



Oh Captain My Captain

The salute is a sign of not only respect, but acceptance. After spending a month with a cohort of friends, I felt fully integrated into a group for one of the first times in my life.

First impressions are deemed so important, yet as a person with cerebral palsy, I often operate from an immediate disadvantage. Too often, my physical disability is unfairly linked to an assumption of limited cognition—making it harder to form lasting relationships built on mutual respect. For years, I resented my condition and the pain it brought me.

I will confess that I was lonely. I had people around me, but not people around for me. The idea of belonging to a community felt unattainable, so I turned to something that brought me joy: comedy.

Writing and performing comedy introduced me to a culture where being different was celebrated. Making audiences of 150 people laugh did wonders for my once-nonexistent confidence.

When I joined this month-long cohort, I went in with zero expectations. I left with something I didn't even know I craved: love. Intimate, but not physical. Love built on bonds, who a person is, respect. Love built on acceptance into a group.

The salute is an acknowledgment of one's humanity: We see you for the person you are. A group is only as strong as its individuals, and it is an honor and a privilege to be accepted into this one.

– A Sitdown Comedian.



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Our Ghosts

Watching, waiting

Crying “Stop”

Someone I love in the backseat of a car, their hands
gripped around their neck

Breathing staggered

But they stopped, and the birds continued to chirp
Life went on.

Yet the memory still haunts me

Like a ghost of what could’ve been.

I tried to push away that memory, swallowed the
ghost,

bottled it up and screwed the cap too tight.

Now I couldn’t breath, I couldn’t let it out

It just stayed locked away in my chest, pounding to
be free, to be talked about

It was no longer about them, it was about me

What did I lose that day?

1. The ability to deal with my feelings.

2. The ability to let people know all of me, even the
things that scared me
too much to admit to myself

But ghosts can walk through walls

And these walls I’ve put up can no longer keep it
inside

My family would say “it’ll pass”

We’re here for you, why bring in a stranger?

It's just another motion of life, a phase

But I know it’s not

I know I need to seek help

We all do

No matter what they say

No matter what society will think

We all need some way to loosen the cap on our bottle
full of ghosts

Full of feelings and thoughts

Full of experiences and life

We need someone to carry some of the weight with us

Someone to show us we are strong

And we are,

but first we need to be okay with feeling everything we
feel

*-“Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for
tomorrow”*

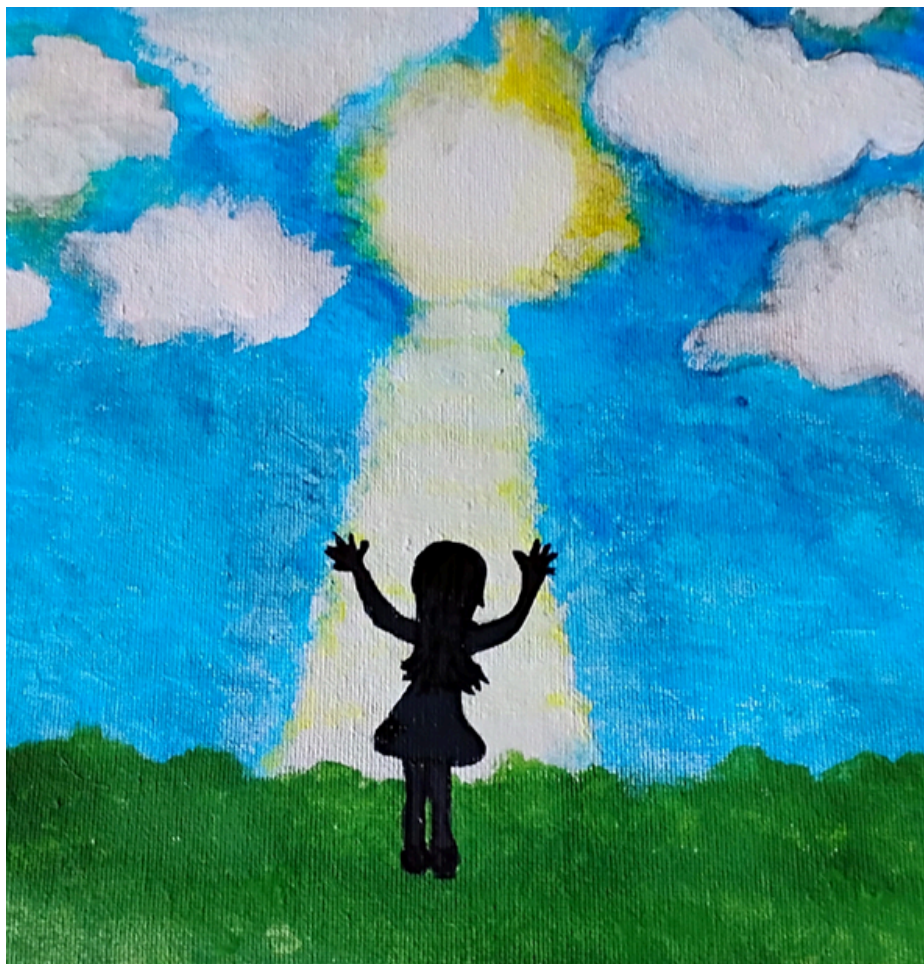


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Growing my mind.

