



# MOON PREP'S Favorite Essays

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## HARVARD EDITION 2025

Ten Essays that landed students a spot  
at Harvard

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# One.

In my vision I focus on a lone front tooth backdropped by a black abyss; thin lips dance around it in motions forming words, yet I can't seem to hear them.

In the kitchen behind my grandfather sits his definition of luxury — a now stale and cold Filet-o-Fish from the Beijing McDonald's. American basketball plays on the television across from where we're sitting on the sofa; players' shoes squeak and balls bounce louder in my ears than those words. In this moment, his Mandarin goes in one ear and out the other. I don't listen the way I do when he's screaming at my mother, a bitter, blind rage fueled by undercurrents of fear and "I miss you."

My focus blurs, and the tooth disappears. Basketball fades to silence, and I'm on the airplane home to America. We're separated once more by an ocean and three thousand unspoken miles. It's a whirlwind; five years pass, and my few apathetic summers in China are over before I can blink twice.

The last clear memory I have is waking up on my thirteenth birthday to my dad handing me the landline kept for international phone calls: "Waigong has something he wants to read to you."

It is a poem that he had written about me. Through the phone, I could do nothing but hear his voice, static worsening the Mandarin already slurred by missing teeth. The poem says everything he loved about his granddaughter, everything he saw in her, despite barely knowing her. It is a reflection of last dreams, visions, and hopes of his own.

He was gone not long after that, once more turned to forever.

It wasn't until I found myself chancely entrenched in poetry because of a mandatory school competition that I began to think deeply about this disconnected relationship. Poetry Out Loud's anthology introduced me to hundreds and hundreds of poems, and I felt like a hungry child at a buffet. When I discovered "Old Men Playing Basketball" by B.H. Fairchild, I saw tired arms and shaky hands as a pure geometry of curves, hobbling slippers as the adamant remains of that old soft shoe of desire. In words, I was safe to miss my grandfather for all the things that made him human. For the first time in my life, I began to realize that I might have a love for beautiful words that ran deep in my blood, a love that couldn't be lost in translation.

On that makeshift podium in the school cafeteria my sophomore year, "Old Men Playing Basketball" becomes "Waigong Playing Basketball." I'm taken back to that sofa in Beijing one more time, where he takes my small hand into his trembling one covered by gray-brown patches of melasma, where he tells me, "You are a gift, a wonder. You are a hu die." Butterfly: my Chinese name. Born to one day fly.

But it is no longer his voice I hear. It is my own— crisp and clear, raw and strong. The poem becomes the glass wand of autumn light breaking over the backboard, where boys rise up in old men. I see the whole scene this time, not just tooth and abyss. I hear every word.

Perhaps I will never be able to know my grandfather beyond his love of basketball and poetry, or hear his voice read me another poem. But when I am stirred by beautiful lines or liberated by my pen on paper, I know I am one of two same hearts, forever bound together by the permanence and power of language.

I am a vessel in flight, listening, writing, speaking to remember histories, to feel emotion, to carry forth dreams and visions and hopes of my own. My grandfather becomes an elegant mirage of a basketball player, carried by a quiet grace along my trail of spoken words floating upwards toward heaven.



# Two.

The mouthwatering scent of beef broth brought back a flood of childhood memories as it wafted around me. After a 12-hour drive from Florida to Texas, the familiar smell meant I was in "bep cua bà", or "grandma's kitchen" in Vietnamese. Every summer when my family visited my grandparents' house, my grandma always had a steaming pot of pho ready for us when we arrived, and this time was no exception. For my family, pho was more than a Vietnamese delicacy: it symbolized bringing us together over a warm, hearty meal. This specific visit, however, came with a change of perspective; as a young adult who was now conscious of his cultural roots, I wanted to learn more about my heritage by learning how to cook pho from my grandma.

As she boiled the water, my grandma stressed to me, "Every bowl of pho needs a strong foundation: the broth." Without a good broth, she explained, none of the other ingredients mattered. As I stood over the boiling pot, I thought about my own foundation: my family. My parents immigrated to America after the Vietnam War with nothing and had to work tirelessly to accomplish the celebrated "American Dream". From taking me to a 7 am student government fundraiser or a 10 pm baseball game in a city five hours away, I would not have been able to participate in these activities, which I consider an integral part of my identity, without their support. Being fortunate enough to have a strong foundation in my life has allowed me to be a strong foundation for others. For example, as an upperclassman on my varsity baseball team, I strive to be available for my teammates. Last season, when a younger teammate was struggling in a few games, I stayed back after practice to work with him on his fielding before driving him home, even though he lived almost an hour away. This small gesture was a reflection of my attempt to build a strong foundation for others.

