



Swan Records

11 Personal Essays by ACES Students
Spring 2022

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Preface

Hope, in English, Spanish, Japanese, Arabic, in any language really, must be one of the most beautiful words in the world. However, my father hated the word hope. He said hope was dangerous and prompted people to live in an unrealistic bubble. I do not share my father's perspective about hope. And after reading your essays, which are filled with voyages and hopes for a better life, for a better you, for a win, I'm thrilled to know you are all kindred spirits who believe in the power of hope too.

Hope in your essays always seems to accompany a trip. A physical or nonphysical trip each of you took prompted hope to appear. While reading your essays, I stopped and asked myself, can the word voyage be a synonym for hope? With each of your stories, I felt like I was traveling the world. Your stories took me to the Sayana Cafe in Nepal, waiting for coffee and an important text; to the American Consulate in Delhi hoping to study abroad; to a cave hoping to come out a new person, a better version of myself; to football games hoping my team, after so many losses, would win; to my house hoping the pandemic would end; and to graduation, hoping the pressure would evaporate. For me, the journey of being an ACES student gave me hope that I'm a creative being, capable of traveling through literature and taking others on this trip with me. This hope only came after the journey of immersing myself in a language that was alien to me, a language remote to me, but the journey of being an ACES student taught me that even when writing in a language that's not native to me, I can inspire hope in myself, and in the reader, and hope that my prose will make us more thoughtful, more confident, more courageous versions of ourselves.

I hope that you all continue taking trips and sharing your epiphanies and watershed moments with the world. These last months have shown us how unpredictable life can be, so when

you write, keep in mind that you are being, in KC's words, "a ray of light penetrating the black cloud sky of uncertainty." Your poetic prose, at times witty, and always relatable, is hope. A hope that speeds up the heart, as fast as a Formula One car, but this hope is certain; this hope won't make you crash. Both writing and reading give hope, to the writer, and to the reader, and your essays are vivid testaments of this. With all these thoughts in mind, let us now hear from the creators of hope in this year's ACES Reader.

Alisson Martinez '22

St. Joseph's College, Brooklyn

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My Most Memorable Eid-Ul Adha by Md Rabiul Rishat

As a Muslim, I am used to celebrating a few big festivals every year. All the festivals of my religion are important to me, but Eid-Ul-Adha is my favorite. Eid-Ul-Adha is the festival of sacrificing. Muslim people celebrate this festival as a reminder of Prophet Ibrahim's obedience to Allah. Before the festival, Muslim people buy a goat, sheep, cow, or camel, and sacrifice them to Allah (Muslim God) on this day. Some Muslim people go to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, where the Kaaba is located, and do the Hajj for six days. Then the next day, all the Muslims who do the Hajj, and those who are not able to do the Hajj, sacrifice the animal they have bought to Allah. I have many memories of this festival, but I had my most memorable celebration of Eid-Ul-Adha when I was 12 years old.

The preparation started two days before Eid-Ul-Adha that year. My maternal uncle, my younger uncle, and my father talked about going to the market to buy a cow. After a small discussion between my dad and maternal uncle, everybody decided to go look for a cow. My uncle hired a white car to go to the market because

it was so far from my house. The car came at 2 pm sharp. I joined my maternal uncle, younger uncle, and father in the car, along with two very expert people at buying cows. After driving for two and a half hours, we reached the village market—Barakpur, Chuknagar. I was so excited to enter the market. While getting out of the car, I heard the uproar of people. Besides this, I could hear the noise of the cows. There were almost 2,500 animals at that market, and as a result, the noise sounded like "Moo." It was an exciting moment because this was my first time going to market and helping my father and uncles.

"The price of cows is very high in this market. So, we should go to another market which is near to us," my younger uncle said. We got back into the car, and after a short journey, we reached another village market—Doshani, Chuknagar. This market was bigger and there were 10,000 cows. I felt so because some of the cows were running back and forth. The market was muddy. As we entered, I stepped into the mud. The smell of the mud was repulsive. It was a pathetic moment for me. I'm not too fond of mud, and I was not used to it because I lived in the city. In addition to the bad feeling on my feet, I knew that the mud was very unhygienic. "How could I visit this market in my sandals?" I said. "I told you, son, that you should wear sneakers, but you didn't listen to me," my father said. After that, I felt that I was good for nothing.

We eventually found a giant cow at a price that matched our budget. The cow was also good, and we bought it. I have never seen so many cows before in front of my eyes. Usually, my father, maternal uncle, and younger uncle went to the market without me every year because it was hazardous. I was happy, and my younger

uncle hired a small truck for the cow. Then we started our journey back, and after some time, we reached our house late that night.

After returning from the market, my uncle tied the cow to a pillar. The color of our cow was black and white. I remembered that the black and white cows were known as Holstein. I learned it from my agricultural workshop. It had a big black horn and a long tail. The following day, I was surprised that there were four other cows tied beside our cow. Every year there were five cows in front of my uncle's house, which looked like a small local cow market. Moreover, we bought cows before the night of Eid day every year. But this year, we purchased our cow before two days of Eid, and it was the first cow of that house. My neighbors would buy a cow the next day. Everybody in that house took care of their cow. My uncle gave hay and bran to our cow, and the smell of cow dung was awful. As a result, I wore a mask to go down there.

I wanted to feed our cow, but I was scared. I went in front of the cow and gave it hay. It did not do anything to me. I remembered my uncle getting so close to the cow. I thought that if I got closer to the cow as well, it would not hit me with the horn. So, I went closer with hay. Unfortunately, it tried to hit me with its big horn. My father pushed me to the side.

"Why did you wear a red t-shirt and come in front of the cow? Do you know that the cow gets angry to see the red?" my father said to me. I replied in the negative to my father, and he added, "Do not forget: cows get angry when they see red, so do not wear any kind of red in front of it." I went back to my room and

changed my shirt, and came back. This time, the cow did not try to hit me with its big horn.

Two days later, it was Eid-Ul-Adha; we prepared ourselves for our Eid prayer. After a while, we went to Mosque and came back after praying. It was the time for slaughtering cows, which is called Qurbani. My maternal uncle and younger uncle sharpened knives. Then Huzur, the person who cut the cow's neck in the name of Allah, came to the house.

My uncle untied the cow and put the rope slowly around the four legs of the cow. It was a sad moment for the cow. My father, uncles, and neighbors pushed the cow firmly, and suddenly, it fell down on the ground. My uncle, father, and maternal uncle started forcefully pressing the cow's body. There was no chance for the cow to move. I was on the balcony. My heartbeat increased because of my nervousness.

The final moment came. Huzur approached with a big knife, and everybody was ready. "Allahu Akbar," said Huzur and cut the cow's neck with the knife. The whole body of the cow was shivering. Blood gushed out of its neck within a few seconds. I felt that the same thing would happen to me if I were there instead of a cow. While thinking this, I did not notice that I had fallen on the ground. My aunt came and saw me. Then she called my mom and took me to the bedroom. After that, I woke up, and I realized I had fainted.

This was my first time seeing this type of moment in front of my eyes. I thought that we were very cruel because we killed the animals for our needs. But then I felt that I was wrong because we did it for our religion, and Allah made this rule. I had to understand the significance. We sacrifice to Allah, and so we did this.

