A Fiction of Fragmented Falsehoods: Curriculum of Unwanted Roads Traveled

Katherine Wyatt

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A FICTION OF FRAGMENTED FALSEHOODS:
CURRICULUM UNWANTED ROADS TRAVELED

by

KATHERINE WYATT

(Under the Direction of John Weaver)

ABSTRACT

highlighting social issues and social order, human rights and circumstances in society. The artwork sheds light on the harsh realities that encompass such social issues as racism, homelessness, bullying, abuse, animal rights and veteran PTSD/suicide, while serving as a lens to those ‘othered’ individuals’ and/or groups’ voices.

Works of fiction may indeed, through their recasting of the empirical particulars of the world, achieve extraordinary power to disturb and disrupt the familiar and commonplace, to question and interrogate that which seems to have already been answered conclusively, and to redirect the convention regarding important social issues. (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 101)

It is an enlightening periscope of identifying another’s lived experiences that will provide a new perspective when understanding and interpreting human experiences, while giving an opportunity to see the world through another’s lens; as well as identifying and questioning the binaries humans and society create in daily experiences and fostering open discussion dialogues regarding these sensitive social issue topics and difference.

INDEX WORDS: Fiction, Empathy, Illustrations, Otherness, Human experience, Social issues, Imagination, Social norms and standards, Inequalities
A FICTION OF FRAGMENTED FALSEHOODS:

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A FICTION OF FRAGMENTED FALSEHOODS:

CURRICULUM UNWANTED ROADS TRAVELED

by

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Committee: Ming Fang He
Robert Lake
William Schubert

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DEDICATION

To my family, who continually offered their love and support through this creative journey. My father, Gordon—who taught me to reach for the stars because I could accomplish whatever I dreamed. My mother, Sandra—who taught me to drive with a purpose and work hard for what I want. My brother, Andrew—who taught me to laugh, to not settle, and when knocked down, get back up and keep walking. My aunt, Debbie—who taught me to treasure my talents and use them as a positive force.
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To everyone who allowed me to have a conversation with you, thank you for sharing your stories and your vulnerabilities. Your generosity and willingness to share your lived experiences allowed me to break through barriers of difference, of un-relatability, in order to learn, to understand, to share.
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PROLOGUE

There is so much world with such little time to travel—to experience, to learn of difference. A *Fiction of Fragmented Falsehoods: Curriculum of Unwanted Roads Traveled* is a synthesis of fiction short stories and illustrations addressing lived ‘otherness’ in different social experiences, exposing readers to a curriculum that shapes human beings and cultures—a curriculum that extends beyond the everyday educational settings. There is a much larger curriculum of life beyond what is learned within the social setting of a school environment—so many realms impacting one’s life and individualized growth and learning. So many domains that affect learning, learning that occurs and extends beyond the classroom. “Such powerful dimensions as the character of the students’ homes, families, communities, and peers play a profound role in their evolving conception of the world, how it works, and their relation to it” (Schubert, 1981, p. 185). It is these dimensions that help shape our experiences. An essential part of learning and personal growth occurs outside of the classroom experiences—this learning is spontaneous; it is action within the moment and it is affected greatly by these powerful dimensions. These experiences are the curriculum that shapes us—that influences the formation of our identity, our role in society. Through experiencing—through the social process—we develop the capacity to learn. We encounter, are forced to engage with difference, adversity, culture and unknown, all of which impart knowledge.

Our gaze must not only include schools, but all aspects of society that shape our outlooks, identities and actions. I call this configuration of shapers the BIG CURRICULUM, and argue that it is neglected and in need of an antidote. (Schubert, 2006, p. 100)
It is the BIG CURRICULUM that defines us as a human being—these experiences mold us, inspire us, and teach us. You cannot truly understand something until it happens to you, whether directly or indirectly. It cannot be taught. Learning happens in experience. It happens through interactions, through differences—through trial and error. Exposing one to the larger curriculum of culture and life, fiction short stories and illustrations have a pivotal role in providing a path enabling the reader to walk in another’s lived experiences. Fiction is an important vehicle to teach us about the bigger curriculum of life, whether similar or different from our own realities—or our own experiences. It expands our gaze and provides an awareness and empathetic understanding to others’ differences, while also directing an attentiveness of thyself. Literary lenses power the imagination, making it possible to establish cultural empathy by helping construct one’s identity, which in turn builds an understanding of another’s difference—another’s curriculum of life.

A Walking

Is there such a thing as a roadmap of a life well lived? As I travel, I see life lived. Taking in the sights around me, I see change. I see change is inevitable and always occurring. Occasionally it is natural; sometimes it is probed, and frequently it is a drastic impediment of reality. But one thing is certain, change will happen—change does happen. It is accompanied with declarations of how and why, some as suggestions and others as direct commands. As I travel, I identify with the notion of how one’s lived experiences and interactions greatly impact their world views, choices and encounters. Instilled in us all is the unfettered freedom to establish self-identity. We set out on a path to forge our identities early in life. As empty vessels, we begin to travel. I pace forward, my vessel being overtaken, filling with experiences influenced by cultural characteristics, beliefs, assumptions, thoughts, values and morals—some
passed down through generations, some learned through social interactions and experiences, and some generated by my individuality.

As I travel, I see humans are more than bare life. Distributed by difference—identified by difference. Injustices, inequalities and mistreatment are continually directed onto others in the face of diversity. A self-identity synonymous with equality and acceptance—a prized possession sought; yet for some they can empty their pockets into the crane machine and the claw continually dives down and grasps another moment filled with narrow-minded views. I stride forward taking in the stillness of the moments I pass, for the calm allows my mind to move freely around the image, the message and story, without any interference telling me what I am observing or how I should interpret and feel. I pass the stripping of one’s identity, a degrading process that ultimately leaves an individual lost among the intercepting concept of who they were and who they are now forced to be. As I am moving, I come to rest on a realistic snapshot of the anti-utopia take on society living the American dream because of racial discrimination. Imprinted is how one race defined how another should endure life. I progress forward. To my right, I see her grip ever so tightly on the bat, offering the ideal that she can protect herself; however, the bruises on her face lead me to believe this is not a true dynamic of her life. Next, I see the storm clouds encompassing and magnifying, acknowledging that it is only a matter of time before danger and violence will impede the social experience. I continue, glancing at the next moment. A moment that represents the underlying social power a culture can inflict on others who are continually discriminated against and subjected to socially motivated injustices and debasement. Near the end, I see that power happens because it draws each member with its grip clinging so tightly, seizing the mind, taking over the thought processes. I see sharp words thrown in many directions cutting people down, weakening them—hurting them, humiliating
them, degrading them, dishonoring them. Words that cannot be taken back, cannot be undone. A momentary stride - I turn and glance behind me at my travels that took me past a montage of realities. The face of the diverse seen in the face of another. The cliché that words harm embedded in the moments, offering a demoralizing and degrading visual assault. A reminder that for every empowering moment of progress associated with positive social change, there is another tragic moment of blinkered views and assumptions bringing injustices, inequalities and mistreatment back to the forefront.

As I travel, I release myself from the shackles that minimize and desensitize others’ experiences. The message is starkly transparent, we are all human - diversity is in everyone. Go beyond the binaries, look at the individual, not the patterns of people. Open up your consciousness to others’ current way of being and the fragmented realities within their everyday lived experiences, which will cultivate an understanding forming empathy and compassion. Empathy and compassion kill societies’ ills, while expanding knowledge of the other by looking at experiences through their frame of reference. The scars stamped in my compartmentalized memories of my travels forge a mindful awareness, one that reminds me that I can be a social change agent. One that values no matter what life and society bestow on you—there is always hope for better. Change is inevitable and always occurring—and it starts with me!