As I watched the broth simmer in a giant pot that my grandma had continuously stirred for two days, she imparted another bit of wisdom onto me: making a great bowl of pho was also all about balance. Simply taking a great broth and indiscriminately adding to it would not suffice; each of the ingredients had to be in perfect balance with each other. Balance was never really something I considered until recently, when I experienced the struggle that can come from its absence. When I suffered a stress fracture in my lower back a few years ago that left me unable to play baseball for the foreseeable future, I felt as if suddenly a major part of my identity had been stripped away. I struggled with this new reality for a while until I realized I could fill this temporary void by acting as a mentor for my younger teammates. Additionally, with my newfound spare time, I was able to further develop my interest in Mu Alpha Theta, which gave me a new, enriching opportunity to compete in mathematics competitions. By the time I was finally cleared to play, I had developed a fresh appreciation for the importance of maintaining a balance among all the activities I did, as I had experienced firsthand the empty feeling of having this balance stripped away.

While putting the finishing scallions in the bowl, I reflected on the delectable meal I helped create and realized that what had started out as me simply wanting to learn more about my heritage became something more poignant: an introspection. Although there may not be a single perfect recipe for pho, by applying my grandma's cooking principles in my everyday life, whether it be in baseball, my volunteer lab experience, or my service trip to Guatemala, I hope to be able to make a "bowl of pho" that is perfect for me.



# Three.

I woke up one morning to the usual noise in the kitchen. “That plate of porridge is mine,” my brother yelled outrageously at my sister, “leave it or else I will beat you up.” Food scrambles and fights were order of the day in the family I was raised. The size of one’s meal would be determined by one’s age. You had to fight for food at times, or else hunger would eat you alive. Living with ten siblings in a polygamous family is not the definition of tranquility. However, I have learned more from this revolving door than I could have been taught in solitary silence. Beyond chaos, there is a whisper that teaches the benefits of unselfish concern.

My mother was a teacher, but her salary could not sustain the big family. Almost every day, she would wake up early in the morning before work and go to the fields. My parents were shadowy figures whose voices I heard vaguely in the morning when sleep was shallow, and whom I glimpsed with irresistibly heavy eye-lids as they trudged wearily into the house at night. We sat together as a whole family on special occasions. After a bumper harvest, my parents would sell their crops in the neighborhood. I vividly remember my mother counting proceeds from the crop sale, her dark face grim, and I think now, beautiful. Not with the hollow beauty of well-simulated features, but with a strong radiance of one who has suffered and never yielded. “This is for your school fees arrears,” she would murmur making a little pile. “This is for the groceries that we borrowed from Mr Kibe’s store,” and so on. The list was endless. We would survive at least for the present.

My father instilled in me the importance of education. I would see the value of education every time I shook hands with him; the scratches and calluses from the field in his hands were enough motivation. After every award I received, he would firmly shake my hands as a sign of profound pride. My tacit prayer was to ease his pain one day. Unfortunately this was never to come true, he died on 5 February 2016 in a car accident, only a week before I received my IGCSE O LEVEL results and I had attained 14 straight A grades, standing out to be one of the top performers in the country. After my father’s death, his brothers took everything that he had acquired.

Inevitably, circumstances forced me to take a break from school in January 2017 and bear my share of the eternal burden at home. I had to take care of my mother whose health was deteriorating. I would spend the day doing household chores, and the nights were times of intensive study. It was on my mother’s deathbed when I was fully convinced that she was a seasoned fighter. “Barry,” she called me, “I am not going to die till you finish school.” In order not to disillusion that extraordinary faith in her voice, I assured her that she was going to live. Unfortunately, she succumbed to death on the 15th of March 2017. I “died” with her. My belief in the God she had ardently prayed to till the time of her demise was shaken.

Already laid waste by poverty and pain, I went back to school through the generosity of strangers. School became a battleground for victory. I came back to life determined than ever before. I out-performed the country boys who mocked my struggle. I went on to win accolades in the National and Regional Mathematics Olympiads and was awarded the Higher Life Foundation Scholarship that was going to pay my fees throughout high school.