After this, I again went to see what was happening in the yard. The people who cut the meat started to remove the skin off the cow's body and started chopping. Finally, it was the time of the distribution part. Based on the rules of this festival of distribution, the whole meat of the cow would be divided into three parts: one for ourselves, one for relatives, and one for poor people or homeless in our society. If we took a slice of meat from the part of poor people, then our Qurbani would not be accepted by Allah. My uncle gave our own interests to my aunt and mom. My mom started to cook some meat for us to eat.

It was time for distribution among the relatives and poor people or homeless. My father and uncle started packing the meat and giving it away. Then my father gave meat to the poor people. I could not believe my eyes because there was an extensive line in front of my uncle's house. My father finished giving meat to them. I helped my uncle, father, and younger uncle with their work. After all of this, I was exhausted.

Some of our relatives finished their lunch. Some people who came from the village left our house after eating. After that, I went with my father to give meat to my relative's house. It was almost 7 pm. After spending some hours there, we came back home. The day was finally coming to an end. All my family members sat down to spend some time together. We started to gossip with each other. My mom said, "Can you make tea for everybody, please, my son?"

"Of course, I will," I replied to my mom.

I made tea for everyone, and I served my family members. My younger uncle said, "You are a good boy because you help us today, and you make and serve tea for us."

"Thank you so much. It was my job as a family member, uncle," I replied to him.

The day of Eid Ul-Adha was over. I enjoyed it to such a great extent because I went to buy the cow and helped my uncle from beginning to end. Usually, the purpose of this sacrifice is, as Allah says in Al-Hajj, "Their meat will not reach Allah, nor will their blood, but what reaches Him is piety from you." The significance of the festival is to sacrifice and share our happiness. These are the rules and beauty of my religion. In Islam, we have to share happiness and sadness with each other.



Liverpool and Me by Dravid Rajaure

We all feel happiness through different measures. As for me, I adore the Liverpool Football Club. There had always been moments of expected defeats, regular sloppy football, and so on, and there was a time when I even questioned my support. But was I going to stop? No. You will gradually come to know why I did not give up at the end. And slowly, good moments did come, some that were beyond my wildest dreams.

I was enrolled at Budhanilkantha School back in 2011. It is in the lap of Shivapuri hills, which is one of the highest hills in Nepal. It feels like home to me as I had to stay there in a hostel for about eight years. The day I fell in love with Liverpool was when I watched my first football match at the age of twelve, Liverpool vs. Newcastle. A victory over Newcastle was praiseworthy and notable, but what I saw in Liverpool Football Club drew me to join the fanbase. The players were quite good, but their hard work and dedication could be seen throughout the game. They never looked tired the whole ninety minutes.

Six years later, Liverpool Football Club, as usual, was on a roll. They were on such a roll that they were rolling rock bottom, and all we as fans could do was dread it. And there wasn't even a "we." It was all me. I felt like a stranded sailor on the island, all alone. My friends were rival supporters of other top clubs in the world who were supported by money, had great players, and, of course, lots of trophies. "Who would even support Liverpool? Look at Dravid man, his mind is out of state hahaha..." said a flamboyant Prashant. He always came off as a dashing, charming guy with all the pettiness in the world within him. He was constantly on his stride, his head held high, and ridiculing others for fun. He was one of my friends though, so I cannot talk badly (as if I haven't already).

My friends and I were heading towards Silver Jubilee Park inside the school to relax and hang out. As usual, Prashant and my friends were taking shots at my team. I was burning; the heat was all over my head due to the blazing sun as well as irritation. I felt like even ten ice baths would do me no good. My hair felt like it was hit by a sandstorm from the sweat trickling over my scalp, and guess what? I had just witnessed the first match earlier in the night, how Liverpool was smacked 3-0 in the semifinals of Champions League by a growling Lionel Messi while my friends made a joke out of it. This made our walk to the Silver Jubilee Park more unpleasant. The sound of the fountain used to make me feel comfortable at the peaceful and silent park, but that day it sounded like a noisy babble.

Let me make a quick note about Champions League football here: a total of thirty-two teams play at the champions-league group stage where eight groups are consisting of four teams. They play six matches facing each other at home and

away. Gradually, there will be four teams remaining for the semifinals. The semifinals are just two matches for each fixture at home and away, but the final is just one game. Remember, the team that scores on the road has the advantage and this rule was only till 2021. If the aggregate score of the fixture is 4-4 and the number of away goals of a team is greater, the team has the advantage of away goals and gets a chance to advance in the competition. And where was Liverpool? Trailing by 3 in their aggregate score before the second game of the semifinals.

Two weeks after we visited the park, there was a second game, and the team that scored most in those two games would go through to the finals. I was dreading the game after being ridiculed by my friends with constant “another three, right?” jokes. But it was like an obligation, like a father attending his son’s parent-teacher meeting when the son hasn’t been doing well in school. I just could not miss that game.

And was the wow-so-fun-ridicule-Dravid game going strong? Surely. The darkness and silence were spreading as the sun made its way down the horizon. Nobody was going to watch the game except for me, as my friends felt it was not worth it. It was midnight, and all of them were asleep in the hostel, dreaming. Here I was alone, in the darkness and silence and all I could see was the kick-off streaming from my laptop, and the sound I could hear was the sound of fans from Anfield through my earphones. Liverpool vs. Barcelona. My heart was running miles per hour, it was pounding out of my chest, with my hands squeezed together. There went the kick-off whistle, and the match started.

The ball went through the back of the net two times in the first half. Aggregate score 2-3 for now. I could barely keep myself straight, but I had to keep calm as Liverpool was still down. The second half came. One more goal from Liverpool and not much celebration from my side. I could see players and fans celebrating as the score was level, but I couldn't join them as it was not the end of the match, and the winner was not decided yet. Trent Alexander Arnold with a quick corner and Origi striking with his right foot made it 4-3, in the semifinal of the most prestigious football tournament in the world, against the best club in the world. "Oh what a dream," I shouted, as if I saw God in front of me. I felt like I was in heaven. How was it possible? I was getting goosebumps all over my skin, all over my body. The full-time whistle was like music to my ears, just to hear the phrase, "And Liverpool Football Club, have romped on at Barcelona, and are in the finals" by the commentator.

I felt like Superman. I was howling like a wolf. My boisterous scream woke everyone up and they came to me as if something terrible had happened. Prashant and the group were dumbfounded. I was in tears. It was such a paradox, I was smiling, but my eyes were shedding a gigantic waterfall. I could hear the fans from the stadium singing "ALLEZ, ALLEZ, ALLEZ" and it felt as if I were there, watching the match at Anfield. Everyone came by my side and watched the celebration along with me. Soon after, we won the Champions League and Liverpool was the best team in 2019 across Europe.

I loved every bit of it. I was flying, and so was Liverpool, and that is where we connect. When I look back, I never expected it to come. The moment became

the climax of my short but maybe over-dramatic story. A year later, Liverpool lifted the Premier League trophy after thirty years and was the best all over England.

