



Telling Our Own Stories

QUEER ASIAN YOUTH
WRITING PROJECT

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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About This Project

Telling Our Own Stories: Queer Asian Youth Writing Project

QAY has always been aware of the lack of representation and/or misrepresentation of queer Asian youth identities in the community. As a response, QAY developed a project called “Telling Our Own Stories: Queer Asian Youth Writing Project” to create a book by and for LGBTQ+ East and Asian youth, the first one to be created in the community. QAY pitched the project to ArtReach in 2015, and was successful in receiving funding from them to make this project into reality.

Through this project, QAY wanted to engage and empower LGBTQ+ Asian youth aged 14 to 29 through creative writing. We invited 3 experienced LGBTQ+ Asian writers to become mentors for 10 LGBTQ+ Asian youth. The mentors facilitated 5 workshops that gave the participating youth skills and tools to transform

their life stories into art. The mentors also guided the youth throughout their creative writing processes by providing one-on-one mentorship. We also organized monthly support groups to provide group feedback and exchange ideas.

This project also aimed to increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ Asian youth in the community. The stories from the participating youth have been compiled into a book, and printed copies were distributed to Gay Straight Alliances (GSA), LGBTQ student groups in colleges and universities, community centres that serve Asian populations, and libraries in Toronto. PDF version of the book was uploaded online for even wider reach. We also organized a community book launch to celebrate this monumental piece with the community members.

QUEER ASIAN YOUTH

Queer Asian Youth (QAY) is the Youth Program of Asian Community AIDS Service (ACAS) that has been providing youth-led social spaces, capacity development, and peer support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, curious and undecided East & Southeast Asian youth and their friends since 2000. Every year, over 200 LGBTQ+ Asian youth and their friends attend social events, support groups, leadership trainings, educational workshops, and other activities organized by QAY. QAY also regularly develops multilingual resources for LGBTQ+ Asian youth, parents, families, and friends.

ASIAN COMMUNITY AIDS SERVICES

Asian Community AIDS Services (ACAS) is a charitable, non-profit, community-based organization located in Toronto, Canada. We provide safer sex education and services to the East and Southeast Asian communities and support services to persons living with HIV/AIDS and members of the LGBTQ communities.

We at ACAS are committed to provide HIV/AIDS education, prevention, and support services to the East and Southeast Asian Canadian communities. Our programs are based on a pro-active and holistic approach to HIV/AIDS and are provided in a collaborative, empowering, and non-discriminatory manner.

Our Mentors

RAIN CHAN

Rain is a writer, performer, artist, facilitator and community activist. Most recently, Rain was awarded second place for their play *The Virus* at Pat the Dog Theatre Creation 24-playwriting contest. Rain's play *Lullaby for the Abandoned*, developed through Cahoots Theatre Company's Creators' Hot House, has been showcased at the New Ideas Festival and Cahoots Theatre Company's *LIFT OFF!* Their play, *Rem*, received its first reading at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre (*Eventual Ashes*) and *The Cure* was showcased at the fu-GEN 6th Annual Potluck Festival. Rain directed *Blondie* (*Inspirato* Festival), a solo piece

developed heavily through movements and gestures. Rain was assistant director for Crash (Theatre Passe Muraille), which was the recipient of the Dora Mavor Moore Awards. Rain's writing has been published in Project 40 Collective, Pink Ink, and Venus. Rain has facilitated workshops for Krafty Queers, Queer Asian Youth, and Community Action Centre of the Student Association at George Brown. Aside from writing and performing, Rain enjoys training in qigong and has received two medals at the Toronto Health Qigong Tournament. Rain is currently working on their first science fiction novel while also studying Traditional Chinese Medicine.

KYM NACITA

Kym Nacita is a Calgary-based spoken word artist and workshop facilitator. Her time in Calgary is spent organizing art shows such as #POCSUPREMACY and Taking Back What's Ours which gives a platform for queer/trans black, indigenous, people of colour (QTBIPOC) to share their work. She also facilitated a workshop series for QTBIPOCS on reclaiming our voices through poetry and writing. She has performed in various events including the Calgary Bridge Foundation's Youth Conference and Topsy Press' Where We're Going We Don't Need Roads.

A self-described fat femme monster, Kym divides her time between cooking for rent money, watching bad horror movies, and finding the perfect shade of lip-

stick to scare unwanted visitors. She comes by way of the Philippines though it has been too long since she's set foot on her people's land.

CARRIANNE LEUNG

Carrienne Leung is a fiction writer and educator who lives in Toronto. She holds a PH.D. in Sociology and Equity Studies from OISE/University of Toronto and works at the Ontario College of Art and Design University. She is co-editor, with Lynn Caldwell and Darryl Leroux, of *Critical Inquiries: A Reader in Studies of Canada*. Her debut novel, *The Wondrous Woo* was shortlisted for the Toronto Book Awards 2015. Her second book of fiction, *That Time I Loved You* will be released in 2018 by Harper Collins.

Project Writers

ANTHONY

Anthony is a young, queer, Asian artist who attempts to navigate his world through his works.

After discovering QAY, he has found his voice to help explore his thoughts with art.

MELISSA

Melissa is a non-profit professional who's forever grateful for the path in life that writing and soccer have taken her. In her spare time, she enjoys seeing the world through her girlfriend's childlike wonder. Get that kid a puppy!

MELINA

Hi, my name is Melina, and I'm a dabbler; I dabble in different things and try to find what I enjoy, one of which is writing. This is the second time my work will appear in a book (my first was a short poem in an anthology). I tend to take experiences from the world and apply it to my writing, but try to branch out to different areas as well. I don't know how far I will take my writing, but for now I will keep at it.

CHUCK

Chuck Yachun Li, born and raised in China and came to Canada as an international student in the year 2011. With great passion on engaging in the community, Chuck started to volunteer in different community organizations and events. Because of the outstanding contribution to the community as an international student, she was awarded with scholarship in the Association of Chinese Canadian Entrepreneur Award Ceremony in the year 2012. Chuck has also been an LGBTQ and social-justice activist since she came to Canada. She has been involved with different queer supportive organizations and has been a long time volunteer with Asian Community AIDS Services. In the year 2014, she became the resources development lead of Asian Community AIDS Services and developed resources for queer Asian youths. To convey the vision of social-justice and anti-oppression through art and performance, Chuck joined the feminist taiko drummers group Raging Asian Women Taiko Drum-

mers as an apprentice in the year 2015 and gave three concerts with the group in March 2016.

JUSTIN

Justin Chander is a twenty-one year old student in Toronto where he is studying environmental science and human geography. He is passionate about environmentalism and social activism. He enjoys writing poetry, volunteering at various organizations, traveling, learning about new cultures and languages, and being involved with student clubs on campus. He is also an intern at the provincial government. Justin comes from a third generation Indian-American family and identifies as queer. He has been writing since elementary school and primarily writes poetry, although occasionally writes short stories as well. He writes based on his life experiences and writes primarily for himself, and in this publication, in memory of Petra, his friend who recently passed away.

GARY

Toronto native, born into Chinatown, raised in the north, shaped by the great metropolitan and formed with all the colours. a boy with an unadulterated love for the city he calls his home

ANONYMOUS

Contributing Writers

MTAM

I call her my boyfriend. That is how my world simultaneously turned upside down, brightened up and tormented my mind and soul for years to come. I identify as a queer Asian cis-gendered female. I was born and raised in a traditional Chinese family with deeply embedded heteropatriarchal values. My parents were strongly unaccepting of their queer and “abnormal” daughter. I chose to transform my narrative into my passion. Although I started my university career in the sciences, I have found a new love, a new passion in the realm of gender and sexuality studies. As a second generation queer Canadian youth I have faced a difficult time coming out to myself and my family, and so I want future second generation Canadian youth to know that they are not alone, that they have resources and that they have supportive communities waiting for them.

CJ YABUT

I am from the Philippines. Born and raised. Moved to Canada roughly three years ago. I am also gay and came out to my family and friends two years ago. My poem is quite dark and gloomy as I wrote it when I was still closeted. It's a representation of how I viewed the world as a closeted person.

XJ NG

I am a Malaysian-Chinese student at University of Toronto, studying mental health, and my literary interests include science fiction, steampunk and fantasy. In my writing, I lean toward lyrical, free verse explorations of yearning, fragility, and identity in diaspora. Underpinning all my work is the belief that willful vulnerability is therapeutic and powerfully subversive.

ALICE ANONYMOUS

Alice is a student at University of Toronto. Although she specializes in English Literature, throughout her undergraduate education Alice was gradually drawn into cultural anthropology and identity politics, especially in regards to her beloved home country of Indonesia. When not thinking about graduating in time or having existentialist self doubts, Alice pretends she understands theoretical humanity books, including about Indonesia, and she always welcomes book recommendations. She is also getting back into writing, both in English and Indonesian. You can talk to Alice at alicehoney_virgo@yahoo.com.

Trigger Warning

This book contains triggering subjects such as depression, suicidal thoughts/ideation, self-harm, sexual abuse/harassment, physical abuse/harassment, emotional abuse/harassment, etc.

If you are going through difficult times and need someone to talk to, please consider contacting some of the places listed at the end of this book.

Foreword

Dear Reader,

In community workshops, guided by mentors in writing groups, these young authors have been writing to expose and explore the core truth of who they are, and of who they are becoming – persons of value. Some have written pieces with a light touch; others, with lightning bolts of self-recognition. The workshops must have been exciting places to be – for each writer seems to have discovered something in their work that now must surely strengthen their pride as story tellers; that is, they have become persons who matter, who now can claim attention and much genuine respect.

For here are published words imbued with lightning flashes of insight, made true with wonderful and serious intention – so much here is nurtured and created with the voices of some very fresh and inspired minds.

They each have given evidence that their words, these stories, these personal essays – in so many ways – now forever matter very much - deeply and truly.

To all concerned – and on behalf of many others who will be reading these soulful pieces – ten thousand thanks!

Wayson Choy

.....

Writing requires courage, patience and generosity.

This group gave all these things to each other, and I was honoured to be part of it. Readers only get to see final words on a page while the process of coming to these words remains largely invisible but so important. Through sharing their work, the writers in this collection gave each other a valuable gift – helping each other find language that would allow them to express what they needed in order to tell their stories through poetry, fiction and non-fiction. The writers took leaps of faith by sharing their words, kept themselves being open to receiving feedback even when they were scared, developed trust in each other to dive in deeply. I know I am supposedly a “mentor”, but I feel like I also learned so much from witnessing these writers create their work along with building a community.

Everybody has stories, and these stories are worth telling. I hope this collection of funny, moving, sad

and celebratory pieces inspire you to put pen to paper and write your own!

Carrienne Leung

.....

In high school and university, I wrote about my experiences as an Asian person and as a queer person. Somehow, my experiences as a queer person received far more publicity than my identity as an Asian. People, or perhaps more specifically, the white readers and audience were interested in hearing stories about my queer identity and queer struggles. But when it came to stories around my Asianness or my Chinese identity, they became less interested. Why is it that when I am around Asian folks, I feel the need to step back into the closet? Why is it that I am either queer or I'm Asian, but I don't feel safe to be both? At the core of this struggle is about equity and about love, about my need to be seen as a human being. I want to have the freedom to celebrate both my queerness and my Asianness, because these two aspects are equally as important and meaningful to me as my identity as an artist. I remember participating at QAY events at age 16, and it was perhaps the very first space where I felt I can embrace both of these aspects of my identity without guilt or shame but instead with some sort of pride. It is an honour to be invited to help out as a mentor for our current generation of youths in writing about their experiences as queer or trans and as a person of colour. There are not enough spaces in Toronto that

allow this kind of acceptance and for us to express our feelings and struggles. The stories that these writers share with us are inspiring, heartbreaking, witty, uplifting, and unnerving, all of which queer Asian youths have at one point or another felt in their journey to self-acceptance and self-love.

Rain Chan

.....

“I know life will not always be kind
to your soft heart,
masked by concrete walls.
I know what it has taken for you to
survive this long,
to breathe in a world that wasn’t
made with you in mind.
But I will fight tooth
and nail
and skin
and words
for you, my love.
Forgive me,
for how long it has taken to
write this letter.
But I am here now,
with breath
and fire
and a future
for us.”

Excerpt from *A QPOC Love Like Mine*

Hearing the breadth of stories from queer and transgender Asian youth reminds me of the power in our voices, our experiences, and our survival. Often we are viewed as subservient, quiet, demure, and polite which denies the history and current movements of resistance that we lead and take part in. It also denies the challenges we experience as settlers on this land, whether through chosen or forced migration, the roles we play in antiblackness, and the damage that the myth of “the model minority” has done to our communities and in our relationships to each other.

This book is a reminder from the youth that we can resist through art, dialogue, protest, and in this case, through writing stories that reflect the fears, struggles, and love we have for and within our community. It is a reflection of the ways youth survive mental health issues, gender oppression, underrepresentation, racism, queerphobia, ableism, grief and so much more. There is a sense of an unfinished journey to finding belonging, purpose, and community that weaves its way from their words to us.

To say that I am in awe of these writers is not adequate enough of a statement.

I have been given breath.

For which I am eternally grateful.

Kym Elisse Nacita

I

Realization

Am I an Artist Yet? PT. I

by Anthony

Am I an Artist Yet?

A question often asked
Well in the depths of night,
I sometimes, usually wonder,
If I am ever right.

Titled above in this page,
A question often posed,
The true form of my infinite passions
Have finally been exposed:

However, I am fickle,
By the many things I do.
Below is a list of stuff:
- This poem included too

I am designing for projects,
Illustrating covers for friends,

Preparing for auditions,
Studying scripts when I can;

I am performing a visual play,
Scribbling stories for a book,
Taking tap to rust my feet,
Writing log lines for a hook.

I am working full-time,
Taking voice classes with the best,
Volunteering for non-profit,
With barely any rest.

Now I am scorched
by burning love for the arts,
Exhausted to the point
Where my brain just departs;

And now I see here,
With all that's down and set,
I must ask myself mindfully,
Am I an artist yet?

Firsts

by Anonymous

FIRST CRUSH

When people have crushes on someone, they're like cute little puppies who follow that person around and tries to get their attention or approval.

Many of the girls in elementary school had crushes on boys in the class or on movie stars. The other girls described having a crush as having “a fluttering in the stomach” each time they saw their object of affection, or “being tongue-tied” when they tried talking with said person.

She's never had a crush. She didn't mind though: it was fun listening to other girls talking about the ones they crushed on, whether it was the charming boys up in the front row who were good at school and at badminton, or Orlando Bloom in Lord of The Rings as Legolas the Elf. It was harmless chit-chat, after all.

Now, in her twenties, she can find people “cute” or “good-looking”, but she still has never had a crush. It hadn’t bothered her before, and still doesn’t. It was hard to imagine what having a crush would be like, and from the looks of it, most crushes led to nothing, so there didn’t seem to be a need for one.

FIRST RELATIONSHIP

Relationships are tricky. As people grow older, the talks about relationships become more romantic and sexual, and eventually become talks about marriage and long-term benefits.

She’s never had a romantic or sexual relationship. In her high school and university years, when she hung out with her friends for “girl talk” and they asked her about her first relationship, she always replied, “I’ve never had one, and have never been interested in one.” After hearing this, her friends started making up absurd imaginary partners for her, or imaginary love stories that she secretly had. The most popular one was about a rich husband who was waiting for her in Asia. Sometimes she wondered how they came up with these ideas, and why. But she knew her friends were imaginative and creative. It was all very cute though, and she never felt pressured to get into a relationship, or left out because she didn’t have one and wasn’t interested in getting into one.

She liked to listen to people’s relationship problems, and offered advice or a listening ear when she could. Sometimes it was difficult because she hadn’t

experienced a relationship herself, but she tried to be there for them and did what she could based on what she's seen or heard of before.

She was lucky to have grown up in the household and environment that she did. There was little cultural pressure to find a partner. In high school, from her understanding, most Asian parents wanted their kids to focus on school, and it was the same for hers. Since she never brought up any indication or interest in relationships, they never brought it up either.

However, as she grew older, that slowly began to change. In her first year of university, her mother asked her, "So what kind of boy are you interested in?" At first she answered, "I don't know, someone who loves me?" Her mother told her to find someone who will be at least as financially successful as her when she started a career.

In her second and third year, her mother asked her, "So what kind of boy are you interested in?" She answered, "I don't know. Someone who I can share assets with and am comfortable with? Someone who complements me?" She wasn't sure if she said that to please her parents, since she didn't have any idea about what kind of person she would be interested in.

By the fourth year, her parents told her to find someone before she grew too old; she wasn't sure she even wanted to be with a boy long-term, or with anyone for that matter. She wasn't the greatest at sharing,

and she liked her privacy. She didn't quite see the need for having someone either.

She also felt she was too reserved to want to be part of a romantic relationship or any long-term, close-contact relationship for that matter. She could have long-term friends, sure. She could talk and hang out with them, and celebrate birthdays, and they could be there for each other and anything else friends do. That was manageable. But the amount of time and energy put into keeping in touch with a "special someone," and seeing each other and celebrating special days, not to mention the PDA and all the other lovey-dovey things that people in relationships seem to do, was not something she thought she'd be able to commit to.

But other key factors of her not wanting to be in such relationships were that she did not think she'd have much to share with the other person. She needed to expand her knowledge and interests beyond video games and shows to be able to hold decent conversations. She felt uncomfortable with physical contact unless it was by a family member or by a friend, and even then it depended on who the person was. And she would not be able to open up about her more hidden thoughts. Those were private and hers and things she couldn't share.

FIRST FANTASY

People have all sorts of fantasies about all aspects of life, as a sort of get-away from the everyday mundaneness of life.

She had a lot of romance novels in her room when she was in middle school. She didn't buy them. They were put in her room by her parents for storage, along with a plethora of other books: detective novels, National Geographic magazines, and so forth. Her parents had a thing for knowledge; the saying "knowledge is powerful" was something they believed in greatly. Maybe her parents wanted her to self-learn by reading all these books. But was reading M-rated (or were they R-rated?) romance novels the best way for a middle schooler to learn? Maybe they were trying to teach her about "the birds and the bees" without actually telling her. She wasn't quite sure how effective this method was, as reading the books didn't exactly teach her anything more than physical education class did. And even that class didn't teach much when it came to sexual health, other than basic reproductive anatomy.

She did read some of the romance novels, but more often than not for the storyline. There were several parts in the books that involved sexual intercourse, but she often skimmed through them because they were too long and descriptive for her to bother with. It was an unfortunate habit she had, but she does the same when she reads other books as well, like *The Lord of the Rings* series: the books often had long descriptions of the enchanting scenery or the magnificence of a town, but she often skipped through them because she was impatient for the plot to continue.

A few months after she began reading the romance novels, she lent a few to a good friend of hers. She knew

her friend was an avid reader who liked to read really thick books. Since her romance novels came in all sizes, she gave her friend one of her thickest ones, warning her, “I didn’t read this one because it was so lengthy, but I’m pretty sure there is adult stuff in there.”

Her friend accepted it without problem, and finished the book in less than a week. When the friend returned the book to her, the friend exclaimed in a playful and embarrassed manner, “Woah, I can’t believe you read this stuff! It’s so explicit!”

She only shrugged in response. “Oh, are the books really explicit? I didn’t realize; I just kind of skipped over those parts because they were long.” That night she took the book she’d lent out and finally began to read it. It was a fictional story about hostilities between two countries, and told of the encounter and growing relationship between the royal kin of one country and the captive commander of another. Right away, the first few pages contained some of the adult scenes, which she hadn’t expected. She did read those scenes, and though she was at first intrigued about the sexual interplay the two had at first, it later became repetitive. The scenes weren’t always the same, but after a few times of reading things like, “Her sensual and shaking body was making his inner beasts known; he wanted to see more of her as she squirmed and moaned“, or, “Her pounding heart raced wildly as those devilish fingers traced a pattern down her neck, around her breasts, and even farther down to the warm secret hidden between her legs,” she just wanted the story to go on.

It was in high school that she began to read more erotic and graphic material. Part of her interest may have been due to a couple of her close friends who raved on and on about the Boy's Love genre in middle school, and after hearing about it so much, she grew curious and began to find material in that genre. But even then, she often skipped explicit material, or read things that had very light mentions of said material.

Sometime in high school, she began to watch pornographic videos. She had always avoided them, probably because society and her family had always said, "Do not have sex", and no one had encouraged her into being in a relationship or having sex. Even when she read her romance novels and her Boy's Love material, she hadn't considered them to be "porn". So she started watching the videos. The people in the videos were constantly touching themselves or being touched, and they seemed to enjoy it. The visuals and the sounds made it look so much more pleasurable than it did in the books, and she grew very curious. She eventually touched herself while watching the material, and it felt good. It felt so good, in fact, that she began to do it often.

Originally, she always needed to be watching a video to feel good. Years later, it felt good just by fantasizing without needing to look at anything. She fantasized about many things, and as she grew into her twenties, her fantasies grew as well. She fantasized about a man and woman, or about two men or two women together. She fantasized about groups of three

or four or more people together, and fantasized about non-humans as well. She fantasized about them in different settings, times and circumstances. Some of the thoughts were probably morally and ethically questionable, but she fantasized about them anyway. They were things she had watched and liked, so she kept at it. It was only in her mind, after all, and all the people and things involved were not real.

She hardly ever put herself in these fantasies, though. Watching and listening was enough.

FIRST KISS

Some people dream about their first kiss. The Disney movies make it seem like it's something magical, like in Sleeping Beauty and Snow White when the prince wakes the sleeping princesses.

She first met him in the summer before high school. She was working at a summer camp and walked to and from work every day of the week. He was a neighbour who was on his driveway at the time, fixing up his car. He waved her over, and, curiously, she did. "Hey, I see you walking every morning and afternoon. Where do you go?" he asked.

She hadn't had much interaction with men before, or with strangers who weren't working in retail for that manner, but he was an adult, and she respected adults. And he was smiling and seemed friendly, so maybe she could get practice talking with adults more. Besides, the question was harmless enough.