*Different Directions, Different Strides—Different Ideas*

It is through these travels (not all in the literal sense)—the listening, the watching, the reading —that influences the comprising of these fictional stories. I am observant, always noticing the occurrences around me, taking meticulous mental and handwritten notes. My creative mind affords me the opportunity to indulge within another’s emotions, feeling their
pain—their discomfort. My eyes and ears are sharply focused on the daily actions occurring around me—the mannerisms, the interactions, what is being said, the emotions that arise, the facial expression—I take it all in, noticing even the smallest details—the smallest of grimaces. I think differently, my brain is messy—often all over the place and unable to shut down. I see things differently and interpret them in many different lenses. I can mold myself within another’s reality, feel it firsthand as if it is happening to me. I am aware. I am always looking around—distracted by a movement, a difference. Anything and everything gripping my attention, causing me to observe—to take notice. I observe stories based on real life events and use fiction to retell these stories, helping others to understand and see another’s reality through their imaginary lenses. A reality of outside experiences with alterity—with difference—a reality of relatability or un-relatability, both offering imaginative opportunities to decrease cognitive difference associated with the acuteness of otherness, with diversity.

I use fiction and illustrations to engage the audience, while exposing them to a realm of new knowledge and experiences, to interpret the narrative, meanings and implications while bringing awareness to the realities the artwork is depicting. They are used together to afford the reader the opportunity to visualize and understand the tone, mood and content of the story, all while providing a better understanding of the words in the text. The illustrations are more than just pictures, they are visual words of understanding—encouragements to look beyond the words, to see a character, a story—to feel the emotions, to feel the reality. They depict what is happening and affect the reader during the reading process, while also giving extra details. They forge a stronger interest in the story and bring characters, setting and experiences to life, causing an awareness of these realistic details. Through these creative outlets, I forge a path, a walking, a traveling by the reader in different directions, at different strides and through different ideas.
These fiction short stories and illustrations designate areas to have conversations, while allowing the reader to articulate the identity of the characters. Leaving the characters without any identity markers and historical context was done intentionally to allow the reader not only to define the character with how he interprets and analyzes the story being told, but to also resonate that these social realities are not confined to a particular time in history, but however, are still influencing social experiences and realities today. These social realities are not labeled to one specific identity marker—they show no prejudice among the genders, the classes, the ethnicities. The fiction and illustrations coexist in playing with the boundaries within society—the truth, the reality, with experience, with circumstance. It is real life experiences that structure the ideals and images one has and sees, as well as how we draw meaning, but there is so much more than our individualized experiences and identity. Art is an important vessel to bringing awareness to other views, memories and realities of social and cultural constructs entrenched in the history of, and current day, human experiences—and plays a pivotal role in the development of one’s curriculum. Let’s learn! Let’s go for a walk!
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

One of the most influential things we can do for others is have conversations with them. Through conversations we learn—not only about others, but about ourselves. Through conversations one is exposed to a new realm of knowledge—knowledge about ‘otherness,’ difference—a different reality. These conversational interactions occur through a variety of mediums including, but not limited to, direct speaking with another, storytelling, literature, reading, cinema, television and art. A Fiction of Fragmented Falsehoods: Curriculum of Unwanted Roads Traveled is a composite of fiction short stories, paired with hand-drawn illustrations that serve as vehicles for communication (conversational pieces) exposing one to the social, cultural and historical realities persistently impeding the shared constructs of human experience. Life is a composite of exposures and journeys—of left turns and rights turns, going in reverse and moving forward. These continuous turns on our roadmap of life chart one’s lived experiences. Experiences fictionalized by social norms and standards. Some roads easy. Some hard and unwanted. Some unfair. Life has a way of sending us down these paths, sometimes for a reason and sometimes for no good reason at all. No matter what path life sets us down, one thing is sure—we must continue to move. Move in a direction. Move to change! Move to learn! A critical inquiry into lived experiences and the forces that impede the overall well-being during these occurrences can provide an alternative perspective and bridge an understanding and connectedness to another who is different, who is ‘othered’. Such an approach challenges the audience to read between the lines in order to find a deeper, sometimes unwarranted controversial meaning, one that provides knowledge, awareness and understanding of the realities of another’s experience, promoting not only awareness in oneself, but in others. A simulation of social experience, the short stories will provide the audience an opportunity to
build an awareness of otherness, and each story will define that an individual does not have to be a victim of one’s circumstances, while also identifying that our circumstances do not define us.

The social and cultural fabrics of society influence human experiences in everyday life relative to relationships and interactions with others, power structures, and the world-setting around them. It is these social and cultural dynamics that shape one’s world views regarding individual or group identity markers, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, age, etc., that instill a power construct. Power is a social characteristic embedded in the communal structure of intertwined cultures, personalities, beliefs and opinions, evident in the historical framework of race, class and gender and imparted in current day interactions. The social forces fashioned from these power structures generate social inequalities and injustices that marginalize an individual or a group in society’s framework. Through fiction short stories correlated with illustrations, social issues prevalent in society will be highlighted. These social issues embody difference, injustice and inequality inflicting hardship on social experiences and social relationships. The fiction short stories paired with narrative illustrations will shed light on the harsh realities that encompass social issues, while serving as a lens to those ‘othered’ individuals and/or groups’ voices. This cross-curricular topic, synching such topics as art, literature, social justice and economics, is an enlightening periscope of identifying another’s lived experiences that will provide a new perspective when understanding and interpreting human experiences, while also providing an opportunity to see the world through a different lens (another’s); as well as identify and question the binaries humans and society create in daily experiences.

The purpose of this study is to use art in the form of fiction and illustrations to provide a vehicle of awareness regarding social issues in everyday lived experiences. Injustices, inequalities and mistreatment have had a pulse embedded in the cultural and social constructs of
history and continue to do so today. Using the medium of fiction short stories and illustrations, the main objectives of this nontraditional topic are: 1) to generate an awareness that social issues are prevalent in today’s society and that these experiences affect the overall well-being of individuals; 2) to identify social and cultural underpinnings, including biases and assumptions that produce experiences of injustices, inequalities and mistreatment; 3) to encourage the viewer to question, think and notice the binaries humans and society create in daily experiences; 4) to provide a voice that encourages empathy and compassion for others; and 5) to foster possibilities of open discussion dialogues regarding these sensitive social issue topics.

*Fiction and Illustration Inquiry*

The notion of experience is greatly influenced by one’s cultural identity synonymous with the social constructs present in everyday life. “The rules of experience here are nothing but formulations of our knowledge concerning economic, social, and psychological interconnections” (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 193-194). While abstract, these powerful social characteristics embedded in the communal structure of intertwined people and cultures are the embodied skeletons of lived experiences. “The pure abstractness to which men are reduced in their social relations extends as well to intercourse with ideas” (Marcuse, 2009, p. 69). Societal bones of inequalities, discrimination, and mistreatment inflicted, accepted and traditioned on one by another indulge themselves in the body of social issues. “Within history, in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for man as an uncomplete being conscious of his incompleteness” (Freire, 2004, p. 5). Social issues forge the notion of power that lies within the historical framework of race, class and gender and are continually present in everyday relations and interactions essential in experiences. “Experience has its genesis in our transaction with the qualities of which our environment consists” (Eisner,
1991, p. 17). Fiction and art can confront the social, historical and ideological forces and structures that produce and constrain inequalities in social norms and issues by providing a lens to one’s lived ‘otherness,’ to provide an alternative viewpoint.