Finally, my obsession with the team was worth it. I knew they had the winning mentality and the gameplay needed to triumph, which is why the bad times were worth it in the end. I knew good times were to come eventually. And guess what? Prashant was back again, only this time, in a Liverpool kit, supporting Trent Alexander Arnold Liverpool.



A Trip without My Best Friend by Garima Lamsal

As the days were nearing for my long awaited trip to Pokhara, a beautiful city that lies in the lap of the Annapurna mountain, I was so excited that I would daydream about trekking up a hill. I was going on a three-day adventure with my best friend, Rabina, and my other friends, Kanchan, Manjita, Suchana and Celina. We had been preparing for a month. We worked out all the bookings and schedules for the three-day tour. This trip helped me realize one of my fears and allowed me to form new friendships. Sometimes we need to be reassured, or even pushed, when plans change and things are uncertain, to squeeze through the moments to find happiness.

As I was sitting under a tree a few days before the trip, Rabina walked up to me looking sad. She said that her father wouldn't allow her to go on the trip because of her motion sickness. We had never been on a long trip together before so her motion sickness was surprising for me. She explained that if she traveled after eating, she would often become very sick, and her father was concerned that she

would be sick during the whole trip. This made us sad, because we both were really excited about the trip, so we decided to talk to her father. We walked up to her house to convince her father, but he would not agree.

I wanted to drop my plan as I had never traveled without her, and this was a three-day trip, but she insisted I go. I always felt happy and comfortable whenever I was with her as we would always do everything together like playing basketball, studying or hanging out. I felt nervous about being without her.

The day came, and my friends and I left together on a bus. I was missing my best friend as we would usually be talking a lot during such trips. It was a windy evening and the road was long and bumpy, though the roadside greenery was pristine. The setting sun was painting a faraway mountain to gold and I could hear the river racing with us beside the road, even if it sometimes got muffled by the bus's engine. Although I was in such a beautiful and vibrant environment, I was feeling gloomy. Everyone tried to brighten my mood by singing self-made funny songs, which did make me laugh. It was a happy but tiring drive. We had traveled from evening and night to give us some more time for travel during the day.

We finally arrived at the hotel exhausted. As we entered our room, Kanchan pulled me by my hand to the bed, blasted fun music and started jumping. Although I was not so familiar with my friends, I started enjoying their company and how they were trying to make me feel good during this trip. Others were recording it and laughing. One second we were happily jumping, then suddenly, the next second, we were lying down on two different sides of the bed because we broke the plank. We were rolling around laughing and Manjita even got it on her phone. We did not

want to pay a fine, so we decided to tell the management that the guests before us did that before we left for the day. I know, it was wrong, but hey, it was actually fun.

I video-called my best friend and showed her our room. I felt guilty being here while she was alone at home but she motivated me to enjoy this trip. After some rest, we headed toward a beautiful, ancient temple located on a small island in Fewa Lake. We had to take small boats. As we were rowing, I could see a person on another boat trying to pick a waterlily while his friend held him by his thigh. I imagined myself and Rabina doing stuff like this. It was hilarious. We went to the temple. It was serene and peaceful, filled with the smell of incense. We headed to a huge cave next. As we walked along the paths through the cave, we could see the cave walls shining and shimmering as if somebody had embedded diamonds in them. We moved ahead and saw a huge crack that faced a shiny waterfall. I really enjoyed my day with my friends.

I was so excited to visit another cave the next day. Little did I know I was going to face one of my hidden fears. I was walking with my friends enjoying the huge cave but also noticing that the path was getting darker and narrower. Suchana said, "If people come out of a cave they are considered reborn." We laughed at the superstition. We were walking uphill now. It was getting colder and our laughs echoed. I saw water droplets dripping from stalactites onto stalagmites. I saw a colony of bats hanging above on the ceiling. As the paths were getting narrower, I felt a tension building up. Near the exit, I saw a lady squeezing herself out of a cave's opening that was literally the size of my face. My jaw dropped. I wanted to go right

then and there but the place was getting crowded and I could not go back the way I came. My mind was wondering, *what if we all get stuck, what if I get stuck in that opening?* It was difficult to breathe and my palms were sweating. Because my body was trembling with fear, I needed a friend's support to stand. I missed Rabina here but Kanchan held my hands the whole time and also supported me with motivating words. My other friends were also very supportive and they said I could do it.

The guides were helping people out through the opening. Some of my friends went ahead to pull and some stayed back to support me. I was feeling chest tension and sweating, probably because I was wearing a blazer, which I threw through the hole before I climbed up to it. My muscles felt jammed as I was holding onto a rock. I asked the guides to pull me and I closed my eyes. I felt I was going to be stuck there forever. I was breathing deeply when I suddenly felt warm sunshine on my skin. As I walked out of the opening, I actually felt reborn. The fact that I could overcome this scary situation filled me with joy which made me feel alive. I felt so happy, relieved and even proud. I bragged to my friends I could probably do it again although I doubt myself. I am pretty sure my friends did too. We watched the sunset that day.

The final day of the trip was Christmas, so we all walked around the town buying gifts for family and each other. I packed one for Rabina. The city was decorated beautifully. They put lights at the lake shore and people were biking. We ate a lot of holiday foods on stalls by the lake. We walked around the hill at night, which was scary yet fun. We were back home the next day with so many happy memories, which I later shared with Rabina. She was so happy to hear them and

happy with my gift. I had brought her rings. She said we all would plan another small trip together.

I realized during my trip that I had been missing out on amazing friends till now who were very supportive and fun. I also realized having other friends won't affect my friendship with my best friend. I really enjoyed my trip in nature, the sounds of rivers flowing and birds chirping. I am actually happy that I took this trip. I learned that I can overcome obstacles if I am willing to try and if I have the support of my loved ones. Such accomplishments give a sense of joy. I am now willing to take such unexpected journeys in the future and see what happiness is waiting to unfold.



Necessary Masks by Rivujoya Hem

You know things are bad when the person who is as stiff as a rock breaks down in front of you crying. In the year 2020, during the coronavirus outbreak, my father became unemployed for the first time in thirty-five years. Because he was the only earning person in our household and my mother had been a homemaker all her life, finances became the biggest obstacle. However that wasn't the only impact. Amidst the pandemic, finding a job became ten times harder and my father genuinely loved what he did. Working as a government officer at the Health and Family Welfare Ministry, being the chair of multiple NGOs, leading projects that provided awareness and medical treatments to children with autism—all this became a part of his identity. Doing something different was unimaginable for him. The dynamic of our house changed completely.

In the beginning of 2020, Bangladesh had its first death due to COVID. The government took rapid precautions and declared a lockdown for a whole month. Stories from my grandmother taught me that the pandemic was nothing new;

this is a woman who was there during the smallpox and cholera outbreaks that happened in our country. I was sure that just like the other outbreaks, this would only last a couple months, maybe even less due to the advancement of technology. An unwoven three-layered mask was the only thing that was protecting us from the deadly virus. Masks suddenly turned into a necessity; not wearing one was even considered a crime.

I was observing and analyzing as much as possible. For me to live through this time felt like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We were going through a time that would soon be turned into movies, inspiring writers to fill up the pages of their best-selling books and novels. As days turned into weeks, however, people we knew started getting infected; some cases were so severe they had to be taken to the intensive care unit. Conversations over phone calls from other friends and family members about how dire the situation was, where the health system had collapsed, and how people were dying without receiving any treatment at all made me feel guilty.

