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Favorite Essays

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Eight Essays that landed students a spot
at Hamilton

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One.

75,000 flipped pages. 11,520 packed boxes. 6 school maps.

I began measuring my life in flipped pages, packed boxes, and school maps when I was 6. As my family and I flitted between states and coasts for my father's job over the last decade, I shielded myself with fantasy novels. With my head propped on the baseboard near my nightlight and a book held up in front of me by aching arms, I would dance in whimsical forests, fight daring battles, and rule dangerous courts long after dark. In my fantastic universe, I could take turns being the queen, the knight, the hero, and even the villain. These books helped me express the happiness, anger, sadness, and queerness I could not have even begun to imagine alone.

The characters I discovered in novels as I toured libraries and Barnes & Noble stores in strip malls around the country taught me resilience and empowered me to nourish my strengths. Mare Barrow showed me the power of determined women, and I unapologetically strove for academic excellence and obtained a GPA of 4.4. Tane, from The Priory of the Orange Tree, inspired me to push the limits of my own body, so I've traversed approximately 1,544 miles in cross-country races and practices. Evelyn Hugo's unapologetic character compelled me to want to embrace and feel free with my queerness rather than shelter it away in a shameful corner. Even further, this year I am adding a third dimension to my love of fantasy by interpreting Mrs. White in my school's production of Shuddersome and The Monkey's Paw with assistance from Anne of Green Gables, my first fictional idol, who massively influenced my personality and tendency for dramatics. But above all, Leigh Bardugu, my favorite author, gave me permission to even dare to write and to dream that I can.

What began as a safety net in my adolescence has grown to something more, a true passion for English and all that it can express. Language is power and I wish to wield it like a mighty sword. I want to be the puppetmaster, the speaker, and the leader in a world that is crafted in ink. I want to be a New York Times bestseller and to know that whatever I do is impactful and that it creates a difference, no matter how small. I want to walk down a crowded street and see "my book" spread open in a passing person's hands, as they refuse to put it down, just like I did so many times in the hallways of my middle school. A writer, a college professor, a publishing lawyer: I want it all, the riots of failure, and the pride of success.

Without the assistance of literature, I wouldn't be who I am today. If I hadn't grown up fueled on library hauls I wouldn't have discovered that I love English. I wouldn't get shivers when I fret for a favorite character or celebrate their triumphs, be as ready to face obstacles, or be as adventurous as I am. Without the moves around the country and back, I wouldn't have become so resilient and open to change, so adaptable to life, but most importantly I wouldn't have become so in love with language. With every move I burrowed in books, and with every book I became me. Literature has made me in every way, and the only way I can repay it is to become the penman.

Two.

I dreaded their arrival. The tyrannical cicadas swarmed DC and neighboring areas in 1987, 2004, and again in 2021. I was freaking about Brood X, the worst of them all. Brood X is a cluster of cicadas that descend on Washington, D.C., every 17 years. I live in the epicenter of their swarm. Cicadas battled with mosquitoes for first place in the top tier of the human annoyance pyramid. I hate these off-brand cockroaches.

For 17 years, cicadas live underground feasting off of sap, running free of danger. Then, they emerge and face the real world. That sounds familiar. I have lived in the same house, in the same town, for 17 years, with my parents feeding me pasta and keeping me safe.

Is it conceivable that I have more in common with cicadas than I previously thought? Cicadas have beady, red eyes. After a year of enduring Zoom classes, attending tele-health appointments, and spending too much time on social media and video games, I too feel a little blurry-eyed and disoriented. But what about their incessant hum and perpetual noise? That is not me. OK, maybe I do make protein shakes with a noisy blender at all hours of the day. Maybe I do FaceTime vehemently with friends, blare music while I shower, and constantly kick a ball around both inside the house and out.

At least I do not leave damaged wings, shedded skin, or rotting carcasses everywhere. Smelly soccer socks on the clean carpet after a long practice? Check. Pools of turf in the mudroom after sliding all over the field? You got it. Dirty dishes and trail mix stains after accidentally sitting on a mislaid M&M are hardly as abhorrent as cicada remains, right?

The more I reflected, the more I realized these bugs and I are more alike than different. After 17 years of being cooped up, we are both antsy to face new experiences. Of course, cicadas want to broaden their wings, fly, and explore the world, even if it means clumsily colliding into people's faces, telephone poles, and parked cars. Just like I want to shed my skin and escape to college, even if it means getting lost on campus or ruining a whole load of laundry. Despite all my newbie attributes, I am proceeding to the next phase of my life whether I am ready or not.