“Oh...work. I work at a summer camp.”

“That’s cool.” He caught her eyes wandering over his tools. “Oh, I do a lot of woodworking and fixing and stuff. I get a lot of clients all over the city, and even in neighbouring towns. I do contract work as well; sometimes, the hours get long, but it’s all worth it.” Well that was interesting. She didn’t know much about woodworking and asked more about his job. He told her a bit more, though he could probably see her confusion about the topic. He then asked, “So what’s your name?”

She wondered if she should give her name. She had always been told to be careful about giving any information away, but she also wasn’t sure about lying. The silence was getting a little awkward, so she gave her name.

He nodded and smiled, giving his name as well. “It was nice talking to you. I need to get back to work now, but maybe we can talk again?”

She nodded and left. It was harmless conversation, but she didn’t tell her family. She didn’t think they’d be happy with her talking to a stranger.

They crossed paths a lot throughout the summer as she walked home. Later on, throughout high school, she got a job working in the evenings, and passed by his house each time before and after work. He was constantly working on cars or woodworking or other

projects, either in his driveway or his garage. As he was older and ‘wiser’, she mostly listened to him talk about life, like jobs, vacations, cars, fixing things, and so forth. She was comfortable enough with him, and he wouldn’t try to hold her back if she had to go home and do homework or anything else.

Over time, he began asking her more questions about herself, “How old are you? Do you have a boyfriend?”

She gave her age and denied having a boyfriend. Both were true, and seemed harmless to say those things. She only saw him during these times going to and from work, and she supposed that, at that age, many people were dating, so it was only a natural question to ask.

“You’re beautiful, you know. Like a rose.”

That startled her, and made her a little uncomfortable. “Um, thank you?” It seemed out of the blue, and she hadn’t really been told that before. Sometimes she would hear her parents and their friends talking about their kids and praising their intelligence or beauty or accomplishments, but that just seemed like something adults with kids do.

“I just wanted to let you know that. Anyways, it’s getting late, and I actually need to finish this project by noon tomorrow. See you another time?”

He was casual about it, so she nodded and left. It was still a little uncomfortable and strange, but she hadn't actually told anyone about her meeting him, so she wasn't sure whom to ask about it. When they crossed paths again, he talked to her again like he normally did, asking about her work and school, and talking about his current job. Occasionally he'd drop in things like, "You're beautiful," or "You're growing like a rose," and she'd reply with, "Um, ok," before he went on about the other topics again.

Despite it being uncomfortable, she put up with it. She had a hard time "being rude" to people; she remembered that there was a time when a couple of religious people came around the neighbourhood to talk to people about God and, though she found it annoying that they came every week, she didn't have it in her to say, "Go away" or "Don't come back". They were so nice after all, and they weren't hurting anyone. Even when her parents kept telling her to tell them to go away, she didn't; she'd listen to their preaching and nod and, for whatever reason, they'd come back even when she said she didn't think she'd go to their church. Eventually they stopped coming, and she was just glad they did.

He started to ask about her age more often, and continued to say things about how beautiful she was. Once she told him, "Please don't call me that."

He looked surprised and asked, "Why? Do you want me to call you ugly?"

“No, I don’t want you to say anything about my appearance at all.” When she thought about it, she couldn’t come up with a reason as to why he shouldn’t call her beautiful, and her discomfort didn’t seem a good enough reason. They ended that conversation soon after, but still spoke on many evenings when they happened across each other after she finished work. Even though she was uncomfortable each time, and started hoping that he wouldn’t be there when she walked by his driveway, she’d put up with talking with him if he was there.

One night, as they were talking, he told her “If you ever want to come visit me at night, you could. I could take you out on a drive or something; I told you how cool my car was, right? Or we could just spend a night in my backyard.”

Even though he didn’t explicitly say anything, she was pretty sure she knew what he was implying based on the mature material she’s read. She had no interest in him in that way, but she wasn’t sure how to say it. She also wondered why he would ask something like that if he was already married. So she replied, “You’re married and you have two children”, almost like a reminder to him that he had a wife.

“Don’t worry about age. Age difference is just something that society came up with; if two people really love each other, it shouldn’t matter how old they are.”

She wasn’t sure if she could argue that, and she still

didn't have an answer to her question. But it seemed rude to keep on asking, and she wasn't very good at questioning things, so instead she said, "Um...no thank you" and hoped he wouldn't persist.

"Alright, that's cool. I'm not saying you have to do anything, just that the option is open. But what I said earlier about love? I believe that's true; love shouldn't be defined by age, but by how compatible and strongly the two feel about each other."

She listened to the advice, nodded, and bid him good night as she went home. After all the things he'd said before, it didn't seem out of character and weird for him. And he gave her a choice too, so she could handle talking with him if he asked her again.

She told herself that maybe she should stop talking to him, but each time they saw each other, she felt it was too impolite to ignore him if he asked to talk with her. It was like with the church people from before; she wanted something but couldn't quite voice it. So she continued talking to him, though sometimes she would say she "had to do homework" so that she could go home faster. Other times she'd let the conversation go on, especially if he had a new project. Like the time he told her about how he was helping to fix a client's porch, and that he had a set of keys to the house so he could go whenever he wanted. She was fascinated by this because she couldn't imagine trusting a stranger with a key to her house, even if he was a contractor. But she supposed he must have had a good reputation

or something, in both the work he did as well as his character.

One day when they were talking again, out of the blue he asked her to “touch here” and indicated a part in the front of his pants. Confused, she did. It was a bulge. “What is it?” she asked. “My manhood,” he replied.

She withdrew her hand reflexively, unsure about what she should think or do. Until he told her that was his penis, it didn’t quite register to her what the lump there was. She kept thinking that it was something in his pocket, though it seemed to be a strange pocket if that was the case. Though, when she thought back to the pornographic material she watched, she probably could have put two and two together to guess what it was she was touching. He told her, “It’s okay, it won’t bite. Touch it again.” She did so briefly because he asked, but drew back again. It just seemed wrong to touch it, but she couldn’t really explain why. She had never touched another person’s genitalia before, and being asked to so suddenly was a little strange. Reading and watching about it was different from doing anything in real life.

They ended that conversation soon after, but still spoke on many evenings when they happened across each other after she finished work. She didn’t really think about the incident, other than “Why didn’t I realize that that was a penis before”. Though the incident was a little weird, she at least knew now

what it likely meant if a person wanted her to touch something in the front of their pants. And, no, it likely wasn't a wallet in the front pocket of their pants.

Despite all this, they still continued to talk, even though she would continue to hope that she wouldn't see him, and would make up excuses to leave early. They continued to talk about work and school and life, and he would make occasional comments about her beauty and age, as well as ask her again about coming over to spend the night, though she would just brush it off with a quiet, "I'm not interested," or "no, thank you". She wasn't particularly forceful about it, she felt that the two had developed a positive acquaintanceship, and that it didn't make sense for her to ignore him or be rude to him since he hadn't done anything rude to her.

Several weeks later after that incident, she was walking by his driveway again. It was cold and wintry, and he invited her in to watch sports with him on the TV he had in his garage. She declined the offer, not having an interest in that particular sport, and left to leave him to his game.

The incident from before, where he had her touch him, might have sparked something in her, perhaps a curiosity. It may have been because Valentine's Day just passed. It may have been because she knew some of her friends were becoming sexually active. It may have been because of all the explicit things she had watched and read, and how the activities seemed

enjoyable. Whatever it was, a few steps away from her home, she wondered what it would really feel like to do things with another person. And here was someone who was nice to her and who offered her the chance to do things with. He had said time and again that he'd only do something if she wanted it, and he'd stop if she asked. So, after some debate but mostly on impulse, she went back to the man's house. She waited silently outside his garage, peering in as he rummaged around with some things in the garage, unsure of what to say. He turned around and saw her. He waved her in with a smile.

She didn't say a word as she entered, and he met with her. The lights were dim as he brought her behind the other garage door for more privacy. He wrapped his hands around her and pulled her in for a kiss on her lips. She either stared through him or averted her gaze, but she did not close her eyes. She felt his tongue licking her lips and kissing around them. "Open your mouth," he whispered and returned to kissing her. She didn't open her mouth.

Eventually he brought her to the backyard, but not too far in. At first she whispered things like, "I don't know about this..." but he whispered back, "Not too loud. People might hear."

She became quiet. He pulled her in against his chest, undid her pants, and slipped his hand down them. She didn't remember if he touched her breasts despite him having made so many comments about

how beautiful and full they were; she didn't really think of anything at the time. She didn't feel his fingers too much as he touched her, rubbed her, slid in and out of her. She may have been too wet to feel them; he was skilled. She remembered hearing him groaning and grunting into her ear, but she didn't make a sound.

Eventually it came to a point where she felt good. Her legs trembled as her body convulsed, and she sagged against him after it was over. He pulled his hand out of her pants soon after.

She didn't remember exactly what he said afterwards. Instead, she redid the button on her pants and quickly walked out without a backwards glance. Once she got home, she cried quietly to herself and washed her face with soap and water. She wasn't sure why she was crying; all she knew was that she needed to call a close friend who she knew was beginning to be sexually active too. She had never spoken about her talks with her neighbour to anyone, as she had no reason to before. But now she told her friend about how they met and how that had led to what just happened. Her friend listened patiently and told her she was sorry that she had to go through that. Her friend was a bit lost for words, but she was just glad she could get it out there and not feel judged. They both had to go soon, though, so her friend wished her safety and said that they can talk again whenever she wanted.

She went to school and work the following day. When she walked by his house, though, she ignored him. She wasn't sure why, but she didn't want to look at him. Sometimes she would take another route to avoid having to pass by him, or walked along the other side of the road.

It might have been a month or so after the incident that she finally returned to talking to him, but that was only when he approached her or waved to her, and she talked to him only out of politeness. "Are you mad?" he asked. "No", she replied, because she wasn't. She wasn't sure exactly what she felt, but anger wasn't it. Maybe it was fear that he was stronger than her and that he could force her into something she didn't want? She didn't think it was embarrassment she felt, or shame. Was it guilt? Did she feel that she violated some inner standard she unconsciously had? She wasn't sure; she was not very in touch with her emotions or thoughts.

"Oh good, I was afraid you were. You kept ignoring me whenever I called out to you, and I hardly see you anymore. If you want to come over again, we can go farther in my car next time."

She politely declined. They returned to their chatter again about school and work and things in general, though she mostly just listened to him and nodded politely. When it grew late, she headed back home.

For the next several months she either avoided the route or put up with speaking with him. Their talks were almost always the same, with them commenting on general things in life before him flattering her again and trying to get her to come for the night or to the backyard again. She declined politely each time, and would not go into the garage with him even when he asked, even when it rained. She still felt that he hadn't really done anything bad to her, so there was no reason to be rude to him. At the same time, she was still uncomfortable with him and didn't want to do anything more with him, but she didn't like conflict, so she put up with it. But when she finally graduated from high school and left for university, she was glad to not have to put up with it anymore.

In her first year of university, she was invited to join a study on sexual resistance education. After a few sessions, she realized that what she had gone through was likely categorized as sexual coercion, and that what happened was predatory activity; she should have said, "No" more confidently, not spoken with the man, or left the situation altogether. She also learned more about the dangerous things that could have happened, and realized how lucky she was to have been able to walk away intact.

She's not sure if the event had hurt her or not, and how much it had hurt if it did. It was certainly an educational experience to know that there were predators out there. At the very least, she now knew

she had options in what she wanted to do and that she shouldn't feel compelled to do something just because someone wanted her to.

But maybe those were just excuses to hide her feelings. Maybe her brain was just trying to protect her from whatever she really felt after that incident. Maybe that's why she wasn't willing to touch any males for a long time unless it was a handshake or casual fist pump, or why she still has never felt any attraction towards other people. A couple years later, in university, she felt compelled to tell a few other close friends about the situation, but she mostly talked about it in terms of facts. She dropped the occasional, "It was weird and uncomfortable," but didn't say much more. It was because she didn't know either.

She's not sure how she didn't realize that what happened wasn't normal behaviour, but she hoped she would have the strength to react if something like that were to happen again.

FIRST TIME

Doing anything for the first time is scary but exciting. Scary, because you might screw it up and you don't know what might happen, but exciting because it was a new experience.

During her university years, she was working as a summer student at a company when she met him. Through each day, she was sometimes bored, so she would go around and talk to different people in differ-

ent departments. He was in the department just down the hall and, though they didn't talk much, they were pleasant with each other. At the end of the summer, the two exchanged numbers because he asked for hers, and then she headed back to school.

A few months later, she received a text from him asking her how her life was. She spoke about her school life while asking him about his work life. Apparently a lot of changes had happened at work, particularly with management. It was unexpected but interesting to hear.

"So, anyways, I called because I wanted to hang out. I'm still new to the city and don't really know anyone, so I thought maybe we could chill or something? I can show you around the city, if you're free."

She thought about this; school had only recently began, and her midterms and assignments weren't coming up for another couple of weeks. Although she lived in another city, she knew of a direct bus there that didn't take too long. "Sure thing, I'll be free this or next weekend. I don't really know much about the city though; I didn't go out much during the summer other than for work."

"That's cool. Next weekend we can meet up. I'll have a plan ready for then."

The week passed relatively quickly, and the weekend arrived. When they met, an uncomfortable feeling

went through her. She recognized it; it was similar to the discomfort she had felt with her neighbour when he had made his unnecessary comments about her. But she passed it off as nothing and spent time with her previous co-worker.

They went out to eat, and then visited an aquarium. The aquarium was interesting as it was newly opened, and she hadn't been there before. He bought her a gift, even though she said she didn't need anything. They went around the city a little more before getting take-out and heading to his place. It wasn't the nicest of places but it was decent; he was renting the basement with its own small kitchen, living room area, and a hall that probably led to the bedroom, washroom and laundry room. The walls were peeling a little, and the air was a little musty, but at least nothing was leaking, and the heating worked. He said that his tenants were fairly nice and, although they had children upstairs, they were mindful of their noise level. Still, it wasn't the best of places to live. They chatted a bit more about music and life. There came a point where they stood face-to-face, and she had a feeling that he wanted to kiss her, but she didn't know what to do. Maybe her discomfort showed and stopped him from doing so. Whatever it was, she was thankful for it; she wasn't sure if she would have been able to stop him, or if she would even have tried, if he made a move. It confused her since she wasn't sure why she didn't think she'd be able to react. Regardless, it was late into the night by then, and he gave her a ride home.

They texted ever so often after that day about work and school and life in general, though it was always him who initiated the conversation. She didn't mind; he was an acquaintance, and it was fine to text with friends and acquaintances. She didn't really think much of the uncomfortable feeling she got when she first met him that day, nor about that time she thought he wanted to kiss her. It was probably all just in her mind, since he didn't do anything strange.

Then one day he called her. As they conversed about everyday life, he suddenly asked her if anyone had ever caressed her breasts or sucked her tits. At first she wasn't sure if that's what he said, because he had said it quickly and in an embarrassed manner. But when asked to repeat it, she was sure of what he said. She didn't feel anything though, other than confusion. Why would he care?

He asked if she had a boyfriend. She said no, and asked if he had a girlfriend. He said no, though he had one in the past. He then said that he liked her, and thought that she was beautiful, and that, even though she rejected all his advances, like not letting him hold the door for her, he was okay with it. She wasn't certain what advances he was talking about, but didn't have much time to think about it when he said:

“So, maybe next time, we can hang out again, and you can stay the night?”

“Oh.” She was uncomfortable with the idea, but didn't reject it right away. She was already in her 20s

and had never had sex before, and here an opportunity presented itself with a seemingly decent person. But she couldn't quite seem to agree to the proposition, and she couldn't come up with a logical reason as to why not.

Her hesitation was obvious, and he persisted that it could just be for one night, with no strings attached, and that it would feel good. She knew it would feel good, and that's why she wanted to try it. But she also wasn't sure that she wanted to do something like that with him, particularly because she was not interested at all. Her only reason for possibly accepting would be for the physical pleasure, and she wasn't sure if that was worth it. It was again an issue of pleasure versus various factors: fear of the unknown world of participating in sex, fear of the other person being physically stronger than her and thus overpowering her, discomfort with the other person, not being interested in the other person, health complications, being shamed, and so on.

After remaining indecisive, he said that they'll agree to meet one weekend at the end of the following month, and that she could choose to take back the offer whenever she wanted to before then.

Still unsure about the decision, she spoke to her close friend about her meetup with the co-worker and the proposition that was made. She explained her uncertainties about participating in sex with the co-worker, and also how that it might just be that it's

because it's her first time that she was so hesitant. Maybe her worries were for nothing and that she was just scared because it wasn't something she was used to. Her friend was supportive and listened, and told her about her opinion on sex and engaging in sex, but that, in the end, it was up to her to decide.

The thoughts swirled in her mind for awhile. It was a matter of physical pleasure versus values and other unquantifiable emotional and psychological factors, and she wasn't sure how to weigh them. But then, it wasn't like this was the only opportunity she will ever have. And she really, really couldn't see herself going through with it, especially considering her reaction after that night between her and her neighbour. So after a few days of thinking, she texted the co-worker and told him she was declining the offer and that they shouldn't meet at all at the end of the next month. He called immediately and apologized for asking her something like that. He said that he spoke with his friends and that they, too, said he was stupid for saying it like that. He hoped that she could forgive him.

She said she did, because she didn't feel angry. He had only asked her a question, and she had said, "no", and he took it well. He then changed the subject, and they spoke for a while longer before work and other duties called. She forgot about the incident after a while.

Occasionally he would text her and ask her about life, which she talked about, and she would ask him

about life too. Out of the blue, he would apologize again and say how sorry he was about what had happened, and again she would brush it off as it was nothing to worry about. This happened for a long time and began to irritate her. One day she finally told him that his apologizing was irritating, and that he should stop it. Why bring up something meaningless again and again when it wasn't going to lead to anything productive. He apologized and never texted her again after that.

So she didn't actually have her first time. But it could have happened.

FIRST CONFESSION

Online dating was a popular thing now, maybe. It allowed people who would have never met each other otherwise to connect and realize that they existed.

She decided to join the online scene during her final year of university. It wasn't that she was really looking for someone; her friends had set up a profile for her out of boredom and for fun, so she had tried to look for people. But it took too much time to find people to message – sifting through profile after profile required so much effort – so she almost only responded when she received messages.

She had only met with boys on that website, although she supposed she could have talked to and met with girls and others as well. A few had questioned her when she identified herself as “question-

ing” on her profile instead of “straight”, but she only said, “yeah, I’m not sure,” and left it at that. Some people she had met only once and that was it. Some others she talked to for awhile but they never made plans to meet, either because the conversation dragged on or something else came up.

She met up with a boy a few months after joining, in the middle of summer. She saw this as more of a hangout than a “date” though. They had talked long enough online to make her feel more at ease with the meeting.

They met at a noodle shop, and both parties quickly grew comfortable with each other. They shared many interests and were able to talk for a good length of time. After eating, they visited a museum, and then a cafe. The night ended with them agreeing to meet again.

Since they were both working summer jobs in different cities, they were only able to meet on weekends. They went to many places and shared many stories, some personal, some casual. Throughout the meetings, they did have talks about kissing, cuddling and sex. She was uncomfortable with touching at first, even holding hands, but eventually did allow him to hold her hand. They also joked about sex, or at least she thought they did.

They talked about previous relationships as well, and she said she had never been in one. He asked if

she liked anyone before, and she said “no”. He asked if she was asexual; she said she wasn’t sure. She had heard of the term before and had looked into it a little, but she still didn’t know for certain. She then opened up about her previous experiences with her “first kiss” and “almost first time”. Afterwards, she asked him about his experiences, which he spoke at length about. The conversation later returned to more casual talk.

Late one evening, they walked along a trail. It was dark and no one was around. He indicated to her, physically and verbally, that he wanted to kiss her. Part of her wanted to try it out as well, but a larger part of her didn’t want to. She briefly wondered if it would be easier if he forced her into a kiss, or if she was blindfolded so she didn’t have to see anything. But then she thought that, if she really wanted to kiss him, maybe those weren’t things she should be thinking of. And when he moved in, she pushed him away. They didn’t kiss.

That night, after they parted ways, she received a call from him. He confessed that he found her very attractive, and wondered what she thought of him. She thought about it, thought about where this could lead. She saw him as a friend, a great friend, really, but nothing more, and she told him so. She knew it would hurt the other person, but it was better to be truthful than lie and hurt him even more further down the road. They both agreed that it was best to not continue this if it wasn’t going to become anything more.

Occasionally they would still meet to hang out, but soon they became busy with their own lives and hung out maybe only once or twice a month.

FIRST LOVE

Love is like a box of assorted chocolates. You never know what you might pick or like. And maybe you won't like any of them at all.

She's never had a first love. At least, the kind that wasn't between friends and family. She wasn't sure if she would. But there's still time; maybe she'll find someone eventually. Maybe not. Who knows? What was love, anyway? What did it mean to her? She didn't know for certain. What she knew of it she saw only in the books and movies, or from some of her friends in relationships. Love seemed like some sort of intense feeling that people had for each other, at least based on what she saw. A lot of effort seemed to be put into love to make it work, and even then, it often fell apart.

Did she really need love, though? It comes back to the question of what was love. After meeting and talking with different people, she realized that different people had different ideas of love. It seemed to vary across different cultures, and changed as you aged.

Did she want love? Did she need to love and be loved? What kind of love? How was it different from caring for others, and where did it factor in life? It didn't seem mandatory in marriage or sex. She couldn't imagine how it would feel to "love" someone deeply,

but that was probably because she hadn't decided yet what it was to her.

It was something she should probably think about. Later.

FIRST STORY

Stories are a way for people to share personal experiences, to invent imaginative worlds to escape to, or to let history be known. Some could leave the audience laughing, some crying, and others angry. Anyone can tell a story; they don't have to be an expert to do so.