A month before my father lost his job, word was going around that everyone in his department would get laid off. Me being an optimist, I was hopeful till the last minute that things would work out and he would still have his job. Meanwhile my mother's cataract surgery had been rescheduled due to the COVID outbreak. I was focused solely on my mother's wellbeing. I realize now how I used it to distract myself from what was about to happen.

On December 31st 2020, the doorbell rang and I rushed to the door hoping for some good news. As I opened the door, seeing my father's head pointing towards the ground made me realize the worst had happened. As hard as it was for me, I realized that it would only be harder for him. Too afraid to ask him this time about his day, I let him in and asked if he would like to eat something. This was way past lunchtime and he still refused. As he walked through the corridor and passed the room my mother was in, his tone suddenly changed as he was masking his emotions so my mother could have one less thing to worry about. Due to her cataract surgery, she was bedridden at the time and was prescribed to take various eye drops by the hour. My father was sitting all alone in the corner of the bed and as soon as I walked in I noticed him smudging the corner of his eye and getting a little startled. I could read the situation clearly, so I sat down next to him and started babbling about how he's better off without them, that it was their loss and there were way better opportunities. Midway through my speech, I could see him sobbing while rubbing his eyes and eyebrows as aggressively as possible. I turned silent as I couldn't find anything else to say and I sat right next to him looking at the wall hoping for all of this to end.

It was almost time for dinner. Usually at this time I would rush to the table and nag my mother by asking about what we were having for dinner. No one had an appetite that day but I was able to force myself and reheat the food my mother prepared prior to her surgery and serve it to my father. My favourite meal of the day that I always look forward to, the dinner conversations that worked as a stress reliever for me, had now changed. The food tasted bland, the room was completely

silent and I could clearly see how my father was forcibly stuffing his mouth full of food. Halfway done, he suddenly left the table and went back to his room. The porridge for my mother was done cooking by that time. After doing the dishes, I rushed to my mother to feed her as it was almost time for her last medicine for that day.

The current state of my parents startled me. All I wanted to do was break down crying but I decided not to. Masking my emotions for the sake of my parents felt like the right thing to do. Day after day was going by with my father doing little to no activities and his health was deteriorating. The man who used to be so active and assured that he didn't even have an ounce of time just to hear about my day, seemed completely lost. At that point, I wanted nothing more than just to have my old life back. I started encouraging my father about how this was a turning point in his life and it was their loss for him not to work there anymore and constantly reassuring him that he would find a better job. My laughter and positivity was the mask I decided to put on during that time. Deep down I knew we had left the best days of our lives behind and there was no going back.

Gradually, though, things were getting better: after a few weeks, my mother healed completely and it turned out the surgery was a total success. I started looking for colleges and my father's friends reached out to him with a plan to open a small consultancy firm together. One day I overheard my mother say, "I can't believe how much she grew up. When everything started going downwards she was my biggest concern. But she really masked her emotions for us." After a while I

could hear my father say, "I think we worry too much about her. Now I know she'll be alright." This time, I broke down crying over my reading table. I felt as though I had achieved something great with a sudden realization of how we were all able to get through a terrible time together. Surely, it is not over, nor did things go back to the way they were but we were able to move on. I realized that sometimes for the sake of others' happiness and mental stability, we must mask our emotions.



Art by Rivujoya Hem



La Decima by Pratham Kandel

The red light on the board lit up. It read the number 3. And that 3 felt like some ultimatum, a do-or-die moment, a now-or-never moment, clutch it-or-fluff it. And honestly, that’s what it was. The board showed 3 added minutes and the clock showed ninety. Every passing minute was running like it was on a millisecond scale. It was the Champions League final, with Real Madrid, the club of my heart, the club I have supported ever since I can remember, “los blancos,” against direct rivals Atletico Madrid. All that separated me and millions like me from pain and agony were those three minutes. I was a nervous wreck and my nails seemed like they could not have been any shorter. The millions around me were just the same, biting their nails, faces red like pepper sauce, and heartbeats pumping at insane beats per minute. That day, all that saved me was a mask—at least that is what I believe.

COVID has hit us hard, and by hard, I mean diamond level hard. People have started to dread masks, and while the majority of the crowd is moving in that

direction, I was moving in a totally opposite direction. Even soccer fans have come to dread the mask mandates. As I say, people have come to hate masks, but I did not. Why? Because of that fateful day, which I believe a mask made possible. I come off as not superstitious, but it is hard not to have any superstition. We like to believe that little things make big things possible.

My day on the Champions League final started bright. The sun lit up my entire room, and the leaves were greener than ever. The slight water droplets from the rain the night before sparkled directly into my eye, and everything around that time felt bright. It was normal—after all, it was a big final, my first as a fan, and I was eager to see the glory come back to the city of Madrid after 10 long years. I was as eager as your dog is when it sees you after ages, jumping and waving its tails—if I ever had one. I was counting every second like I counted my pennies, and trust me when I say time was moving slowly. Awfully slowly.

Before the game, I got into a debate over who would win the match. I wanted to prove to people that Real Madrid would win. And I did argue for it. Words were flying all over the place, and I was barking out my arguments with Hesul, who supported Atletico, that day. “You’ll see when the game ends, Real Madrid are getting smacked!” Hesul had a huge hate for Real. Hesul is my friend in high school, who, while short, had the biggest mouth ever. He was a fan of the Barcelona soccer club, the eternal rivals of Real Madrid. Whenever he heard the word “Real” he would jump over and start spinning his arguments. But I was as confident as they come as Real Madrid had not lost a final in an extremely long time.

The match did finally arrive and my heart was throbbing, looking to march out of my body. I was shackled by anxiety, but I had belief. But guess what? The first 10 minutes in, Real went down 1-0. The stadium went pin-drop silent, and there was tension in the atmosphere. I peeked to my side and saw that Hesul was waving his red and white scarf (a symbol for Athletic), and loving it. The match was a blur for me from that moment forward. Every miss, every mistake in front of the goal, was just another cut to my soul. It was getting hard for me to keep up the façade I had built for myself.

I don't remember much of the match but minute 92 is as clear as spring water. When the ball curved in from the foot of Luka Modric, it was about a few feet high, and no one seemed like reaching it. It was now or never for us, otherwise Real Madrid would be in agony, and at that moment the club needed a shield, a fighting spirit, that would leap above the adversity and reach for the stars.

And there he was, a masked man, leaping as high as a salmon, jumping for glory and heading it in. All I heard then was a brief moment of silence, and then the commentator burst into flames. "Ramoooooooooosss, golazo del Real Madrid!" 12 seconds to go and this man, with a broken nose and a mask to protect it, rises high to save us all! There were drinks flying, people jumping and it felt as if they managed to produce an earthquake. I, for one, was numb. What a moment! The joy captured me and tied me up and for a while I could not move. My hands were stiff and felt about a thousand pounds heavy. And then I went wild. I slid all over the room, I hurt my knee, tore my trousers but who cares? The game went on and 2, 3, 4 Real Madrid

hit their rivals 4-1 in the final. The trophy after 10 years of waiting: the 10th trophy, “La Decima.”