Only the hardiest of cicadas survive their emergence and make it to trees to mate, lay eggs, and ensure the existence of their species. I want to be a tenacious Brood X cicada. I will know what it means to travel into the wrong classroom before getting laughed at, bump into an upperclassman before dropping textbooks everywhere, fail an exam after thinking I aced it. I may even become the cicada of the lecture hall by asking a professor for permission to go to the bathroom. Like cicadas, I will need time to learn how to learn.

No matter what challenge I undergo that exposes and channels my inner-cicada, novice thought process, I will regroup and continue to soar toward the ultimate goal of thriving in college.

When I look beyond our beady red eyes, round-the-clock botherment, and messy trails, I now understand there is room for all creatures to grow, both cicadas and humans. Cicadas certainly are on to something ... Seventeen years is the perfect amount of time to emerge and get ready to fly.

Three.

I was born to two moms. One, my biological mom, Meredith. One, my mom who adopted me, Mary. Because they were a same-sex couple, the law required that Mary adopt me in order to be my parent. They used Sperm Donor 3311. All I know about my “father” is that he didn’t have a familial history of cancer, he has a twin brother who is 6'4", and he studied math in school. This is all background information; I don’t even know his name. He doesn’t know mine, nor does he know that I even exist. People often ask “What does your father do for a living?” and I’m forced to respond “I actually have two moms,” triggering reactions like that of my driving instructor, “Oh, well that must be different.” I’m 17-years-old and still don’t know how to respond to these comments.

When I was 5, Mary, who had been sick for a long time with leukemia, passed away, and my life was turned upside down. I was old enough to understand grief, and yet I still question why it happened. It was terrifying seeing my mom break down while saying, “Mom died last night.” I wonder what I missed out on and carry guilt that I don’t remember much about Mary, because we just didn’t have enough time together. Many say grief gets easier with time, however, I think the way you grieve just changes over time.

The world kept spinning and, in 2011, my biological mom met another woman, who soon became my stepmom. However, to me, Kerry is also my mom. No longer do I reveal the fact that I have two moms; now I get reactions to the fact that I have three.

Not knowing my father doesn’t leave a void in my life. “Dad” didn’t sing “there was an old lady who swallowed a fly” and tickle me when the old lady swallowed the spider, my moms did. He didn’t take me to Gunpowder Friends Meeting where I shook hands and spent time with 80-year-old friends from the retirement home, my moms did. He didn’t console me when I began crying at the dry-erase board at school because it reminded me of white boards Mom wrote on when she was unable to talk. He didn’t teach me that love is love. He didn’t teach me who I was becoming, my moms did that.

I’ve never known my father or that I was supposed to have one, so why would I think my life is any different from the so-called “norm?” If there’s one thing I have learned from my parents, it’s that I have developed a love for difference. I openly accept all those around me and excitedly anticipate the relationships that I will build in my future. There is no such thing as a normal family structure, and my upbringing has given me that greater world view. My moms have raised me to believe that I can accomplish anything. There are still limits, though. My family chooses not to travel to Jamaica because we aren’t accepted there. Before each family vacation, we must research to see if it is a gay-friendly place. I don’t know the answers to questions about my dad’s side of the family. But I don’t let those kinds of things get to me because instead I can talk about the people who raised me. The world is changing as we speak. “Normal” is fading, but it has already disappeared for me. I don’t want anything different than the family I have, and I own that every day

Four.

“The difference between an anti-personnel and an anti-tank mine is not that complicated,” I am told casually, in halting Russian, by a boy even younger than I am during a walk through the Chechen mountains. I am freshly 14 and visiting my father’s homeland for the first time, unfamiliar with the harsh realities that kids half my age already know ironclad. My guide points out the areas where the grass is overgrown and the fruit trees abundant. People and animals alike know to avoid them; someone has learned of landmines the hard way. It shouldn’t surprise me — the scars of war on this rugged country are omnipresent — but it is so jarringly different from my life in London that it is nevertheless hard to digest.

It also differs from my father’s rosy stories about his childhood in Katyr-Yurt, stories that made me wish to swim carefree in icy rivers, devour handfuls of fresh sour cherries straight from the tree, and see nights dense with stars. I still experience these beauties of place, but my eyes are now open to the less romanticized parts, both enriching and complicating my connection to my family’s past. Suddenly, too, I am made uncomfortably aware of the conflicting layers of my familial identity. It is the Russian of my Muscovite, Jewish mother that I grew up speaking at home. Yet the Chechen children speak in broken Russian, and the grownups who are more fluent in it are not keen to communicate in the enemy’s language. Seeing the ugly scars of war, both physical and psychological, I cannot help but feel like an intruder, ashamed not only of my Russianness but also of my city-boy naivete. Despite this shame, I yearn to discover what it means to be Chechen, to see their home through their eyes, and through this desire, I begin to feel a deep connection all of my own to this beautiful, fraught land.