She called me up after hearing from mutual acquaintances that I was involved in a writing project. Having held these experiences in for over a decade, she wanted to let her story out. However, she didn't feel like there was anybody she could talk to, since she didn't know what she wanted from telling anyone her story. Then, hearing about a project where she could just say it and know that the writer probably wouldn't question or badger her too much about her actions and decisions, she decided to take the plunge.

After hearing her story, I warned her that this would be a book open to the public, and asked if she was sure she wanted me to write about this. She said "yes, just don't include my name or a description of me."

I asked her if there was any specific point she wanted to get across to the audience. She told me something along the lines of, "There are lots of things to

take away from this. For me...I guess I just wanted it out there. Let the readers decide.”

I thought of adding my own ideas of things to take away as I wrote this, but I thought, “Why should I? It’s her story. Just let it be heard, as she wishes.” And so I submitted the story.

Everyone has their own story. Some are happy, some are not. Some have ended, some have stopped, some keep going on, and others are just beginning. From stories, people can learn, share experiences, enjoy, and take away from. The possibilities are limitless.

So what’s your story? What’s your first?

Chansons Innocentes

Response

by Justin

A voice blown in the wind-
Carried over a mountain
Contempt wedged beneath it
Glazed a film over the surface

Churning a concoction
Filled with life ingredients
But its base ever so plainly delicate
Sweet on the tongue

Robust winds by and due
The Source more Northern
A frozen tundra
Always has its hot spice

Whence one think is lost
Is always a staple part
You may lose a little by little
But the essence is always in your heart

Hopelessness

by Justin

Hopelessness is like a thing with darkness-
That grips onto the soul
And sings the song without a tune
That ends us all for all

And worst in the storms bared
Strong must be the gale
Could cause the sweeping raven-
That struck us all for gold...

I've heard this in the warmest place-
Within the frozen lake...
But even in the slightest-
It can destroy a part of me.

Immeasurable

by Gary

Two blue dots. One blue pill. And all the days in between. Many filled with joy, some with doubt, often with struggle but always abundant in love.

Every day; all the days.

The day I realized I had finally arrived. I did it. I endured. I lived. I fought for this day. A day seven years ago I never thought possible; in my reflection I saw neither despair nor burden but hope and resolve.

The day I accepted that run, walk, or crawl on my hands and knees, there is no glory or dignity to be gained in the blind pursuit of the mythical beast, only certain defeat.

The day I understood that my body and soul are mine to claim and mine alone; an irrefutable truth that nothing living however small or large can ever deny.

This day, every day and all the days before and after.

A brilliant woman used to ask me:

"..ready, spaghetti?"

I am ready.

With bated breath, unwavering heart and unyielding momentum, I remain always, positive.

II

Turmoil

Tender

by Justin

All those dust particles-
Ripping through my lungs
Causing suffocation
An endless plague

Set them to rest with the rest
Because of all my rage-
Take flight the angel of vengeance
And slay through their throats

Vicious blood slinger folding wing upon wing
Hunt them to scare
Take the bow of my heart and wield a barrage
upon them
So that they feel the pain

Red roses
Crimson ash

Fly down upon us to redeem the pain and loss
Unleash a great torrent to cleanse the impurities

Dispel all those sickened, furred up lies
So that one may truly understand their impact
On us and all those who surround
Vanquish the fiend among us

To hope that one day we can begin again anew-
Free from all this conflict
So that each mirror can mirror each individual for
who they are
And not for their strife because of others

Scatter and scold
Let the vine by its boundaries
For none told to be so
And don't stop until ragnarok

Fly mighty and high
And bring about a cover-
of that one may hold tender
And never be lost

I Call Her My Boyfriend

by MTam

Witnessing one's own parents being pinned down and handcuffed is a traumatizing experience one may never forget. The process of coming-out is generally a difficult one and it is worsened by negative reactions such as discrimination and harassment from family. While the 'closet' feels safe, hiding creates increased stress. What comes next is my experience in exploring my sexual identity and the consequences that came along with it.

I was born and raised in Toronto, one of the major urban cities of Canada. I was given Barbies to play with, clothed in dresses, and was called a princess. Perhaps I was taught to love these things. Nonetheless I enjoyed them and did not oppose them in any way. The culture of the dominant group is seen as the 'norm' and I was shaped into what society would call a "girly girl" that was automatically presumed to be heterosexual. Queer theorists argue that binary systems

of inclusion and exclusion are enforced by the power to erase all that does not fit into categories already established (Bromley, 2012). This is evident through discrimination of minority groups whether it be race, culture, class, gender, or sexuality. In society, many people never question their sexual orientation because they presume they are heterosexual (Rich, 1980). Like many people, I always presumed I was heterosexual.

I did not start questioning my own sexual orientation until I was about 18. I assumed I was attracted to the opposite sex until one person came into my life and triggered an avalanche of life changing questions and events. This person self-identifies as a “tomboy”. The tomboy identity is tolerated at a young age, but when it begins to extend from girlhood to adolescence, gender conformity is quickly seen to be threatened. She embodied “female masculinity”. The concept of “female masculinity” suggests that the term “masculinity” should not only be used to describe biological males, but that there are alternative masculinities that can be used to include other sexes (Halberstam, 1998). At that point, I saw her as a male, knowing she was female. The attraction I developed for her felt wrong because society did not seem to readily accept homosexuality. I found myself constantly struggling between what made me happy and what society saw as the ‘norm’. I came to a conclusion that it did not matter if this person was biologically male or female, so long as I was content. However, not everyone else around me felt the same way and supported my decision.

Disclosure is a difficult and emotional process that not every individual chooses to go through. Hiding meant that ordinary daily interactions became burdensome. It required constant attentiveness to avoid mentioning partners, as well as other activities involving LGBTTIQ communities. However, the decision to disclose to others was also a problematic option. This is true, particularly for youth who may fear expulsion from their home if parents respond negatively to their sexuality (Schneider, 1997). In my case, home was more than just a place where I lived, it was a place where I felt loved, welcomed and accepted. These feelings felt fragile, as they could be taken away if I did not conform to the heterosexist patriarchal views of my parents, the supposed creators of my 'home'.

Testing the waters allows for preliminary investigation into how successful or acceptable the concepts will be before implementing it. This is exactly what I decided to do with my mother. Despite increasing social acceptance of lesbians, gay males, and bisexuals, heterosexist views remain a strong inhibition to openness about sexuality. I wanted to see her reaction to the idea of homosexuality in society. I brought my mother to the restaurant that my boyfriend worked at and introduced them to each other. My boyfriend was introduced as a 'friend' and my mother seemed comfortable talking and socializing with her. My mother seemed to judge her, as expected, and categorized her as a lesbian because of her short-haired, tomboy look. After dinner I asked my mother what she had thought

about my new friend. She told me she was completely fine and comfortable being around lesbians as long as they did not develop feelings for me. It occurred to me that my mother's homophobic attitudes were not as strong as I had anticipated them to be. At least she felt comfortable around my 'new friend'.

A week later I decided I would come out and tell my mother about my relationship with my boyfriend. We discussed my childhood and how it had affected my sense of security. I then told my mother that I had found someone that gave me a 'sense of security'. My mother promptly asked who it was, and I replied "you met her". At first my mother seemed to be appalled but accepting. She asked me about how I met her and when we started dating. Soon the conversation went downhill and she started asking me why I would date a girl, as if it was the worst thing I could do to her. For the third time in my life, I saw my mother cry. It was heartbreaking, however, for the next five days I was verbally harassed day and night. "Why would you do this to our family? This is not normal. You are abnormal. I will take you to see many doctors. How can I make you change?" she asked. Suddenly, being me seemed wrong. Was I wrong for making myself happy? Despite her constant verbal harassment, I continued to date my boyfriend because I was not willing to give up what made me happy.

Handling my mother seemed to be a walk in the park in comparison to my father finding out a month later. As fathers are generally perceived as less accept-

ing of their children's sexual orientations than mothers, I was terrified of the idea of my father finding out (D'Augelli and Hershberger, 1993). Heteropatriarchy plays an important role in the outcome. This hierarchy placed my father in a seemingly dominant position over my mother. Even if my mother had slowly started to accept my sexuality, she would seem to listen to my father and agree with whatever he said. My father's negativity brought along outcomes I could have never imagined.

My mother told my father about my sexuality behind my back. I came home one day and was sat down by my father. He spoke of the duty of a daughter to her family and what was expected. He then asked me how I felt about what I was doing with my life. At this point, I was still oblivious as to what was happening, so I replied "I am happy, I'm doing well in school, and I treat my family well." This answer seemed to leave him unsatisfied. He then asked "why are you being abnormal, irrational, and stupid?" I was taken by surprise, as I finally realized that he had found out. I fought back as he verbally abused me with monstrous and devastating words. I was not able to swallow my anger. He attempted to take my basic human rights away by telling me "You are not allowed out of your room and if worse comes to worst we are sending you to China!" I was outraged, he was not legally allowed to imprison me and send me back to China against my will. I am an adult; I have my own rights and am no longer anyone's liability. I felt like I was being treated

as an object, he did not have power over me and my decisions.

That night, I decided I needed a break from my parents. I wrote them a letter explaining that I will come back home, I just need a break and to not come looking for me. The note was left on my pillow, and I left the house with them thinking I was just going stargazing. I left for five days in hopes that the situation would be better and everyone would be calm when I returned home.

All seemed to be calm when I arrived home. The first day went by smoothly with no mention of what had happened. The verbal harassment began again on the second day. The moment I woke up and every night that I came home, I would be harassed. "You are a disgrace to the family, you have disappointed all of us. This is not acceptable in our Chinese culture" my father would continuously say. I suddenly felt that I had to choose between being queer and being a member of my own ethnic/racial group. "You can leave, go live with her. You are no longer my concern. Unless you are dying in the hospital, I will not care," my father said. That was it, I was no longer going to sit there and tolerate his abuse. I called my boyfriend and was ready to leave again.

The moment my boyfriend parked her car by my house, the situation went from upsetting to complete chaos. My father saw her car through the window and immediately ran out. He climbed on top of her car and

started taking pictures of her, her car, and her license plate. My boyfriend stayed inside the car while my father hurled threats at her. "I will find you and your family, I will find where you live and get you and your family," he threatened. While insults and threats were made, I was stuck inside the house with my mother and godmother holding me back. I managed to free myself and ran out of the house. Not long after, my mother ran out and started wrestling me to the ground and throwing me onto the driveway. It was completely terrifying. At first I did not want to fight back as I did not want to hurt my mother. I passively let her pin me down. It wasn't until my mother told my godmother "it is too late now to turn back," that I realized I could not passively let them hurt me and my boyfriend like that. I started screaming at the top of my lungs "help, help, they can't do this to me." All my neighbours came out, and within 10 minutes, the police arrived. The police immediately grabbed my mother off of me and my father off of my boyfriend's car. I sat on my lawn in devastation and watched the police pin my parents to the ground and handcuff them while they struggled. To this day, I am still not able to get that image out of my mind. It was a traumatizing experience that I will never forget or be able to forgive myself for. I was the reason my parents were put in handcuffs.

My personal experience with an act of discrimination against sexuality is one that struck close to home. The root cause of the outcome is power. Those in the dominant group may believe that they have the power

and what they are doing is the ‘norm’. This may not be true for every individual in the dominant heterosexual group, but it was true in my parent’s case. My father also believed he had power over me and my mother’s views and decisions because he is “the man of the household.” In their minds it is all about them and what their daughter had done to them. At the end of the day, I was not willing to conform to their traditional heteropatriarchal views. If I was not pan sexual, the situation would not have occurred. It was me being different that caused their disapproval and unhappiness. But was this really my fault? What I learned along the way from a wise soul is that if society has a problem with you, THAT’S THEIR PROBLEM NOT YOURS.

Endnote: This story was written in 2013 when my psychological well-being was on its decline. Since then I have experienced immense personal growth. I have decided to transform this story into questions, questions that make up my Master’s research and thesis.

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EDisorder

by Justin

It stares at you in the mirror-
Commenting irrational fears
Consuming everything-
That you cannot

A black hole-
Engulfing one further-
And further into themself
Until it can go no further

The fault forms-
And the breakage occurs
Ripping your image
And body into a million pieces

Your soul-
Irons out into physicality
Obsessed with what shouldn't be
Feeling like an eternity

But this isn't the end
With strength one may overcome
Engulfing issues like these-
Pick up the sword and shield

Move forward into
A real, healthy mind
Less binds
Confidence and less blinds

Stare yourself down-
Realize you're you
Perfect in every point of view
Nothing more and nothing less

Then take your fist-
Take all your strength;
And smash that mirror
And all that vanity-

Let it go-
Leave it behind
No more fake images
The Real beauty pouring out
of You and Your Time

Things That Keep Me Hiding

by CJ Yabut

In the dark and dust, I conceal
Confusion, shame and hatred, I feel
Away from everyone, I want
Just leave me alone, I chant

Girls stare. Boys tease
In the hallways, will not leave me in peace
Someone with a smile approached me.
I was happy
Lifted his fists, I began to worry

He hit me hard and called me fag
I fell on my knees and started to gag
I received more punches, kicks, and gay
This unbearable pain, just go away

He's like everyone else, just the same
I am limping. I need a cane

The smell of baked turkey and pumpkin pie
The fragrance from scented candle fire that
seems to never die
Family members, sitting beside each other
With friends. Like brothers and sisters

Sweating and shaking, my heart is in pain
From the courage that is beginning to drain
I am going to tell them the truth, I think
I shouted it out, in a blink

Faces turned and mouths were opened
My father's eyes, glaring like he wants me
to repent
He stood strong and say
"Go to the hell away! I do not have a son
who is gay"

Father is like the rest
I am drowning. Throw me a vest

Disco ball and laser lights dancing gracefully
Loud boom of the music ringing in my ears
beautifully
Arms, heads, and legs moving like crazy
I see him. Eyes so damn sexy

We went out on a cold and snowy night
In black leather jackets and denim jeans
so tight
Along the dark alley, we cuddled and kiss

Do not care if anyone sees us. Mind your
own business

We went to his apartment while kissing
all the way

Entered his room, took of our clothes,
and began to play

I am touched by an angel. So sweet

I am floating. Bit by bit

A blinding light and unknown masked
faces hovering over me

With that beeping sound, it annoys the
crap out of me

I see tubes and wires that seem to be
intertwined

One lifted a sharp metal tool that in the
light shines

The wrath of God, that's what they say

The main reason why I lay

In this appalling condition I am

Will I ever leave this place and feel the sun?

AIDS, rejection, and bullying

These are the things that keep me hiding

In this intolerant and cruel world

These will be my final words

I am falling, failing, and dying

Don't save me. You'll just waste your time
trying

(Reverse) Culture Shock

by Justin

Coming back from a daydream away~
In the land of beau and play
Was like dropping a mirror once held close
And watching it shatter into a million pieces

Two spheres engulfed my head
Each yinning off where the other one yanged
Picking up each shard
My fingers got cut and bled tears and alcohol

How can someone live like this?
Isolated and in bliss?
It seems everything was cracked
And this would be Humpty Dumpty's funeral

Dimorphic life it must be~
Compare and contrast it all
But slowly I see those shards
Reflecting all sides of my beauty directly at me

Sorting out who I am and where I stand now
Is a puzzle of pieces from the past
Reforming that shattered manifestation
Into something new and even better

I reach to my left and right and
Take each piece embraced and embraced again
To reform my identity
True and behold my core and periphery

The hands reach out and point me
back in the right direction
Stars light up my heart, mind, and sky
My light restored true!
Of course a different hue in some respects~

Incorporating all the lessons I've learned
And the mixing of a person with
two heads together into one
Time heals yourself, beauty, and meaning
And makes running forward to destiny's
doors more eager!

Am I an Artist Yet? PT. II

by Anthony

Art problems

My current problems with my artistic endeavours are the following:

I want to do everything now.

I am impatient, yet passionate.

Organized, yet cluttered.

Willing, yet not resourceful.

My current problems with my artistic endeavours are puzzling...

As struggle between creating content for myself,

Yet challenging modern content to be a part of;

I seek the consistency that is corporate,

Yet the raw expression of freelance.

My current problems with my artistic endeavours is:

It's possible.

Mental Turmoil

by Justin

I don't what's going on in my brain
So many thoughts
Scattered in dots
Connected
My place is a mess
Even getting dressed
Is difficult
What date is it now?

Feeling paralyzed
At a loss of words
It's like I've been freeze-dried
Left to drown in kerosene

Caught on fire
Scattered wire
Lightning strikes down
Electrocuting me

Sipping poison
Trying to cure myself
What is my problem?
Then...

My head
I will sort it out
But where to start
Stop the storm a'brewing in my heart

Wind chills
And Oceans slam
Volcanoes Erupt
And earthquakes cause tremors

I guess there's is no place to start
Kind of like on a circle
Where does it start?
At no specific point...

So make one.
It's like Ms. Schmidt said,
"If you're not sure what to do...
Do something; it's better than doing
nothing."

Sleep boy

Sleep

The darkness you don't experience at night
Is creeping into your life

Your incomplete thoughts

Are not being processed at nighttime

So be sound

And lay the hammer down

Hush and be quiet for awhile

It's time you stop counting numbers

And count sheep

Sleep

Fall in the deep

When the sun dries the pool shallow

The moon replenishes

The tide fills the pools back up

Time and Negative Time

Climb and Break

Don't let the tree Break

Rest and Keep On

Colours flow

Appreciate the black and white shades

So our colours don't explode

Power of the not be

The otherness has power too
And when you're only looking at the time
of the living, you become tired
You cannot go on
Respect the balance

Do yourself kind
Work and Not Work
Live and Lie
Love and Rest

Let your wings fly
And in the night, roost
Look and Shut
Wake and Sleep

A Cry For Help

by *Anonymous*

I want to die.
Four words everyone fears.
I love myself.
Three words I rarely hear.
Help me.
Two words that scream in my head.
Help me. Help me.
One word. That's all I need.
Love.

A Cry for Help
From a Friend

SAssault

by Justin

I was out just for some fun
Unfortunately it could happen to anyone
It was just another day
Just was there to say 'hey'

You brought me home
I just wanted to chill
But it was like a pill
More alcohol to the bone

You were nice
But it chilled me like ice
What I hadn't realized
Was that you had me really traumatized

Under the influence
Was your key to entering me
Without my constant defense
Like a villain you stole me

Well, screw you
Like what you did to me
Will not leave me in harmony
As time passes I realize you

I thought I liked it
But it was forced
Fucking coerced
You rapist bitch

You will burn for what you've done
In all the guilt you've caused
Because my shame should be none
Son of a gun tossed

Go to hell
You tried to cover me in foggy snow
Well here's to ring your bell
You've fallen lower than low and I will grow

FADE INTO YOURSELF

International Student, Indonesian Queer

by Alice Anonymous

The year was 2011. The president was SBY. I was 18 years old.

It was winter. During school break, within the enclosure of the dorm room, I typed with hesitation.

Indonesia gay

Google immediately displayed a list of top results. Some of them were gossip forums. A few were organizations that I have never heard of before. I scrolled down cautiously, reading the description of each website with carefulness. There was one for Indonesians to share their coming out stories. Another was an HIV awareness website for gay men. A website called CONQ was alive and sprouting with articles from its readers.

I was giddy. Is this the same Indonesia that I had just left? Since when did these organizations pop up?

The only gay website I knew at the time was a lesbian website called SepociKopi. It means a pot of coffee. It's been around for about 4 years, and had just celebrated its one million and a half visits.

I clicked on each website and revelled in my new discoveries. After 2 a.m. I closed Safari with excitement. Who would've ever guessed that Indonesia would see a number of websites openly catering to gay people?

That night, I went to bed with a sense of excitement, and new hopes. I was hopeful for Indonesia.

.....

"You're not like other Asians," my roommate said with a grin. I laughed at her remark, but later my pride turned to annoyance. I am from Asia. There are shisha bars in Indonesia, although not many. There are many more in Malaysia, where my dad almost tempted my aunt to go and try the shisha if it weren't for my sister saying with a frown that they could just go to the one in Jakarta. My aunt ended up not going. She thought it would be cheaper in Indonesia. There is nothing un-Asian about smoking shisha.

Later, the same roommate would tell me, even more surprised, "You're from Indonesia? You don't look like one. Where are you from, really?"

Yes, I finally admitted, I am Chinese Indonesian.

"Oh, that makes sense," she said. "I've seen docu-

mentaries on Indonesians. You don't look Indonesian at all."

I wanted to yell at her, "You don't look African either!" but I stopped myself. After all, she was very proud of her African background. She talked about it all the time.

The year after, she left Canada and went home. Both of us were international students.

.....

"You're an international student?" He remarked with raised eyebrows. Then he smiled and stared knowingly at me.

"You must be rich. You must be rich."

I looked back at him, not knowing what to reply. With tuition money six times the domestic students', what do I say to someone who is struggling to even find change for the city bus fare?

After that, throughout the night he interviewed me on my tuition. *How much do you pay per year?*

This is the conversation topic I try to avoid the most. Who likes talking about their finances anyway? But it's hard to not answer when your friends would not stop asking for an actual number, even though you curved up your lips and said, "A lot. Any plans for the weekend?"

After years of facing the same questions, now I would tell them the numbers.

“Twenty-five thousand per year?”

Her eyes widened upon hearing my answer. I nodded at her silently, not wanting other people on the bus to hear it too.

“Wow,” she said. With mellow eyes and an even mellow smile, she told me, “Your tuition could cover my house mortgage.”

I looked at her in silence. I wish I had a house here, I thought. I wish I had my family here so I could go home to them. I wish my mom was around to tell me to run errands. Instead, I had to rush home on the earliest bus after class because I let my landlady’s dog out to the backyard in the morning and rain started drizzling in the afternoon.