This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself. To be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.

(Nussbaum, 2010, p. 95-96)

Fiction and art are very powerful forms of communication that allow individuals the freedom of creative expression through storytelling outlets that vividly depict social issues, history, emotions, and injustices, among some, while providing a voice to be heard. Comparable in relation that they both can tell stories, different in the manner that they transfer the knowledge—one verbally, one visually. However, both can be used to shed light on injustices, current issues and societal norms, which can provide opportunities for the audience to connect to their senses, body and mind. “Bourgeois art strives for identity—an identity between its image of the real and the existent. It presents itself as social reality” (Held, 1980, p. 82). Fiction and art provide an undefinable variety of perceptions, ideas and knowledge, all of which encourages the audience to feel and open an awareness or acceptance to someone who is different, someone who is ‘othered.’ “In a sense, arts-based research is a heuristic through which we deepen and make more complex our understanding of some aspect of the world” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 3). It is this frame of reference, infiltrated by one’s cultural and social awareness that sees someone as different. “Culture is where the social gravity of power is organized in both the circulation and use of representations and in the material experiences that shape everyday life” (Giroux, 1996, p. 15). A difference that shuns a perception of less human, one who is not equal, one who does not
have the same rights and one who lacks the empathy from others perceived as atop the hierarchy, having higher power in society’s structure. This difference labels and weakens experiences with inequalities, injustices and mistreatment. Fiction narratives and illustrations have the power to illuminate awareness on social inequalities, and to encourage change. “The order in the world is captured by a deductive chain of thought” (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 189). This order, difference—these societal constants—brands experiences with inequalities, injustices and mistreatment. “These human constants are also a part of reality objective to us, that is, a permanent character of the world as we know it” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 6). Fiction narrative helps illuminate awareness on these social inequalities, and it encourages change.

Works of fiction may indeed, through their recasting of the empirical particulars of the world, achieve extraordinary power to disturb and disrupt the familiar and commonplace, to question and interrogate that which seems to have already been answered conclusively, and to redirect the convention regarding important social issues. (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 101)

When fiction narrative is used to advocate an alternative perspective, it is powerful in the manner it presents knowledge to open up dialogue for a new conversation—to open awareness to someone else’s story. “Everything written with vitality expresses that vitality: there are no dull subjects, only dull minds” (Chandler, 2007, p. 101). Dull minds do not seek the why. “What we cannot do, as imaginative, curious beings, is to cease to learn and to seek, to investigate the ‘why’ of things” (Freire, 2017, p. 88). Dull minds do not seek to learn. Dull minds do not seek to understand and are not receptive to ‘otherness.’ Dull minds are muted, complacent—never growing, never learning—just staying stagnant.
“The literary text is a mixture of reality and fiction, and as such it brings about an interaction between the given and the imagined” (Iser, 1993, p. 1). Fiction, dominated with the theme of poetic justice, enhances our ability to understand because it comprises stories with unpleasant subject matter that exposes another to morally repulsive behavior coupled with societal realities, inequalities and mistreatments that stimulate an emotional response due to the real life presence and actuality of these stories occurring in past and present societal experiences. The literary device enlists readers to engage in literature where stories mimic a scenario of upholding moral principles and provide an opportunity for the reader to acknowledge and critique their individual moral behavior. Fiction with the theme of poetic justice offers story lines containing a fitting retribution related to the life choices its characters make. “Where we readers of these fictions find ourselves is in a place of disjunction, displacement, and disorientation” (Doll, 2006, p. 57). This is due to the presence of authenticity with the storylines being presented. “Fiction in any form has always intended to be realistic” (Chandler, 2007, p. 91). This fiction serves as an opening—either an opening fitted with transparency allowing one to see otherness, with the possibility of stepping into that world, or a shiny reflective surface that emulates oneself, that produces a reflection of who other than the reader. It is this fictionalized realism that causes an identification or awareness, while simultaneously clutching tightly to one’s emotions as we engage with the characters and the storylines. “Reader and writer engage in a conspiracy, and through the imperfect system of language, the two cooperate to make a world” (Leland, 1998, p. 1). This conspiracy relationship occurs because of the mirrors and windows produced delicately in the descriptive writing that captivates the reader to open their consciousness, to observe, to perceive, to feel, to connect. This fictionalized realism has the power to take the form of a mirror or a window. A mirror because as a reader we form a
familiarity bond as we identify with a piece of ourselves—our reality—with the one being presented. Sometimes this mirror forms a crack allowing one to peer through to the other side—a side that while similar offers some discrepancies to one’s unique reality presenting new insight from a different perspective. Then there are the transparent windows that display another’s experiences—another’s reality. These windows provide the opportunity for one to see through the stereotypes that hinder one’s realities and everyday experiences. They can be opened and stepped through allowing the reader to identify on a whole new level with the character and the absolutes of his reality, including emotions tied to the experiences. “Fiction elicits an interpretation of the world by being itself a worldlike object for interpretation” (Dillard, 1988, p. 155). Fiction stories provoke; they open awareness to those who are desensitized to others’ experiences and differences. They can provide positivity in the face of adversity, and they can change societal views. “They are about suffering, misfortune and injustice and have a capacity to shock, to affront” (Clough, 2002, p. 18). They are about comradery, acceptance, loyalty and hope. They depict love and hate—fragments of the real world. “Every literary text inevitably contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, cultural, and literary systems that exists as referential fields outside the text” (Iser, 1993, p. 4).

Inclusivity occurs through creative fiction, which allows readers an opportunity to immense themselves in the psyche of characters to understand the complexities of social life. Fiction can serve as a catalyst to changing attitudes and opinions regarding defined group identities, cultural values and social norms. It provides windows to access the mental states of others and invites us to become active participants in others’ realities different from our own. “We might call this fiction of otherness: it appeals to the reader not primarily because it allows him to escape his own reality, but because it explains to him other realities, or creates them of the
whole cloth” (Leland, 1998, p. 8). Entering these fictitious worlds helps us improve interpersonal understanding, while enhancing our ability to connect to others by binding us together around common ethics and values, and helps us foster empathetic growth. “Reading imaginative literature fosters a deeper understanding of our own identities, our families, and our relationships with historical events” (Morris, 2016, vol. 1, p. 396). It can teach us important life lessons and render us more empathetic to difference because of growth in self-knowledgement and development in our ability to assume the perspective of others. Fiction, a reality simulator, lays moral foundations through the exposure of adversity in its characters and storylines. “Just as the reader may say to an author, ‘Tell me about myself,’ so she may say, ‘Help me escape myself’” (Leland, 1998, p. 7).

Critical illustrations portray social reality by gathering and synthesizing serious problems, conditions and circumstances in today’s society in the elements of the drawings to be deciphered by the viewer. Functioning as a vacuum, enticing the viewer to acknowledge and critique the social reality being depicted by the artist, while allowing the viewer the opportunity for personal interpretation and formation of their personalized version of the story being shared through these illustrations. An interpretation that is molded by an individual’s personal experiences and beliefs occurs. Critical illustrations have the ability to set an emotionally evocative tone, driving to the forefront the viewer’s senses while acknowledging feelings associated with the social reality exhibited. Critical illustrations are thought provoking enough; however, when paired with prose that buoys the harsh realities of everyday life in contemporary and historical society, a vehicle of engagement for the audience is established to interpret the narratives, meanings, implications and messages while opening a channel for social change.
Art creates a new way of seeing, causing a cognitive dissidence that causes political and social changes as people begin to see themselves and the world around them in a different way thereby requiring a different way of thinking and living. (Weaver, 2010, p. 80)

A path of collusion brings intricate qualities of ownership that can narrate the same story, powerful in the fact that one brings visual to the auditory, and vice versa—auditory to the visual. Both can equally engage the viewer honing in on different senses and together spool the entire embodiment.