Real Madrid had been in despair, and a masked man named Sergio Ramos came to the rescue. Since then, I always adore masks of any kind as they symbolize a spirit for me; a fighting spirit, a protective power that leads to glory, leaping above the adversaries as high as the mighty Spanish superman did.

Now that I connect the masked man with the COVID situation we are in, the mask has always been there to protect us. It is a way for us to pick ourselves up from this crisis, to end the body count it continues to rack up. So, for me, the mask is a symbol of protection, a symbol of determination, a symbol of one giant leap to redemption. And all that connects to that one special night in Lisbon, LA DECIMA!



Halfway Through a Journey by Prem Sitaula

I was in my parents' two-storey house in rural northern Dhading. It was a regular day, and I was lying on my couch watching various news, speeches, and dialogues on a silver screen television. I could hear the whistle of a pressure cooker from another room and smell something delicious. I could also hear some random motorcycles with loud noises and sparrows returning to their comfy nests in the big avocado tree next to my room chirping-chu cha-cha-cha!

I looked to my left and saw the old remote of the television. I took out the batteries and bit them quickly with my teeth to make them work again. I changed the channel frequently, one after another. Suddenly, something caught my attention. I saw my favorite journalist interviewing a policy analyst. A certain kind of calmness came upon me. I started watching the dialogue between them with full concentration. I found that the interview had just started. The interviewer asked, "What made you able to work in such international organizations even though you

were born in one of the remote areas of our country, Nepal?" The policy analyst answered, "Hmm, I consider the education opportunity that I received made me able to accomplish such achievements."

Moving onwards, the interviewer requested that the analyst share some inspirational visions that changed the life of a country and its people. He shared four examples. Among them, one name interested me more than the others: the name was John F. Kennedy, 35th president of the United States of America. In my secondary school, I had read that John F. Kennedy was one of the presidents of the United States of America who was assassinated. This further interested me to learn about him. The interviewee had shared about the "Moon Mission" of President John F. Kennedy. I quickly noted down the name and reference he had provided on a newspaper on the table in front of the couch. After that I got up and moved upstairs straight to my own cozy study room. There were books on the shelf, a laptop on the table and some crayons, pencils, wires, and papers on the floor, laying there as if they were free like birds in an open blue sky.

I opened the laptop and typed "JFK's moon mission." Thousands of videos, articles and explanations appeared like a volcano had just erupted before me. I clicked the video posted by Rice University entitled, "Why Go to the Moon?" This was the part of the speech that Kennedy delivered on September 12, 1962, a warm and sunny day in Rice Stadium Houston Texas. "I therefore ask the Congress, above and beyond the increases I have earlier requested for space activities, to provide the funds which are needed to meet the following national goals: First, I believe that

this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth..."

The words "and returning him safely to the earth" struck me. They were words of determination, clarity, and strong will power. My eyes became curious and hands became energetic. "What happened to the moon mission of JFK?" I typed in the search box. On July 16, 1969, Apollo 11 completed its mission. Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. The day when his words turned into reality was nearly 8 years after his speech. A journey was accomplished.

That evening, dinner was tasty, with every spoonful of rice tasting better and better. I returned to my room. I closed the curtains and turned on the lights. I sat on the small chair in front of my study table with both hands on my chin. I asked myself, "What about my dreams?" I had just graduated from high school. I was confused with what I should do in the next phase of life. I had two options: First, go to a college in my own country; and second, go to a college in a foreign country. On one hand, the first option was an easy option, but I didn't know where that ease would drive me. On the other hand, the second option was a difficult option. But I was confident that this scary path would lead to a pleasant dawn. I chose the second option. That night I made a decision to study outside of my country, renouncing comforts and combatting every hurdle of the journey. I wrote in my diary, "I will go outside of my country to study and return back to my country with knowledge and exposure."

That was the start of the journey. I did everything I needed to do. It was challenging when I was on the way but interesting when I look back now. Drafting a

college application is obviously not an easy process. To meet the college requirements while being an international student is even more challenging. There were some moments in which I felt as though I was not a good candidate for being an international student. But I never gave up. The consistent effort brought my first part of the journey to an end. Just like “return a man safely back to earth” was the most challenging part in President Kennedy’s speech, “return back to my country with knowledge and exposure” is even more difficult for me. The excitement is still here, hands are dirtier, heart is still exhilarated. The work is halfway done. Life is now in subways. Cha Cha-Cha-Cha! Who has changed the water in the bowl attached to my window? Those small, lovely and kind sparrows might have forgotten me but I have not forgotten them. I will go back to meet them and their children or maybe grandchildren might come next to my room chirping and playing all day.



A Long Awaited Text by Siddhartha KC

It was a humid monsoon day in the capital of Nepal. A shower-like tear was pouring down from the black cloudy sky. I was in a café waiting for a friend. The place had quite an unusual name: “Sayana Café.” And in that unusual café, an unusual scene: a guy who had just turned 19 sitting alone at a table. People there flocked together as herds. It felt like even my washed-up sweat could not find space amongst the huffing and puffing. However, the intoxicating smell of freshly brewed coffee gave a soothing presence to the air inside. Amidst all this, my cell phone vibrated, disturbing the vivid image of a hot coffee that I was imagining. I received a text: “We are going to Delhi for our US Visa Interview.” It was from Abi, a smart, charming, serious, and talented guy whom I had known for a year only and who was my closest friend then. We both were clueless about our futures. We had already waited for a year and a half since we graduated high school to get into the States. Abi and I had thought the US days were still far away from us until the text message popped up.

The smell of hope started to out-smell the smell of the strong brewed coffee. A different aroma was around the air then. In two years, this was the first time I felt closer to the USA. A ray of hope was penetrating the black cloudy sky of uncertainty making every effort to form a rainbow of excitement and new beginnings. And the man was here, Everest, my friend who was almost an hour late. "What's up," he said. I had no time to reply to his question. I immediately showed him the text and he reacted, "So India, huh?" "It looks like that," I replied. I was not sure if the text was real or a prank, but I had made up my mind. "India it is."

It took me an exhausting week to get my papers done for India. Those seven days felt like seven seconds. Hectic government processes and miles-long queues for getting travel approval killed every nervousness that I thought I would go through during my preparation days for visa interviews. Time fled as quickly as we fled for Delhi, India. New place, new people but the same old dream: USA. Time was speeding like a train of rapidly sprinting compartments carrying mixed emotions of nervousness, excitement, and joy. We still had a long but also short three days left before the Visa Interview. Every hour felt like a minute. I had no other choice than to stay in my hotel room and prepare.

Eventually, the big day was there. Carrying some useless papers and my passport, I entered the Visa Consulates of Delhi. Gigantic walls surrounded me from all sides. It felt like a war zone where losing was not an option. I was the only one among my friends who had a Visa Interview that day. It was like rubbing salt in my wound: Nervous and lonely with no acquaintances around is the worst someone could hope for on the biggest day of one's small life. My heartbeat was no slower

than a Formula One car. I had only three things going on in my mind: Visa, Visa, and Visa.