I wanted to tell her, *you know, it could cover my house mortgage too*. Heck, with a hundred thousand my family built a big, nice house in the suburbs. It was enough to afford us a land in a neighbourhood surrounded by walls, with security at the gate 24/7. The hundred thousand also covered the cost for bullet-proof windows for the house, because my parents were still traumatized by the mass killing of Chinese Indonesians fifteen years ago.

I with my family could all move here to Canada, so I wouldn’t have to read the news about Indonesian politics every night before bedtime.

.....

The year was 2014. It was summer. I showed my best friend Lucas the videos produced by CONQ on YouTube. When he asked what CONQ meant, I explained that it was a reclaimed term, short for bencong, a word used like the F slur in Canada. I said I was proud that gay men were reclaiming the word bencong.

“What’s the word for queer?”

I thought for a while. There is no “queer” in Indonesia.

.....

When a group of university students did an interview about LGBT acceptance on the street, the interviewees pronounced LGBT slowly, each alphabet tumbling out awkwardly. And then they said, “It’s a product of the Western world. We shouldn’t let it spread in Indonesia.”

When I first heard about these kinds of opinion, I rolled my eyes. *It’s not a product of the Western world!* I wanted to yell at the computer screen. But the more I learned about colonialism, the more I doubted myself.

Why do gay people in Indonesia use the word gay? Why do lesbians call themselves lesbians? Why does the term transwoman become more popular, as waria declines?

If people would study about Indonesian history, I would argue, they would’ve known there were warok and gemblak, and bisnu, and serat Centhini.

But are warok and gemblak really gay? In North America, their relationship would be labelled pedophilia. And Bissu isn't an exact translation for transgender. They exist within a spiritual sense, and without that spirituality there is no Bissu. These words exist specifically within the cultures in Indonesia. And yet, these two words are as foreign to a lot of Indonesians as the term LGBT, because their practice is no longer allowed. Only the word bencong and waria is familiar to Indonesians, because it's often used for convenient comedy. Maybe this is why the terms gay and transwomen are preferred, because they are devoid of the painful history that bencong and waria have.

.....

“But, aren't you...”

The question was unfinished as they looked at me with a vague smile. It seems that Canadians love smiling, even when there is nothing positive to smile for. I'm starting to think it's part of the politeness.

I looked at them with a tired look. No, I'm not Chinese, I thought, but I didn't want to announce it to the whole room. Yes, I am Chinese, but I'm not from China. I don't speak Chinese apart from the few vocabularies I remember from a course on Chinese language in fifth grade. The term Chinese becomes an awkward explanation to explain my looks because Chinese implies anything and anyone that comes from China, which I am not. My ancestors came from China. I did not.

However, the complication is not merely about whether someone or something is from China. The word immediately became clear to me when I read a book by an Indonesian author who put it compactly in the retelling of an incident involving her uncle: when he was called “stingy Chinese” by a street busker, he jumped out of his car, shouting, “You called me Chinese?”

It suddenly made sense to me why my mom always said “China” instead of “Cina.” It made sense to me why President SBY issued a presidential decree to change the word Cina and China to Tiongkok and Tionghoa. It made sense to me why my friends and I are not to call each other Chinese in public, even though people who are from Java, Batak, Ambon, or Papua are proud to announce their heritage.

I wish I could tell my friend that yes, I am proud to be called Chinese. I wish I could say I can use the word Chinese just like some gay Indonesians use the word *bencong*. I wish Chinese and Cina inspired me just like *bencong* inspired CONQ.

Not everyone is like you, I thought. Not everyone could reclaim their heritage.

.....

“International students are THE WORST! They drive around flashing their million dollar cars while us domestic students are suffering just to pay our tui-

tion! We need to kick them out, why are we discriminated in our own country???”

The comment was posted anonymously on the university group page on Facebook. As an international student who had no car, I was offended. I was even more offended for my friends who had to leave the country after a year or two in university because their parents couldn't afford to pay the tuition anymore. In Ontario, that means at least twenty thousand dollars wasted.

It's hard for us too to see other international students who could pay to have their own car, when some of us have to wrap our sneakers in duct tape so they would survive the snow in winter, or skip a meal for a day every once in a while to make sure that next year we could still attend university, and we don't want to make our family skip a meal for us when their sacrifice is so much already. It's hard for us to hear other students say, "They could pay that much for tuition but not a fifty dollar ticket?" when the stake is an event ticket or a seat in class. It's hard for us to know some people are eager to kick us out of the country, when the reason we are here in the first place is to get out of ours.

For some people, fighting to not be kicked out means taking a huge risk and work illegally in Canada.

.....

The year is 2016. The president is Jokowi. I am 24 years old.

Last year, CONQ'S Youtube account was closed. According to the creator, the closure was for the safety of its film crews. CONQ also closed down their blog. A short statement is put up to say: *we are laying low for everyone's safety, but we are still fighting*. In February, after almost ten years, SepociKopi website was gone. Only its Facebook account is still active. Its most recent activity was sharing a video about people failing to realize their privileges. The Indonesian minister for technology, research, and higher education stated that LGBT is not accepted in Indonesia. The Support Group and Resource Center at University of Indonesia became the most controversial topic for spreading awareness about LGBT. An Islamic boarding school for Muslim waria was forcibly closed by the local Muslim group. In my 24 years, I have never witnessed such strong and widespread rejection against LGBT.

I learned of this news as I was lying in my bed in Canada. Pictures of Indonesian activists against the local anti LGBT Muslim groups were paired with live updates of the clash on Facebook.

.....

Sometimes I call myself an activist and am loud. Sometimes it feels ironic that I join the protests in Canada, and yet I can't support the very fight that is happening in my country. I

learn about social justice, community building, and colonialism in Canada, but what are these skills and experiences when I can only passively watch as people in Indonesia are fighting for their - our - rights?

The choices are in my hands - am I willing to give up a future in Canada where I can be safe and queer? Or is this another reason to continue the fight and stay in Canada?

Am I failing my family, or am I failing my country?

III

Resignation

Sins Against My Mother

December 25, 2012

by XJ Ng

My mother once told me to come out
in winter
when it was cold but beautiful
I did
this is the morning after

Her silver spoon jangles
in coffee black
you can hear distaste stirred
in circular motions
clink. clank.

I am her second cup
no cream, no sugar
she drinks little sips
careful not to scald herself
on lukewarm dregs

I have been scolded a lifetime for this
moment
for living lawless
my lie was flawless

Oh if only she'd known
she might've done something, I don't know
stage-whispered louder about those freaks
in drag
that queer—look how he's walking!
why are you walking like that?
straighten your back!
chest out, like a man
hair short, like a man

Like a man, she puffs up fierce
in a sad caricature of machismo
eyebrows scowled, biceps clenched
like Popeye the sailor
but I am scrawny and 2 inches short of tall,
dark, and handsome
cowlicks she can't flatten
a crinkle she can't straighten, can't iron,
can't fix
SO WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?

what's wrong with me?

what did I do wrong?

she doesn't say that
but I hear it
I hear it like I hear her slippered feet
plod down hardwood stairs
I missed that sound in college
seven thousand miles away
god I missed her
and she missed me too, I'm sure
I mourn her absent footsteps
she mourns her absent grandchildren

My mother takes her coffee sweet with
brown sugar
but today is a strange day
where her coffee comes black, bitter
with just a few drops of salt
Her second cup is cold but
still beautiful
She tells herself it could be worse
I tell myself it could be worse

It's Okay to be Me

by *Anonymous*

I don't feel beautiful in my skin.
Whenever I look at it, I want to cry.
Because it's something I can't change.
People would tell me, you're so "dark"
for an Asian.
Saying lighter is more ideal. It's better
to be pale.
I agreed with them for such a long time.

Every time I look into the mirror.
I would see my ugly self reflecting back
at me.
From head to toe, making fun of every
detail of my body.
How do I make my eyes less "Asian"?
Wishing my round button Asian nose
was more narrow and pointy.
Wanting to be white. I threw away my

own culture, language, and identity.

I wanted to belong.

I hated myself so much that I never expressed self-love.

Loving myself seems vain and arrogant.

It seemed like such a foreign concept.

How do I love myself? I never once looked in the mirror and thought I was beautiful.

I never gave the credit that I owe to myself.

I hope these nevers turn into firsts.

And that these firsts turn into life lessons.

Life lessons telling me, it's okay to be me.

Am I an Artist Yet? Part III

by Anthony

And I Learned...

After brief emotional-artistic-crisis

A few hours ago,

Still continuing, every day,

I have discovered the following:

I like to perform.

But I also like to draw.

And I also learned it's okay,

To like many things,

Than no things at all.

Singing brings me joy.

As I sing songs of power

And I learned I should conserve water,

During my dramatic showers.

Art is my career;

It gives me a sense of glee.

And I learned art is alive
A never-ending process
You can't see.

After brief emotional-artistic-crisis
Still continuing a bit more,
I learned it's okay to take your time,
To find out what you yearn for.

II Resignation



Last Day In Korea

by Justin

They say to be strong is to be able to be vulnerable. About two years ago, I experienced one of the most difficult periods in my life so far.

Ring! My phone's alarm went off. It was my last day in Korea. I had to get up for our exchange program graduation ceremony. I got up and quickly hopped into the shower and got dressed and ran down the stairs of the dormitory. I met with my friends and we were off to the graduation ceremony, a bit late, but that's nothing unusual for me.

Last night was around the craziest one and it was our last full night together! I drowned my stomach in soju, jager, and many other assortments of alcohol at the bar with a bunch of friends and then hit up a major local club. There were things I had definitely been doing throughout my time in Seoul, although this last time was rock n rolling at the next level!

We got there towards the end of the ceremony and to be honest, the ceremony hall was tiny and jam-packed. Like they had viewing rooms instead, where people sat inside and viewed the graduation ceremony. We were given gowns and hats to wear to officially celebrate the moment which was nice.

We made it to the end of the ceremony, enough to celebrate the moment, throw our hats up, take a few photos, and enjoy each other's company followed by dinner.

I was amazed by all the spectacular food prepared there. Tons of beautiful dishes to wish us well. Snap! Another photo taken - a beautiful group photo. After dinner, I took some more photos with the local buddies who helped us during our time there. Then it was off to our favourite local bar for one final drink. I got there a bit late due to my farewell with the buddies lasting a bit longer.

At the same time, I had a hurricane going on in my head. I think it was due to the circumstances, the situation, the hard-wiring in my brain, a combination of all of them probably - I don't know. At this point, I can definitely say it was a natural internal disaster. My head was racing. The pain in my mind so great. It felt impossible to tame. I felt a throbbing in the right, back-side of my brain. It wouldn't go away. I knew something was wrong, terribly wrong.

I was going through a lot then. A lot to comprehend. The excessive partying, drinking, lack of sleep coupled

with being young and inexperienced in my first year of university and just beginning to embrace my LGBTQ identity as well as being an overthinker. I remember I got caught up in my head on an incident playing soccer with the staff at the staff vs students soccer game, thinking I didn't play that well. Even though I played well and scored and was having fun in the beginning I got tired towards the end. Perhaps this was because I was up late partying the night before and didn't speak Korean like the rest of the other players when I switched teams or really know/recognize them that well. The alcohol was getting to me. Never playing soccer again. I thought. That wasn't true though. The fog was just clouding my brain.

Thinking about these things underneath and my last day in Korea, I got to our favourite local bar and the crew was already drinking. *I'll just hangout and stay with them here for a bit before I have to go back and pack and fly and leave Korea. I don't really want to announce that I was leaving because I did not want to dampen the mood,* I thought. "We're going to Octagon tonight!" exclaimed one of them.

"I'm not going clubbing. I have to pack. I'm leaving for tomorrow morning. My flight is that day."

I guess my words got drowned out by the noise of partying, drinking, living in the moment, living in Korea. We were exchange students, partying it up in a fast-paced culture. I realize, in retrospect, you have to keep your judgment of yourself then and of others

then low. When you are so enraptured in the moment, you will understand. This would be the last real time together. They all had drunk some regular soju and were now drinking some fruit soju. I wanted to get my drink game on too a bit before I left. They were passing shot glasses around and pouring blueberry soju in all their shot glasses mostly for the girls or those who were the patrons of the pitcher. I was towards the end of one of the tables so I could not possibly reach to talk to everyone too, just those on my half of the table.

I put my shot glass in the pile of them pouring drinks; the others requesting shots from the pitcher, "Hey, Hey, Hey" snarled one of the bitchy ones.

"Go pay for your own drinks!"

"Yeah!" piped in another one unexpectedly.

The moved my shot glass back at me. Another friend there, threw an empty water bottle in my direction drunkenly and said, "Yeah, drink this."

I was shocked.

This is how people were going to treat me during my last time being with them. Fine! I thought. If this is how they're going to treat me. They'll regret it. They'll miss me when I'm gone because I won't even say goodbye to them I thought in vengeance. But at the same time, another voice in my head said, you'll regret this.

It was drowned out by the hurricane. My emotions had gone from slightly sad since I had already cried

before to utterly emotionless as I put a cap on the bottle. I had no mental energy left to speak my mind. I had imagined our goodbyes with all of them would be me tearing up and hugging them but that's not how it went down, at least not in that moment. Things never happen the way you expect them. My whole trip to Korea is an example of that, originally I wanted to go study in Japan since I was a bit of an otaku in my middle and high school years, but it was too difficult to go there and study on exchange because of the limited amount of spaces available. So I chose Korea because I thought it was the next best thing. Of course I would never tell Koreans this because that would be so offensive to them, especially considering their position with Japan, which are things that I explored in my introduction to international relations class at the university there. The unexpectedness is the truth! And it changed my life!

After drinking a few shots of soju with those surrounding me and making sure just to get a bit buzzed only since I had to pack and fly out in the morning to get back home, I was thinking, it's too early. And then I saw a side group of friends, other exchange university friends that I knew but not as well as my main group. They were sitting in the bar at a table a little farther away from us hanging out. At that time it was getting late and it made me wonder what they were up to. Also, I saw a cute guy there and I knew he was gay and drunkenly; one friend yelled at him to 'get at me' while a group of us students at the university were drunkenly walking down the street towards Anam a few days

prior to this. On that occasion, I reluctantly said I was bisexual after many others in that group said they were gay/lesbian, despite the lack of general understanding in Korea then, especially among the older generation. At the same time, there was a girl in our group that we hung out with, who I was getting close with, but it wasn't working. I'd get really pissed off when this asshole guy in our group was getting with her because he didn't deserve or appreciate her; he was just there. I felt like I should be with her, but at the same time, it didn't feel right. It was the right porcelain but the wrong type of tea.

When I saw that gay guy again that night, I was kind of like, this is my chance! In retrospect, what was I thinking? This was my last day in Korea, how could I get a boyfriend, especially one who is somewhere else in the world and not in T dot?! Korea's love-scene had gotten to me. It is such a beautiful country with so much based on romance and being a couple. Those single, even if they love dancing to single ladies by Beyoncé, will feel left out. I hope to visit Seoul Tower on my next trip to Korea if I am in a relationship when I go, if I am ever in a relationship (again). Someone better remind me too.

The large amount of alcohol consumed there and the stigma of mental health in Korea which I had been told about by others only elevates the loneliness one feels and it was what I was feeling. I have been told the latter is still so strong even though it is such a developed country, people do not speak of it. I found based

on my experience in Korea that it isn't only Korea but Asia in general that stigmatizes mental health. I can definitely attest to that from my Indian background and as I explored Korea more, I found a lot of similarities between the two, not just one thing, and of those similarities, mostly positive things. I found that it placed a lot of emphasis on the community as opposed to the individual like in the vast majority of Asian cultures. Growing up in a North American context, I find it places the individual ahead of the community and I feel that both are equally important.

Being part of the queer/trans community, I felt isolated going to clubs when all the other guys would dance with girls and all the girls with guys, so that definitely led to the further isolation in my head and I wanted to do some other things as well like dance with boys and talk with boys of interest to fully express myself. So I sat with them at the dinner table and watched my friends for the last time as they went off to the club.

Before they started to leave, someone must have mentioned to all the others who were a bit farther away from me on the tables that I was leaving the next morning and will go and get ready for my flight soon so this would be my last time with all of them together like that.

One of my brothers came over and was like, "Are you leaving?"

“Yeah, I am.” This was it. He gave me a warm hug. I’m happy for this. Another came over and did the same thing.

Another one of my brothers was like, “No, you can’t go. You have to come with us to the club, just for a bit.”

This was our last time together. He was also upset at my departure, at all of our’s and this was his way to express it. He started to drunkenly drag me around.

He was like, “I usually only do this to girls, but I will do this to you too...” as he pulled me to the elevator toward the cab pickup location to go towards the club.

A girl in our group in the elevator said, “Oh, Justin, you’re coming to the club with us? I thought that you’re leaving?”

“I Am!” I said.

As we took the elevator down, I was like, this can’t be the case.

There’s too much at risk here. My brother yelled, “He’s coming!”

He wouldn’t let go. This is what love feels like; true friendship.

I think we all wanted to hang on. Our exchange was very fast. Change isn’t easy. Re-entry isn’t easy either. The environment is not as changed as you are.

Another friend told me, “Yeah, you need to go pack for your flight.”

She knew that that was the most important thing. I had to get back. If I missed my flight, I had no idea what would happen.

“Bye Justin. I’ll see you in Toronto.” Another friend studying in Toronto said. I wanted to believe it and I did believe it for a time. It never happened. I still hope that one day it will.

After Korea, we all went our separate ways. I have yet to meet up again with someone who was a part of my exchange program since. This definitely makes me sad, but it is a reminder that nothing lasts forever and to always remember that all your beautiful experiences will be a part of you forever. At the time though, it definitely made it difficult for me.

After a bit of skirmish with my brother, I broke free and was walking back to Sky Bar.

Along the way, I bumped into a few friends, who were like, “Can you take a picture of us?”

I was like, “Sure!”

And then I made it back to the local bar. I couldn’t let that friend drag me back. It would be too unexpected. Part of me wonders what would have happened if I had gone out with them for a little while. Who knows what would’ve happened if I had gone with them clubbing? I

might have been able to party a little longer with them or I might have not been able to make it back the next morning which would cause a lot of (other) trouble. I really don't know, but the way I acted, it was better safe than sorry. They say we make choices and decisions to go down other paths because the original paths we make a turn on lead to dead-ends. Sure it was sad to leave like that but one experience does not define the whole trip. I took the elevator up and then made it back to the local bar.

I was just in time to join the other group as they were finishing up and ready to leave the pub. We were like, "What's next?" I suggested karaoke. It would be a nice final activity in Korea. I sang the song, "Conspiracy" by Paramore. The debut Paramore song that I had discovered while doing noraebang in Korea. Each time I sang it, it literally felt like a 'conspiracy' more and more in my head. I think that song reminded me of childhood insecurities when I was in middle school and then when I was in high school, where I was a target of many people to make fun of. As much as I feel like I moved on from those days and I have, those insecurities are still something I work on and get better at not only dealing with them but overcoming them. As we neared the end of karaoke, I got a one-hundred on it on my last night singing the song "Conspiracy." My first one-hundred at the noraebang. A perfect score! We then departed back to our respective places. Two friends went back with me to the dormitory as they

had to get back because they were leaving soon too because the university's exchange program for the Summer was now officially over. On the way back, we helped some international people get their passed out friend back to their hostel. We went back to the campus in Anam. We exchanged hugs knowing that this would be the last time with anyone, and I hugged them back and we went our separate ways. As I made it back to my room and began to pack up the mess, it dawned on me just how this was ending. It wasn't on a good note in my head and it made me upset. *How could it end like this? Without giving all my friends a goodbye hug, without finding a love interest. With this throbbing pain in my head of unfulfillment, I began to cry. What was I going to do? All that was left to do was pack and post to Facebook of my departure.* I got a small nap in between but I was so exhausted mentally and physically even though it was a grand experience. The many nights of drinking and little sleep had caught up with me causing my physical health and especially, my mental health was really deteriorating, along with other aforementioned conditions as well. I've learned to appreciate this experience though. Nothing always ends the way you plan it. And it's not necessarily the front cover or the back cover of the book, but the story that's told in between it. The tears I cry later on might be of temporary relief but from my opinion now, seem excessive. Although all stories and events involving my life are significantly important to me, this story and these events in my life hold a special place in my heart.

On the flight back, during the longest leg of my flights back, I met this guy travelling back to Texas for his university. He was a Chinese guy living there and we were good company for each other. I told him about who I am and my experiences in Korea and he told me about his relationships and his life as a student. I felt a bit more relieved and I felt that he understood me a bit. I do wish we were still in contact but something must have happened and although I gave him my number, I never received a message from him. I'm glad we met though and I still remember his name.

When I got back to Massachusetts, I felt completely shattered. I felt as if the mirror with my reflection in front of me had shattered into a million pieces. I could not sort out my identity. This was true because I had only spent one year in university so far. My life in Toronto was new to me just like living in Seoul was and since they were comparable, I viewed each as permanent situations. Of course, I came to realize that only the former of the two were true.

I couldn't make sense of everything in Korea. The hurricane going on in my head had reached ahead of a Category 5. I literally could feel my brain beating, trying to find meaning. It was difficult. Back to T dot I went and when I got there and our training had begun for our work on Residence, I made it known how Korea had influenced me. One of my friends on exchange told me in Seoul that it's sad how we have all come so close together in the past month and a half and now we're leaving and when we go back to our lives in the places

of which we came from, life moves on. You're going to have changed and people are not going to understand your change since they were not there with you as the process unfolded. I definitely felt that coming back during our residence job training. In fact, I was really loud-spoken of my adoration for Korea and people recognized that. In fact a few coworkers of mine made fun of me for that even though they had no idea what I was going through. No one else had been on exchange in that group at the time so they really didn't understand, period.

During my time in Korea, that friend there said that this is goodbye because we'll probably never see each other again and things will never be like they were then again. At the time of writing this, she has been right. I think more and more everyday of how all those friends I made there are gone. I miss them from time to time. Even though it makes me sad thinking about how difficult the return from Korea was, it is a constant reminder of how strong I am to be able to endure this.