Today, I am an epitome of a black, double-orphaned, African boy who lost everything he ever valued, but refused to give up on his dream.



# Four.

Of the memorable moments in my life when I have discovered one of my passions, almost all of them involve my bright yellow Crocs. Buying rubber shoes in such a conspicuous color was not a spontaneous decision; it took me two months to choose. I had been stalking crocs.com, clicking between the color options, and asking for the unsatisfying opinions of friends before what felt like my rom-com “meet cute” moment: a girl wearing a black tracksuit walked past me in Crocs the brightest shade of yellow I had ever seen. That very week, I opened my laptop and decisively purchased a size 8 pair of “Lemon” Crocs. Ten business days (and two months to build up the courage to wear my eye-catching kicks out in public) later, my self-discovery began.

I was wearing my Crocs when I recognized the importance of activism in young communities. This revelation came on a Saturday in March 2018. I took a 25-minute train ride down to Washington D.C. to participate in the March for Our Lives rally—my first protest. For all 25 anxiety-inducing minutes, my heart raced and my muscles tightened as I tried to ignore the probing stares from strangers wondering why I decided to pair yellow shoes with a green coat.

But my fears (both Croc and non-Croc related) quickly dissolved as I stood alongside activists that were my age; in front of a stage dominated by leaders that were my age; making me realize that the only thing stopping me from being a student activist, at my age, was effort. The young voices calling for change inspired me to step into my responsibility to use my voice to help those whose voices are being suppressed. I stood there for one hour, but what I saw was enough to encourage me to actualize my vision for a world where students are driven to engender social change through service. So, five months later, I co-founded The Virago Project (TVP), a student-led organization focused on building a community of activists like the ones I stood alongside in March. A “virago” is a woman displaying exemplary qualities, but the term has been twisted to demean assertive women. From its name to its activities, TVP is about redefining leadership.

After my day in D.C., I wore my Crocs to every student meeting TVP held. I wore them as we sold 150 handmade bracelets to raise funds for a local children’s home and again when we posted colorful cards with encouraging messages all over my high school. Walking into rooms full of ambitious student leaders using TVP as a jumping-off point for their own service projects, I beamed as their gaze met my sunny shoes and then shot up to my equally cheery smile.

“Dunni, why do you wear such noticeable shoes when you lead these meetings?” asked one of our activists. Pleasantly dumbfounded, I could only respond with a curious smile—it’s not often that frivolous items lead to unintentionally philosophical inquiries. So, I held my tongue until the answer struck on a late-night in November 2019.

I wear such noticeable shoes when I stand in front of other student leaders because I want to model the kind of leadership that is as smile-inducing, deliberate, and visible as my Crocs. TVP has trained me to be, above all, altruistic, and I love that I get to learn and model this with a generation of world changers. It took me two months to decide I wanted a pair of sun-colored shoes but only two seconds and a model to realize that I desired the option I’d once overlooked. Now, I realize that, to curious strangers, I am the girl walking past in Crocs the brightest shade of yellow they have ever seen. And I am delighted with the thought that I could be the one to break someone’s cycle of indecision and social apathy.



# Five.

Breakfast after church is a Sunday staple in my family. We're not allowed to eat beforehand, so right after Mass ends, my sister and I race to the bagel shop only to inevitably wait in a long line. Often when we reached the cashier, we'd find they were out of plain bagels. It was a perennially difficult decision: pick from an assortment of non-plain bagels, or wait another 20 minutes for new plain bagels.

People's bagel choices tell you everything about them, and I was a plain bagel girl through and through. Even when faced with 20 extra minutes of hunger, I decided to leave the sweet bagels for the adventurous, the savory for the straightforward, and the "everything" for the indecisive. I came for plain bagels, and I would get them, no matter the wait.

After a long wait, the warmth of the freshly-baked plain bagels radiating through the paper bag assured me my patience was worth it. Being a plain bagel girl means knowing exactly what you want—no more, no less. It means that I'm in control of my decision-making and always end up satisfied.

In senior year, my teacher graciously brought bagels to our class. Upon approaching the bag, however, I found there were no plain bagels left. Instinctively, I retreated. But my teacher stopped me and advised that I break from my comfort zone. Reluctantly, I chose an egg bagel, preferring its odd yellow shade to the surrounding sweeter variety (who wants a french toast bagel anyway?). My first bite introduced me to a new world: this sweet and savory egg bagel flawlessly balanced the worlds of the adventurous and the straightforward.