All my life I was told that being okay was all I had to do, I've heard the words "Why are you sad? I'll give you a reason to feel sad" or "You have no responsibilities, why would you feel stressed? Why would you feel bad?" It became normal to keep everything just for me that I felt ashamed every time I wanted to look for help. It was always like that. All I was "able" to do was to be good at school, to always do my best to win, always do something to be seen. Even though I didn't have much responsibilities, I felt pressured, I felt like I wasn't supposed to fail, or feel down.

One day, I found myself crying at school, I was so ashamed that I wanted to leave. I tried, and then I realized I had really good friends, they helped me feel better, but then a teacher saw me, and sent me with a counselor. I felt weird because it was the first time meeting with a counselor. I felt everyone's eyes on me...

After I met with the counselor I felt better, I felt like finally someone was seeing me, and understanding me. After that one day, that fear of being judged was gone, I enjoyed visiting the counselors office. It felt right, it felt liberating.

I wasn't ashamed anymore, I didn't feel any pressure because I knew I could ask for help, even though my family didn't feel like it was helpful.

Now I'm writing this to tell people, that it doesn't matter who tells you it's not helpful. As long as you feel okay with seeking for help it is fine.

It is okay to not be okay.

It is okay to ask for help.

It is okay to need that help.

I know it, and now I know that I can help other people who are still struggling.

- JM



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Breaking Free

My parents always cared about others' opinions and societal standards; however, me on the other hand, I never seemed to care as much as them. But, as time passed I saw myself thinking like them. I would always worry about what other people said about me.

Embarrassing things I did would always replay in my mind, I always found myself thinking about all my mistakes and embarrassing moments. Some of my classmates were always invested in school drama and gossip. I noticed they would always speak badly about the nicest people. The things they said stuck to me and I wondered if people talked about me the same way.

Soon I realized it's really not that deep. People don't really care as much as I think they do. I've noticed my friends and other people around me worry about their embarrassing moments and cringing at themselves a lot; however, everyone else including me didn't see it as that big of a deal. I feel like we care deeply about what others think about us and pay too much attention to it. To the point where it takes up a big part of our thoughts, actions, and maybe even our self-worth. One thing I've been trying to do is to not think negatively and pay less attention to what other people have to say about me.