There was a thin and tall man with short black hair wearing a white chiffon shirt and plain black pants sitting in a small black leather-coated office chair. It allowed him to move back and forth and rotate in every angle possible. His robotic voice was calling out names of applicants who were supposed to go to a Visa Officer for an interview. The nervousness burst inside me like an atom bomb. Nervousness made me think that he would never call my name, but my thoughts worked like a jinx. "Siddhartha's next!" barked the big speakers. I leapt up, supporting myself with my palm on the armrest of the couch I was told to sit on. I nervously scanned every visible sight. Absolutely zero eyes were on me. A deep breath and I marched towards counter number seventeen. Those five minutes that I spent in the interview were like lost data from a memory disk. I don't remember a single thing the Visa Officer asked me; the only thing I knew after the interview was, I'm going to the USA.

I had never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would get lost in the subway stations. I never imagined that I would pose for a photo in front of Times Square. I never imagined that I would have a friend who doesn't even speak my language. But I am going through all this, and I am in love with it.

A dream that was ceased by the COVID crisis is not a dream anymore. One and a half years of patience and wait just to get into college was a huge deal for a young guy who has thousands of new, different, stupid ideas striking his mind every

day. A sudden text message which even I was not sure was real or not ended up being the turning point of my life.

And now, I have finally found a reason to sit in front of a desk, have a pen and paper in my hand, scratching my head, and trying to complete all my blood-sucking assignments. I finally have due dates that wake me like an alarm in the middle of long nights.

However, the same thing repeats for me: Wait and Wait. Sometimes I think to myself, "If waiting was an art, I would be Picasso." From waiting for college decisions to waiting for COVID to end; from waiting for a friend in a café to waiting for the visa interview day, I've come a long wait. "Work hard today, live joyfully tomorrow." I've been told this several times. And here I am, trying to find that tomorrow. Although I've just started the conquest, I know a beautiful tomorrow awaits me again.



Words in Silence by Smriti Karki

It was the middle of the semester when she stood before us, silently waiting to be introduced. It was unusual for a new student to join the class between semesters. She had long black hair, with the same braids as every other girl in the class. She looked a bit older than an average eighth grader and had an unhealthy posture, like something was not quite right. Her skirt was way below her knees and at that time, when we had just become teenagers, we knew about the fashion sense of the person by the length of their skirt. Moreover, her eyes were cast down and she almost never looked up.

The teacher introduced her, but I was not interested in her name. I was too focused on looking at her appearance. I could not tell exactly what it was, but I knew in an instant that she was different. She had not uttered a single word but even then I could sense her fear. If it had been anyone else, I would have guessed it was shyness but in her case it was evident that she was scared. She was even trembling a bit.

Then the first dilemma of every new student, “Where to sit?” came into light. She slowly walked towards the seats. The seats were desks and benches arranged as two in a row and five in a column where three to four students could sit together. She looked towards the teacher. He understood that she meant “Where should I sit?” and told her to be seated on the bench, which was two or three rows ahead of me. She quietly went towards the bench and sat down. She was placed there because she was a little big and that was the only bench with only two people currently on it.

Days passed by but we barely heard her speak. She stayed alone most of the time. She replied to our hellos with a hand gesture. Words like “Thank you” and “Sorry” revealed that she had a high-pitched voice. I could imagine how a full sentence would sound funny in that voice. Maybe it was one of the reasons she did not talk.

About a week later, I heard some of the girls complaining about her to the teacher ten minutes before class. While talking to the teacher, they were frequently looking towards the back of the room, where she was sitting. I was not that close to them so most of what I know is what I assumed from the scene. I was trying to listen to their conversation just out of curiosity. It was so hard to guess what a girl who barely speaks might have done to offend someone. I went towards the front of the classroom where they were talking so I could hear more clearly. Apparently, she was very smelly so no one wanted to sit beside her. One of the girls who was her benchmate said, “We can’t concentrate on anything. It is really bad.” The teacher called the new student to the front. With those words we parted to the side. He

continued, "I am not trying to offend you but you should take care of your hygiene. Your friends are bothered by it. You could even take some measures if that is a health problem." She just nodded in response and got back to her seat. I personally thought that the teacher was being as polite as possible in that delicate situation.

A few days later, the girls again were talking about how the issue was still bothering them and so the teacher told her to sit with me. I was shocked at first, but it gradually became clear to me it was because of my academic aptitude. She was very poor in studies. She could not do basic math or even spell correctly. Clearly, the teacher hoped that sitting with me would gradually help her excel in studies. I was reluctant to sit with her at first because she smelled bad. Later on, I complied with it because the teacher said I could have the whole bench for both of us and having a whole bench for just the two of us was a big deal. Moreover, I got an idea to stuff bags and other things in the middle so that I didn't need to be close to her.

Weeks went by. The other kids still called her "stinky" and "fatty." She never responded and she ignored them. I was a nerdy student who needed quiet moments to study and do my assignments. So, I stopped them from calling her nicknames because it was disturbing me too. Then one day, her father came to school and talked with the teacher. One student overheard and the words spread from one to another. Apparently she had an accident a few years back. She had fallen from the first floor and hit her head on the ground. After that, she had experienced a lot of difficulty speaking and studying.

Hearing this information, my perspective about her changed. I wanted to help her in any ways I could. After that, I helped her with her studies. I started writing the assignment journals in her diary. I asked if she had done her homework to prevent her from being punished. I tried to become friendlier to her. I tried to stay in the classroom during lunch hours because she had no other friends and I wanted to keep her company.

After the exams were over, everyone came to me to say that the new student's father was looking for me everywhere. I was scared. I was asking "why" to the three classmates who told me three different times as I was walking down the stairs. But they all said they had no idea. My heart was racing as I went down every step. Finally I found him in the canteen waiting. He was tall and I could tell that his daughter resembled him. As my friend told him I was the one he was looking for, he came to me and said, "My daughter speaks a lot about you. Thank you for being there for her. She said how she was really glad that she found a friend like you." It came as a big shock to me.

Even though we sat together and I helped her in her studies, she never openly talked to me. Even if we were a bit more on friendly terms, we actually did not speak that much at all. But after knowing how she viewed me, how she felt about me, I was glad that I met her. Her warm feelings touched my heart. I had not done anything special. But what I had done had a huge impact on her life. Maybe her father wanted me to know how she felt and how grateful he was.

This encounter with my classmate led me to come to a great realization. We don't see how we are unknowingly affecting people around us and how small

things around us are impacting others' lives. Furthermore, we all experience being the new person in some parts of our lives. Like my classmate, we stand there in front of people we do not know and feel vulnerable. For me, I experienced this when I came to New York. I was at the airport looking at people from all around the world and as I stood there, I realized there would be more new faces that would surround me. It made me remember the fear she must have had on the first day, and that helps me see people not based on first impressions but based on what they might have experienced.



Swan Records by Ana Mestas

Watching movies can either be the most fun or most frustrating thing in the world. For me, it is frustrating when I don't understand them or can't tell if I like them—something that happens often when I watch movies with my dad. My dad is one of those parents that likes to show their kids extremely bizarre, underground cult movies. This is because he passionately dislikes anything and everything mainstream. Sometimes his cult-movie obsession is fun but other times we end up watching movies that are so obscure I feel like I will never get those two hours of my life back. Nevertheless, something I love about my dad is the way he always picks movies and music to show me that he believes will make me think he is the coolest. Of course I already think he is the coolest, just because he is my dad. Although many of my dad's obscure movies I have watched and quickly forgotten, there is one that for some reason resonated with me. It helped me realize perhaps we can relate to each other in many more ways than we think.

