are you interested in attending Columbia University?

The first thing I noticed about Columbia University was the cherry blossoms, strewn across the ground, plucked from their branches by a rainstorm that left the streets of New York damp and glistening. In Japan, cherry blossoms symbolize ephemera—the relative brevity of their lifespan is a reminder to embrace spontaneity, and to make the most of every opportunity.

Columbia’s intellectual spirit shares a lot with the cherry blossoms that decorate its campus in the spring. A Columbia education allows me to make the most of a four-year undergraduate experience. The Core Curriculum, fundamental to Columbia’s educational philosophy, encourages undergraduates to explore a host of different fields. I’ve always had a diverse range of interests, spanning policy studies, literature, and biology, and I plan to explore all three in college. Four years isn’t a lot of time, and at any other university, I’d have to choose what to study. At Columbia, the structure of the curriculum allows me to explore everything. The Core gives me a multifaceted perspective on the world, and prizes both breadth and depth in knowledge.

But there’s so much more to Columbia than just academics. It’s nestled in the heart of the greatest city on Earth, giving me an unparalleled access to internships and fellowships. It’s also possible to engage with the community at large from within Columbia’s gates. Independent newspapers like The Columbia Daily Spectator hold the powerful accountable; startup culture and incubation thrives on campus; student-run organizations protest rampant gentrification. There’s a journalist, an entrepreneur, and an activist in every student at Columbia. Over the past four years, I’ve played all of those roles. They’ve enriched my high school experience, and it’s my hope that I can continue to push the boundaries of social and economic involvement as a student at Columbia.

# A Journey of Two Worlds Anonymous

## Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.

I showed up to school in thongs today... no not that type of thong. Indeed, Australians call flip flops, thongs. As my physcis teacher told me he 'reckons' I should take off my thongs and put on 'runners' (i.e. sneakers) to avoid labratory hazards, I couldn't help but reflect on how crazy my experience with moving really was.

Portland, OR

Kennewick, WA

Bunbury, WA

Perth, WA

Darwin, NT

5 unique cities equals 5 whole new worlds to explore.

I began life in the Pacific North West, and ended up in outback Australia.

After my 7th birthday, home would no longer be Washington. In a few days I was about to venture across the globe to a foreign place called Australia.

Which is home you ask? Arrival or Departure? Home for me means many things. The world I come from is not associated with a worn out welcome mat and friends who learned to walk together. But I love that it is inherently complex. America holds my childhood filled with pine cones, blockbuster movies and Mt. Hood snow trips; Australia owns my adolescence abundant in fast paced social scenes and the place where I grew into the person I am to this day.

Throughout my time of living through endless summers and having a regular routine of going to the beach with friends, I realized (or 'realised' as I should say thanks to my English teacher's constant reminding) that I am beyond lucky. Having the opportunity to live in these crazy and exotic places ultimately resulted in my character becoming adaptable and versatile to my surroundings, and staying still while the world around me moved.

I loved each place I lived in for different reasons. I've made unforgettable relationships with people and each place has helped shape who I am. I immediately developed an enthusiasm for swimming and surfing, and my love for these grew exponentially. Being a competitive swimmer for the past decade and taking up a job as a lifeguard for the past year has reminded me that there is something about the warmth of the salty ocean and early morning swim training that evokes a feeling of utter relaxation. Catching my first wave in Bunbury at age 8, resembled snowboarding down the golf course in Kennewick during those cherished white Christmases. This only further instilled the virtue that moving has granted me the opportunity to absorb the best of both worlds.

As I sit here writing this essay, I take a tentative look around my room filled with moving boxes as we prepare to go back to old town Portland after my high school graduation, and remind myself of the adventurous and unconventional life I've had thus far, excited for what the future holds. I think of my journey best expressed through the quote: “Where am I moving you ask? Onto better things.”

# On the way of finding my true passion-master Anonymous

## Describe how your professional and academic background has prepared you to pursue an advanced degree in the field of engineering or applied science at Columbia University. If there are any special circumstances that need to be brought to the attention of the Admission Committee, please include that information.

I did not realize life could be so fragile and unpredictable until my grandmother was diagnosed with lung cancer. With social security as her only form of income, my family was burdened with extreme financial pressure. It was through this experience that I came to realize the importance of health insurance. As amathematics and statistics student with a concentration in actuarial science, I am intrigued by data analytics and its applications to the insurance industry.