My willingness to try an egg bagel didn't lead to a phase of food experimentation, but it did make me see that I could be more spontaneous than my plain bagel self might allow.

Before high school, you could never spot me on a dance floor; I much preferred to watch from the audience. But in my freshman year, I joined the dance department of my school's annual production of *SING* on a whim.

As soon as I tried the first move, I knew the decision was worth it. I enjoyed diligently practicing routines and adding my own flair, satisfying my tendency to prepare thoroughly while also fulfilling my desire to explore the realm of dance. Eventually, I excelled so much that the directors chose me as their successor—a position that has strengthened me as a dancer, leader, and person. Though I relished my newfound sense of spontaneity, my plain bagel girl roots helped me to effectively manage others' dancing. I tirelessly choreographed and re-choreographed each step and count of a routine, no matter how long the detailed revisions took. During practices, I analyzed the dancers' movements and refined them to what could only be described as plain bagel perfection.

Sometimes the moments when I thought I needed to be in control to be successful were when I needed to be more spontaneous. In my first year being director, I was unfamiliar with managing a multitude of variously skilled dancers. Shedding my fear of being an inexperienced leader was difficult, but I soon learned to open myself to others' advice about describing moves and maintaining the beat. Together, through sometimes spontaneous practice sessions and spurts of inspiration, we worked to adapt the choreography to accommodate all dancers.

I revel in the contradiction that is my simultaneous meticulousness and spontaneity: my egg bagel epiphany. I can count on myself to prepare thoroughly to optimize my potential, no matter how long it takes. But I can also trust myself to make the most of the unknown and stay true to myself while doing so. It's what makes me multidimensional; it makes me a young woman no longer defined by her bagel choices but rather by her versatility and what she can do with it.



# Six.

When I was little my grandfather taught me the German word *Waldeinsamkeit*, the feeling of being truly alone in a deep forest. “Forests are special in Germany,” he explained. “In Florida...it’s swamps,” pointing to the brackish pond behind his house.

Back then, I knew only that he was a scientist, and that my mom’s forehead furrowed when he was mentioned. It was years before I saw him again, and many more years before I learned that, despite the silence of forests and families, no one is truly alone.

I always felt that science was in my blood. In 8th grade, I attended the Summer Science and Engineering Program at Smith College. I left hoping to study Chemistry--that was what my grandfather had taught.

So in high school, I emailed dozens of labs...and received one positive response, from a plant lab. Plants? They didn’t move or talk; they’re boring, I thought. And I had accidentally killed every plant I’d touched--including a fake one I’d dropped. But Dr. Yanofsky encouraged me. He also taught me that most of what I’d assumed about plants was wrong.

New research suggests injured Douglas firs send distress signals to nearby pines through a series of mycorrhizae, a fungi which acts like a plant internet. In other words, trees “talk” to each other and are “friends” during hard times--they help injured trees by sharing resources. If we listen at the right frequency, we can literally hear forests communicating.

In Dr. Yanofsky’s labs, I began using CRISPR-Cas9 to explore two genes in *Arabidopsis thaliana*. It took years, but my engineered plants produced nearly three times the fruit of the wildtype average, with clear applications toward world hunger. I entered my project in the Greater San Diego Science and Engineering Fair (GSDSEF), where I won First Place and Sweepstakes, sending me to the International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF), where I became a Finalist.

The next year, I took these principles to the Garcia Scholars program at Stony Brook University to study nanotoxicity. I’ve learned that people across the globe speak a universal language of science, including bad puns. I’ve also learned that everyone had a mentor.

That’s why I helped launch the Student Leadership Board of GSDSEF. Traveling to dozens of schools, leading monthly Saturday workshops, I saw classrooms without science equipment. I met kids whose parents couldn’t afford even modest science fair entry fees.

So I created Science Fair Buddies, a mentoring program at a middle school where most students receive free lunch. I persuaded a local company to provide financial support, and recruited science fair alumni as mentors. We hold workshops when late buses are available. I’ve learned to look and listen in ways I hadn’t before. “Will there be snacks?” often means “I haven’t had a meal today.” Kids make formal presentations in t-shirts because that’s their only shirt. Seats for parents at award ceremonies are often empty. Taylor, a 5th grader with orange hair, comes with her grandfather; he’s her primary caretaker. Many kids seem to be their own caretakers.