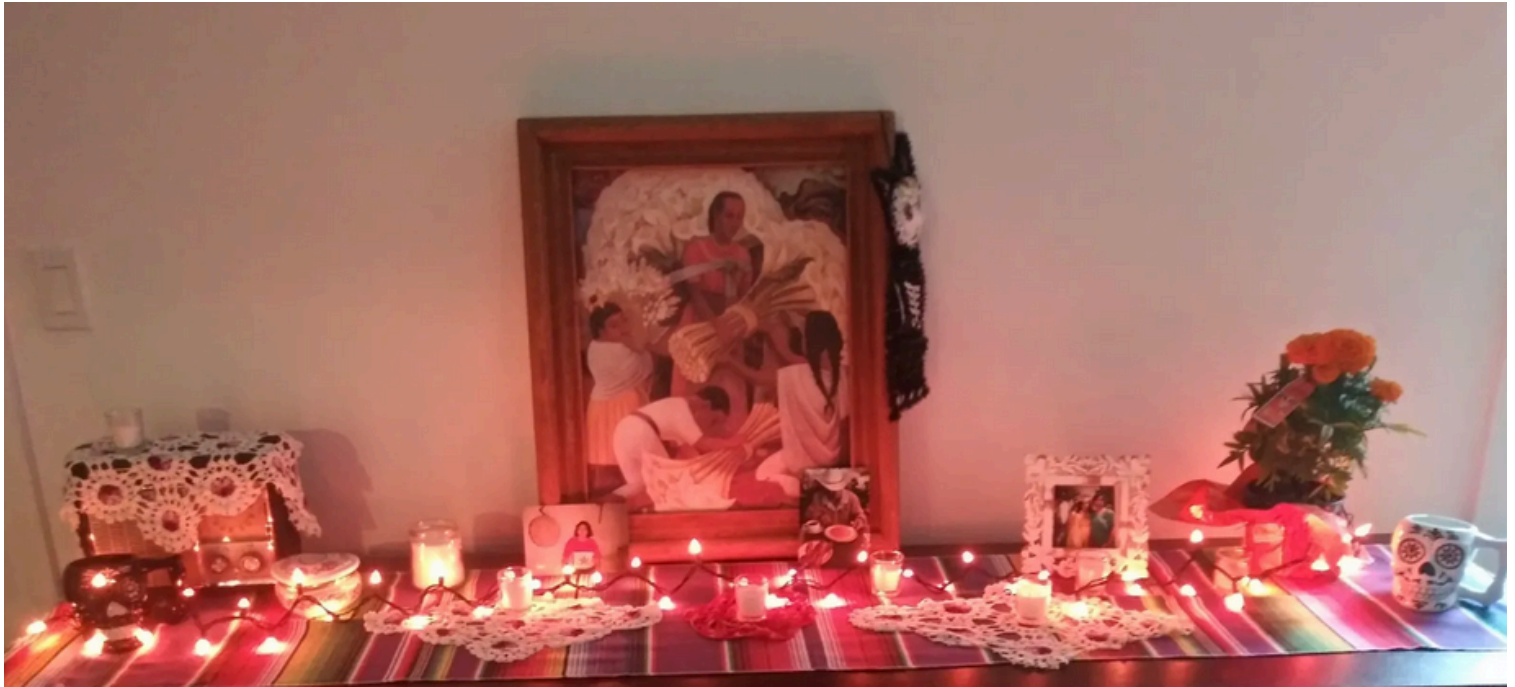
-San Bruno



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Unlearning and Holding On

Growing up in a Mexican household, I rarely heard the term “mental health,” and when I did, it wasn’t in a positive way. For most of my childhood, it didn’t feel relevant—until my grandmother passed away, the first person I deeply loved and lost. I expected grief to unfold like in the movies: denial, an emotional breakthrough, and then acceptance. In my family, that moment never came. Raised in an immigrant community, my relatives didn’t often show vulnerability. Opening up about pain wasn’t the norm—it felt risky in a world that didn’t always accept us. Instead, grief was carried quietly. I saw it in my father’s long stares at her photo, in the way conversations paused when her name came up, in the heaviness that lingered in the house. At first, I felt lost, unsure how to manage the weight of my emotions without talking about them. I did realize that my culture had other ways of coping though. When our extended family gathered, food and music filled the house. Food became an unspoken language of love, honoring my grandmother with care and familiarity. Music brought energy back to the room, reminding us of our shared identity and keeping us connected through the pain. This experience forced me to examine how my culture views mental health. I’ve had to unlearn the silence and stigma around expressing emotional struggles. But I’ve also chosen to carry forward the positive parts—community, care through action, and traditions that remind us we’re never alone in loss.

-IQ



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Roots Intertwined

I remember the air at Jinci Temple being still, the kind of quiet that makes you lower your voice without thinking. It had been my first time back in China after nearly six years, so my uncle insisted on taking me around, determined that I breathe in the places my family had always spoken about.

That's how I encountered the two trees known as Zhou Bai Tang Huai. Zhou Bai, a cypress planted during the Zhou Dynasty, is said to be nearly three thousand years old. Now, its trunk leans heavily, its weight carried by Tang Huai, a Chinese Scholar Tree from the Tang Dynasty that still flourishes every spring and summer.

People call them symbols of endurance. When I saw them, I thought about my parents. About how they have spent their whole lives standing straight, holding more than they could comfortably carry, because that was the expectation. Because asking for help would mean that they were weak.

I used to believe that too. But when I saw the two trees, roots intertwined, I didn't see weakness. I saw survival. I saw how something can bend and still last thousands of years, not by resisting the strain, but by allowing itself to be held. Maybe strength isn't just about withstanding the years alone. Maybe it's about finding something, or someone, to share the weight with. And maybe that's the kind of endurance I want to carry forward.

- San Mateo, 16



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Chasing the Light

During my junior year volleyball season, I started to feel overwhelmed. Practices were 6 days a week with occasional tournaments on weekends, and the schoolwork expectations became harder. As the varsity setter, I felt like I had to be strong all the time; there was no space to slow down or admit I was struggling. In my culture, mental health isn't seen as a real issue, so talking about it openly isn't normalized. You're expected to keep going, stay tough, and not complain. But inside, I felt drained and anxious, like I was forced to stay together as I was falling apart. One day, I finally opened up to my coach. Instead of being disappointed, she encouraged me to listen to myself and reminded me that it's okay to rest. That moment helped me realize that taking care of myself didn't make me weak, it made me stronger. I learned that being honest about your well-being is part of being a good leader and a stronger version of myself.

-Age 17, San Mateo



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A Small Step Towards Healing



One morning, on the way to summer camp, my dad suddenly started yelling at me, calling me selfish and accusing me of using him for money. It wasn't the first time. I'd learned to live with outbursts like that for as long as I can remember. My parents had been divorced since I was three, with me living full-time with my mom and seeing my dad a few times a week. Because he holds traditional Asian values, whenever I try to speak up about my feelings, he usually says I'm being disrespectful or "talking back."

When he picked me up later that day, it was like nothing had happened. We got dinner, he let me practice driving, and avoided the subject entirely, just like we always did. That night, I called to tell him how hurt I was, but he yelled again. Still no apology. We didn't speak for two weeks, the longest we'd ever gone without talking.

Then one day, he texted me asking if I wanted to get pho, our comfort food. We sat down and ate quietly at first. Then, unexpectedly, he said, "I'm sorry." In my culture, parents rarely apologize to their kids, so those two words meant more than he probably realized. I knew it wasn't easy for him to say. For once, it felt like he was considering my feelings, not just his own.

That moment opened a small door in our relationship. We didn't fix everything overnight, but it was the start of healing. It showed me that even in cultures where mental health and emotions are often left unspoken, small acts of vulnerability and care, like sharing food and offering an apology, can help bridge the gap and bring us closer.