In Moscow, my new awareness of conflicting identities only intensifies, but now on account of the maternal side of my heritage. Relatives there largely see Chechens as terrorists and raise an eyebrow when they hear where I have spent my summer. Babushka’s neighbour, a nurse who witnessed the carnage from the theatre siege in Moscow, turns away disgustedly when she overhears me relate the beauty of the mountains and the notable generosity of the people. Once again, I register the fear and distrust of “the other” that reigns in the more homogeneous cultures in Russia, making me appreciate the diversity of London all the more.

When I return there, I cannot slip back into life as normal as I have done after past summers. I find myself pondering the question of identity and the way people interpret their own past, informed just as much by collective emotion and memory as by fact. The cosmopolitanism of London is just as I remembered it, but the things I loved about it I now see in a new light. I had always revelled in the fact that, despite our differences in heritage, my peers and I had seen each other as the same — bound together by being Londoners first and foremost. Now I am interested in conversations that I would never have considered previously, wanting not only to share my newfound experiences but also learn about the personal histories of my friends, many of whom, like me, are the children of immigrants to the UK. When did they come to explore and interrogate their own complicated identities? How did these discoveries make them feel? What does it mean to carry the stories, the poetry, and the pain of so many places within them? Questions like these, which were so important for me to answer about myself, also became a powerful place from which to understand more deeply the people around me and the complex world we share.

Five.

I know that I had prepared well for this moment. For two arduous months, I readied my fingers for an exciting concert. No anxiety could undermine my confidence in my preparation, and my piano recital's success was "in the bag." I selected three pieces for my repertoire: the ambience of Erik Satie's Gymnopedie No. 1 as the opener, a somber contemplation of Beethoven's First Movement of the Moonlight Sonata, and Bach's light and surreal Prelude in C Major for the conclusion.

My shining moment arrived, and I strode purposefully toward the piano. The building in which my performance was held was new, but its dwellers were old. Respect and prestige permeated the atmosphere as I took each stride to my seat. As I sat down, the chair creaked and moaned as if in sympathy with the audience's aching desire to hear me play. I prepared my sheet music and commenced my epic moment.

Never was such an exhilarating performance heard. All of the little techniques and tricks that I practiced were executed perfectly. I captured the dynamics I wanted to express in Satie's phonological experiment with each chord to which I applied varying pressure. Moving onto one of Beethoven's most famous works, I crafted the cascading arpeggios of each new chord, which resonated unity uninterrupted in me and in the audience. When I concluded with the airy prelude from Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, the room swelled with bliss. Having poured my heart and soul into each piece, I beamed with pride.

As customary for a stellar show, I rose to bow to the audience to thank them for their eruption of applause. Flowers were thrown, cheers elicited, and standing ovations bestowed. From the subsiding din came a faint question to rain on my parade: "Could you play something more lively, darling, say, a Neil Diamond song?"

I work on weekends at a long-term-care facility, and my geriatric audience, although a pleasure with whom to interact, can be brutally honest. Begrudgingly, I thanked Mrs. Hersch for her request, promised her better next time, and stewed in my own irrelevance. Going home that day, my feathers were ruffled. How could any civilized listener, after such a superb medley, disregard such time-honored compositions? The notion was absurd.

Yet perhaps more outlandish, as I later acknowledged, was my visceral reaction to the events that had transpired. Why did I react hesitantly to a simple request made in earnestness? It would have been easier, in fact, to practice "Sweet Caroline" than to break my fingers over Beethoven's work. Then, in my moments of introspection, I concluded that my choice of musical pieces mattered little as long as my audience enjoyed them. Whether it meant recreating the most tortured and heinously composed pop song or a masterfully crafted Romantic concerto, I vowed to play them all.

Throughout my life, my adult mentors have succored me with platitudes when most needed, which laid the foundation for my confidence. Yet, while working with people who have lived five times longer than I have, experiencing so much more than I can imagine, I know that the world does not revolve around my tastes and interests. I'm okay with that. Thus, for a couple of hours each day in the living room, unlucky family members passing by are subjected to the torment of my tenth run-through of "Sweet Caroline" as I prepare for my next recital for an audience that has taught me more about personal preferences, and myself, than I anticipated.

Six.