In the last year, in an awkward conversation, I learned my own mother was one of these kids. I learned my grandfather was an alcoholic. That she spent afternoons stranded at bus stops. That he once ran over her dog. That he broke down a neighbor’s door to drag her back home. That the swampy pond behind her house was her designated meeting spot for friends to comfort her.

Last year, we traveled across the country to bring him home to live with us. He was alone, and suffering from progressive dementia. Some days he speaks nonsense, asking for “blue noses” for lunch. But yesterday he said his hobby was “finding truth where it may not always be obvious.”

Forests may be peaceful, but they’re not lonely, or even silent. Trees—and people—are always sharing resources in ways that remind us we’re never truly alone.



# Seven.

It's terrifying how much we can get from Amazon nowadays: groceries, clothes, books, and crises of faith are all just a click away.

After Audible thanked me for listening to *The Most Dangerous Branch: Inside the Supreme Court's Assault on the Constitution* by David Kaplan and *The Brethren* by Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong, I wanted to cry, scream, and march to Washington to shake answers from Chief Justice John Roberts.

My emotional whirlwind burst from the dichotomy between reality and my expectation of it. Growing up, I knew the judicial branch as the apolitical arbiter of constitutional law and the bias-blind defender of civil rights. With fear across the nation rising as fast as the global temperature, I was sure the best way to change the failing status quo was through the courts. I dreamed of becoming a lawyer to advocate for justice and to help my country prosper. My ambitions sprouted from the ideals of public service ingrained into me at school and at home, and my goal hinged only upon the judiciary's mandate to protect our freedoms. My dream was purposeful and straightforward. But 37 hours of audiobook rewrote all my beliefs in the judicial branch.

The Supreme Court: apolitical arbiter and bias-blind defender? No. Rather: potentially politicized, petty, proud, and irrational. Partisan politics dance about the Justices' Conferences. The Constitution and personal biases govern rulings. Most rights supposedly afforded by the Constitution are interpretations, not explicit clauses, of it. For example, Chief Justice Warren Burger manipulated case assignments, so Justice Potter Stewart tattled on him to Woodward and Armstrong in retaliation. The right of the judiciary to strike down laws deemed unconstitutional is derived more from *Marbury v. Madison* than from Article Three. Justice Harry Blackmun based his majority opinion in *Roe v. Wade* on the rights of the doctor to practice. *Stare decisis* is optional, as is judicial restraint.

I felt sick. I had worshipped the courts as the perfect forum for change, always upholding truth, equality, and scholarship; I saw them as the eventual birthplace of solutions to gun regulation, climate crises, gerrymandering, immigration, and social inequality. I did not want to acknowledge courts could be anything but perfect. Desperation drove me to keep listening, but with every new case I covered, the clearer it became that I had worshipped an impossibility. After finishing Jeffrey Toobin's *The Nine*, I finally admitted that, prior to these books, I had known nothing. Perhaps that epiphany should have terrified me, but it did quite the opposite.

It was liberating.

Socrates once wrote that true knowledge was in knowing that you know nothing. I couldn't agree more: once you know you've hit wisdom rock bottom, you can be reckless with your curiosity because you only have everything to gain.

Since that epiphany, I have been gleefully chasing infinity. Even if my capacity to learn is finite, my curiosity is not. The history of the courts, the ethics of judicial restraint, the politics of judging, the rhetoric of opinions, the intersectionality of all of the above and more... there is so much to explore.

For the record: I purchased those audiobooks on a whim. I was not looking for anything more than a fascinating nonfiction read. But they have plunged me into an exhilarating, all-consuming, fully unpredictable adventure, one that stretches back to our nation's founding and far into our future. While these books initially upset me by revealing the imperfections of the judicial branch, they showed me a whole undiscovered history and future at my fingertips. Rather than smothering my dreams of public service, they fanned the flames; now, my dream of public service is fueled by my passion to serve and to learn.

And I'm ready to chase it.



# Eight.

I am a builder. No. I am a seasoned architect. My tools are foreign to the realities of others but mundane by my standards. I don't compose the perplexing and unique structures that most think of when the word architect is mentioned. Matter of fact, I don't make structures at all; my mastery is in the assembly of walls. Mental ones, to be exact. I am a skillful artist of intricately woven walls to create a complex maze for the others that try to get to know me; they are left confused, with no choice but to surrender their arbitrary efforts to "save" me.