Writers are not therapists, but in their delvings into the human heart they often reveal certain truths or insights that bring comfort to a reader or provide, for lack of better term, a new ‘angle’ on a situation the reader finds himself confronted with. (Leland, 1998, p. 5)

Enriched from the real and the imagined—facts, experiences, interactions, sights, and viewpoints are combined to convey in a meaningful way that connects to the viewer in some sort of fashion. “Imagination is the capacity to posit alternative realities” (Greene, 2001, p. 65). The storyteller has imagination, and the viewer has to imagine. “Writing teaches us to learn about ourselves in relation to the world, to others, and to other texts” (Morris, 2016, vol. 1, p. 394). Reading equates—also providing teaching moments.

“To imagine is to generate images; to see is to experience qualities” (Eisner, 1991, p. 1). Through the visual and auditory, human senses are propelled to not only imagine the story, but to see the experience. “The ability to reflect, to evaluate, to program, to investigate, and to transform is unique to human beings in the world and with the world” (Freire, 2017, p. 5).

Fiction can supply opportunities to move past the generation of images to perceiving the qualities of experiences entrenched in the social constructs of everyday life. “Arts based research is, at its
deepest level, about artistic and aesthetic approaches to raising and addressing social issues” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 57). Vibrant with unwavering passion, fiction in itself is an art form that uses a complex blend of experiences, cultures, characteristics, history and struggles that induce influential emotions, thoughts and ideas to accelerate social issues to the forefront of awareness. Fiction highlights the notion of truth. “The truth brings men together, falsehood scatters them and sets discord among them” (Ricouer, 2007, p. 165). Fiction brings awareness to difference, which in turn sets in motion opportunities to dispute social norms in the form of discrimination. “Our fight against the different discriminations, against any negation of our being, will only lead to victory if we can realize the obvious: unity within diversity” (Freire, 2017, p. 45). While fiction and art cannot completely resolve social issues and realistically indulge the entire story of injustice, inequality and mistreatment present within society’s constructs, it can serve as a bridge to cultural and social awareness in the form of understanding a new perspective, seeing it through another’s lens. “Unlike most historical works, literary works typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 5). Fiction and art can inquire critiques of modern society in correlation to power and social constructs with social evolution, highlighting injustices and inequalities and circumstances in society that hinder the construction of the future while guided by the conditions of the past. “The truth is that the future is created by us, through transformation of the present” (Freire, 2017, p. 39).

Theoretical Framework

I am using Critical Theoretical Framework because it seeks to uncover social hidden agendas by evaluating, explaining and discussing the social reality of human experience, while supplying criticisms of inequalities cast in society. ‘Otherness’ resonates from a multitude of
historical contexts encompassing different ethnicities, gender and class roles because this label does not have boundaries as to what characteristic markers a person must possess in order to be identified as different. We live in a diverse world, one where the authentic experience is not an individualized journey but rather one that is intertwined in the social interfaces of injustice, inequality and misrepresentation. A world where society is engulfed with a constant fluctuation of controversy charged assumptions and stereotypes in the face of diversity toward an individual or cultural group, masked by society based on their limited stature in the social hierarchy or as an outcast, a reject in society undeserving of being considered equal. “For all societies at all times have their particular blind spots, groups within their cultures and also groups abroad that are especially likely to be dealt with ignorantly and obtusely” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 106-107). This obtuseness stems from a belief and value system that provides a lens to determine how to construe events, situations, interactions, relationships and thoughts toward the different. “From the beginning the critical theory of society was constantly involved in philosophical as well as social issues and controversies” (Marcuse, 1991, p. 5).

Based on the notion of dissimilar lived experiences among different individuals and cultures throughout history, social dynamics that shape one’s world views of cultural identity markers such as race, gender, class, among some, are powerful stimulants within these experiences and the hardships that accompany them. “Suffering, violence, and destruction are categories of the natural as well as human reality, of a helpless and heartless universe” (Marcuse, 1991, p. 110). It is this mistreatment, influenced by an entangled, dynamic web of predetermined beliefs, values and assumptions, which is exhibited on marginalized individuals or groups highlighting harsh realities of discrimination, racism, exploitation, and economic and social inequalities. “Theory has been used to conserve an unequal social status quo as well as to
challenge social inequalities” (Anyon, 2009, p. 4). Theory can examine social reality by investigating how culture and social factors influence human experiences in everyday life relative to social relationships and interactions as well as power structure. “Critical pedagogy is interested in the margins of society, the experiences and needs of individuals faced with oppression and marginalization” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 23). It challenges us to read between the lines in order to find a deeper, sometimes unwarranted, controversial meaning, one that provides knowledge, awareness and understanding of the realities of another’s experience.

Learning to see another human being not as a thing but as a full person is not an automatic event but an achievement that requires overcoming many obstacles, the first of which is the sheer inability to distinguish between self and other. (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 96)

Critical thought of one’s inner reason, morality and assumptions regarding diversity and ‘otherness,’ provoked by creative expression in the form of art and fiction, can promote not only awareness in oneself, but in others. This critical inquiry of the embodiment of oneself and the harsh realities society can inflict serves as the foundation for social change—for a receptiveness to ‘others’ and their experiences.

Significance, Limitations and Concerns

The significance of this topic is to provide the viewer a lens to a different reality of one’s ‘otherness.’ Social history has had a continual habit of alterity with the exclusion, mistreatment and inequalities of ‘others.’ Art and fiction are vehicles to share the stories behind these social issues that stem from being different from the norm, the status quo. The definitions of ‘who’ and ‘what’ counts are cluttered in the ideology of social and cultural constructs, and those who fall
outside today come from an extensive, rich history of diversely exhibiting outside the dominate social sphere. Through illustrations and fiction, the audience will be exposed to a realm of new knowledge and experiences, while critiquing modern society in correlation with highlighting socioeconomic injustices and inequalities in experiences in everyday life. Each story will meticulously generate life in characters trapped in different social issues so the viewer cogitates the intricacies of the harsh realities that contemporary life forges with everyday experiences. Not only will the viewer gain awareness of one’s self as a person, but the reader will also cultivate an awareness of how social and cultural dynamics can impact one’s well-being. With the intent to provide an escape from a limited perspective, the illustrations and fiction short stories offer an exploration of new ways of thinking. While providing a voice and representing the unheard, they encourage the audience to question, think, and notice the transcends of limitations humans and society create in everyday experiences. The realm of a new consciousness of another’s perspective will communicate a need for social change while instilling compassion, empathy and a knowledge of accountability for choices and actions one makes daily.

The key limitation of this topic is that I will be writing the stories from a combination of the real and the imagined; nevertheless, I cannot relate to some issues because I have not experienced them personally. While I can relate to some issues, either from personal experience or from a spectator point of view, I can never fully feel how someone else feels who has experienced these social issues. I can only have empathy/sympathy when serving as a vessel to provide a voice of awareness, but not speak for the entire population. ‘You never really understand a person until you consider things from his (sic) point of view…until you climb into his skin and walk around in it’ (Lee, 1988, p. 39). Through these stories I want to engage the viewer in the reality of social issues and the perspectives of individuals encased in them, while
providing an opportunity for the viewer to take on the role as a social change agent. My biggest concern is that I represent the social issue and cultural group/individual in a respectful manner.