-K.L.



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Embracing The In-Between

As a kid, I decided, without even realizing it, that I would be “white” in my mind. I rejected my culture. I hated when my mom packed chili chicken and parotta instead of Lunchables. I avoided Indian music and listened to Katy Perry instead. I never learned my ancestors’ language. I disliked Indian clothes, my skin color, and dreaded trips to India. Everything began to change when I attended a summer program at Oxford. There, I met two friends, Shrishti and Nick, who helped me reconnect with my roots. They were proud of our shared routes and embraced it fully as a part of their personalities. Through them I slowly learned to not be ashamed as well. They reintroduced me to Bollywood, Indian food, and the beauty woven into my heritage. Because of their influence I began watching Indian movies, participating more in traditions, and appreciating the values of family and community that had always been a part of my life. That winter, during a Christmas trip to India, it all clicked. I finally understood why I could never truly hate it. The vibrant streets, the smell of spices in the air, the warmth of being surrounded by family, the unique traditions, and even the wild cows weaving through traffic all felt like home. Now I no longer question who I am. I am both American and Indian, and that blend is my strength. I have learned that true belonging means embracing every part of yourself. My culture is not something to hide. It is something to love, to share, and to be proud of.

- IA, San Mateo, 17



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Why Can't I Just Be Me?

Can money, fame, and power bring ultimate happiness?, a cliché question I have pondered my whole life. Endure the workload, sacrifice movie nights, and pretend you are okay; this is how you stay on top of everything; this is how you make your parents proud; this is how you make your family proud; but what about me?; take the most rigorous classes available or work overtime to show them you care; get involved in leadership positions to make an impact; participate in all the offerings: sports, theater, social gatherings; showcase your potential to them through relentless work, but conceal your exhaustion; but what do I really want in the end?; don't let a single deadline get out of your hands; don't start late, or else you'll run out of time; try your "best;" but what if your idea of my best is unattainable?; adapt, persist, SURVIVE; but what if, in the end, I am only me?

"You only live once," they say. What do I want to do with this one opportunity? I want to explore beyond the norms; I want to discover who I truly am; I want to be ME.

What is the key to my happiness?, I finally asked. The key to my happiness is buried within my flesh.

-N.W.

P.S. Despite what is mentioned above, I still want to express my gratitude for the privilege I have to have access to the educational opportunities I have today, as there are millions of people in the world who don't have access to the same education we have in America.



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Going Outside My Comfort Zone

Growing up, my family placed a strong emphasis on excelling academically, and I have been able to meet those expectations. Now, I am in a fair position to get into a good college. But I always felt like something was missing. It hit me that while school was a priority, physical health wasn't given the same attention. So, I decided to step out of my comfort zone and take control of my fitness.

Even though they didn't think I would stick with it, I kept running. I knew this was something I would do long-term. Over six months, my mileage steadily increased, and I eventually completed the San Francisco Marathon, a goal I once thought was impossible. I learned that while my family cares a lot, I still need to set my own boundaries and make my own decisions, regardless of what others think, because in the next 5 to 10 years, it will all be up to me.



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Unspoken Bonds

Coming from a Filipino family, food is a big part of the culture whether it is big main dishes like adobo , appetizers like lumpia , and desserts like ube. Cooking and eating big meals is a big part of how we bond with there being so much food at every event and with this can cause some diet issues such as diabetes and gout which is something my Yee Pau (my Lola's (grandma's) sister) has. These health issues aren't regularly talked about with our family and so my Yee Pau for a while refused to believe that she had any issues. Not being able to come out and seek the help needed we found out that she had all these problems at once after a doctor's appointment. Also later finding out that she had cancer. After finding out of course we were all there for her checking in on her constantly making sure she knew that she wasn't alone in all of this and that we would always be there for her. We Filipino dishes that she liked in a way to make her feel like home through all of this. From this I've learned that even though health issues aren't talked about, I know that I have people around me who care about my health even if it's not said.

- DL, 16



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Diet Culture

Diet culture is everywhere. Social media is full of edited images of “perfect” bodies, and it makes me start questioning my own. Every time I scroll through my for you page, I see influencers promoting unrealistic standards, and it makes me feel like I’ll never measure up. It's hard not to feel insecure when everything around me is telling me my body isn’t good enough. I also see so many posts about dieting, apps, products, and even weight-loss drugs being advertised like quick fixes. Some of the people I follow even talk about how they use these products to lose weight fast. It's hard not to get sucked into thinking that these extreme methods might be the solution, even though I know deep down it’s not healthy.

-A.B.



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Dear T.A.Y.

Phht... And just like that, I'm an "adult." Forced to close the 18-chapter book called Childhood and start Adulthood—a book I'll be writing for the rest of my life.

For me, adulthood felt like being thrown in. After graduating, my options were school or work. I graduated during COVID, so my relationship with school was rocky. I chose work. I landed a food service job close to home and picked up whatever shifts I could.