I have never felt such palpable emotion, such profound grief emanating from a space, as I did while hiking through the forest fire scorch in Philmont, New Mexico. A universe had once existed under the protection of these Ponderosa Pine, now black and crusted, turning brittle in the wind. It was a landscape that didn't sing its laments, but whispered of its loss through every pile of scalded timber and skinny, wavering shadow cast by the hollow towers of ash.

I felt prepared when I made the decision to become a scout. I love nature and camping. I love the Scouts BSA program. I love the people. I was definitely not prepared, however, for the numerous challenges I would face during my years as a scout.

I was the first female "boy scout" in my town, which continues to be both my greatest honor and a constant reminder of the isolation and insecurity that comes with being any "first." I became a symbol, whether for good or bad, and my actions not only spoke of me, but of the future young women in Scouts BSA. I felt like an imposter.

I wasn't a strong-willed leader like those who usually have "first" stitched into their title. My seventh-grade acting career did little to veil a shy and insecure girl who crumbled at overheard comments on how I didn't belong or how girls like me were poisoning BSA's spirit. As time passed, I found myself waiting to develop the toughened heart that the leaders that I knew held. As my troop and I backpacked in Philmont Scout Ranch this past summer, my doubts and insecurities seemed to echo from this inky forest.

Coming from Pittsburgh, I had expected the kind of desert with raspy air and coat hanger cacti. Nothing quite shattered this expectation as much as putting on my last pair of dry socks before the fourth day of downpours. We navigated steep cliffs and vibrant meadows, and pulled ourselves up peak after peak. As the sun set on one of our final evenings, the flat, mountain-ornamented horizon gave way to a modest footpath, daring into a new forest. This forest, differing from the field of burnt pines we had seen prior, had burned several decades ago. The fire had cleared everything and had left its signature singed onto the bottom 10 feet of every tree. The forest floor was clean. Wild grasses with accents of purple and blue flowers blanketed the ground below the pines like snow, which had fallen while the world was asleep, completely untouched and extending to infinity. Above the burnt limbs of the trees, thick bundles of green needles soared into the sky.

Not long after Philmont, I was awarded my Eagle Rank, the culmination of my experience as a scout. I believe that my time in Scouts BSA has been the first to the forest that is my life. Though scars remain from my experience, new change and strength have flourished out of the damage.

I have come to the conclusion that it is not always the fierce leader who becomes a "first." It is the extra hours. It is finding a way to listen to criticism and try harder, rather than feel the thorns. It is using one's own feeling of isolation to see others who feel alone. It is the act of going through the fire and staying with it, allowing it to advance you, which changes people who dare to be a "first" into the leaders that they go down in history as being.

As I think back on my experience in Philmont, the first forest we saw, this blackened graveyard, is what I picture. I remember the charcoaled ground so vividly, but more so, I remember the soft purple wildflowers hidden in the desert soil. Though few and far between, against the grieving timber, they were stars.

Seven.

I'm 6. The sounds of hornpipe and laughter drift across the gymnasium-turned-cafeteria-turned-auditorium. Mum caught me dancing to some of her old Irish tapes — the Chieftains, Sinead O'Connor. She asked me if I wanted to do it for real. I said sure and went back to dancing. Now a freckled woman digs around in a cardboard box and pulls out a pair of dusty, worn black shoes. "Don't worry," she says, "you'll learn eventually." The shoes are too big; they sag at the toes. I approach the stage. Twenty-five pairs of eyes fix on me. In a room bustling with motion, everything stands still. It doesn't matter that I feel like a clown in an ill-fitting costume. All that matters is the dancing.

I'm 9. I sit in the hallway of the Times Square Marriott watching girls in big wigs and sparkly dresses run around, squawking like glamorous, unhinged chickens. In my tartan skirt and simple bun, I feel like an ugly duckling. The bobby pins dutifully securing my bun in place make my scalp ache. My hands slide to my shoes. They're too tight. Mum put them on her feet to "try and stretch them out a little." I pass some over-enthusiastic dance moms who put the "mother" in "smother." I reach the stage. A hundred pairs of eyes fix on me. In a hotel bustling with motion, everything stands still. It doesn't matter that I'm out of place. All that matters is the dancing.

I'm 12. My brain won't stop flipping through disastrous scenarios as I stand with my teammates in a hotel in Orlando, Florida. We've trained for months, sacrificed everything for this moment. I try to think of happy things: the pride on Dad's face when he watches me dance, the freedom of flying across a stage on invisible wings. We recite our steps like a poem, the sequences like a song that carries us through an ocean of fiddles, pipes, and drums. My parents sacrificed a lot to send me here. I want to make them proud. I want to make myself proud. We approach the national stage. A thousand pairs of eyes fix on me. In a world bustling with motion, everything stands still. It doesn't matter that I feel like a fraud. All that matters is the dancing.