Fragments of the Real World

The common story of struggle is what defines us all and humanity, especially when these stories are based on the social realities of lived experiences because of differences, injustices and inequalities derived from pre-established world perceptions including cultural perspectives and knowledge of others. “The human does not exist without experience” (Serres, 1997, p. 31). Social behavioral standards, norms and values are underlying factors of the quality of lived experiences which greatly influence the construction of these stories depicting everyday struggles. “For life is no uniform uninterrupted march or flow” (Dewey, 2005, p. 37). Fiction and art, both simulations of social experience, are useful tools for delivering these stories of struggle to a wider audience. Struggles brought on by otherness. “This is a world which one wanders within and between multiple boarders and spaces marked by excess, otherness, and difference” (Giroux, 1996, p. 31). Through both of these creative communicative outlets the audience is exposed to an unmeasurable realm of new knowledge and others’ experiences because they reveal one to the realities of social, cultural and historical events that one may not otherwise be subjected to. Experience is affected by conditions of life. “The nature of experience is determined by the essential conditions of life” (Dewey, 2005, p. 12). It is these conditions that strengthen the struggles that define individuals or groups in societies. “For our identities are defined in relation to how others identify us, and they do so in terms of groups which are always already associated with specific attributes, stereotypes, and norms” (Young, 2006, p. 43). Writers and artists both shine light on history, current events and societal norms. “We live in a world where people face one another across gulfs of geography, language, and nationality” (Nussbaum,
2010, p. 79). The world is like an encyclopedia with countless subjects as entries defined by identity markers, morals and values while journeying through everyday experiences gaining information and learning about the world around them through social interactions. “Every thought, idea and particular is interwoven with the whole societal life process” (Held, 1980, p. 182). So much knowledge the world contains and bestows. So much difference. So much pain, unjust, unfair treatment accompanied with some positivity and hope, intertwined with varied emotions. “It is rooted in the belief that everything that exists within the life experiences of a person or group of people is their reality” (Emdin, 2013, p. 18). It is this reality that artists use words and visual imagery to depict these experiences, the struggles along with the accords. “The voice is also an important expressive instrument” (Rose, 1994, p. 66). The artists use their individualized voices, vividly and creatively depicting how society has treated them or their community. “Language, through literature but in other areas as well, circulates and creates new opportunities to change our minds with/in the world” (Weaver, 2010, p. 2). They take creative risks to share the imperfections society has—the injustices, inequalities, harsh living communities, daily struggles, and so much more. “Reality impinges upon, constrains individuals; it remains something seemingly ‘non-human,’ objectified and reified” (Held, 1980, p.190). Reality shapes experiences. Reality shapes beings.

Artwork depicting the inescapable societal problems of inequalities serves as both a mirror and a window, depending on who locks eyes with the artistic view. Social inequalities affect everyone and art brings these prevalent struggles to the forefront in the manner of an artistic light. “Through aesthetic form (the style and qualities of a work) aspects of the human condition are revealed” (Held, 1980, p. 85). A mirror because familiarity is noticed; a window because the view is different, exposing an alternative reality. “We are concerned with possibility,
with opening windows on alternative realities, with moving through doorways into spaces some of us have never seen before” (Greene, 2001, p. 44). Art can make analogies to the external world illuminating the struggles of others. “If every picture tells a story, so every person has stories to tell” (Leland, 1998, p.40). The intersection of artwork, stories and meaning with the human persona are defined by a shared focus that engages viewers to tap into their consciousness with respect to their individualized experiences, opinions, boundaries, emotions and beliefs. “All great art has meaning beyond itself” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 18). Art reflects culture—mirrors the aesthetic standard of the time—art comments on culture. Artwork is a cultural strategy, one that is used to help expose and shift the way people perceive some aspect of the social world. “Art offers life; it offers hope; it offers the prospect of discovery; it offers light” (Greene, 2000, p. 133). Art manages to convey profound messages, representing itself as immediate truth. “When art causes our senses to mix and merge, our perceptions are altered and everything becomes more ‘densely packed’ and mixed up” (Morris, 2016, vol. 2, p. 42).

A work of art functions to engage beings with the world around them in some manner, by communicating realities, beliefs and ideas about the human experience—experience that is not defined by a specific civilization or time period.

One of the advances of our time is a (sometimes grudging) recognition on the part of many of us that those we have long categorized as other for whatever reason (ethnicity, gender, religion, education, culture, mores, geographic location, physical condition) share in the human condition. (Greene, 2000, p. 3)

Artwork can be seen as a catalyst to this recognition. “Images complete reality” (Bachelard, 2002, p. 130). Images portrayed in fiction and art provide exposure to social realities and
important insights into past and existing cultural and social norms, which helps us to understand how we have lived, how others have lived, and values amidst both. “The arts in general teach us to see, to feel, and indeed to know” (Baron & Eisner, 2012, p. 6). Artwork provides us with portraits of emerging cultures and social realities that cultivate human mental and moral awareness. Artwork teaches us about life and about difference. It aids with the exploration of different points of views and perceptions in new ways. “Images can enhance empathetic understanding and generalizability” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 45). A work of art takes on an aesthetic form to stimulate emotions, to change minds, to produce thinking, and to elicit a response. “Beauty in whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears” (Poe, 2007, p. 5). Art is an object of experience, one that mirrors society. One that envisions seeing more than merely what is in front of you, exploring the underlying meaning, recording ephemeral feelings and aspiring for change. “The structure of art forms enacts an alternative vision” (Held, 1980, p. 81). The real world is unfair, complicated and overwhelming. “Humans have invented a variety of forms of representation to describe and understand the world in as many ways as it can be represented” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 164). Exposing one to mankind’s essential life lessons and experiences, these artistic forms can teach us to be human while helping us identify with one another, can provide a perception of ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ or ‘other,’ can enlighten one to different experiences, perspectives, ideas and knowledge, and can help us to understand something with not only our minds, but also with our feelings—emotionally and physically—looking beyond the veil of the known. We have all read those books that become glued to our hands, raging a war of full engagement with our thoughts and emotions, as we interact with the characters and their social realities ever so delinquent crafted through the author’s voice. Books that produce an imagination of possibilities shift our thinking
on individuals, groups and social norms, make us explore the hazy areas that make humans, their experiences and social interactions complicated and facile and outline morally just and reputable experiences. There are ones that provide hope and resilience in an effort to uplift the communities infiltrated into society. As we read, our inner thoughts and feelings stir because of the relatable personas with the characters we come into contact with, building an emotional attachment. We feel raw, exposed to the truths depicted—truths in all forms. We invest our inner psyche into viewing the events we read about, the characters and the experiences, from someone else’s perspective. We invite this alternative point of view into our consciousness. We follow along as these characters suffer due to their differences, being forced into hardships while along the way making difficult decisions, producing an appreciation for human life. We live with these characters, we suffer with them. We envision ourselves as one with the characters, taking on the emotions they are feeling during their social experiences—their realities. Through this association brought on by our connection with fictional characters, we form a bond, we produce empathy. “Because it summons powerful emotions, it disconnects and puzzles” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 5). Fiction portrays a variety of humanitarian issues—ones we identify with on a personal level or through our knowing someone. We see ourselves or someone we know in the characters we read about. The language is rich, gripping us, drawing us closer, penetrating our consciousness which helps us recreate the experiences, allowing us to relate to the experiences. Fiction helps us embody differences. “All men (sic) must escape at times from the deadly rhythm of their private thoughts” (Chandler, 2007, p. 101). A journey is taken by the reader through the story, investing themselves and their emotions. Journeys through cultural differences and inequalities, through the hearts of mankind, asking us to question our fabrics of being and build understanding. Journeys where we are indeed the experiencer—the learner. Fictional writings are
keys that unlock one’s consciousness to the differences of others, allowing them to journey into another’s reality.
Here I am, sitting in utter silence, listening to only the racketing rhythm of the wheels that are not quite encompassing the circular rim framework that glides the cart across the track. The
unsteady rhythm provides a pulse of unconsciousness driven by a humming and steady wavering motion. A loss of my purpose silently retracts into the shadows of my being. I sit there, my body unconsciously rhythmically dancing with the movement of the cart. A break in my meditating rhythm occurs as the track bulges the cart in an indirect, unnatural movement. Suddenly aware of my surroundings, I frantically direct my attention to the compartment at my feet. My hand hastily bobs up and down on the floor, hitting every nook in the compartment. A slick texture grazes my fingertips and I ungracefully pick up the photo. With a wave of relief, I carefully straighten my most prized possession, leaving fingerprints while caressing it methodically. I wallow in the reality of the photo, of the woman she had become. One who had a voice, who stood up for what she believed, and who did not shy away from staring down adversity in its callus face. Lifting from the seat next to me, I tenderly slide the photo into the front cover of the book, a book ever so cherished for it was her book, and now it is mine. A book that articulates life’s words and experiences, her life—her words, her life experiences. For a few moments, I gaze out the window, graphically examining the landscape that rapidly disappears from view. With the book securely in my hands, I thumb to a page and begin to read.