A couple months later, I picked up another job. Soon I was stuck in a cycle: work, sleep, repeat. I missed family gatherings and time with friends. I wasn't happy with the life I was living. Bills, responsibilities, and figuring out my future weighed me down. I started smoking weed heavily to escape. I felt I'd already failed adulthood by not choosing school—at least in school there are resources and support. Working wouldn't feel like such a rigid expectation.

At 19, I found P.I.O.N.E.E.R.S., a program for Transitional Aged Youth (18–24). They taught me about mental health—what it looks like, why it matters—and gave me space to open up about my struggles. I connected with the counselors, who helped me land a better job and supported me in practicing healthy self-care.

I realized that being a TAY means you're still learning, still growing, and most importantly—you don't have to do it alone. Sometimes, finding your village is the first step to rewriting your "Adulthood" story.

With Love,
21, Samoan & Tongan, Burlingame



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New Lens

I was only 15 when my dad was yelling at me for being unhappy, as if I chose to feel this way even after everything I had been given by him and my mom. Growing up, feelings were rarely brought up or talked about in my household which was due to the cultures in which my parents were raised. My mom was raised in an Asian household and my dad was raised in a Hispanic household where neither talked to their parents about problems due to feelings of weakness. It was never much of an issue for me until high school came around, where I struggled with mental health problems while adjusting to a new school with all new people. I struggled with motivation and was always in a bad mood but my parents viewed it as me being ungrateful or complaining rather than recognizing that these are real feelings. I felt very invalidated and as though my feelings needed to be suppressed. Over time, my parents had more conversations with me and even attended workshops until they became much more open and understanding of mental health. Today they push me to join different mental health programs while supporting my strive to one day have a career in mental health. I learned that it is possible for disbelief or negative opinions on mental health to be changed, no matter the background or culture that a person comes from - anybody has the ability to see something from a brand new lens.

-San Carlos, 17



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Swing Set Escape

Beside my house, there's this swing set in the park. Whenever my mind's all tangled up with problems, I head over there. It's like a timeout from the chaos.

Sitting on that swing, gripping the chains, I push off with my feet and start to move back and forth. Gradually, the rhythm takes over. The back-and-forth motion becomes a distraction, a way to step out of my head.

I watch the trees, listen to the birds, and let my thoughts wander. It's like my brain gets a break from its usual overthinking routine. The repetitive creaking sound of the swing somehow calms my racing thoughts.

Sometimes, there are kids playing around, shouting and laughing. Their energy is infectious, and I can't help but smile. It's a reminder that there's more to life than just the worries in my head.

By the time I'm done swinging, I feel a bit lighter. The problems haven't magically disappeared, but they don't feel as overwhelming anymore. That swing set is like a reset button for my mind, a brief escape that helps me face my problems with a clearer perspective.



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Traffic

Growing up in an island in Indian Ocean, a lot of us are isolated from the society. When I first came to US, I only had one friend from my country; however, he ditched me when I got here. Therefore, I did not have anyone to rely and I neither spoke or understood English. On the first day in US, I need to get food so I was trying to go to the fast food place, but I did not understand the traffic signs and did not know how to cross the road so I have to go around the whole block to go to the McDonalds right across the place I stay. I had to struggle with loneliness and anxiety since everything around me was new. I had no one beside me and I was not able to meet my family. However, after some time, I meet new friends at the college and the people I did not expect has become a support to me and beside me. I also learnt that sometimes, people we do not expect stay beside us and support us while some people we expected to stay with leave us. After a year in here, I got to blend in with the people and starting to adopt the culture. My stress and anxiety also decreases gradually. Hence, I would like to share everyone that you will also find a place for yourself in the world and you will be happy again.



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Address Change

Last summer, I cut off one of the closest people in my life.
I thought blood was thicker than water,
not realizing the blood around me was so thick
and stagnant,
it crusted a cage around my peace.
I didn't think I could leave it,
I thought the guilt would crush me.
While I let their blood trap me,
my blood was boiling.

When home was scorching in hurt,
leaving was breathing.
Now I know— guilt doesn't live here.
Neither do they.
My wounds and ocean water are what's left
and they heal,
which is more than what I had before.
I thought my power was in the ash dusting the floor,
because no one told me on fire
wasn't the only way to be a light.

Forgiveness is a power I don't owe them.
Here is healing without them,
as you are allowed to hold more weight to your growth
than to the pain someone is holding
that drove them to hurt and hurt you.
you are allowed to apologize to yourself
and you are allowed to forgive yourself.