I'm 15. An Irish accent lilts through the ballroom of the World Championships. It sounds like mashed potatoes and Sunday bests and the green hills of home that I know so well. We mutter a prayer. I'm not sure I believe in God, though I should. I look at my partner and wish we were more than friends. She smiles. I don't think God believes in me. We ascend the stage. A million pairs of eyes fix on me. In a universe bustling with motion, everything stands still. It doesn't matter that I'll never be enough. All that matters is the dancing.

I'll be 18. Murmuring voices will hover in the air of the gymnasium-turned-cafeteria-turned-auditorium. A little girl will approach me timidly, wearing a very old tartan skirt. I'll reach out softly, adjusting her bun to soothe her aching scalp. Then, I'll slide my hands toward her feet, toward a pair of small, dusty shoes. "You'll learn," I'll say. They'll sag at the toes, but I'll reassure her: "Don't worry. You'll grow into them." Then, she and I will look at my own beloved shoes. They'll be worn, but I'll tell her the creases are like a map, evidence of the places I've been, the heartbreaks I've suffered, the joy I've danced. My life is in these shoes. We'll hear the music begin to play, the tide of fiddles, and pipes, and drums. I'll take her hand and, with a deep breath, we'll climb the stage. "Ahd mor." It won't matter that this is the end. All that has ever mattered is the dancing.

Eight.

The black void descends toward the young girl standing in the grassy field. It slowly creeps up on her, and as it reaches for her perfectly white dress … Swipe. I quickly wipe away the paint without a thought except for panic. Before I realize what I have done, the black droop becomes an ugly smear of black paint. The peaceful picture of the girl standing in the meadow is nowhere to be seen. Even though I successfully avoid having the spilled paint touch the dress, all I can focus on is the black smudge. The stupid black smudge. As I continue to stare at the enemy in front of me, I hear Bob Ross's annoyingly cheerful voice in my head: "There are no mistakes, only happy accidents." At this moment, I completely disagree. There is nothing happy about this, only frustration.

Actually, there is one other emotion: excitement. Don't get me wrong; I'm not excited about making a mistake and definitely not happy about the accident. But I am thrilled at the challenge. The black smudge is taunting me, challenging me to fix the painting that took me hours to do. It is my opponent, and I am not planning to back off, not planning to lose.

Looking back at the painting, I refuse to see only the black smudge. If lacrosse has taught me one thing, it is that I will not be bested by my mistakes. I snatch my picture and run downstairs, carefully setting it against the living room window. The TV newscaster drones in the background, "California continues to be engulfed in flames as the fires continue to burn." I slowly step back from my painting. California fires, I think, as I look up into the blood-orange sky. California Fires! I look at the painting, imagining the black smudge not as a black void, but smoke creeping up on the girl as she watches the meadow burn.

I grab my painting and run back to my room. The orange sky casts eerie shadows as I throw open my blinds. My hands reach first toward the reds, oranges, and yellows: reds as rich as blood; oranges as beautiful as California poppies; yellows as bright as the sun. I splatter them on my palette, making a beautiful assortment of colors that reminds me of one thing: fire. A rich, beautiful, bright thing, but at the same time, dangerous. My hand levitates toward the white and black. White, my ally: peaceful, wonderful, simple white. Black, my enemy: annoying, frustrating, chaotic black. I splat both of them onto a different palette as I create different shades of gray.

My brush first dips into red, orange, and yellow as I create the flame around the girl. The flame engulfs the meadow, each stroke of red covering the serene nature. Next is the smoke, I sponge the dull colors onto the canvas, hazing over the fire and the trees, and, most importantly, hiding the smudge.

But it doesn't work. It just looks like more blobs to cover the black smudge. What could make the gray paint turn into the hazy clouds that I have been experiencing for the past several days? I crack my knuckles in habit, and that's when a new idea pops into my head. My calloused fingers dip into the cold, slimy gray paint, which slowly warms as I rub it between my fingers. My fingers descend onto the canvas, and as they brush against the fabric, I can feel the roughness of the dried paint as I add the new layer. As I work, the tension from my body releases. With each stroke of my fingers, I see what used to be the blobs turn into the thing that has kept me inside my house for weeks. As I lift my last finger off the canvas, I step back and gaze at my new creation. I have won.