November 4, 2007

A voice is a forklift that can mobilize mountains.

A voice challenges traditions, thoughts and beliefs.

A voice is a powerful testament.
A voice is knowledge.

A voice is destructive, harmful and can banish.

A voice brings out social anxieties.

A voice is emotion depicting life's experiences.

A voice is an atonement of blind recruitment.

A voice is a right.

I have a voice!

How are you going to use your voice?

The book collapses over my fingertips as I immerse the meaning of voice to my essence, for this is the purpose of my journey. It has been embedded in my inner consciousness from a young age that I have a voice and it is powerful. I packed minimally. Only this book, the clothes on my back, and the poster, which is inactive in the seat next to me; heading for the destination to launch my voice, to be heard. I flip to the next page, her first entry. An entry that eventually cultivates into a manifestation of personalized entries defining her life’s journey. One that is a beginning. One that shares her first active crusade in her belief. While this entry depicts her first crusade, a crusade influenced at a young age, it is not the defining moment of her life. That comes later. I begin to read her scripted writing.
October 27, 1988

The First Hoorah:

This morning, I soundlessly quick step through my house exiting the backdoor without stirring attention from my father, avoiding the reprimand that would venture my way if he found out. I climb through the window of my car in order to conceal the noise associated with closing the door. I take a deep breath and, in that moment, promptly bring to life the car, throw it in gear and take off down the driveway, peering back in the mirror to see if my father would drunkenly stagger from the house in an attempt to derail my journey.

I wind down a road to a destination that navigates me some distance from my town. I can’t be seen close by, for my father knows everyone and would definitely find out. The whipping of the wind breaking through the framework of my open windows twirls my hair into a frantic array like I have been head banging at a Metallica concert. I turn on the radio and settle into my drive, for it is not a close journey—I dare not stay too close to home. Lost in my thoughts brought on by the music playing, I almost miss my final turn. The car comes to a rest, a stalemate among an immense crowd. A nervous twitch travels down my body. The courage to exit the car escapes me momentarily. This is my first time, I do not know what to expect. Empty-handed I slowly open the driver’s side door and exit the car. I
stutter step in the direction toward the noise, intensity growing in magnitude with each step. I remind myself that I have a purpose today...I am their voice.

I hesitantly walk toward the eruption of noise. As I grow nearer, I am thrust into the utter chaos of yelling, confusion, signs propelling vertically in the air and crowdedness so great that it is befuddling whose side of the fence I am standing on. A shear overwhelming pain of nervousness comes over me. I shudder to the side, out of the chaos. Uncertain of the environment I have inserted myself into, I space myself from the protesting crowd. For some reason, I do not stop walking, I just keep spacing myself farther and farther. I am their voice, but maybe not today.

Before the crowd disappears from view, I turn one last time to the panoramic scene to captivate the experience unfolding before me. This is my first true meaningful, concrete experience with regard to the destiny of my voice. I am not ready for it today, but I will be. With my head hanging low, I extend drag back into my car. The car sluggishly rolls out of the parking lot, this time no radio and no windows down, and I begin my long journey home, feeling unaccomplished and unmotivated. Next time. This moment will not define my voice. My voice will be greater than this moment. I know it will.
As I read her journal entry, emotions of uncertainty stir within me. She was young, barely old enough to drive. I am much older now than she was then. I am on my way to embark on my first journey to be their voice. Would my experience be synonymous to hers? I sink into my chair and gaze out the window, pondering the reality that would ensue. A tap on my shoulder startles me into an upright position that propels the book onto the floor, rousing me from my unconscious daydream. I am promptly asked if I would like a beverage, which I decline, and like a contortionist manipulate my body to pick up the book. I begin to thumb through the pages, again landing on one of her writings about animals. Even though her first experience is unpredictably shortcoming, this experience does not detour her voice. It is a building block to her voice empire that she would steadily build. While the next occasion will not come for some time, she promptly puts her words down on paper to buy time. Her voice is inscribed throughout this book, a book she gave to me. I expose the inner summations once again and begin to read.

April 13, 2000

Passing Through an Identity Crisis:

Who is human? Who is animal? Are we really that different?

We are not all humans, but we are ALL animals. I am human. I am animal. Oh, how this notion stirs up a manifestation of emotions and beliefs upon humanity as a society. Animals and humans alike are embodied souls—alive, filled with
emotions. Filled with similar emotions. Projecting love, hate, compassion, loneliness. There is an essence of soul within us all, those that are considered only animals and those that are considered humans. We are alike, we are one. How can we be so different? Some say it is because humans are moral. My question is, are we really? Not only do we kill for sport, we kill for fur, skin and ivory—for FUN. Animals are continually subjected to cruelty and neglect—debased by the human population. Violent crimes against animals occur daily. We entice the fighting of them for what...money. We take their innocence away. We take their lives. Thou shall not kill...WE KILL! We subject them to purgatory until we coin them worthy enough to dismember them into food. They are innocent. They surely do not want such conviction. Again, I ask are we moral? Human moral transgressions correlate to destroying others. We are harming others. We are harming animals.

How is this humane? How is this moral?

How can one species destroy, betray and harm another?

Animals—what we all are!

My fingers rhythmically dance through the pages landing on another excerpt of her writing. One of my favorites, a poignant depiction of how her voice began. An experience that set forth her
journey. A journey that is not so easily forgotten and impeded on her youth which, while traumatizing, served as a lens to bring out her voice.

October 16, 1999

The Beginning of My Voice:

The date is ever so clear, like a fresh scar, October 16, 1977. I did not want to be there that morning. I knew the purpose. I hated the purpose—a purpose forced upon me this morning. A purpose I tried so hard to never be exposed to, enthralled within. The purpose was evident by the mass grave of the killed—more like murdered—executed strategically like a puzzle on the walls of my house. A house I dreaded to enter so much. A house that was drained of love and drained of respect—respect of others, respect of the animal.