- 16 S



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Shadow Lurcker



The shadow ridden girl walks among the night
hoping that she'll find a ray of shining light
she spends her days alone and afraid
wondering what would've happened if only she was
made
of light and joy and a piece from the sun
maybe if that happened she'd be out having fun
what a melancholy life that shadow girl lives
her troubles on repeat and nobody gives
a care in the world about this lonesome girl
her life is an oyster and she is the pearl
her hope keeps growing that maybe someday
someone will see her and show her the way
out of the shadows and into the light
she yearns and she pleads; she isn't alright
"enough is enough" she finally yells
as she climbs out of her suffocating shell
alone on a journey, but this time she sees
it's a journey of self only she can appease
the light that appears is nearly blinding
but instead it is comfort, it is stabilizing
no more whispers, or stories, or friends (all unknown)
she can see that she'll never again be alone

- found, 17

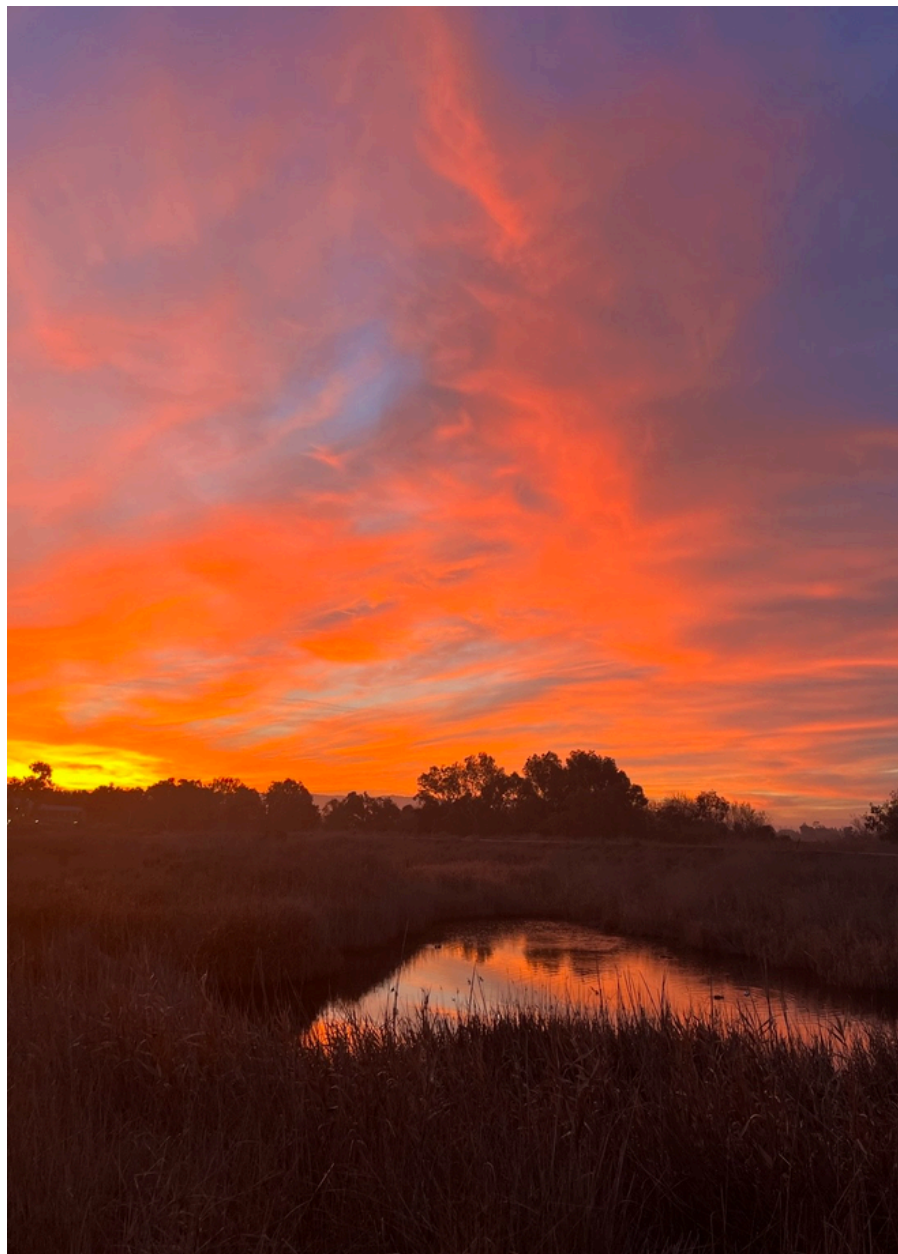


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Caged

You taught me not to lie; to always tell the truth
but my own desires felt shrouded, hidden in my youth
complied by what you want, I buried what I felt
I'm sorry mama i'm the biggest liar of them all
I don't want to hear you cry out
this is not my child
or my grandmother turning in her grave
oh what she would say to me now: You are a disgrace

You taught me not to lie and here's the truth
Her arms around me feels like the sun on my chest
and I don't hear my father's shame
fag get out you are no daughter of mine
Her soft hair flows like water through my fingers
and then I don't feel your rough rugged hands across my cheek
again
Your words like bullets slicing through my skin
But her's a bandage, healing everything I thought I knew

Ask the Lord why I'm different
why my chapel sundays are now spent on her bed
my love is a sin and that's the truth
I feel safe in a place that will take me to hell
but hell is denying my truth that makes my soul cry
cry out for a love you all failed to suffice
I choose love and lies if you may ask
next to her, your labels fade
so I guess my prayers came in time and I'm no longer caged.