I also look back and remember the happy times that we had together. That's important too. I always remind myself that just because it's really difficult to see your friends or you can't really see them anymore or both, doesn't mean your friendship isn't still there. In that regard, friends are like stars in the sky. I am happy to have made friends all around the globe from this experience because it is a reminder that as big as the world is, we're all connected.

Isn't it funny how 'goodbye' and 'hello' use the same hand motion? A wave. I guess in a way, when you say 'bye,' it's like you're saying, 'thank you for being a part of my life.' I've honestly never been great at them, more so in recent years. These heightened circumstances only made it worse. There's a quote about goodbyes. It says something along the lines of "in the end, goodbyes are just scraps that we try to make the most of." For example, when a loved one dies, you don't always get to say the goodbye that you think you would.

After leaving Korea, I eventually shot each of my friends from my exchange experience there a message in an effort to tie up all loose ends, which happened gradually. I've realized that in all honesty, I would have never been able to say 'goodbye' to everyone I met in Korea before leaving. During my night of leaving, I could only say 'goodbye' to the ones who I was hanging out with there. The goodbyes that I got and gave that night weren't mostly just waves or words or hugs but an acknowledgement that times change fast and even if we try to make the most of the situation, we do the best we can in the moment. That's what counts.

I felt so alone. I didn't know what was going on and I wanted it to stop as soon as possible. I didn't really reach out to the other exchange students until much later. I felt maybe they didn't understand either and that they were all moving on with their life too so I didn't want to bother them. As I began to talk to them more and more post-exchange, I feel that some did go

through similar experiences, although maybe not to the same degree. They missed Seoul and all the wonderful friends they had made there as well. I still do miss them now too.

After getting back from Korea and then returning to Toronto, I spent a few nights crying in my room because I did not know what was going on with me. I felt I was dying and I was a mess. Two Justin's of the past were competing for his current body mercilessly and it didn't stop until they decided to compromise and combine themselves into one together. Also just before, during, and after my adventures in Korea, I had also begun to use applications to find potential boy-friends. I thought that that was the way to go at the time, young and naive.

During the start of my journey of recovery, I met a couple wonderful friends. I knew them both from before but not really well prior to the start of the new school year. One of whom, is still one of my closest friends today. I am grateful for the time they have given me. They helped me so much. Sometimes, all it takes is an extra push by someone or some people to get you going again. During our conversations over the next few months, I began to divulge all of what I was going through until I felt content with the volume of my thoughts unloaded. As I told them these things, they definitely got a better lens on my perspective. They promised me it would be alright. I began to see a light in the dark of what felt like a bottomless-hole.

At the same time, I thought I could find a boyfriend to solve all of my problems right away. I had no idea about relationships to be honest and had not been in any serious one yet. The reality of the matter is you can't let someone else save you because the only true person that is able to do that is yourself. I started hitting up clubs again, new to the gay scene in Toronto and freshly enjoying the clubbing scene and clubbing in general, starting in Seoul. I went out a weekend early in the Fall with a friend I met on an application and had a blast. I thought I could try going many consecutive weekends myself after that and continue to have a blast, get over my stress, find a boyfriend and heck well, solve all my problems. With this illusion in my head, it made me more prone to making bad decisions. When you're young, you're prone to make mistakes. However, in life, you need mistakes to learn, to solidify, and to develop.

At the time, I was so lost. Wandering in the shadows. Incomplete... And I thought the only way to complete myself was by finding someone. I thought drinking and clubbing were my only escapes, my only form of release, my only way to find that someone at the time. It was a temporary relief, but in the long term, it made things worse. Even though it got worse, it eventually allowed me to grow even more. I was not expecting it, and it was not easy, but this is how it turned out.

In my search for romance, I lost it all one night. One of the first few nights drawn to the club. *Thought I'd dance with someone nice and forget my stress? Find a boy-*

friend? I thought I could in this way, in this environment and in this manner. My light was dimming. I ended up running into someone, two in fact. They brought me to their friend's place to drink and hangout. The alcohol was taking over my blood more and more. Back to their place we went. Him being more than twice my age. I wanted to leave. I felt I didn't belong there too late. They gave me no option. Coerced me into things. My lips touched someone's for the first time. I was losing it. I thought, what if this makes things better for now. What if I die tonight? Is this it for me? He took me all that night while the alcohol took over my brain. My light grew even dimmer.

I only remembered parts of that night. Afterwards, I could not fathom what had happened to me. It was going through my head, like a snake through a garden. What was going on? I wasn't fully sure what happened last night. Where could I go from there? Once some things happen, you are forever changed. Change is a scary and difficult process, yet a beautiful phenomenon. Once a caterpillar goes through the chrysalis stage, where it will not be certain whether it survives to adulthood, and matures, it becomes a butterfly and flies away. As I began to go through my thoughts even further, I could not believe what was happening. It's as if I had just climbed part way out of a hole and had been knocked down further, deeper into another hole below it. I felt like there was no way out. My struggles had created a mental prison for me and I didn't know how to fight it. I felt more hopeless. What could I do about what had happened?

But that wasn't the end of my ordeals either... Not remembering all of it had me thinking that I might be infected, and not just my mind. *How was I supposed to know? What was I supposed to do? I had very little information on it. What if he had lied after I had texted him about it.* I had to do more research like I had begun to do for everything that happened to me. It is a good skill that I have and cultivate and make use of. I figured it out for the most part; I'd have to make a separate trip to go downtown and get tested. Eventually, in my head, I would come to this realization as well.

Following my mental shattering and the shards being frozen to the ground, I began to feel completely out of control, physically and mentally. Spiraling downwards and one way I thought I could be in control again was through meeting guys for hopefully something more, but all it turned out to be was sex.

Then at that point, after three total, I realized enough is enough and this is over. I am going to end this cycle. I stopped going to the club drunk and started focusing more on other things. I had to put my mind 's throbbing to rest and find peace on so many levels and I needed my whole self with me at that point. I needed to start focusing on growing stronger again. I needed to take back my life. At this point too, I started to open up about who I am to more people around me in Toronto area following first embracing and sharing with others about me starting in Seoul. There were a lot of things going on.

But that wasn't it... A girl had popped back into my life from before. Prior to this, we had not been in contact, since we both did not like each other. We had an argument before and had ceased communication since then. I was talking to someone who I was friends with then who was also friends with her. I mentioned her and then he brought her into the conversation. That's where things got heated. This happened unexpectedly, but it happened because we had some argument that arose from some old flames starting online and it lit up to the point of her issuing death threats to me on top of everything I was going through. It was unbelievable. Just when I thought that things could not get any worse, this happened. I saw them as more of a joke. "I'll take a baseball bat and come to your place with my boyfriend because I know where you live." A friend I told this to about, cautioned me. He brought me to the campus police. This was no laughing matter. He was right and I was so shaken from everything that was going on and had gone on internally and externally within the last few months that I wanted to write this off as a joke because I didn't want to process having another wound on me. Anyways, I reported her and we are no longer allowed to mutually speak to each other legally. That was the beginning of healing the wounds. Going to the gym regularly also eased my pain. It lessened it and cleared my mind for that time being. It definitely helped but that in itself was not enough.

The next step was to get tested. The thought of it made me so nervous: the thought of being positive.

I also had gotten physically really sick recently, which usually never happens to me, which made me even more nervous as I had read online that it was an indicator that you might be infected. I kept telling myself it was likely a seasonal sickness that I caught from someone combined with all the stress that I was already going through. The thought of something ruining my life further, or so I thought, was ripping through my brain. *Is this God's punishment?* I thought. What a cruel life. Falling from such a high in Korea to such a low in Canada. I remember the day that I got tested was like a judgment day for me because I knew for sure that my life would be forever changed depending on the results. Or maybe this was a test, a test in order to build myself up and make myself stronger. Often when you have a shaky foundation, things come crashing to the ground. And then when you're ready, when you use the time, you use that material and then some to build your structure again with a sturdier base. And I was negative.

Also, to add to this, was the fact that I had just started working. It was a new experience to be working on top of studying in a position that felt more like a position and less like a side-job on the weekends like soccer refereeing had primarily been, which I had been doing for the last five plus years. I had to attend meetings, manage students, act more like a role model, and be a student leader. It was tough and a lot of time commitment. It was around the clock and in a way felt like taking one or two really long, time consuming courses. It

was especially tough on top of everything I was going through. Definitely a huge triumph for me to be able to get through all of these difficulties.

Even though it has yet to be two years at the time of writing this since the transpiration of all of these events, I feel like I have grown so much from them. They say in Hinduism and Buddhism that the lotus is very symbolic of who we are. The lotus rises up through all the muck and dirt that surrounds it and blossoms into something beautiful. It needs all the dirt and muck around it to give it the nutrients to grow and then adjacently illuminates its surroundings.

I'm really glad I had two close friends by my side. Talking to them definitely helped me to ease my problems. But in the process I realized no one was going to save me but myself. People could only help until a point. After that point, it was up to me to get myself the rest of the way through. I saw a lot of parallels between myself and my struggles and Avatar Korra in the final two seasons of the Legend of Korra, which is one of my favourite television shows. It definitely was a huge reminder that I was not alone and would be able to get through whatever I was going through. I was strong just like Korra. The seasons aired back to back from summertime until the end of the year as my troubles unraveled and resolved as I seized the reigns of them.

With all these struggles, I did suffer and so did my grades, but I was able to find meaning through my suf-

fering and rebound. I felt so uncertain at times. It was difficult not being certain what was going to happen. That I would just keep receiving more and more pain from life? An endless and tireless struggle?

At the end of the day, these struggles have made me stronger, mentally, physically, and spiritually. It made me realize that I am one small dot on this planet trying to make a difference and the world is so unpredictable and as much as that can be difficult, it can be beautiful and full of meaning with time. Through my suffering I was able to find a deeper meaning. Struggles are there in life because without them, you would not have been able to understand life to a much greater extent as I do now and appreciate them just like aroma of the tree of life that contains the hidden fruits, so sweet and succulent. I was merely skimming the surface of the pool and until I took the plunge and opened my eyes and rose back up, did I realize what was in that pool and what was creating who I am.

“Change can be difficult. Change can be beautiful. It’s often a combination of the two”, but you can’t have a two without a one. Traumatic experiences in life can have a huge effect on a person and cause them to spiral downwards further and further, especially with additional layers of trauma on top of that. You do your best to get back up but it isn’t easy and it takes time. You have to be patient with yourself and also try and utilize as much time as you can for healing. Ultimately, in order to get through, you need to pull yourself through. Part of this is accepting that these

certain events have happened in your life and although they are over now, they will still remain alive in you. Whether they be happy or sad or neutral, they are complete. Why? Because life is about balance. "Happiness is like a tree that grows to the sky, and sadness is like its roots that grow in the ground toward the womb of the earth. That is its proportion. That is how it is." You cannot appreciate one without the other. All your experiences will have lessons. You have to learn from them, whatever they may be, you will learn something from them and that's the most important thing with your life as you keep progressing in it. I definitely was able to learn more about myself. Knowledge is powerful. And through knowledge we grow, and whatever that growth may be, I see growth as absolutely positive, so through that, I find my light in the dark.

My experiences thus far have been a lot for just over twenty-one years of age, but they are a testament to my strength and growth. Life is always going to throw you curve balls when you least expect it. Life's not perfect. Perfection really is a four letter word and it should never be used and the only way it's relevant in life is in the word 'imperfection.' 'Imperfection' describes life and that's what keeps it interesting. I know my life, more likely than not, is going to throw more ordeals in my direction down the road, but I remember all of the strength I've had in my life to get me so far, and I know I will make it through whatever else tries to block my path. It is just a reminder to come back stronger and taller each and every time.

Culture

by Justin

Culture is like a metaphor in the wind
With its roots set down high atop a
mountain
It balances itself atop the crease-peak
However, as the harsh storms combat it
throughout-
It grows.

It gathers the nutrients from all the
crevices and creeks it finds itself wandering
in and out of
It fights each battle with anything that tries
to rule its roost
Its valiancy is always tested giving further
fortitude and strength for each
Although its foundation set, it meanders
throughout the air indefinitely, adding
more and more depth

It is not the same plant that once began
a seed.

But as long as it's got its stem, it will be
a warrior.

No bounds are set ahead of it!
As it continues to develop.

Pokémon

by Justin

Had to Catch Them All...
A dream of my childhood...
That had lived on into my young adult life...
Until it was stolen from me.

All those years building up...
All those cherished fractals
Taken from me...
Along with long put-in effort of other kinds

My pupils gone
Falling far
The graph took an unexpected plunge
A part of my heart lost forever...

I cannot comprehend
It's too much to breathe in one day
A re-growing passion...
Gone.
My tears infinite for now

Cannot
Unbelievable 'till the end
All of my friends.

Flame doused.
No longer aroused.
I think that this part is over for me.
What can there be more of?

You ripped my heart out unknowingly stranger
And took away a piece of it.
I don't know if there's anything more to say.
More than a game to me.

爱自己 (Love Myself)

by Chuck

As a queer international student from Asia, I had many eye-opening and life-changing experiences in the past six years since I came to Canada. In this piece, I want to share these experiences as well as the lessons I learned. It's not only about my queer identity, but also about learning about myself, becoming independent, accepting myself and loving myself. I want to share this with everyone who is on their way of finding themselves and and striving to live their one-of-a-kind lives.

人活在世上的過程，其實是一個不斷學習的過程；學會愛自己、發現自己、活出自己。每個人的出身、所處的環境和境遇都不一樣，但總有些感受、經驗和教訓是相同的，可以互相分享。身為一個從亞洲到加拿大留學的學生，又是同志，我的經歷或許對一些人來說比較特別，但從中所得到的感悟和學習到的事情，相信對很多處在人生類似階段的人來說都適用，所以也想拿出來與大家一一分享。也希望讀了這篇文章的人，多少都可以有所收穫。

愛自己，是我們活在這世上最重要的事情之一。

愛自己，把自己照顧得好好的，才有能力去愛身邊的人，去好好照顧這個世界。小時候的我，夢想是像聖誕老人一樣，做一些讓人開心的事，甚至幫人實現願望。從小到大的過程中，我也都一直在這麼做：放學的時候看見路邊的乞丐，自己也覺得好心疼，就哭著鼻子去跟媽媽要了一百塊，第二天放學給了那乞丐；幫身邊的人想辦法解決困難；生日的時候為朋友準備驚喜……那時候覺得，看見別人開心，我也就開心了。這成了我很多年的一個習慣。但人生總不可能一直快樂。當我最初步入人生低谷的時候，也還是一直保持著這個習慣，也並沒有花很多精力去讓自己的生活回到正軌。但是漸漸發現，當自己的狀態不太好的時候，照顧身邊的人的能力，或者說讓身邊的人開心的能力，也會變弱。當自己很弱很弱的時候，如果還硬撐著要幫身邊的人，甚至還有可能會幫倒忙。所以愛自己，把照顧好自己放在第一位，並不是自私，而是你可以讓世界變得更好的前提。

愛自己，才知道哪些事情不應該勉強自己、哪些事情不該妥協。我曾經為了追求一個喜歡的人付出太多、犧牲太多，但是因為太想和她在一起，所以堅持付出。到了最後身心俱疲的時候，才發現自己已經傷痕累累。後來被一個女生表白，心裡想，自己是同志，有人願意跟我在一起，已經是很難得的事，就接受吧。結果發現兩個人其實觀念上的差距很大，最終也是不歡而散。通過這些感情上的挫折，我認識到，不管是直人，還是性少數人士，我們都該愛自己，在感情上追尋自己的心，不要勉強對方、勉強自己，這樣才能找到對的那個人。

愛自己，從自己最基本的需要出發，直覺才會在你迷惘的時候指引你做出適當的決定。我七歲的時候父母離異，之後就一直跟母親一起生活。母親很愛我，總是盡力給我最好的，也希望把我的人生計劃得盡量完美。所以大學畢業之後，母親就拿出她大部分的積蓄供我來加拿大讀書。因為她覺得，開闊一下眼界總是好的。我自己並沒有對這件事考慮太多，可能是習慣了母親為我做安排，也是為了滿足她的願望讓她開心。於是在懵懵懂懂的情況下，我來到了加拿大，開始了我的留學生活。由於種種的原因，剛來的時候我適應得很不好，甚至陷入了迷茫和抑鬱。但是因為一心想滿足母親的期望，所以一直硬撐著。很抑鬱、很迷茫、但是沒辦法決定下一步怎麼做，這種狀態持續了幾年的時間。長期的抑鬱讓我身心俱疲。但我很慶幸求生的本能讓我開始反思，我的人生到底是哪裡錯了，會這麼辛苦。然後漸漸意識到，自己的人生，需要由自己計劃、做決定。首先是因為每個人所處的環境、遭遇和所能利用的資源都有所不同。特別是在留學的時候，和母親身處兩地，她無法完全了解我的情況，很多困難可能再怎麼說，她也無法感同身受，不知道情況有多嚴重，更不能指望她為自己做出合適的計劃。最明白自己的處境的，還是自己。所以，與親人討論自己的處境和想法是可以的，但是計劃要自己做，決定也要自己做。

說實話，我曾經在剛剛開始意識到我的人生計劃有問題的時候，責備過母親。責備她為什麼要做出這個計劃，讓我吃這麼多苦。但後來想想，太順從別人，或者說太依賴別人為自己做決定，也是自己的問題。而且大家都是人，不是神，不能預知未來會發生的事情，所以只能依照自己過去的經歷、利用自己的情商和智商做出計劃和決定。母親是

愛我，為我好的，所以她做出的計劃，也一定是她認為的最好。只是沒有人能預測未來，所以她也不知道後來會發生什麼。因此，我也不該因為受過的苦而責怪她。

愛自己，才知道什麼時候該進，什麼時候該退，撐到什麼程度是合適的。不至於為了進步而太勉強自己，傷到自己，得不償失。一直呆在舒適的環境中，很難進步；但如果讓自己太不舒服，結果可能是要花更多的經歷和時間去讓自己復原。當初來加拿大讀書，是為了像母親所期望的一樣，讓自己開闊眼界、讓自己進步。然而由於種種的原因，適應得很不好，甚至很長時間陷入抑鬱，卻還一直逼自己硬撐著，告訴自己無論如何不能退縮。結果就導致現在要花一些精力去讓自己復原，還要為舊賬埋單。回過頭想想，如果當初知道愛自己，就會清楚為了讓自己進步，硬撐到什麼時候、什麼程度是合適的，什麼時候應該保護自己，什麼事情不應該做出犧牲。我并不会为了之前发生的事埋怨自己，但是如果有機會重來一次，很多事情我會慎重考慮，做出不一樣的決定。

愛自己，認識自己，接受自己，活出自己，在遵從社會的習慣的同時，也要關注自己的感受或需要。人活在世上，難免要遵守很多約定俗成。比如，男生不能哭，男生不該呆在家裡照顧孩子，應該要出去賺錢養家；一定要很努力學習、努力賺錢，出人頭地……大部分情況下，我們遵守著社會的規定，只是因為一直以來大部分人都這麼做，或者社會期待我們這麼做，於是我們就這麼做了，甚至沒有想過那樣做合適不合適、有沒有必要。激發我對這一點的很多思考的，是關於同志們對自己的身份定位和性別表達。在我長大的地方，官方不會提供詳細的有關性的教育；早些年，社會上人們也

不會積極公開討論相關的話題，因為大部分人認為這是一種禁忌、需要避諱。在這種情況下，性別就被簡單和傳統地分為兩類：要麼很陽剛，是男性；要麼很陰柔，是女性。任何不符合這個標準的，都可能不被接受。男生如果稍微女性一點，會被人說娘娘腔；女生稍微男性化一點，會被說成是假小子或者男人婆。這種現象甚至在性少數群體中也普遍存在：性別表達比較偏陽剛的女生，如果偶爾打扮或行為稍微女性一點，就會被人笑娘砲。所以她們也很努力讓自己符合社會對陽剛或者“男性”的設定。有些甚至不惜冒著得乳腺癌的危險，每天穿著束胸，只是為了讓自己盡可能符合“陽剛”或者“男性”的標準。我希望她們可以在愛自己的基礎上做出選擇，或許她們可以認真地想想，陽剛或者陰柔到什麼程度是适合自己、忠於自己、讓自己舒服的。就像五月天的歌中唱的：“我可以是男是女，可以飄移不定，可以調整百分比。”

跳出性少數這個話題，對於很多人來說，我們經常要面對一些壓力，會身不由己，不得不對一些約定俗成妥協。但是我們也都可以關注自己的需要、忠於自己、做真實的自己。也希望社會可以有更多尊重和包容，讓每個人都可以自己喜歡的方式，活得多姿多彩。

來加拿大留學的過程中，我學會了愛自己、認識自己、誠實面對自己和做自己。期間所獲得的經驗和教訓，也會作為參考來計劃將來的生活。改變的過程中，可能會因為習慣而重複以前的行為，也因此改變的過程可能會需要一些時間。但是只要愛自己，做出改變，未來就會不一樣。希望大家可以共勉。

IV

Hope

Self-Deprecation

by Melissa

Armed with a wealth of average
achievements,
I take on the worlds of colleagues
and comrades,
unsure of my place as the wanted or
the waning.

I look to you with eyes filled:
Admiration. Aversion.
Care. Conceit.

Our words duel yet complement.

As I navigate your charm, wit and success,
I project my fronts of charm, wit and
success.

On brief and rare occasions does it
dawn upon me:
you're putting up a front just as
much as me.

But why would you need to?
You're you.
You're not me.

The truth is:
Beneath us both are stories of struggles,
shame and insecurities.
They're stories that we embellish and
they're stories that we downplay.
Some are shared. Some are whispered.
Some are buried with us.

The fallen tears and skin we've touched,
the breathless laughter with face so flushed.
Bruises from your best camping adventures,
bruises from your worst family disasters.
Our reel of dreams keeps us going,
our real from dreams stops us from glowing.
These temper our souls.