We laid there perched on a hill, looking for any sign of movement. I did not want to be there, but knew I could not speak of this aloud. There I laid with my secret, praying for no movement to stir. A thunderous crack that shook me to the core was followed by a squall of booms that sounded like multiple car backfires. I glanced out into the landscape, knowing my prayers were unanswered, to see the life drain from one of the most beautiful creatures God placed in this world. A creature, whose broad stature exemplified one of strength, safety and love, one of
a protecting family man. A creature only moments ago, unaware of the untimely
death about to be embarked upon him—harmless, minding his own business,
living freely upon his land, his home. His body splashed around on the ground
where it fell momentarily, then finally rested still. Tears moistened my eyes and
my hands fisted tightly into a ball of anger. Choking on my rage and hate for my
father, I sat there in silence. I said nothing in that moment because if I did, the
hate would slash itself across my face. A hate of different opinions. A hate of
disappointment. A hate of anger. What was his family going to do without him?
Who would protect them? This useless act of violence toward another animal
shredded my heart, splintering it with pain. Unanswered prayers that morning—
broken heart, anguish. Pain for the animal, pain for his family, pain for me and
undeserving pain for my father. How could a man be so cruel and get such
pleasure in the harming and misery of another animal?

As my tears formed more fiercely in the dwellings of my eyes, my dad forcefully
grabbed me and shoved me in the direction of his kill. Ashamed of his action,
tears continued to well up and gently slid down my cheeks leaving a trail of wet
droplets behind as we proceeded closer. I bit my bottom lip to mask the quivering
from my father, to escape the wrath of a verbal attack. The death had been so
senseless—avoidable and cruel. My dad boasts with affirmative exhilaration
while he presses the barrel of his gun to the forehead of the bear, whose life is
slowly draining away—whose life is nearing a premature end. My stomach
ascends into my throat…I think I am going to be sick. I stand off to the side,
sliding away from my father, staring into the soul of the bear through his damaged and pained eyes. I just wanted to run to him and comfort him. Rub his back until he feels better. But, Death is the only solution to stop his pain—his death will end all his pain. Death is near. Death will only make him better, but his death had inflicted unwanted pain on me. My pain will always last, for I can never un-see this. For I can never forgive!

A glaze of water slowly surfaced over my eyes as I continued to read. She experienced this unwarranted infliction of pain, death onto another animal, by a man she loved so much at a very young and vulnerable age. This was one of those lived moments that influenced her life choices. She never forgot this traumatizing experience. I know because she has spoken of it many years later. Mapping my finger down the page to a line she added a year later, I paused on a drawing of a young her caressing the back of a bear, whose eyes so vividly portrayed the hurt her father inflicted on him that day. I then fixated on the final line to the page. This line is the beginning of who she would become and what she would stand for.

October 16, 1991

*Passion cultivated within me that day—for the other, for the animal!*

I extract my pen from the confinement of the inner cotton of my pocket. Gradually I shimmy the book to an angle and methodically, for my current ride is a textured terrain, inscribe at the
bottom of the page under her last line. A line that intertwined my journey with hers. A line that etched my purpose alongside hers.

May 30, 2017

*I have a voice too. A voice like yours. Now it’s my turn.*

I remove the photo out of the front cover of the book and eagerly study her facial features, ones that define a strong woman who firmly believed that animals were soulful beings that had rights. Rights to live a meaningful life without suffering. Rights to live a meaningful life without exploitation. Rights to make their own life choices. Rights to love and protect their families. Rights to be free. A life’s journey summed up in one photo. A defining moment. Her greatest moment. A moment where she is the strongest voice, a voice to be heard. She led the rally that day. A rally that defined the unjust treatment of animals, for we are all animals and should be treated equally. I continued to flip back and forth through the pages reading entry after entry.

December 18, 1990

*Dwelling on Equality:*

*Today I found an old poem I wrote as a class assignment when I was twelve. We had to write on a topic of our choice, only stipulation...it needed to be something*
we were passionate about. It was a no-brainer the subject I was going to write about.

February 18, 1982

I’m tired of being an animal like me,

A human is what I’d rather be.

They rule the kingdom and make the rules,

And make us out to be beastly fools.

I want to live a long, happy life,

But they destroy our souls with a knife.

We’re not the same, can’t you see,

The world would be a better place if we were equal and let each other be.

I was so opinionated and stubborn at such a young age. I remember reading this poem in front of my class, a class full of children who eerily stared in my direction snickering with disagreement and an unwillingness to appreciate my voice. My belief. My childhood experiences, being raised in a house where the animal was menial and unjustly killed to serve as wall décor, definitely defined the casting of my voice. A voice that would mature over time. A voice that would be heard.
What an amazing woman she was. So strong and so passionate. Many people go their entire lives not being as strong-willed as she was, and she was at such a young age. I only hope one day I have the courage to be as strong-willed. To not care what other people think regarding me and my opinions. To not divert from my being, my beliefs and my voice. I start to read again.

August 6, 1989

A Fence Is Created:

There is a clear divide between animals and humans. A fence is built. A fence of morality. One set so high that the two species cannot cross into equality. A belief that one has humanity while the other does not. The other—the animal—does not.

Oh, how this is such a bad belief. One that leads to moral lapses toward the other, who defined by society are not humans, the animal. These thoughts and assumptions, are tenacious. These thoughts influence actions, actions that are harmful and degrading. A way of life chosen for the other, defined by humans. We chose to build a fence. To make it high enough that there can never be equality.

Why do we define our lives to be better than animals? Are we really better?

June 21, 1993

Prisoners of War:
Tied up, caged, barred from freely roaming, and abused—animals are prisoners of war. Humans are the commanders, the rule makers and the law enforcers.

Animals are in the custody of humans. We own them. We choose for them. We barricade them in constraints, limiting their movement, their lives. We lynch them to inanimate entities to prevent their natural roaming, making them vulnerable to the harmful effects that society offers. We humiliate them for the enterprise of entertainment, not allowing them to be their natural selves. For what - a good laugh! An ooh, an aww. We continually exploit them for their labor—why do a job, when someone (no, something) else can do it? Animals have no rights.

Animals are abused. Animals are punished. Sounds exactly like a prisoner to me!

As I read, an experience discharged into my consciousness from a compartment at the back of my memory gland. One I had long thought about. Since my youth, I have always loved animals, all kinds of animals. Definitely an inheritance from her. When I was six…I think…it was about fifteen years ago, so I am not exactly positive of the age, she took me to the zoo. I so vividly remember upon walking into the zoo, seeing all these different animals confined to areas that humans prescribed livable for them. Humans created and fashioned the landscape for each species of animal to inhabit. As natural as the habitat looked, their home was far from true. Zoos are humans’ architectural prison to confine a species of animals into one enterprise of entertainment. Animals whose sole function is to entertain an audience solidifies them as a fabricator for gains. A maker of profit (money). A maker of entertainment (more money). This
concept is constructed and believed to be no harm. Habitats of exclusion. Habitats of order. Order there is, only because of the spatial separation of these animals who are not a surplus, are imprisoned within a man-made society created to showcase their livelihood for a profit. I peer out the window, taking in how much I loved graphically dissecting the characteristics of each animal species in the moment. I was naïve then, but she allowed me to be. She allowed me to cherish this experience, this bonding moment I had with animals, without imposing her voice. The landscape offered no clues as to the length of my travel still to come, so I flipped to another page in the book and read some more.

May 2, 1991

Are We Really that Different?