- sa



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Time

I remember your face when you broke down with me and told me that we would get through it together. You said no matter what, we would get through it together. It's a memory engraved into my mind because when someone so strong in your eyes has a moment of weakness, it sticks. I felt everything you felt for him: anger, sadness, and disappointment. I knew what was going on, but hearing it from the person themselves is different. I didn't realize what it was doing to me until I felt like I was going to explode at any moment. I was conflicted with the love and admiration I had for him and the burning hatred I had on your behalf. I was talking to my cousin, and I told her that everyone cared but no one cared enough. She told me that I was getting older and needed to start doing things for myself. As harsh as it seems, looking back, it was what I needed to hear for the switch to happen in my head. So I thought of how to ask for help after weeks of translating what I was going to say. The time came, and I was finally able to reach out and get the help I needed. I started therapy nearly 3 years ago, and I've been able to talk about my past experiences and try to heal my relationships with the people around me.

-17 year old



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Peace, Strength & Healing

I am lucky to be alive.

In October, I overdosed on my meds, taking over 8x the amount I was prescribed.

A near-death experience; my psychiatrist told me, "You're lucky you're alive."

That same month, I attempted to overdose on pain meds.

I was hospitalized for 3 days.

Even though I didn't think it was a big deal at the time, I realize now it was the lowest point of my life.

When I returned, I began to use different coping skills.

Healthy ones.

I didn't pop pills when I got overwhelmed anymore; I tried not to crave the high, calm feeling the pain meds gave me.

I began to heal and find peace.

Strength.

I am lucky to be alive.

-Inner Peace, 17



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Season of Growth

As seasons change, sometimes we find ourselves in the fall
a time when the tree stands with no leaves, bare of it's beauty
A beauty that it might seem impossible to get back
But eventually, the seasons always change.
Sometimes, a tree full of leaves is left with none,
just as I was on the day I discovered
my dad was not my biological father.
In an instant, my tree was bare,
and I was thrown into a cold, gray season.
I didn't know who I was anymore.
I began to wonder if I was even worthy of love.
If the man who was supposed to love me couldn't,
then how could anyone else?
It was a hard time,
my world felt black and white, drained of color.
But what I couldn't see back then was that
even in the darkest moments,
there is still a light that shines.
That light was me.
My circumstances did not define who I am.
And just like the seasons, I began to change.
I started to bloom again,
growing stronger, brighter,
until my world was filled with color once again.
-ACVDS



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Polluting the Mind

Pollution is all around us. Although we contribute to and are affected by it, society is never motivated enough to make a change. Pollution can also happen in the mind, fogging things and not allowing one to see the real problem. I didn't realize I polluted my own mind until my problems couldn't be ignored. I grew up in a household with the mindset that vulnerability was a sign of weakness. Having not known anything different my whole life, I helped those close to me with their problems to distract myself from my own. Then, when I moved out, I found myself without any distractions. With no idea how to talk about my feelings or confront the problems circulating in my brain, I began to rely on marijuana to silence those negative thoughts. It was so simple: breathe in the drug and breathe out my problems, that I did not think there would be any consequences. This, however, obviously didn't last. I was turning to it every time I had the slightest negative thought. I polluted my brain so much that I could not pinpoint what was bothering me. I felt detached from reality. Unlike at the beginning when that was almost the goal, it now felt like I was surrounded by a bad feeling, yet without the ability to identify what it was, I couldn't escape it. I couldn't shake these feelings, even with the drug that I thought was the answer to everything. This forced me to open up. It wasn't easy formulating how I needed to be supported or the next steps for me, but giving it so much thought grounded me in a refreshing way. I ended up seeking professional help and now have not turned to marijuana in a year. Being at such a low point was hard for me, but without it, I wouldn't have discovered the freedom and happiness that comes with confronting such issues. I know now that although vulnerability takes a lot of courage, it gives you the strength to confront your problems in a healthy way and find the support you need.

-Resilience



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To My Younger Self

To my younger self,
 I'm so sorry you had to teach yourself how to swim.
 You were pulled away from the shallows of the ocean,
 And straight into the deep end, far too many times.
 I know it felt like you were drowning.
 Drowning in a black sea.
 It was hard to breathe.
 Hard to see.
 You couldn't see or feel the sunlight that was within your grasp.
 You wanted to feel the sun on your skin once more,
 And just go back to shore.
 Go back to the way things were before.
 But the waves were too strong,
 And constantly left you wondering "where did I go wrong?"
 Your head was underwater,
 Things were only getting harder.
 You kept getting more and more added to your plate.

You began to wonder "why even bother?"
 You didn't know how to deal with all of these things alone.
 You didn't know how to swim back up to the surface.
 You didn't know how to ask for help.
 People began to notice you were struggling to swim,
 No matter how hard you tried to hide it and play it down.
 I'm sorry you had to deal with the heartbreaking realization that you needed help learning how to swim.

It was hard getting used to at first,
 And it took a lot of practice.
 But eventually we did make it back to shore.
 Who knows if we'll ever end up in the deep end again,
 But I promise you that if we ever head toward that direction again,
 We'll make it safely back to shore.