Even with that realization in hand,
I can't help but reprise my performance.

The cloak of self-deprecation is too heavy
to remove.

Overanalyze

by Justin

Gripping my head
Ripping it apart internally
Stray thoughts
Rogue with the wind

Scattered astray stray to fight back
With their bite of flesh
Trying to take over my head
Please go away...

Grappling a Titan
We are not meant to be Atlas
Nothing is perfect
Humanity

A flame burning up a dandelion
As it releases seeds into the wind
Each one a'flaming
Blaze of hell's trident

Tries to stab my mind
Throb and boil
Blast and Bust
Destroy and End

What is my water?
My throat is drying into the Grand Canyon
Has the river been blocked
Stop

Go!
Flow out
Flow all over the land
Flood

Be true
Transform this fire into new life
As it flows from one to the next
The fire is the death

The water nourishes new life
And that is the beauty of the cycle
It hurts to lose, but it's joyous to have anew
And these wings aren't visible

They'll fly
Because maybe that's how they're built?
Invisible to others
Cursed to some

And I guess as much as we try
We can only do so much

To exhibit Change
Because We are who we are

The wind will become violent
When the conditions are right
But right so wrong
And they test these wings

And with that change
Even these wings can fail
And when they do
It'll be a long way down

But when you know your way up the
ladder
The climb is much easier
To Rebuild
And grow

The seasons turn
The tree grows and then loses itself
When the time is right,
When it's stored up all its goods

It will grow
Bigger and More Beautiful
For Beauty is imperfection
Reaching not to better than anything
or anyone else

But being better than you were yesterday
And when I say yesterday, I use it in kairos

Time is a human invention
Thus, when we speak, it should revolve
around ourselves as individuals

You are a testament to all the scars
you've faced
And that makes you stronger than all
Stronger than a diamond in the rough
A human

Although people can be treacherous
There is a draw towards good
With all the negative energy that the
universe spews
I can feel a positive shift happening

Balance infinity
A finite system
Of incomprehension
We try to understand

But we only see a glimpse of its beauty
Our wings will fly again
Our souls will soar
With due time

Sometimes it's not that you need the
water to douse
It's that to remember you're not aflame
It's not time for Winter yet
Keep growing young grasshopper



Asian-American

by Justin

I find that people always want to categorize me. They want to know my background. Where I come from and why I look the way I do. Well not that I am obliged to say it or if I do say it, to say it to the extent that it reaches the depths of the oceans, but here is a lick of it. This is my story of being Asian-American, a term that I definitely identify with. In the United States, this term describes all people of some sort of Asian descent and of American nationality, since there are not as many of us there in the land of the self-proclaimed free. This is my story about being an intergenerational Indian-American with both my parents being Indian, and of being of mixed ancestry.

Being Asian-American is definitely an important thing to consider because being in America, where everything is not truly mixed yet, we live with a dual identity, being both Asian and American. It's beautiful but it can be difficult. People often ask, "where are you REALLY from," when you're a human being living in North America, just like them. Being a person of

colour does not entail for others to inquire about your background, especially when it comes out of nowhere. Anytime someone does these kinds of things, it's important to call them out on this because they are being rude and need to know that they are being rude.

When I come back to my country of origin, I wanted to be treated as a proper citizen and be welcomed back as a citizen of the country, not an outsider. When people look at me, they shouldn't question my background. They should inquire about my foreground. Backgrounds are important, but so are foregrounds. Sadly, very little attention is given to this matter, which is very problematic. How are we supposed to progress if people keep asking ridiculous questions like "where are you really from?" (which is a pathetic excuse for asking about someone's background)? If you're going to stereotype people, place them in a box and keep at it, you will learn nothing about anyone's culture. Adapting to a more globalizing world can start at any level. The point is you have to make that start for yourself.

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I remember ever since I was young, the idea that being 'white' meant being a first class citizen in America. It meant that being anything else left you a bit different than the others. It's almost as if that's what brought people together in the suburbs, their 'whiteness.' I remember my Dad telling me how the

suburbs—were essentially founded by white people to get away from ethnic minorities in the city.

Although I come from a complex ancestry, being part white myself, I remember always clinging to that whiteness. Ignoring the Indian-part of me. I did not want it to cast a shadow on my identity, or so-I thought. At a young age, my skin was lighter and my hair was very curly, not typical features for an Indian boy or a non-white person. I blended in. I was assimilated in.

Ever since elementary school, I remember kids singing racist nursery rhymes about Chinese people, and degrading all kinds of people of colour through their ‘jokes,’ especially Black, Jewish, and Chinese people. I guess I never took it to heart or thought about it much. I think it was partly because those type of people were absent in our classroom at that point. I was the only Asian, the only person of colour in the classroom, and semi-white-passing. I didn’t care to be Indian. As a kid, I never heard too many negative things about Indians from other people, either because my peers never mentioned them that much or they never really mentioned them much around me.

As I got a grade older, I began to notice my skin colour a bit more, as well as it being a little darker than most other kids’ in the classroom. We actually did some global studies and studied other places in the world, such as Asian countries like India, Japan

and China. During our unit on India, “[which is the] seventh largest country in the world, on the continent of Asia” or so the classroom nursery rhyme goes, my Mom came in to do a presentation on India, since she was from there. I remember this is one of the first few times where I felt visibly Indian. My Mom came in and showed traditional Indian clothing and items, but even herself as an Anglo-Indian was white-passing for others, their view of her must have been a little different. After that presentation, it definitely registered in their minds that I was Indian.

Later on during that year, a project entailed mapping out one’s family tree. I remember doing that and feeling ashamed of all the Indian-sounding ‘pet-names’ and trying my best to focus on the Scottish-ancestry quarter of my family tree. We had this project where we got to pretend to be immigrants to the United States. When we pretended to be immigrants from other countries as a class project, all the other kids chose European countries, since all or most of them were white. I wanted to do that too. I wanted to be white like them at the time.

“Why didn’t you choose India?” a (white) teacher inquired. “Because I’m Scottish too,” I replied, which isn’t a lie, and I had become fascinated with Scotland since I had found out I was part Scottish ancestry-wise, but culturally, one-hundred percent Indian or Indian-American. I guess I really wanted to get away from being Indian. Kids didn’t think it was cool. I think this was because of the negative stereo-

types people had of India on television. They felt Indian people were all one way and not like them, them being the white people in America, and because of that they thought Indian people were weird. When I was visiting my paternal grandparents, I kept saying I was really proud of being Scottish, which comes from my Mom's side. My grandmother kept talking about (Punjab) India, where she is from, and I was like, so you want me to marry an Indian girl, not a Scottish girl, a preconceived notion I had of what it meant to be in love with someone and to be in a cultural context. I told my grandparents when I was young that I was Scottish, not Indian, trying to disvalue my own and their Indian heritage. I must have really hurt them saying this. The dumb American mentality had gotten to me when I was young. I don't feel angry with myself for thinking like this at the time though. I feel that American culture often brainwashes you into thinking these things through its white-centric media, lifestyle and society. Now I look at the way I was thinking then as a point in my life when I was young and how much cultural growth I have done since then. Not just that, but how I want to change the hearts and minds of people who might be placed in similar situations, and how I am going to keep progressing on this path. My grandparents remember this clearly as they mentioned it to me when I talked to them later after I had done much cultural maturing when showing them a video of my participation in a Bollywood Dance Night about a decade later.

In the following grade, I remember a teacher, who obviously was not educated about this properly, say all babies have blue eyes when they're born. Being the only person of colour, (but I also remember, another mixed-Asian person of colour, although quite white-passing, more so than me), I thought "what the hell?". Of course, without "the hell," replace that with "the heck" because I didn't know how to swear at that age until other kids taught me and removed that part of my innocence. She had clearly never seen Asian babies or other non-Caucasian newborns. Someone should have told her otherwise, and I hope by now she is aware of her mistake.

Following this grade, I remember I had a messy desk once. I guess I still do have a messy desk from time-to-time. There was a granola bar left in my desk, breaking apart. A girl who had made fun of me on many occasions in the past like most of the catty-girls at that age, "What's in your desk?" sarcastically. Another guy in my class responded, "They're Indian crumbs," and laughed. She laughed too. They used my Indian background as a target, as a part of my identity that they could make fun of. I remember this is one of the first direct instances I felt ashamed of being Indian, of being who I am in that sense.

I also remember playing soccer as part of a soccer recreation team which I did for a long time and during one of our matches, one of the kids on my team asked if they have television in India. I told that there obviously were and he told me that he thought Indians

were so poor that they couldn't afford television sets. No. It just showed how little knowledge people had of India there.

I believe that for anyone with a non-white identity in the U.S., people, primarily white people, consider that a weakness, and they use it as a target to poke fun at or to devalue them due to white privilege and white supremacy. Being Asian-American and having the experiences that I did, as well as viewing how other ethnic minorities are treated in the U.S., I can attest to this. I'll say it again, the struggle is not easy for any person of colour, especially with the lack of role models from our backgrounds in mainstream society.

A year later, another Indian joined my class. There were more Indians and other Asians in my school in general at that point. This was definitely a plus for diversity. Though, to be honest, I did not fit in with these breeds of Indian-Americans. I am a third generation North American, white-washed, Indian American of mixed ancestry. Complicated, right? But whatever little culture I knew was not the same as the other Indian Americans there. Although I wouldn't say entirely, this definitely has a lot to do with the fact that most of them were first or one-point-five generation, or second generation. I remember my Mom pointing out the difference and essentially saying that 'white-washing' is better. I guess my parents wanted me to have a good life fitting in so they would do that by trying to sacrifice their culture or rather what was left of it.

Fast-forward to middle school and I remember white-washing myself further. I thought it was good. I thought it was essential to functioning. In my mind at the time, it was something like be the ‘whitest’ and you’ll be the best and you can be on top of things. Not only was that idea not mentally healthy but also an utter flaw in the American cultural system of a ‘mixing pot,’ which turns into a white-pasty goo that is only the *crème de la crème* to white people. Anytime my Dad would say an Indian name or an Indian dish name loudly, I would get mad and so would my sister. “It’s not cool.” my sister would say. The American media portrayed Indian people as ugly, smelly, and witless. It also constantly degraded their accent. These are definitely reasons why we thought being Indian wasn’t cool. Of course, looking back, I feel strongly about how wrong the American media and society were and how they wrongly shaped my opinions on Indians and my own cultural identity. I agreed with my sister when she said these things to my Dad. It wasn’t *à la mode*. It wasn’t white, or white-enough. I remember purposely mispronouncing an Indian name, thinking it was cool. “How do you pronounce [the last name of another Indian friend I had]” I inquired to other Indian or Indian-American friends, when in all good-spirit, I knew quite well how to pronounce it. They told me, “You’re a suckish Indian.” This was music to my ears then. I just wanted to erase the ‘Indian’ part of my identity as an Indian-American. Looking racially ambiguous, people always inquired about my ethnicity. I didn’t like disclosing it because being ‘Indian’

wasn't cool and people had stereotypes about them. I would pretend sometimes to be Brazilian or some form of Latino because I thought that that was cooler and I would get mistaken for this often. Also, I think kids at that time thought the same as well. Probably because how the media portrays Latino people and the sheer fact that there's a larger population of them in the United States and also much larger comparably to Asians in the U.S.

Many Asians and people of colour try to distance themselves from their background because they view their background as regressive and white culture as progressive, but the truth of the matter is, is that both can be progressive. Wouldn't it be boring (and regressive) if there were only colours in the background and whiteness in the foreground. The media is a major driving force here. It is very biased and white-centred. How many coloured actors and actresses will you see on screen?-How many will you see in non-stereotypical roles? The problem with casting and writing is that it is still very much white dominated and it makes it hard for persons of colour to get in these positions. Why? Because of racism. Because people won't think they are American because they are of colour, when in reality, they are as American as the next white person or the next non-white person! I realized this more and more with time and age and reculturize myself.

I remember not minding very much when teachers would white-wash my last name, although now I do. At the time, even to some of my relatives with Indi-

an-names or Indian-sounding names, I'd suggest to white-wash them. White-washing names is like erasing an important part of someone's cultural identity. I would never wish that upon anyone, but as a kid, as I mentioned, you feel that white-washing is a good thing, when in reality, it isn't. As I culturally matured, I learned to take more pride in my name and heritage.

I went to a middle school and eventually high school, which were a bit more diverse than my hometown. Throughout middle school, I remember making fun of a friend of mine who was Indian-American as well, with a thick Indian-accent for being born and raised here. That move showed cowardice on my part then. Kids would make fun of his accent by trying to make a fake-Indian accent and talk to him. He was too oblivious to realize what they were doing to him then and I would jump on the bandwagon sometimes too behind his back. In that part of our relationship, I was not being a good friend. Stabbing a brother in his back for being who he is is not okay. I just wanted to distance myself from being Indian. I was ashamed of that part of me and somewhat the mention of India also. I would only like to identify as an Indian for credibility like when an Indian-American friend would talk about India and I'd be like, "I know, I'm Indian" concerning a topic that I knew for the most part, even if I didn't really know it since I was so culturally distanced from India at that point. Like I thought 'Slumdog Millionaire' was a great movie and I would tell non-Indian people that other Indians say it's bad, but I'm Indian

and I'm saying it's good. Just because one person says it's okay, does not make it okay. As I matured and aged I realized the negative stereotypes perpetuated from the movie in mainstream society on India, as people often see that as one of the few representations of India on television globally.

During high school. Some "friends" played a joke on me. We had just learned about Mendel's Law of Segregation in Meiosis and some idiot classmates were comparing it to America's horrific laws on Segregation preceding and during the Black Civil Rights Movements. For a few lunches they thought it'd be funny to implement it themselves. "Chander is here, time to move. It's the law of segregation." They all moved to one side of the table and left me on the other because my skin was a slight shade darker than the darkest member of that exclusionist group. The rest of high school, I just remember blurring out my Indian-identity further. However, when I saw other Asian-Americans who were Chinese or Taiwanese interested in their own languages and cultures more, it made me curious of them. It was different and I definitely thought that that was cool. I also felt connected to them because of our similar backgrounds. Though, I still definitely hadn't put two and two together with my own cultural identity yet. I remember getting excluded from other groups of high school students in my grade. It also might have been partly because I had a different look at the time and high schoolers are often as shallow as tidal pools. Either way, I thought

at some point it might be because of my race. One time in my final year of high school, I remember crying because I wished my skin was white so I could fit in with more groups and be depicted more as a role model in my school, where depicted role models are primarily shown to be white (if there are white people there).

My views on my cultural background began to shift as I came to Toronto for university, Scarborough campus to be exact. Suddenly I was in a multicultural environment, surrounded by the many beautiful kinds of people that people in my hometown would make fun of. Being thrown into a bath of people of many skin colours and races was beautiful and feeling immersed in it felt relaxing.

Suddenly, I wasn't one of the few ethnic minorities. There were many other Indian kids like me. There were so many other kinds of Asian people here. And one thing that made them different than Asians where I was from was that many of them spoke the tongue of their ancestors and they all had a much greater pride in their ethnic heritage. Most of them had kept most of their cultural values and it's not like their identities were separate. Being Asian and Canadian for Asian-Canadians, were blended together quite well. That was pretty beautiful.

My multiple identities are something I am continuously working on. I think we work continuously on ourselves as people. I have definitely been able to

bridge much of my cultural gap and distance so far between my background and my foreground.

My hope is that more Asian-Americans can come to the conclusion that they don't need to reject their background to be 'American,' and that society needs to learn live up to its Constitution by treating all Americans equally and equitably regardless of their background. If America is defined on a melting pot formula, then it should really acknowledge all its components and furthermore, not discriminate and segregate as it often claims these practices are no longer existent in the country. Clearly they still are and it is a huge problem. Society often looks as "white" as 'truly' American. However, American values are based on its melting pot formula which incorporates many different components into it as previously mentioned. It shouldn't be hypocritical and only consider some people 'American.' It's time that America further integrates people of colour into what it calls mainstream society culture. For example, many Ivy League schools in the United States discriminate against Asians and Asian-Americans from entering to keep a status quo of the archaic race percentage of Asians with their institutions. This is very Medieval in a progressive, globalizing society as well as very reductive and such a shame for schools of a high caliber to be denying quality applicants simply because of their race, which in this case, happens to be Asian.

Although Canada's system is not perfect, America has a lot to learn from its cultural mosaic model,

which definitely is a greater testament to freedom that America wants to claim oh so badly for itself.

I have come to have so much pride in being of Indian descent and being Indian-American and no one can ever take that away from me. I want all Asian-Americans and all people of colour in North America to have that same feeling in who they are in all racial, ethnic, cultural, and ancestral components because it is an integral part of who they are. I hope to raise awareness of issues that we face so that we can prevent these sort of things happening to kids going on in the future. We have strength together and power to changing the society and to change the world.

Wishes Floating in the Wind

by Justin

Wishes floating in the Wind-
Waiting to be caught by something
or someone-
Some will fall, while others prevail
Heavenly pieces of sewn silk.

They spew and spew-
Like seeds in the wind.
Carry hope as a force-
As they fill the sky with serenity.

Catch one if you may
And take it to the heart-
As wishes flow by-
Endlessly by part.

Silent Cry

by Melina

Lakisha > Jenny, posted on May 9
I'm sorry.

Matthew > Jenny, posted on May 9
I'm sorry.

Abdullah > Jenny, posted on May 9
I'm sorry.

Kelly > Jenny, posted on May 9
I'm sorry.

My eyes glazed over when I saw these posts on Facebook. I was checking Facebook to confirm the details of our high school reunion. It's been six years since graduation, and most of us in the same class had been loosely keeping in touch with each other, whether it was hanging out in person, by phone, on Facebook, or some other way of connection. I, as many others, had completed my university studies and was now either

working or traveling. Myself, I worked as a financial advisor at one of the national banks in the city, although part of me did wish I had taken some time off to travel before beginning my work. Seeing others post amazing videos or pictures of themselves as they backpacked across Europe or visited temples in Asia tickled my jealous bone, if only a little.

I was friendly with people in high school, but had not developed close relationships with many of them. It was actually my buddy Alex, who I go way back with, who invited me to the Facebook event, a reunion six years out of high school. It was an odd number, which I had mentioned to Alex. Didn't reunions usually happen on a year that was a multiple of five after graduating or something? He said that he'd coincidentally run into a few other classmates at a small festival awhile ago, and they had decided on the spot that they should have a reunion.

Part of me really didn't care about going, and I had said so. But then he cajoled that it would be great to see what everyone was up to now, and that it was going to be held at that new Irish pub downtown. Well, that was tempting. I had heard good things about it, but never really found the chance to go. I guess it wouldn't hurt to attend the event; I didn't have any plans that night anyway, and it'd be interesting to see how everyone was doing. Plus, good food is always a deal-maker.

The reunion was supposed to be in a couple of days, and I was just checking the information for it again

when I saw that weird post Lakisha made on Jenny's wall. They were both nice people, helping others out when they needed to. I remembered Jenny lent me her math notes when I was sick for a week. The two were close classmates back in high school, so the apology Lakisha posted was really unexpected. Or maybe someone hacked into her account and was playing a prank? I didn't think much about it, if it wasn't for the three other posts immediately following.

Curious now, I clicked on Jenny's page. I was met with a slew of "I'm sorry" posts from tens of people, most of which had been posted in the last couple of days. What happened? I scrolled down, but the last post before the apologies was someone posting "Hey, I think you'll like this song!" followed by a link to the song "Could Have Been Me" by The Struts. There was no mention of what was going on.

I called up Alex, knowing that he would be free by this time in the evening. After a few rings he picked up. "Hello?"

"Hey Alex, have you seen Facebook? What's up with the posts on Jenny's wall?"

There was a silence, and it dragged on. At first I wondered if my phone disconnected, but the feeling in my gut told me that something had happened that I didn't want to hear. I waited, and was tempted to ask again, when he spoke up.

"You don't know?"

“Know what?”

A sigh. “I guess you might not have heard. You weren’t close with Jenny after all.”

My heart was beginning to beat faster. “What happened? Why’s everyone saying sorry to Jenny? Is she not able to come to the reunion anymore?”

Another pause. “Well...Jenny’s...dead.”

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We had the back room of the pub reserved, and it was decently sized to fit us all. The place had a cozy atmosphere with its dim lighting, the smell of bacon and cabbage being brought around, the assortment of bric-a-brac that lined the walls, and the fine bar service with its variety of beers and whiskies just out in front. A decent number of people were able to attend, and most people drifted off to their own little groups to converse. Not everyone had heard about the incident; I noticed the people who were close with Jenny were sticking together more closely than with the other groups. It was actually when Lakisha tapped her wineglass loudly to catch everyone’s attention did the mood die down. I could practically feel the somber mood radiating off of her where she stood.

“I am happy that everyone was able to attend tonight’s event; we have all walked our different ways after graduation, and I hope each of you are on the path that will lead to your goals and dreams. How-

ever, it's with a heavy heart that I am announcing the passing of one of our own.

"Jenny was a close friend of mine. After graduating from university, she became a critical care nurse at the largest hospital in the city, to better the lives around her, and she had been a great inspiration to many of her friends and fellow co-workers. However, a couple of nights ago, Jenny was on her way home after a long shift at work and was involved in a hit-and-run." Her voice broke and we gave her a few seconds to compose herself. "Police are still on the lookout for the suspect, though they say that the traffic cameras weren't able to capture exactly who was the driver because of the poor lighting in that area at night."

She went on to talk about the accomplishments and contributions Jenny had made, to her school and the community. When Lakisha finished, everyone was silent; we hear stories of death happening all the time around us, but to think it would happen to someone so close to us was more than a little disturbing.

"That sucked; Jenny didn't ever get a break from work," Alex sighed as Lakisha returned to her group and quiet chatter began again. "She was probably pulling 12 hour shifts or something when she started working. Imagine doing that after coming out of exams! And then this happens."

"I heard that, with the cut in healthcare funding, a lot of the hospitals have been laying people off and exhausting their existing staff," Mariam commented.