I was unmatched in my array of skills. That was until I met Mark. Mark was a worker from my first mental hospital visits who had attached himself to my conscience before I could push him away as I had done with so many others. With an equally impressive skill set, he was able to navigate his way through my long-standing labyrinth to its center. That's where he found me. Still crouched next to my fledgling wall, dirt on my knees with dust on my face, I had finally been figured out for the first time in years. How did he get here? When did I let my guard down? The answers to these questions sat obnoxiously in front of me. The game that we always played. Horse. Such a benign game, that the thought of it having any significant part in my life is utterly incomprehensible. But it did, nonetheless.

Little did I know that Mark was studying to become a therapist in his studies of psychology, and I, his first patient. This is not a story of teenage love and life-changing heartbreak, but of one where an abandoned kid whose father raped her and whose mother gave up custody to have the father's perverted approval, finally gets the parental figure that she was never offered before. I was an emotional wreck at this time, not wanting to live, much less fight a court battle to get the "justice" everyone so badly wanted for me. So Mark, the father I never got to have, taught me how to swim in the never-ending circumstances I was drowning in. With every swish of the net of our game, a new way he would teach my fumbling feet to move in the water. And with every finished game, he was one wall closer to the reality behind my facade. He taught me that being angry at my circumstances would not fix them or get me any closer to overcoming them.

Nothing is going to change my mom's decision. Nothing is going to turn back time and change what my dad did. I can be the ruler of the lonely maze I created, or I can be surrounded by people who love and care for me. It wasn't easy destroying all the walls I had taken years to build and perfect, but it wasn't impossible either. This isn't a fairytale where Mark waved a magic wand and all was better and my walls disappeared from my mind. This is reality, and it took time, patience, and effort to unassemble my walls. Brick by painstaking brick. But in the actual world, people don't get happily ever after. Some of my walls are still there. And that's okay. I have learned to recognize my progress instead of singling out my flaws.

I am finally okay with not being perfect. My walls have chips and cracks, but I am content with their creation and their destruction. The destruction of familiarity is a beautiful thing. And so I climb out of the water, let the flowers bloom in the cracks of my walls, and walk off the court arm in arm with someone who sees me for who I am, not whom I pretend to be.



# Nine.

I wake up in monochrome. Just past the tips of my toes, the Flatiron Building rises above the bustling black and white streets of New York. Cars hurtle by in blurred gray tones. I am a hawk or helicopter or hot air balloon, and I have somehow worked myself into the sky of an Old Hollywood movie. Of course, this only lasts as long as I keep my eyes locked on the IKEA photograph I hung up across from my bed a few years back.

Just before I turned fourteen, I burst out of IKEA—my all-time favorite store—dead set on crafting on a "new and improved" Helen. I rushed home, stripped my room, and launched my transformation. Out with the beaded golden comforter! Out with the floral rug! Out with the pastel prints of savanna animals!

Well, perhaps this is too dramatic. Items are rarely thrown out in the Krieger household, just put to another use. Gazelles and cheetahs now peer down at me from the hallway wall, and the floral carpet rests beneath the brass coffee table in the living room. As for the comforter, I still use the exact same one, just concealed by a stark white cover. Still, the meaning holds: I was ready to refocus. Life seemed to be accelerating and I was not going to sit by the roadside, watching the wheels kick up dust.

Back then, I did not know what I wanted to be, and I still do not know now. However, never has there been any doubt in my mind about what I want to be doing. I want to whiz from idea to idea, question to question, and all the while, learn as much as possible. In all its action of rushing cars, the IKEA photograph epitomizes this ambition. No billion-dollar skyscraper or jewelry store in New York could ever win me over. I am not after Gatsby's gilded highlife, but New York's dynamic—the city's perpetual drive.

When I open my eyes, however, I am just as likely to wake up in a vibrant forest of green as I am to rise in the midst of charcoal city streets. Plants flourish on either side of my headboard. Vines of English ivy cascade down my bookcase, and a sentry palm fans out in front of my closet doors. New York reigns over one wall, but the other three are governed by nature.

This contrast did not always exist. Apart from the occasional bouquet, the Krieger household was void of vegetation until my sophomore year. One Saturday, my copper phytoremediation experiment made the breakfast table home to four groups of greenery. Over the next few months, I watched parts of my garden flourish, and then wilt, and then (remarkably) recover. Although all my plants were eventually reduced to a green juice of sorts for absorbance testing, they had started a revolution.