It was one of the many long nights of quarantine when my dad suggested that we watch one of his favorite movies, *Phantom of the Paradise*. This film came out in 1974 and at the time, it completely bombed. However, over the past 47 years, it has become quite the classic. The film is about a man, Winslow Leach, who is a pianist and decides to audition for a gig at a new club called The Paradise. The song he auditions with is called "Faust," a beautiful song about dreams that never come true. The Paradise club owner, Swan, likes Winslow's songs so much that he decides to steal them. After Winslow does not hear back from Swan, he decides to go to Swan's house and confront him. After some conflict with him, Winslow ends up going to jail for a crime he did not commit. Long story short, Swan gives the club gig to a girl named Phoenix. She is a beautiful woman with a beautiful voice but because she is working for Swan, she is heading down a dark path. After Winslow escapes prison, he falls in love with Phoenix and is determined to ruin the Paradise club. Fortunately for you, I won't spoil the actual ending so you have to watch the film yourself.

At first, I thought the movie was very bad and strange. I'm pretty sure the entire movie I had a very confused look on my face while watching it. It almost felt like it was the longest movie ever but at the same time, it felt like the end came so suddenly. It felt like the movie was trying to be weird and unique and different on purpose. Eventually, I remembered that all Brian de Palma movies are weird, unique and different.

Days passed and after not thinking much of the movie because I didn't think very highly of it, I came home from a long day of skipping class and decided to go on

a very long walk at the park by my house because I don't feel accomplished in my day unless my phone tells me I walked 10,000 steps. For some reason, since I was having one of those days where all you wanna do is sit at the park and hang out alone, I decided to ask my dad to send me the soundtrack of the movie because I remembered some of the songs were good and had a happy tone, which is exactly what I needed on that gloomy beginning-of-pandemic day. While on my walk, one of the songs Phoenix sings came on: "Special to Me." I listened to the song at least five times all the way through. I became so overwhelmed that I felt like I was going to cry but the tears just weren't coming. My eyes were watery and my throat felt tight. Like those days when you are at school or at work and you are going through struggles and you *know* that if a classmate or a coworker came up to you and asked if you were okay, you would probably start uncontrollably crying. My favorite line from the song is, "You weren't workin' just to survive/ But you're workin' so hard/ That you don't even know you're alive." This line made me want to watch the movie again because if at that moment I could relate to just one line so much, perhaps the movie would make me feel better and understood. So I did. I ended up crying for probably the entire second half of the movie. I don't know that the actual movie is what made me cry but I do know that watching Winslow go through all the lies and disappointments made me realize that we have all felt disappointed, lied to and misunderstood despite the fact that we are all quite literally just trying to get through life and do the things we want to do.

I believe we can all relate to the feeling of not really knowing what we are doing with our lives. Or at least feeling like all the things we do are not fulfilling in

the way we want them to be. There is a line in the song “The Hell of It” that says: “Your pipe dreams become obsessions/ they scare me baby/ And we should have nothing to fear/ I’m no child/ But I can’t help wonder/ It seems like some kind of spell you’re under/ You’re listening baby/ But somehow you don’t really hear.” This lyric particularly spoke to me because at that point in my life, I was really going through the whole teenage “What am I going to do with my life/ why is life so long” phase. For me, the spell Phoenix talks about in the song was exactly that: not knowing what to do with my days, working just to barely survive, going through life feeling like I am watching myself from up above. When Phoenix sings about “pipe dreams” she is talking about Winslow being so obsessed and entangled with his own hopes and illusions that he is suffocating her by not letting her follow her own dreams and become a singer at Paradise. Phoenix and Winslow’s relationship embodies the heart of my personal struggle of supporting others and encouraging everyone but never supporting or encouraging myself. I believe everyone has gone through this phase when you’re 16 and think life is over the day you turn 25 and everyone is asking where you’re going to go to college and what you want to study and it seems like the world is closing in and you have to have your entire life plan ready. I hate that. The best plan in life is to have no plan at all, in my opinion. As silly as it sounds, this movie made me feel like what I was going through was not some abnormal moment in life. Even fictional characters can have a huge impact on how you see the world and maybe even how you see yourself. Much like Winslow, I fear for the people around me a lot. I try to always be there for everyone else but usually in the process of trying to help everyone, I end up not helping myself at all.

In the last song of the movie, Swan sings “Roll on thunder/ Shine on lightning/ The days are long and the nights are frightenin’/ Nothing matters anyway/ And that’s the hell of it.” As bad as it sounds, I think that is a great way to look at life. Maybe I am still going through my existential crisis but I think I will just choose to believe that we really are just minuscule creatures who do things that are not very important. That can be a bad way to look at life but it can also be good. Sometimes you need to remind yourself that it’s okay to be sad, frustrated or feel like you are watching yourself from up above. Sometimes it’s okay if you feel like nothing matters. Because it really doesn’t. Maybe it’s better that way.



Art by Rivujoya Hem



Joyless by Pamela Vásquez

It was graduation day. I was trembling on my tight high heels, my sweaty feet were slippery inside my shoes as rays greeted the earth. I walked to the stage, looking for a seat. It took me a moment to realize that my seat was reserved. One of my friends had pointed it out. A portrait of my lifeless face had been placed in my seat.

Sitting on my chair, my fabric mask soaked with tears when I heard her brittle voice say, "... the darkest time in my life." It sharply touched my heart like a double-edged sword. Her words served as a bridge to her heart. I could see the gratefulness reflected in her eyes. Her tears were not in vain. Her words were not in vain. Looking down, I could feel her pain. She had strong features, which made her seem to have a rough character, yet, I knew she was weak like a mirror that breaks down into pieces when shattered by one of its biggest weaknesses. Education was a weakness. She freely and openly shared her academic journey. She shared mine. For better or for worse, we share the same story. We are one.

While standing among the crowd, I felt my heart detach, loudly and rapidly clapping like the audience after I heard my academic achievement awards being announced. However, I just felt like matter on earth taking up a place in space. Thoughts floated in my head like bubbles. I doubted myself.

Could I have worked harder? Did I deserve recognition? That didn't seem to satisfy me. Nor my family's encouraging words when our eyes met.

At school, I often cried: leaning against the wall of the crowded hallway in the main school building; sitting on the dusty stairs; and in the welcoming classrooms in front of my classmates. Through this, my classmates wondered, "What is wrong with her?"

One day, one of my classmates said, "You're so responsible, *vale*." Adding a word of approval. But my weakness—academic striving—was driving me into the open sea, making me drown in my own tears.

Once, one of my writing teachers in high school told me with a great expression of concern, "Don't be too hard on yourself." I ignored her words at the time but they seemed to follow me. Later on, my history teacher would say the same.

After my performance during a Mock Trial competition, one of the judges emphasized the word: confidence. I knew he was speaking to me not only through his words but through his focus on me. Once again, my history teacher would underline the word *confidence* in an acknowledgment letter he had handwritten for me.