“Jenny must have been doing a good job or something since she was with them for only a short while and they hadn’t laid her off with the others. But I guess now...” She trailed off, unsure of what to say.

People were coming and going to Lakisha’s group to offer their condolences. I was standing with Alex and a few others, and was close enough to see what was going on, but far enough to not be heard. “Who’s that?” I asked, indicating a guy who had approached Lakisha’s group. I didn’t remember him from any of my classes or at lunchtime, but the school was big so it wasn’t a surprise if I missed a couple of people here and there. At first I wasn’t sure why I pointed him out. He wasn’t exactly someone who stood out of the crowd; if I passed him on the street, I probably wouldn’t pay any more attention to him than was necessary. But now that I looked more closely, there was something about his presence that caught my attention. It was as if he was being burdened by some invisible weight on his shoulders and couldn’t seem to shake it off.

Irene, who had attended the same university as Jenny, spoke up. “Oh...that’s Jenny’s boyfriend.”

“Really? I don’t recognize him.” Alex frowned. So did I; Alex knew practically everyone in the school, so if Alex didn’t know who he was, then he definitely wasn’t a classmate.

“Yeah, he’s actually...well...don’t tell anyone, ok?” I inwardly rolled my eyes as she said this; Irene had always tried to catch Alex’s attention by either show-

ing off what she knew or by impressing him with something new she welded. She did a quick scan of the area before lowering her voice. “His name’s David. Apparently he was a previous university dropout, but got his shit together again. They met back when Jenny was in her 2nd year, and he was back in the system in his 3rd year. You know Jenny was studying to be a nurse, right?” We nodded. “But David wanted to go for his MBA, so she would have been working while he was still in school. He didn’t come from the richest background, and was going to be in a lot of debt despite winning many scholarships, so Jenny said she’d help contribute to some of his education when she started working.”

“Woah. That’s amazing.”

“It is. And Jenny’s not the one to make a decision like that without any reasoning to back it up. She introduced him to family and friends, to get their opinions on him. Me and the rest of her schoolmates thought he was a legitimately decent person, and a mutual friend of mine who is now in the same MBA class as him also said that he was one of the top students in the class.”

Something was wrong; I could tell by the way she fidgeted. “And her family?”

She sighed. “Her family...didn’t approve of him. Well, her sister did. But her parents had this mindset that...well, I don’t know the exact details. Something about him being a previous dropout and so he couldn’t

change or amount to anything. And that he was just using her because of her looks and potential for money.”

“That’s...”

“I know. I don’t know either. I think they were completely ignoring the fact that he was trying so hard now, won a lot of scholarships, worked in respectable jobs since coming back to university, and had become a better person in general. I guess first impressions REALLY mattered for them.”

“But they were still together?”

“Yeah, secretly. She didn’t publicize it because she didn’t want too many people to find out. And since she’s still living at home for the while - saving up to pay off loans and such - she didn’t want to have to deal with backlash from the family. I think her sister knew they were still seeing each other, but the sister’s really close with Jenny and supports her one hundred percent.”

I watched as David walked away unhappily from Lakisha’s group. His shoulders were slumped forward, his eyes were shadowed and heavy, and he seemed to embody the very image of defeat, as if there was no meaning to life anymore. I don’t blame him; I can’t imagine how I’d react if I lost my relationship partner. I’m guessing he was here hoping to find out more about what happened, since he obviously couldn’t approach Jenny’s family and surprise them by saying

that he was Jenny's secret boyfriend. But I couldn't do anything for him, not without giving away what we were talking about.

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Since hearing about the news, I became more aware of happenings regarding the situation, mostly from Facebook posts from classmates or texts from Alex and others in my small high school friend circle. Various posts would appear on Facebook where friends of Jenny would offer their condolences. The funeral was held later in the week, though it was a private service that few of our classmates were invited to attend. There were a few newspaper reports talking about "this tragic incident", about being careful when walking home after dark, and about their attempts to catch the suspect. Some of the staff that Jenny worked with said in an interview that "she brought a lot of joy and relief to her patients at work", and that "something like this was too early for someone young and bright like Jenny."

One of her previous patients even went so far as to start a Crowdfunder for the family, to help the family after they paid for the funeral processes. I checked the page and saw that many people had made donations. I was planning on donating too, but thought it'd be faster to give the money to Irene or someone else who knew the sister or family.

There wasn't much I could do, since I was an onlooker more than anything. I just hoped that the culprit would be caught soon.

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It was a few weeks after the incident occurred. The police had caught the perpetrator, who was apparently driving impaired, which, combined with the faulty lighting on that street, was likely what caused the crash. The perpetrator, having been charged several times before for other incidents, was fined a hefty amount and would face a severe punishment.

Random debates about the incident sprung up all over the internet. Most were on Facebook and Twitter, and were instigated by Jenny's friends: some people thought the driver deserved life-time imprisonment. Others pushed driving regulations to be more severe. But, as the shares and re-tweets spread, people began claiming that Jenny should have been more careful, that if she wasn't out walking late at night, this wouldn't have happened. Some of her friends lashed back, riveted that people would claim such a thing. Not only was she burned out and stressed from a long day's of work, but she was responsible for other people following safety laws? It was ridiculous.

That's when even stranger things started happening. There was suddenly an uproar of talk about "Jenny's ghost returning". Screenshots of Jenny's Facebook wall were taken and reposted, which I read with alarm.

Jenny posted on June 3

I always wanted to be involved in urban planning. I wanted to improve the current system, to make it more efficient and more effective, and to make the city a better place to live. But you all told me it was not for me: I should be doing something women do, I should be a wife and mom, I should “grow up and be realistic”, and so on. Who are you to tell me that! I should have fought for what I wanted more, but I didn't. I became a nurse so that, eventually, I could move into positions that involved improving health delivery and efficiency. It wasn't the same, but it would have helped prove my ability and seriousness.

I was speechless, and visited her Facebook wall. Sure enough, the post was on her page, under her name. Who posted this? And was it true? Jenny did always have big ideas and dreams, but I hadn't heard of this before. I called Alex to see if he knew anything, but he didn't. He had also checked with Irene and a couple others, but no one claimed they knew anything. There was a lot of speculation on what this was - a prank, a ghost, a friend - but no one knew for certain.

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I began to follow her page more earnestly. A few days later another post came up.

Jenny posted on June 8

I wanted to be with someone who I knew was a good match for me. He may have made some mistakes when he was younger, but he was becoming a better person. I know you're thinking I might just be a "floozy" who is clouded by love, but that's not true. Everybody except you could see that he was making positive changes to the community now. He's provided me with things you couldn't. And for the record, people can change; people can be great one day and be hated the next. So don't judge based on the past alone: look at the facts in the present as well.

Was this post a cry to the parents about how she wished she could have been with David? And what was it that he provided that they couldn't? I didn't know much about her family situation, but this was getting to be pretty personal. But, despite my searches, there weren't any clear clues about who the poster was. More and more people were beginning to believe that it was Jenny's ghost, but I didn't think so. I also had my own work to take care of, and didn't have too much time to invest in this. Maybe some other investigators would find out what was going on.

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Apparently there was more to Jenny that I didn't know about, as "the ghost" alluded to in another Facebook post soon after.

Jenny posted on June 14

I had so many things that I want to say and do, but I never did. It wasn't "proper", it couldn't be "accepted", the system can't be changed, blah blah blah. I opened up a little to someone I trusted, but then they told me that I was wrong, that I shouldn't be saying or thinking these things, and wondered if I was feeling okay. I guess that's why people love the internet so much: they could make connections there with other understanding people who saw the world in more shades of grey than just black and white.

The internet, huh? After searching around, I found a few pages on Reddit, the "Front Page of the Internet", that was discussing the topic of Jenny's death and what it brought about. People had posted links to screenshots of these mysterious posts from Facebook, probably because they were shared so widely by her friends and classmates that they trickled into the public eye. Some people were freaking out about ghosts and occult being real. Most were discussing whether or not it was Jenny's spirit who came back to the world of the living in order to exact revenge on the people who she felt had wronged her, while others considered it a hack from some prankster. Others were just the typical internet trolls, but I scrolled through it and found some interesting yet bewildering information.

A person linked to an article that speculated the possible connection between Jenny and a user on

4chan. I've visited 4chan only briefly before so I don't know too much about it, but I had heard that 4chan was a pretty dark corner of the internet, like many other websites. The article contained a video which had apparently been of Jenny live streaming something on 4chan, and one of the viewers had recorded her at the time. The article proceeded to explain how the video was taken about a year ago, and how she wanted people to see the "real" her.

I wasn't sure if I really wanted to watch this, but curiosity got the better of me. When I tried to click on the video, though, a message appeared saying that it was taken down due to some sort of violation. Part of me wanted to know what was on the video, but another part of me was glad I couldn't see it. It didn't seem right for me to view these things about her, and I'm not sure I wanted to know what sort of things this "real" side of her was hiding.

I didn't bother searching for another link to the video, but I did see several people commenting on Reddit about having seen the video from other links before. The links were either never posted on Reddit or were deleted by the moderators, but from what I gathered from the posts, Jenny had portrayed herself as a disgusting, angry and delusional mess. Some people commented on how much of a whiny little shit Jenny was for complaining about how unfair life and how she hated how society was. Others commented about how hilarious she looked as she was tripping on shrooms, while others countered that she was on

ecstasy. Then there were more disturbingly graphic talk about Jenny's "sweet pussy" and how much they wanted to wreck her. Somewhere in there were even a few posts about her being a crazy nutcase that mutilated animals for the joy of it. Others jumped on the bandwagon and expressed their happiness that she was dead, that she was clearly a danger to society, a waste of space, and a lunatic that would, sooner or later, start attacking the people around her.

The more I read, the more alarmed I was: the things they wrote certainly did not sound like things Jenny would say or do. There was certainly backlash from Jenny's friends, where they shot down degrading and insulting comments with their own scathing remarks. However, no one denied that the person on the video was Jenny, and no one could explain her actions. It made me wonder how much I, or close friends like Lakisha, really knew about Jenny. What had she experienced to make her hate everyone and everything so much, if what the people here said was real? Which of these things were actually real, and which were just made-up lies to add more fire to this incident? Just thinking about it gave me chills.

More and more speculations came up as more comments that Jenny had left across various sites on the internet were brought to surface. Most of these comments didn't explicitly say they were from Jenny, but there were many similarities between the poster's content and the "ghost's" posts that implied that they were from the same person. With all the new infor-

mation, Reddit discussions about her death grew out of control. Though there were still many people who paid respects to her passing, many others condemned her and even praised her death. The posters, all of whom used anonymous code names, said things like, “Stop bitching about life, just go die!”, “Such a slut!” “What is wrong with you, you retarded psychopath!” And so on and so forth. Some people claimed to have spoken with her over the internet and that she had indeed said many of the things that incited the backlash against her, while others still banded to defend her. It was a mess.

I didn’t know what to believe other than what I knew of her, but that wasn’t saying much. I didn’t know her closely, and the last time I saw her was six years ago. A lot could have happened in this time, and for all I knew, people were just making things up to add fuel to the fire. It was probably a game to the people who didn’t know her but just wanted to have something to talk down on. I was disgusted by their inane comments, but I knew better than to get involved in internet debates with people who were probably just trolls anyway.

I felt bad for Jenny’s family if they saw or heard any of this. Her parents might not browse these sites, but her sister might, and who knew what rumours could reach the family’s ears. My mind wandered over to David as well; since seeing him at the reunion, I couldn’t help but wonder how he was holding up through all this. I had asked Irene if she heard any-

thing about him, since one of her friends was friends with him from MBA classes. She had confirmed that David had seen the online posts and even the video. According to her, he seemed to be doing his best to act his usual self, but he seemed more tired than usual, and he was quicker to irritate than before. But he was getting support from his close relations, which was definitely a good thing considering the situation.

Above all, I felt bad for Jenny, even though she wasn't here anymore. These strangers on the internet probably knew nothing about her in real life, and were judging and condemning her for actions that stemmed from anger and frustration. Logically, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised: when we know little about someone, we quickly draw conclusions from the few pieces of information we have. Seeing things like this was still frustrating, though.

When will this all die down? I didn't know. But I hoped it would be soon.

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A few days later, another post appeared on Jenny's Facebook page.

Jenny posted on June 20

I know you're all talking behind my back, but what about your own dirty little secrets? I bet you think you're safe hiding behind a computer screen. You're not. Look at what you dug out

about me. And look at how many lies you made up about me; just find a small grain of truth and fabricate story upon story, and people gobble it up. See, it's so easy to ruin a person's life and reputation. It could happen to you too. So do something useful with your life instead of crying in YOUR rooms.

I don't care to defend myself from no-names. But I do want to say a few things. First, to the liar who made up the Crowdfunder for my family, give back the money you stole! And second, for the people I do care about, I'm happy to have met you. I don't know why this had to happen, but I want you to know that you were what gave me joy every day.

After that last line, it didn't seem like there was going to be any posts anymore. I was curious about what she said about the Crowdfunder, though, and looked into it. An article popped up, but the general topic was about charities and being careful on how you make donations. The article talked about charities and the increasing number of Crowdfunding projects, such as the ones on Kickstarter and GoFundMe, and how sometimes only a small amount of funding actually went to the cause; the rest either went to "administration" or was never heard of again. Ensuring the legitimacy of what was being funded was also important since anyone could start a Crowdfunder and take the money and run, after all. There was a point about how a large amount of money was raised on Jenny's

Crowdfunder, but a family member confirmed that they did not receive even half the amount raised. The member also said that whoever had started the fund should be ashamed for using another's loss as a way to make money, and that if people wanted to donate to any cause, they should do their best to give the money directly to the cause or people involved.

I never did find out if the money was retrieved. There weren't any more reports on it, and neither Alex nor Irene knew the details.

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A month or so later after the final post, I received a text from Alex. He knew I was interested in the Jenny case, even though I wasn't an active participant in the discussion, and wanted to fill me in on the loop about any updates. First, the hype about the "ghost" was finally dying down as other things in the world occupied people's interests. Two, Jenny's boyfriend, David, had secured a job as a CFO in a health regulation body that oversaw many of the financial issues related to healthcare. He also seemed to be doing better mentally as well, according to what Irene told him anyway. And three, what Alex considered the most interesting point, was that the hospital Jenny was working at suddenly gained a new sponsor, and the funding would go to more staffing and better equipment. The donor remained unnamed, but it was going to be a huge plus to the hospital as they were understaffed and overworked already.

“I think David made the donation,” he went on. “You know, as a tribute to Jenny. Kind of like a ‘thank you for supporting me so much. I can only contribute to the place where you worked and loved, but I hope it will help the people there.’”

The speculation made sense, though we would probably never know unless the donor made themselves known. This would be just another mystery in the whole Jenny case.

I went on Facebook again and opened up Jenny’s page. Her last post was still sitting there, with several likes beneath it and many words of support. I felt compelled to add something as well, but I wasn’t sure what. I remembered the series of “I’m sorry” posts before, and realized that, after everything that happened, there really were so many things to be sorry about.

Sorry you had to pass on so young by an unfortunate car accident.

Sorry no one seemed to pay attention to your accomplishments and hard work.

Sorry your dreams and ambitions couldn’t be achieved.

Sorry you couldn’t be with the one that you thought was a good match for you.

Sorry people didn’t think your troubles meant anything.

Sorry people condemned you for being angry and frustrated.

Sorry you felt you had no one to turn to for help.

I still wondered posted those four posts on Facebook after Jenny's death; I don't think it was ever announced or discovered. But, at this time, I supposed it didn't matter. The poster had wanted something out of that, and whoever it was definitely started some conversations and thoughts.

Jenny was a classmate I barely knew, and Jenny had many troubles that I didn't know about. I suppose it's the same for everyone we meet. There are things we see and things we don't; not everything is as it seems. I wonder if I could have done anything if I knew? Maybe not; I wasn't close enough to make a difference. Or could I have? Did any of Jenny's close friends know what she went through? Could she have gone through with what she wanted to do if she had their support? Would she have been able to pass on happier, knowing that she accomplished what she wanted, or would she have been unhappy, knowing that she had so much that she could have done if this accident didn't happen? Did she consider the accident a blessing or a curse?

At this point, I'll never know. I can only take away from this event and move on forward; after all, I was never close to many people before, but maybe I could try harder. Maybe, like Jenny, there are many people

around me who are suffering and who have no one they think they can turn to. Maybe, instead of just focusing on myself, I could focus more on the people around me. Be kinder. Be a pillar of support. Maybe do more for the community, or even the world.

And if I can make even one person's life more bearable, I'd be happy I could help.

I sent Alex a quick text message asking if he was interested in playing ball or just chilling sometime this week. I then pulled up my keyboard and clicked on the Write a Comment section below the series of other supportive comments on Jenny's wall. I wanted to communicate my sympathies for what she had to go through, sure. But I also wanted to show that she was appreciated, that, in spite of whatever rumours were spread about the things she might or might not have said or done, it shouldn't tarnish her name and reputation and things she brought to the world and people around her. But how can I say it without typing full out paragraphs that could be compiled into a little book?

I thought about it for a bit. And then my fingers began to type, short and sweet.

I'm sorry. And thank you.

I Am

by Gary

I am not a poet.
I am not a writer.
I am not an artist.

But I am a builder. I can see the frame;
I can lay groundwork;

I can pull together walls of brick and mortar;
strong, steadfast and abiding.

I am a magus; an unparalleled fortitude
able to invoke the tallest torrents that
decimate everything in their path,
no stone untouched; no thing beyond its
vitriol.

I am a contestant; hand on the trigger;
eyes on the prize; denying any concession or defeat.

I am that person; that inscrutable kind
of person; a cacophony, din, reverb & repose.

But I am weak; and I am naive;
therefore, human.

My wings may be broken
I can never hope to fly
but I will soar

because I am free.

v

Rebellion

The Audition Process

by Anthony

Step back. Look at me.
No, not my eyes,
I'm not squinting;
I can clearly see
Despite my ever small eyes
Poised like almond seeds.
And yes, my skin
Glow's a murky sun,
But why is it an
Important part in
Casting for your
Production?
I see your ads,
With these petals
You call eyes,
But I see you ask
For "white"...

I had hope...

My dream where I see me,
Lead of the stage,
Not a sidekick, nor a freak,
Not a nerd... let's say.

But NO!

Step back. Look at me clear;
That time is not now,
It's nowhere near.
It starts with you and me,
With opportunity,
Being equal,
Pour tea into my cup,
As friends, as allies,
Let's band,
Watch as the leaves glisten
In the swirling ocean dew,
Clink to cheer
To a wonderful new world—

Wait. HOLD. ON.

It's not easy like that.
A gesture does not equate
A millennial of being a mat!
My olive skin is no longer
a piece of luck;

Take it and I'll
Flip it and say
FUCKYOU,
For exploiting my sisters,
Ignoring me,
For pushing me, no us,
Away, when we never have
a say.
Not even a chance.
Two seconds,
Heck, a glance.

I'd offer a hand, serve you tea,
But that's not the best, to say the least,
When my stories are burned,
Offered in ash,
Not written, not proposed,
With no visible facts.
My stories are here, twined deep,
written well.

Step back, and look at me;
I'm Asian, can't you tell?

Dear Past Self

by *Anonymous*

Dear Past Self,

Please put down that knife. I'm begging you don't go through with it. Get rid of the pills, all the drugs. Don't take that leap. I know you're in a lot of pain. I know you're feeling alone, pathetic and useless. You feel like no one can help you, no one gets you. I understand you're upset and angry at the world. It's not your fault. You're not crazy. You feel really emotional because you've been through a lot. The past still haunts you. Please don't go.

I have many things to tell you about the future if you keep going on this path. The truth is, in the future, you're dead. Your mom puts a picture of you in the family shrine. She prays for you every day, and cries for you every night when you're gone. Your two little sisters aren't so little anymore. They are so successful but feel so empty knowing that their older brother couldn't be there to support them. They miss you so much.

One of your older sisters followed you to the grave.

She cared for you a lot. She was willing to give you everything she could because she didn't want you to grow up thinking you were poor. She wanted you to be happy even though she was dealing through a lot of issues of her own.

You weren't there to see your niece and nephews grow up. They wondered what happened to their uncle. Your family situation didn't get better after you left. Everyone blamed themselves because they couldn't protect you, couldn't save you.

Some of your friends still mention your name in conversations to later realize you're gone. Sometimes they try to text you but realize that number doesn't work anymore.

I remember you had a dream, that dream was to be happy and make other people happy. No one is happier in this future. Not a day goes by when you don't cross their minds. You weren't there for all the happy memories to come. The future is better with you in it.

You wanted to be loved and let me say that, you are loved by so many people. You are more than the mistakes, more than the hurt, more than the pain of the past. You're beautiful, intelligent and talented. You have so much to offer the world. Your smile is so sweet, so kind and gentle. You have a beautiful soul, don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Sincerely,

Your Possible Future Self

Foreign Seas Under Alien Skies

by XJ Ng

I.

Minds still as colonised coral
doze on seasalt beds
there uneven polyps reflect questing
wavelengths
just a fraction out of true
But white light
it strikes
sears through camouflage
now undone

My father warned me once
worried about how "you won't fit in there"
I was naive
deceived and thought "watch me"

Now I float without motion

disguised as a deep dweller
I ingest the lie in desperate belief
that these darting anglo-fish are too blinded
by the brilliance of their own (al)lure
to notice my difference
the truth is harder to digest

Down here, they are the only things that move
they coast on currents
swarms basking in sea vents that spew
plumes of mineral riches
all the while the anglo-fish roam
freely amongst our starved coral corpses
these patrols may claim colour-blindness
Oh but my father knew better
now even I know better

II.

My pores suffocate in salt crystals
that tear and abrade
in dogged pursuit of a fairer complexion
Scraped against exfoliants that scour the
pigment
from my skin
because I once scorned it

Yet no peroxide will make me so transparent
that when pale suns glare
their light will shine clean through

Instead I hide behind mirrors
so when predators pounce
they find their reflection
(Where is my own?)