Soon after my experiment ended, I realized I missed my garden, and the plant invasion began. Today, my room harbors seventeen species, meshed into a diverse jungle. A few have even spilled out, taking up residence in the living room and kitchen. Just as I am captivated by the movement of the city, I admire the delicate hardiness of plants. Left untouched by humans, forests would cover most of the United States, and even in the midst of man-made destruction, many species still find a way to break through the cement.

In my room, plants and city streets share the stage. They do not battle, but exist in equilibrium, the gray with the green, urban acceleration in balance with the stability of nature. These worlds are not opposites. For all their differences, they share the energy of growth as well as the promise of regeneration and renewal. To thrive, I need not tear myself between manmade landscape and the natural environment; I need not pick between rapid action and natural growth.

I choose both.



# Ten.

The first bridge I ever built was made of paper and glue.

My 8th grade physics teacher tasked my class with building a bridge out of two pieces of paper. Instead of focusing on the paper, I applied layers and layers of glue, strengthening the paper each time. The following week, the bridge successfully held 22 pounds, setting the highest school record in 12 years.

Two years later, I began building bridges of a different kind.

The car that brought me from the airport drove away, and I stepped through the doorway into the tiny apartment in the small city of Troyan, Bulgaria. The walls were covered with my stick-figure paintings and childhood pictures.

I laid my eyes on the wise woman in front of me and leaned down to pull her into a hug – not so tightly that it would break her, but enough to show my love. Raising her wrinkly hands to wipe my tears of joy away, my grandmother mumbled a row of Bulgarian words of affection and smiled. I didn't understand, but I smiled back.

Since she lives 1247.092 miles away from me, my grandmother is not always there to give me a hug when I need it most. Nevertheless, her heart of gold transcends physical distance and has taught me more than anyone about kindness, empathy, and compassion for others. Although she can't walk me through the intricacies of Bayesian statistics or neuroscience for my upcoming test, she tries her best to understand my ambitions and goals, and contributes in other ways – whenever I have an important test coming up, she prays, lights up candles, and keeps them lit until I'm done.

I could purchase plane tickets to trek the distance that separated our homes, but two other gaps were harder to traverse: my aging grandmother's health was deteriorating and I didn't speak Bulgarian.

I sought to create bridges to close these gaps.

My grandmother suffers from rheumatoid arthritis, a disease that presses her body from every side, deforming her joints, and arching her back. She is the smallest person I know, but yet for me, the greatest.

I wished that I could show her the world and take all her pain away, but the only thing that I could do for her was building a bridge that would connect her to the knowledge she wouldn't be able to access otherwise. I spent countless hours researching healthy meals to create a detoxifying and anti-inflammatory nutrition plan for her that would be easy to cook. The research paid off – the pain in her joints subsided.

When my grandmother and I “talked,” emotions flowed between our souls like stars fly through space. Words would only describe what we feel – but not show. It was like listening to a song, but not paying attention to the lyrics, only to the pain and passion in the singer's voice and the flow of the melody.

In 2017, I decided that I finally wanted to learn Bulgarian. With a flashlight under my blanket, I started learning the Cyrillic alphabet and Audio CD's with Bulgarian day-to-day conversations talked me to sleep. I surprised my grandmother by writing her a letter – written without Google Translate for the first time. Phone calls became much more frequent, and we grew closer together, but I wanted to go one step further. I moved to Bulgaria for a semester the year after in order to see her happy face when we could finally sing the song of our conversations – with the lyrics.

Seeing the influence my bridges had on my grandmother inspired me to build more. After I came back to Germany, I learned that bridges could be built between anyone.

In March 2020, my best friend's mother confided in me that she was overwhelmed with the task of coordinating her children's schoolwork at home during quarantine. It occurred to me that a platform for building bridges from younger students to older ones could take the load off of parents during this time. I quickly found that bridging these two groups of students leads to a higher learning efficiency since younger students often feel more comfortable studying with students that they can identify with. Soon, my startup was connecting a high-quality and often entirely subsidized learning resource to a socioeconomically diverse population of students from all over Germany.

I hope that by building bridges, we learn to better appreciate each other's differences in order to create a more empathetic and connected world – together. My bridge made of paper and glue eventually collapsed after holding 22 pounds. But my next bridge is always stronger than the one before. Above all, I will continue connecting others, and I am excited to see what bridge I will build next.