How could I satisfy both expectations at the same time? I refused to believe that I was being too hard on myself. Nevertheless, I acknowledged the lack of confidence. School made me lose myself.

Am I a slave? Starved, overworked, I yelled at myself, crying unstopably. Trapped, not only within the white cardboard walls, but against my will. I felt like a prisoner against my own freedom, hopeless and without escape.

Winter 2020. The darkest time in my life. A typical day: wake up, join classes, do homework, and sleep. Over and over again, every day. I felt like my body didn't have any function other than to serve these duties. I felt my body decaying, every day. I looked at the mirror and the bones in my abdomen were visible. My body. My weak knees, my visible bones, I couldn't forgive myself.

Do I love myself?

Why would I punish myself?

I tended to reward my hard work by justifying why I deserved it. But, *did I deserve to punish myself?*

At home, aggressively, I closed the bathroom door. Bump! Click. Openly, I let the warm tiny drops of water hug my body. A feeling of relief emerged and made me feel free. *School, I am not responsible, you are. You, who involuntarily made me work like a sewing machine, stitching together perfect grades, while I was coming apart at the seams. I blamed myself, now I blame you.*

You killed my happiness, my desire to learn I envisioned as a kid.

You made me miserable, in front of others.

Weak. But I found strength in you. I embrace and praise it.

I seemed to be strong, like her features, our graduation speaker, the one whose journey I shared. Fierce. But, we were fighting against the same rival. I haven't won the war yet of my invisible killer, but I hope I can defeat you with all the strength you've given me and end you once for all, but I can't. You're my only hope, my only escape.



Wearing the Intangibles by Eskand Ghimire

I remember myself lying on the turf, distraught. Loud shrieks of laughter were spinning all over my mind while I had my head in my hands. My face was all red and eyes all narrow, whilst the Brooklyn heat kept squashing my head. How did it come to this? That's some story.

I feel like at every point in my life I have worn masks. But does everyone feel the same? I doubt it. These past two years I saw almost everybody mask; whether that be those blue medical masks or some fancy black striped face coverage, people have worn masks. However, that is just the tangible part of life. Is life all tangibles? I think not. What I often experience is the intangible things, and in this unusual era of physical face covers, I see through to an intangible part of it, and somehow those tangible masks open up a gateway of intangible thinking for me.

I enjoy soccer a lot. Among the hustle bustle in the streets of Kathmandu, I always found a way to roll the ball through, or hit a tree, and even hit windows sometimes. And that gave me joy and happiness. However, I did not always sport a

happy mask. My glasses broke about a dozen times, making me feel as though I had been stabbed by a dozen nails. I wore a mask of pain in those moments. We wear our emotions like masks, sporting whatever we feel on the inside; clearly visible in our faces, just like those masks are. Wearing different masks from time to time, I arrived in the United States. I wore a mask of uncertainty: what was to follow?

I was new to New York: I still had a ball though, and yeah, a few friends. New city, rude people, overwhelming environment, mazy subways. I felt lost, like an astronaut floating in space, but the space in question here meant literally no space. It seemed to be rush hour all the time, and you could barely catch a breath amongst the flock of people. My eyebrows shrunk every single time I tried to figure out the subway route and my palms started sweating. It was indeed uncertain and overwhelming. My glowing mask of happiness was carved out of question marks at that time. That uncertain mask was terrible to wear. And circling this timeline is when I was lying on the turf, red-faced whilst still changing masks.

It was just my first week. The sun was scorching through my head, and it felt like it was sucking every ounce of energy from within me. We were out to play soccer on the turf at Pier 5; basking beside the serenity of Brooklyn waters with the sun spilling through it, shining crystal-clear on our eyes. The ground there always to me feels like an ocean and dribbling there is as if I were surfing. Just so smooth, just so clean and even. With every kick, the ball was swerving, sometimes smashing across the post, sometimes a bit wide and the sound it made was just so pleasant to hear. I wore a mask of enjoyment, and I'm pretty sure my friends did too.

The sun kept beaming brightly along the surface and some of us were filming too, smashing the ball, and giving out a few decibels' worth of exclamations. Excitement and enjoyment seemed all over the place. Pratham, my roommate, was letting out a huge smile, standing tall in his hulky figure whilst Rohit, my close friend, was shadowed by Pratham's figure, letting out some silky dance moves. I remember myself eagerly waiting for my turn, like a little kid waiting for his treat. I was all dreamy and suddenly, "Ayo Eskand, come up it's your turn and we got the cameras on!" said Hesul and Dravid. I had been practicing my moves a lot at home, and the boys had the camera ready. We were getting a few looks from the people around us, and to be fair, I kind of liked it.

My turn finally came, and it felt like a spotlight moment. I wore a mask of excitement and it clearly showed on my face. I stepped up, thinking nothing but how to stroke the ball gently and curl it towards the goal. I took a deep sigh, played the shot over in my head, feeling a bit of a big shot. After all, there were people watching me, cameras filming me and I had hours' worth of practice, what could go wrong?

I hit the ball just exactly as I pictured it, spinning my foot slightly through its surface edge, and my body angle tilted towards the ground. The ball flew, and my eyes were lit up. It was time for it to dip downwards, dip, dip, dip... but no, it did not dip. Instead, it kept on flying and took flight and with dozens of people watching me, splashed into the ocean behind Pier 5. There was a moment of brief silence, very brief to be fair. Then suddenly, people burst into laughter, some were hiding their faces, some were barking loudly in laughter while my friends started to roll on the ground. And all that captured by the camera! Imagine my embarrassment. The ball

was gone, and it felt like my overconfidence too. The calming sun and the ocean serenity suddenly turned hot and glazy as if I were being suffocated, and that glimmery mask of excitement turned into a mask of embarrassment and this time, it was pretty big.

All I could process was the laughter. I started thinking, *“Oh I’m so bad at this, Do I run? Do I go for the ball? Do I just laugh it away?”* This all felt overwhelming, and I felt like getting on that jet ski and zooming back to Queens. All that joy, excitement and overconfidence shattered with a kick, and the bright blue mask changed to dark, with shades of question marks around it.

But then something hit me. Was I confused about where to zoom away to? No, I had it clear: Queens was where I stayed, and it felt a lot less uncertain. I felt like I was responding naturally: happy, sad, excited, ashamed, but above all, certain. Certain of the place, certain of my home, certain of the way and certain of my life there. And every dark cloud of shame was wiped away in a flip. I felt like masks wear a part of me, I wore what I felt, and sometime later, I would wear a bright and blue mask again. And a split second later, I felt calm and wore that very same bright mask.

We wear a lot of masks throughout our consciousness, but I am always amazed by how we feel masked by emotions. And all in all, I kept wearing masks; masks of joy, happiness, shame and whatever else it may be. But that was normal, so it washed away my uncertainty. All those masks I wore, but I did not feel a mask with the “?” imprints anymore. Hence, in a sense I did hit the ball right, didn’t I? I changed my mask back to a happy one, like a great ending to a story. But it did

splash into the waters, so this one time, I would have liked the mask to be tangible and cover my entire face.