I have lived as a fugitive ghost
my colours washed out
yearning for roving searchlights
to hound the living instead

I would spite my mother
bite my brother
spurn the hands that raised me
while I bring piranhas to our doorstep
Here, blood is thicker than water
I know for I have spilt it

But no more, no more
no more scavenging for scraps
no more bottom-feeder blues
no more mindless gnawing on clean-
picked bones
that yield nothing
nothing but marrow

In cannibalising my people
I have eaten myself
and we are not immortal
this snake cannot devour its tail
without dying
(not for lack of trying)

it will turn inside out
and forget its name

III.

I try to retrace
the path to my birthplace
those murky ancestral waters
my heritage
my birthright
opaque

Tell me, how do I decolonise a body
weaned on, bottle-fed bleach?
How do I deinfest this mind that
knows nothing else?
How do I reclaim my roots?
Because I'm digging and scabbling
in the dirt
dowsing for a compass misplaced
begging for someone to
point me home

I am a tourist in my motherland
afraid to ask for directions

Destiny Is A Funny Thing

by Justin

Destiny is a funny thing-
It will toss you up like a serene gale-
And throw you down-hit your head on a pail-
A bumpy locomotive of the 60's that will fling;

You, your friend, and that thing-
What goes around comes around-
What goes up-falls to the ground-
And when you least expect it-bing.

You're back again from whence you began-
Are we lost?
I don't know.
Destiny – picking from a field of blackberries

Bittersweet.
Sweet, yet bitter.
If only it were fitter

Definitely better-

Be active in your decisions –

Do not let others choose your fate

Pick from the field without haste

And keep an open mind to the taste.

Goodbyes (Part II)

by Justin

When one door closes
Another opens
And with time and effort, more open
I think we spend too long looking at the
door that's been closed

We don't remember to recognize the open door
That's right in front of us
It's the light pouring out into us
The light of other stars have died

But galaxies die and galaxies are born
When one galaxy dies
It opens up room for other galaxies to be born
The universe has a finite material and an
infinite space

Therefore, infinite combinations
There is no end to this

So keep looking forward
Nothing more to say

Sure, it will hurt
Change will hurt
They say change is really difficult
But at the end of the day, it's really beautiful

Look at a frog
It starts as a tadpole
And metamorphosizes into a froglet
Do you think all that effort is easy?
No, it requires time and effort
But finally, it emerges into a frog
The peak of its state

The point is
Life is going to happen in phases
And sure it'll be sad when one thing ends
But it's just a signal to move to the next thing

When a plant dies, it enriches the soil
With its nutrients
Then, the next plant is able to grow
And you know, it grows taller, more beautiful,
more rich in its own respect than before

The more experiences you have in your life
The more you will begin to realize that
Life is a process
It's never finished

It's a cycle
Like the seasons
The start and end are human
definitions thrown into it
The process of growth and decay a
re continuous in life

However, the nutrients there are always there
And not only that
More nutrients are added and are gathered
and stored
And taken in as further growth happens

That way, no nutrient is every truly gone
It is only transformed to new growth
And goes on
Further and Further

That way life comes from death
And the cycle continues
And life goes on
That's why you are a testament to everything
that has happened in your life (so far).

VI

Healing

Where Do I Begin?

by Melissa

The hazy warmth of this bathroom is soothing. My morning shower has baptized and readied me to face another day in the school of life. Just like yesterday and all of those that came before, I wipe away two diagonal streaks of condensation using one hand. My palms pressed onto the edge of the countertop, I lean in without breaking eye contact with my fogged reflection.

"Breathe," I tell myself. "This is the only time of the day you'll get this chance."

It's been a rough couple of years. My dad's still recovering after his accident. An erratic car slammed into the driver's side where he was seated while waiting to pick me up from our school formal. He was pinned by his hips between that car and the frame of his windshield.

Bones crushed, blood lost, a lifetime confined in a wheelchair. Oh, what I'd do to turn back time!

This happened a mere 30 feet from me. I remember running from the steps of the hotel to him as I saw the oncoming car. My screams and that of everyone else near the roundabout weren't enough to warn him.

I cried a lot in the hospital that night. Despite all the chaos, the waiting room had a certain silence that felt eerily loud. Overwhelming.

My closest friends, Elise and Kate, accompanied my family and I throughout the ordeal. They and their families hardly left our side, only once in a while to return with food, toiletries or hugs to help us get by.

A few days after that, for some reason, I just went numb. I stopped crying and stopped caring.

I no longer wanted to be around Elise and Kate or anyone else even though they all showed us support and concern. I wanted to leave behind the life I had prior to my dad's car accident; I yearned to be someplace else.

In October of grade 11, four months after the accident, my mom suggested selling the house and moving two hours out of town to live with my dad's sister. I instantly agreed. Plus, we could take better care of him as a bigger family.

I'm not entirely sure if I found any clarity during that time. My mind was muddled with routinized actions done to simply get by in life: the way I smiled, spoke to new acquaintances or dealt with my family. There wasn't a chance or a desire to seek anything new or adventurous.

I cut ties with everyone and didn't allow myself to reminisce or think about who I left behind.

But as the days, weeks and months passed, it suddenly occurred to me that university was on the horizon. While I was now settled in a new school, the small town wasn't offering what my former school did: a chance to be recruited on a sports scholarship – at least a hefty one. This would help me reach my childhood dream and, not to mention, ease any financial burden on my family.

Maybe the familiar would be good for me again; maybe that's where I unwittingly left my passion and perseverance.

When I called Elise to share my thoughts on moving back, she was still as kind as ever. She greeted the call with a big smile in her voice and her dramatic twang, the sort you'd typically associate with Whole Foods and whatever Canadian equivalent to California wealth.

My nervousness quickly shifted to shock. She didn't seem one bit upset that I was asking for advice after months of ignoring her calls, texts and e-mails.

"Girl, please. Allie... Allie!" she tried to interject as I stammered on.

"Allison!"

"Stay here with me for the school year," she insisted, "you have no other choice."

I'm sure before Elise and I barely even hung up, she already called Kate to share the great news.

Two weeks before September, I moved in with Elise and her mom to prepare for grade 12. I spent so much time hanging out at Elise's since we were six years-old that it always felt like a second home. It's a beautiful brick Georgian Revival in North Toronto. While relatively humble in size compared to their neighbours, it's exquisite in design rather than gratuitous grandeur.

So, here I am: in her house in this very bathroom... trying to pump up myself for the day, to convince myself that everything will be just fine. I need to seize the day.

At school, everyone approached me with a certain uneasiness. There were whispers in the halls. Even grade nine students who weren't around to witness my tragedy firsthand were well aware.

Everything felt just like old times with Elise. Our conversations, although cautiously worded at first, were later abandoned for inappropriate jokes and reassuring hugs.

However, it wasn't the case with Kate. Upon being reunited in the grassy park we'd hiked together so many times prior, she mustered up all the enthusiasm she could allow. But all I could offer were short, close ended answers and a pat on the shoulder. She was nervous and so was I. I couldn't bear to look at her.

Months on and not much had changed in our quest to reconnect.

While Elise was usually herself, the type who makes you feel like the most important person in the room, there was something slightly amiss. She no longer commanded everyone's attention; instead, she avoided social gatherings outside of school more and more often.

Whenever I asked what happened to the once life of the party, she'd quickly change the topic. Perhaps it wasn't something I should press on with her.

But who am I to judge? I, too, was shutting down uncomfortable topics and pushing most people away.

I tried subtly working the topic into conversations with our other friends, but no one seemed to clue in. Kate would most likely know; unfortunately, we weren't on terms to chat like that.

I came home one day on an early spring evening to find Elise seated at the kitchen island. Her hair pulled back neatly and hands cupped over her mouth, she looked to be in deep thought.

"Allison," whispered a dejected voice, "can we talk?" She sounded almost unrecognizable.

"When you were gone last year, you know I spent some time out in BC."

Every word and every pause felt like forever. Her breaths were deep and eyes withdrawn.

"I, uh... I was drinking a lot. Not just during parties – you know how much I liked to have fun," she finally let out a laugh. "But after your dad's accident... I drank almost every day. Coffee, juice, you name it; everything was mixed."

Elise placed her trembling, outstretched arms onto the countertop towards me.

"I tried so, so hard to hide it, but my mom saw right through me. She practically carried me to rehab. She probably cried more than I did."

"I just... Allison..."

Her eyes finally met mine, tears now falling.

"I. Am. So. Sorry. For everything. I was drinking with everyone at the hotel that night..."

Now she blurted out all her words in rapid succession.

"Robbie, Jacqueline, the older kids were all taking shots with us in the suite. It was fine. Then they disap-

peared. Apparently, they grabbed their car to pick up people and party somewhere else."

"It was stupid!"

She came to a halt.

"And then your dad was there..."

I felt incredibly faint, but I just had to pull in Elise for a hug even as she fought me off.

"But I could have stopped..."

We held on tightly and didn't let go.

I wasn't angry. In fact, I was relieved to know how she felt.

For far too long, I pushed everyone and myself out of sight and out of mind. This conversation with Elise was the first time that I was making some sense of things.

She was one part of the night's puzzle, but those kids would have gotten booze from somewhere else anyway. Everyone brought their own stash. No one was in their right minds.

Maybe Elise could have done more to stop them.

Shit, there are so many possibilities, but I don't blame her. At least, not right now.

Maybe I'll be angry when I think about this again tomorrow.

This sent my mind racing: so, if that's what Elise had been hiding, what's been clawing through Kate?

While I have, or had, plenty of friends, many of them were strategic in some way. I was close with the captains of our school's varsity teams, the student council reps and the like. Aside from Elise, Kate was one of the few people who was special to me for some reason or another.

In her signature plaid shirt with rolled up sleeves, thick glasses and constant curiosity, I've always found her incredibly endearing, especially that time she played *The Jungle Book's* "The Bare Necessities" on the trumpet. I could almost make it my life's goal to protect her from harm's way.

We became friends in grade nine because I couldn't bear to settle for an A- in science. I enlisted her, the smartest kid in class, as my personal study buddy and it paid off. A selfish move on my part, yes, but I was exposed to her brand of kindness and patience.

Kate and I just clicked. Our conversations moved seamlessly from science and math to debating the merits of anything from *To Sir, with Love* to *Full Metal Jacket*. When we weren't studying together, we were cheering on each other, whether at my soccer games or her robotics competitions.

It felt like a good kind of intensity, the type that makes you work harder for more. I had a lot to look forward to when we were together. She had a way with

making me feel at ease – something I could never do for myself.

We finally admitted our feelings for each other while sharing a pint of Ben & Jerry's, tucked away in a corner of the library.

After dating for almost six months, Kate and I were excited to attend formal together. The beginning of the night was so picturesque – dancing, stolen kisses, endless laughs. That feeling of freedom and weightlessness – we were so genuinely happy.

When my dad arrived to pick me up, Kate kept pulling me back to extend the night. And I stayed, very willingly with little convincing required. One more dance, one more kiss, one more moment together – we couldn't get enough and it felt so right.

And then... and then... you know what happened.

Is that why Kate and I have been so distant, wrecked with guilt that she kept me from leaving?

I loved her so much back then. How could I allow myself to shut her out like that? What was she bottling up?

Am I a terrible person for wanting solitude at one point?

Until Elise's admission of feeling partially responsible for my dad's accident, I hadn't considered that possibility with Kate.

Even so, I wouldn't blame her either.

There are too many what ifs and could haves, should haves and would haves for that night.

After what happened to my dad, in all honesty, I felt... relieved.

I've been playing every sport you can name since I was four years-old; when I'm not in school, I'm in training or another class of some sort; when I'm home, I'm either studying or... studying.

When I'm getting an A, I'm working even harder to get a higher mark; when I'm scoring goals, I'm puking at the thought of not scoring enough; when I'm a minute late to anything, I feel like I've been a disgrace.

I'm constantly anxious and in competition with myself and everyone around me; it keeps me awake at night; it sours everything that I've achieved.

The list goes on. And I just can't help it.

My dad knew and adored Kate, but he declared love to be too distracting for one's ambitions. Time "wasted" on maintaining a relationship meant fewer opportunities to train or study.

Without a hint of irony, he feared that heartbreak would be too devastating for my confidence, not realizing his own impact.

My dad encouraged me; he brought out the best in me.

But my best was never good enough.

I didn't share this with anyone. It was as if admitting to my worries was a sign of weakness.

"Complainers don't achieve anything," he said.

He was very quiet in his aggression, never showing a physical glimpse of it to others, who often wondered aloud why I was always so wound up. His disapproving voice was threatening and chilling in ways that can't be impersonated.

He wouldn't antagonize the referees or yell from the stands. Yet, I could always hear him accompanying my every movement and thought.

His words seared my skin and left me feeling concussed, broken and exhausted.

In my own twisted way, I was relieved that my dad could no longer be himself. For the first time in my life, I didn't have an all consuming voice yelling at me to be faster, stronger and smarter.

Instead, I now only had my own voice tearing me down and occasionally building me back up.

Sometimes, I wondered if that was really my dad or if it was all in my head, a callous version of him I created to justify my own insatiable need to win, to find a pariah other than myself.

I often blamed myself for what happened the night

of the accident. I'm angered by the thoughts of what I could have done differently.

But maybe all this has been good for me. Up until that night, I always did the rational, most practical thing for my ambitions. So, when I upped and left, I'm now realizing that it was the first time that I did something so emotionally driven. My mind and body craved a break, a moment of calm, a chance to breathe.

Elise pouring out her heart is forcing me to face all the demons I've bottled up for so long.

So, here I am: standing in this very bathroom, reevaluating my life and figuring out how to share what's in my head with Elise and Kate. We need to mend.

I have to work up the courage to just talk. Perhaps I'm letting them down by not talking about it, fostering more self-doubt for us all to battle.

I can't allow shame and guilt to be the crux of our existence.

Maybe, after all of this, I'll be able to breathe again.

Dear Sisters of Colour...

by Anthony

Dear sisters of colour,
I'm sorry that I have not been a better brother,
When mother told us, "girls clean the house,"
While the boys play pretend—
And it took me until today
to learn
What message that had sent.

Dear sisters of colour,
I'm sorry that I have not been a kinder brother;
I spited your ignorance and vain deeds,
not knowing where the pain began,
And it took me until today
to learn
it stopped you from all that you can.

Dear sisters of colour,
I'm sorry that I have not been a caring brother;

When you are victim to agony and blame,
Where every decision becomes a shame in the make-
And it took me until today
to learn
That it put your life at stake.

Dear sisters of colour,
And our beautiful brown-skinned mothers,
No longer will I allow
Your pain to be smothered.

Dear sisters of colour,
I'm sorry I failed as a brother;
But I promise to fix this world with you,
One way or another.

Sleep (via Muse)

by Justin

So tired...
So glad...
To sleep to an end
That had no end

Let the mockingjay burn
Our dreams within our souls return
Like ghosts we replenish-
All of life's juices

A window 'till the future
Often in an end
A door to reality-
Swung shut for then

Kingdom of calmness
Shepherd of the Beast
Let the music break free-

As you relent
Pull the covers over your head-
As your colours spread over dark
Wingless flight-
As you sleep tight tonight!

World Peace

by Justin

Brown, Black, Yellow, Red, and White
And all those in between
without plight
We should be

Hold hands
And see how our light resonates with
those around us
No matter the differences
Look for yourself in others

Look for the book that sets them apart
Under their story from your part
Lift up the Ceiling
That's been shading us apart

On equal ground
Our feet should sound

Given opportunities
All around
We all have an intricate spindle
That forms us into a glowing crystal
The brighter the glow
The more shared it grows

The continents used to be one
Just like us
In fact we still are
Deep in our hearts

We are the human race
Colour, features, and cultures a'vare
Beauteous when we are working together
in harmony
Making music like a symphony

The Future

by Justin

As we dive into the bounds that appear before us-
The bonds we have should not break.

I'm tired of hearing the same old of what people
think

Even though the future is just in a blink

As we go deeper into the chaos that unfolds-

We should hold to our humanity-

For this is our only sanity-

When nothing else holds.

People feel they can see the vista before us-

But only so much can be seen

I feel there's a whole 'nother story to be told.

Much like alludes the present situation

As we go further in

Our changes seem to become irreversible

An ominous presence overtakes us-

So we must endure.

This is our only hope as into the Future we go.

New Year's Eve

by Melissa

New Year's Eve 2013:
with the perfect stranger too great to believe.

The city is ours to seize, to roam.

Music.

Fireworks.

Sneaking into a Victorian home.

We gaze at tall towers
and talk 'til the third morning hour.

I agree to be yours
and you to be mine.
We can achieve great things,
it's only a matter of time.

This life is ours to seize, to roam.

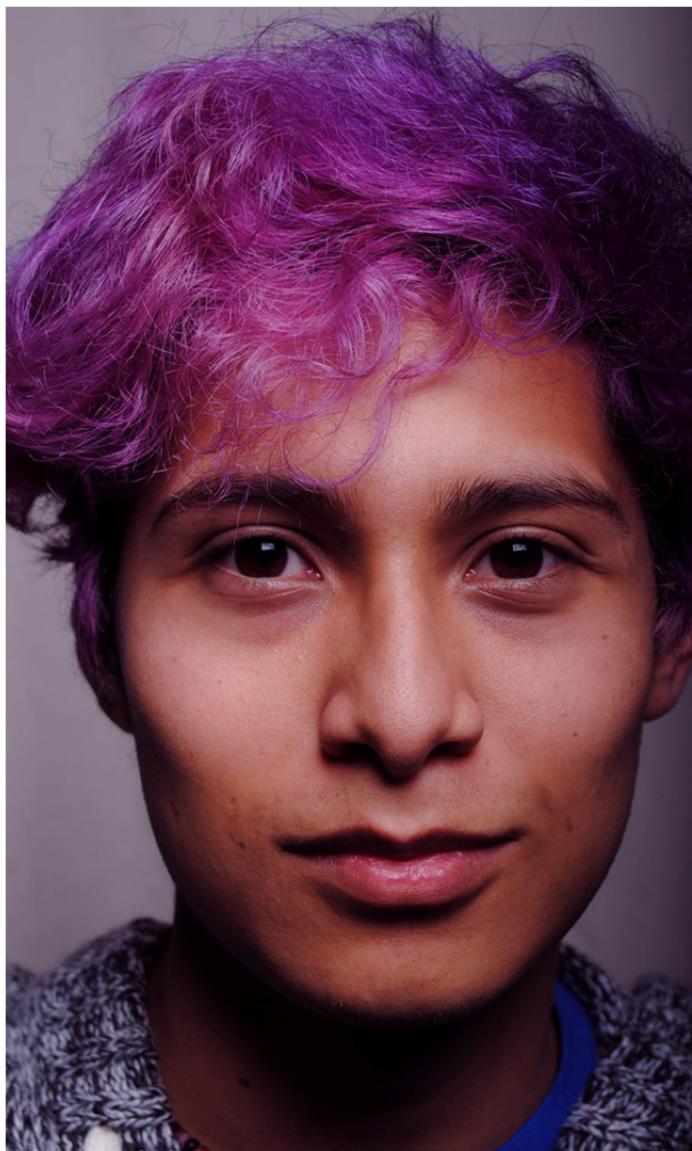
Laughs.

Adventures.

Building our own home.

With love.

Forever. More.





LEFT The boy who defied social norms, by CJ Yabut
ABOVE The ones that suffered but now smiling in heaven, by CJ Yabut





LEFT Never forgotten, by CJ Yabut
TOP Almost Forgotten, by CJ Yabut
BOTTOM Picture itself, by CJ Yabut





LEFT Trail of Memory, by CJ Yabut

ABOVE The Girl Who Lost Her Leg, by CJ Yabut

Resources

If you need to talk to someone about your struggles, please contact one of the following places:

Asian Community
AIDS Services,
Queer Asian Youth
www.acas.org

ADDRESS
260 Spadina Ave Suite 410,
Toronto, ON M5T 2E4

TELEPHONE
416-963-4300
Monday - Friday, 10:30am - 6pm

Parents, Families and
Friends of Lesbians and
Gays (PFLAG) Toronto
Chapter
www.torontopflag.org

TELEPHONE
416-406-6378
24 hours

Kids Help Phone
www.kidshelpphone.ca

TELEPHONE
1-800-668-6868
24 hours

Toronto Rape
Crisis Center
www.trccmwar.ca

TELEPHONE
416-597-8808
24 hours

Assaulted Women's
Helpline
www.awhl.org

TOLL-FREE
1-866-863-0511
24 hours

TELEPHONE
416-863-0511
24 hours

TEXT
SAFE (7233)
24 hours

TTY
416-364-8762
24 HOURS &
TTY TOLL-FREE
1-866-863-7868
24 hours

Gerstein Centre
Distress Line
www.gersteincentre.org

TELEPHONE
416-929-5200
24 hours

Toronto Distress
Centre
www.torontodistresscentre.com

TELEPHONE
416-408-4357
24 hours

Lesbian Gay Bi Trans**Youth Line**

www.youthline.ca

TOLL-FREE

1-800-268-9688

Sunday - Friday, 4:00pm - 9:30pm

TELEPHONE

416-962-9688

Sunday - Friday, 4:00pm - 9:30pm

ONLINE CHAT

www.youthline.ca

Sunday - Friday, 4:00pm - 9:30pm

TEXT

647-694-4275

Sunday - Friday, 4:00pm - 9:30pm

TTY

416-962-0777

Sunday - Friday, 4:00pm - 9:30pm

**Good2Talk Post-
Secondary Student
Helpline**

www.good2talk.ca

TELEPHONE

1-866-925-5454

24 hours

**Ontario Mental
Health Helpline**

www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca

TELEPHONE

1-866-531-2600

24 hours

ONLINE CHAT

www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca



ACAS

Asian Community AIDS Services