- Persevere, San Mateo County, 8/15/2023



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Transitions

Sometimes, making a change in your life is the best thing you can do. Especially if you find yourself living in a way that makes you miserable. I used to live that way, and sometimes, I still do. I was constantly told who I should be, how I should talk, act, dress. At an early age, my politeness and good behavior were praised by adults; but the truth was– I just didn't say much, and when I did, I only said what they wanted to hear. This ended up causing a lot of issues for me later in life, in formulating my own identity. I wasn't my own person. At a concerning young age, I started showing signs of Major Depressive Disorder, and the symptoms only got worse. Something had to change, and my body and mind were signaling to me that something was wrong. I started thinking: What do I want? Not what they want, but what do I want? I was exhausted from living as someone who wasn't me. I was exhausted from saying "yes" when I really wanted to say "no". I was exhausted from pretending to be content every time someone referred to me as a girl. I was exhausted. So, when I stumbled upon an opportunity to leave my old life behind, I took it. I'll be honest, things did not magically get better. It's been a bit over a year now, and I'm still healing. I often get asked if I feel sad that I was cheated out of a happy childhood, but I'm not. As I go into my senior year of high school, a lot of uncertainty lies ahead, but I'm not scared anymore. I'm not prepared, in fact I don't think I ever will be, but I embrace the excitement of life.



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Medicine for Minds Instead of Machines

My mind feels broken. As if all the pieces are scattered. That is the way I would describe it. Really broken, cracked, as if things were destroyed and put in different places. And that is kind of what happened to my mind. But in reality, my mind is not a machine, even if it feels broken and cracked. It is still whole and cannot be fixed. So nothing is off, wrong or crazy about me. People may use those words to describe some people, but it's not true. My diagnosis doesn't define me, but it is a part of me. Because I'm a person and I'm still whole, I have lived through it. I might need medicine but that doesn't make me a machine. Because I am a person not a machine, I can't be as broken as I feel. I am not a machine and so I will not be fixed, but I am not broken. I need medicine like therapy or being listened to. I just need time, care and medicine for my mind. And there is every kind of medicine you could think of. Just like with medicine for the body you have to find what works.

-Anonymous



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Pandemic liberated Self-isolation

When you ask someone how their COVID-19 experience was, many will say it was a rather undesirable one (What a generic opening! If you've made it to the second sentence, I laud you for your attention span). But many will also say it was a wonderful thing to go through. And isn't it? You get time solely for yourself and no one else. Your every waking moment exudes peace. There are no limits to what you can do during the day, because the time needed for travelling doesn't exist at all. You may experience some nagging from your parents, perhaps because you haven't been as active (or, as I might say, less stressed) from the toil of pre-pandemic life. Maybe this is biased thinking coming from an introvert. Maybe you, readers, are extroverts, and are scoffing to yourself about how boring and lonely this writer might seem. In your eyes, I probably sit on the lawn and watch the grass grow or something for fun. Anyway, my time during the pandemic was really a great time for growth, even if it set my social skills back a few months. The pros greatly outweigh the cons. Looking back, I realize that time gave me space to reset, to think, and to just be. Sure, I had to relearn how to make small talk without sounding like I lived under a rock, but it was worth it. There's something oddly beautiful about stillness, about not having to race through life at 100 miles per hour. The world paused, and for once, I felt like I could breathe. Maybe not everyone sees it that way—and that's okay. But for me, the pandemic wasn't just a break from school or a period of isolation. It was a weird, quiet chapter that helped me grow in ways I never expected. And if that makes me sound strange or out of touch, so be it - some of the best moments come when nothing's happening at all.

Sincerely,
Hermit Crab in Human Form



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Invoice

You'll never change." "You're toxic." "I'm always walking on eggshells around you." "You're a bad friend." "You're manipulative." "I don't wanna be part of your life anymore" "You're too clingy." "I am not your therapist."

These words echo in my mind at night, filling me with shame. The narrative is if you've hurt others, you're beyond forgiveness and that changing is impossible. Imagine the judgment forever for past mistakes, even when you worked hard to grow. It's isolating when your efforts are dismissed. Your past clinging onto you like a shadow.

I made mistakes like everyone else. I believe we can change. Fear dictated a large portion of my life. My emotional needs were rarely met growing up, leading to desperation for external validation. I sought acceptance everywhere, but never felt satisfied. This craving manifested into my relationships. I lashed out when I felt abandoned. It was draining. Most of my loved ones could no longer bear it.

Many friends ghosted me. In my pain, I pushed harder, chased harder, until I lost them all. I grieved, blamed them, and blamed myself. But one night, it dawned on me—my co-dependency was the issue. I needed to be nice to myself, especially the wounded inner child I held within. I learned that others can care without carrying my pain. I could not depend on others for my happiness, that would come from within. I set boundaries because space can strengthen relationships. I no longer used others as emotional crutches. I began enjoying my own company.

I am enough and so are you. Spend time with the people you love, take care of your mind, get hobbies, and keep your individuality. You are your best friend. Growth isn't linear. Days are tough sometimes, but you are worthy of love in all of them. Like a caterpillar dissolving into a cocoon, I had to completely break down to become something new. The process was painful, messy and invisible to the world, but required. I was not destroyed, I was transforming. Now I am learning how to fly on my own.



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