Having grown up in China where the health care system is still developing, I’ve seen many people who cannot afford medical treatment receive substandard medical services. I believe more sophisticated medical insurance to be a solution to this situation, and hope to use my knowledge and statistical analysis skills to improve the Chinese insurance industry, thus protecting and enhancing people’s quality of life.

In my freshman year, I started to explore how data analytics is used in the insurance industry. I worked collaboratively on designing a new commercial insurance plan in line with people’s needs and budgets. I designed questionnaires, collected data, conducted statistical analyses, and drafted part of the policy. My analysis revealed a strong demand for comprehensive plans to supplement social security systems for a group of clients. Based on my findings, we tailored an affordable commercial insurance plan.

I also led collaborative research on hospice care, and conducting categorical data analysis to identify the factors that influence people’s attitudes toward hospice care. Here, the attitude was a binary response variable, and education levels and age served as ordinal predictor variables. The results indicated that the probability of people having a positive attitude toward hospice care was positively correlated with education and negatively correlated with age. To test whether the impact of age on attitude toward hospice was dependent on education levels, I added the interaction term in the model. The data suggested that the interaction effect was not significant. I believe that hospice care is in wide demand yet unfulfilledin China. Therefore, I added hospice care features to the medical insurance plan I designed, and targeted a customer group of young, educated people. Together, these two projects have made me realize how data analytics can identify needs and facilitate practical solutions, making an impact in the lives of those truly in need.

Last summer, I took an internship at the Health and Benefit Department of Aon-COFCO. Our goal was to serve our client by writing a suitable insurance policy for them. I collected and analyzed incident rate data from claim reports to provide customer behavior insights to brokers. Then brokers gave the companies suggestions about how to control the budget or how to adjust the weight of different parts of the plans. I created a database to store potential client companies, and analyzed data—including incidence rates of in-patient and outpatient care compared to the whole industry. My database and analysis assisted the human resource managers in keeping track of employee reports in order to manage risk and control the budget. This internship confirmed my understanding that data analytics can track people’s health, andultimately provide more insurance benefits for people. The experience further encouraged me to learn more database management skills and analytic skillsto the insurance industry, to better distribute funds to those most in need while also controlling risk.

This academic year, I have focused on further enhancing my statistical analytic skills by working as an undergraduate research assistant in the statistics department under the instruction of Dr. Schliep, earning honors distinction. The goal of our research has been to determine whether dolphins and whales have associative or competitive relationships, and to summarize our results for biologists at NOAA. I wrote functions in R to conduct Markov chain Monte Carlo randomization tests. The results have indicated that whales and dolphins have strong cooperative relationships but lack significant competitive relationships. I am excited to continue this line of research to study the social relationships between people. I have read papers about detecting unusual behavior in insurance using social networks. Methods such as anomaly detection can help insurance companies to avoid wasting resources on fraudulent claims. In this way, data analytics helps to manage risks in insurance systems, benefitting those who really need financial help. In addition, analysis of networks between providers and patients allows clients to determine the most beneficial plans.

My previous experience in the insurance industry has strengthened my belief that better designed medical insurance will relieve Chinese households of the heavy medical expenses caused by unexpected events. I have also realized the important role that data analytics plays in modern insurance industry innovation. I look forward to working as an insurance industry data analyst to design tailored products suitable for Chinese markets, and to bring people a sense of security by insuring their lives.

I am applying for the Master’s of Science in Data Science at Columbia University because of its strong background in interdisciplinary studies. Its strong network with business will secure me opportunities to see how data analytics work in real industries and prepare me for ,my future. It is important to interact with experts in related businesses and to grasp updated information about advanced developments. In addition, I will also have the opportunity to learn to identify patterns and relationships by creating sophisticated algorithms and computer programs. Elective courses in business and a potential track in the Financial and Business Analytics research center will make me qualified in related career. These skills and knowledge will arm me with the ability to analyze the insurers’ behavior and preferences efficiently and accurately from across a large amount of data. I will then be able to improve people’s lives by improving their policies and knowing their needs better. I believe my excellence in mathematics, applied statistics, and programming make me a qualified candidate for studying data science at Columbia University.