Today I attended another rally supporting the rights of animals. A true believer in the cause. My voice is making a difference; it matters, for it serves as an advocate for animal voices. This rally really delved into the idea of lives that matter. A question was posed to society. Whose lives matter? Are we really that different, different enough to build a hierarchy of importance? With similarities of mind, animals have morals and emotions. They can communicate and reason.

Memories have a permanent residence within my psyche. Some good, some bad, some happy, some sad. These pervasive memories affect choices I make. When confronted with a decision, I make a judgement based on previous information
and experiences gathered in my realm of being. I am a social creature by nature. I invest time and effort in supporting, protecting and loving my family and community. I realize error of judgment. I provide useful information to society. So, the real question is... am I human or animal? Are we really that different?

I turned the pages and began to read another entry.

February 12, 2001

It’s Not Our Fur:

Outside the factory we stood. I was one in an overstretching crowd. Today it was cold, very cold, but that would not discourage us from our purpose that day. The chatter of my teeth soared a deafening tone, but I stood tall, unwavering to succumb to the jitters the cold forged on me. I continued to hold high my sign, one that read, “Only Animals Should Wear Fur.” Authority encompasses us to intimidate us in keeping things peaceful. Don’t they know, peace is why we protest. For the peaceful treatment of animals. To bring the knowledge of love for animals. To not exploit animals for monetary items. We stood here today to spread this love, to spread this wisdom, the wisdom of love toward animals.
A glimpse of a hairy creature from the seat across from me does not escape the corner of my eye. It’s a fur coat, one that is deemed stylish and luxurious. On a sheet of paper in the back of the book I begin to scribble. When you go window shopping or skim through a magazine to find your next high-fashion coat to purchase, think about the animals that were inhumanely harmed or killed to make it. When you put on that fur coat, it is just like skinning the animals yourself and draping their skin and fur over your shoulders and back. Their blood is on you, for you’re the reason animals are continually tortured and killed in fur factory farms. I rip the page from the book and fold it up. It will serve its purpose later. Do I feel badly for what I inscribed on this paper? Not really. I feel badly for the innocent animals being tortured and killed in order to make a nonessential item. One that is not needed for human survival. I peer one more time in the direction of the coat, turn to another page in the book, and continue reading.

April 27, 1998

No Animals=No Humans:

How would society be different without nonhuman animals present? A drastic change in our diet would occur. You want that juicy burger tonight for dinner...too bad. And your cereal in the morning is going to be quite dry. You better have a glass of water with it. There is a change in the menu...forever: No More Meat, Goodbye Dairy. Sharpen your knives humans, it’s time to slay some plants and fruits, but not all at once, we do not want to put a strain on these plants and fruit-bearing trees. Oh yeah...plant life is also going to be different,
taste different and textured differently, because there are no insects to assist in their nourishment and maturation. Now that we have an understanding of our new diet, let’s talk about clothes. Go ahead and take them off…all of them. You need to go find the biggest leaf you can and cover yourself…otherwise you are standing there naked. Only humans exist—we are animals and we are all naked. Aren’t we?

Reading a few more entries, I begin to think of her. To think about the difficulties life thrusted in her direction. I flip the page and begin reading another entry of hers.

October 7, 2006

For the Love of an Animal:

There was a reason I turned right into the parking lot that day. I intended to just take a look...that was all. As I proceeded closer, our eyes met. It was love at first sight. There he was, ecstatically waging his tail, begging me to pick him up. I knew I should not, but I succumbed and did. That was all it took. Immediately, he synced his head into the crevasse of my neck and morphed his body into my chest; we methodically weaved around the cages. Needless to say, I did not put him down that day except in the back seat of my car. We were headed home. I was an ‘I’ and now I am a ‘we.’ Sam, my newest companion, is my knotted being. He has
fastened and braided himself within the context of my life. “We!’ That is what he
did to me that day. He got me to gather him up and made me a “we.”

We lived a long, happy life together making memories that will last forever. He
filled my heart when it was lost and empty. He contently listened when I needed to
talk—or vent, scream, have a meltdown. He always seemed to know when I
needed a hug, which he did by nuzzling up against my body. He was never a
kisser, which I was glad about, but that did not stop him from placing his cold,
wet nose on my check when I was sad. He always seemed to tell when I was
having, or when I had, a bad day. He was a fierce protector and my family. His
bark was definitely louder than his bite, but he took care of us—me and him, just
the two of us.

Today is a gut-wrenching sad day. My soul is ravished with sorrow. Today I lost a
family member. One that stood by me through tough times, protected me and
loved me unconditionally. Today I am grateful for this companion. Today I am
grateful that we locked eyes fifteen years ago. Today I am grateful that we shared
life together. I will always love you Sam. You will always be in my heart. Till we
meet again.
A glistening encased my eyes. I sunk my head to angle down toward my feet, for I did not want anyone to see. I did not want anyone to see me vulnerable in this moment. I really missed him. My mom loved him fiercely and passed on that love to me. Her companion was my companion. I never knew the sorrow she had from an empty heart prior to accepting Sam into her family until I read this. Wiping the drips from my eyes, I reopened the book to again read. The writing is different on this page, one of an immature body. A body who had not yet experienced life, for I am the one who wrote it because she was unable to do so. She laid beside me that day, not the same woman, as I inscribe her spoken words into the book. She indolently stutters her words and I scruffily clutter them onto the paper at the back of the book. Her last entry was written by me, or so I thought.

July 11, 2008

Her Defining Moment:

It was a big day! A day that took much preparation. I led a group in the planning of a march that would take place in front of an animal research lab. Our group wanted to bring awareness to the unruly treatment of animals through experimentation there. A task that took much time and invention to successfully accomplish. We precisely planned. A planning that took many months. Talking back and forth. Planning, sharing, agreeing, arguing—not seeing eye to eye and then seeing eye to eye. However, it needed to occur—all of it. As a group we need to define the intentions and expectations of this march. The purpose!
There is a long history of how animals are treated within the human society.

There are many people, believers in our cause, who have traced these origins. Traced how animals have infused in human society. As pets. As food. As experiments. As workers. As attractions. One of the goals for this march was to bring awareness to how humans treat animals, both the good and the bad. Human beings the dictator. Why are humans judged to be this shepherd? Why are humans deemed the ones to constantly look over all beings, to decide how beings should be treated, to decide how beings should live? Are we really superior? What makes us superior—language? We are not the only species that have language. There is a communication barrier among species because we all speak different languages. We all have a language, no one more superior than another. Animals are subjected to death, exploitation, cruelty, and living conditions that are well below adequate. All of which we planned to unveil to society during our march, for this reality of animal abuse is much beyond today and will exceed into the future—with no end in sight. We met weekly to discuss our plan. Over and over again we met. We met to build a foundation that provided the best opportunity for a positive outcome. We were ready. Our plan materialized and now the only thing left was to execute it.

It was a beautiful morning. We met one last time before we took action to unveil society’s drama regarding the treatment of animals. We took formation and began walking toward the animal research lab, protest signs of the fleet waving with the rhythm of the breeze. We perched ourselves on the stairs, protesting peacefully.
Not a single word was spoken, just our signs doing the talking. There we stood for an extended amount of time. A crowd structures around us, both to support and to oppose. We continued to stand firm, in silence, letting the circumference noise of society lap around us. It was time. I moved to the top step, a step so high that I was superior to the expanding crowd below me. Raising the bullhorn to my vocals, it was time to use my voice. My voice was the luxurious vehicle that day. A vehicle that carpooled the voices of others, both humans and animals. A voice for ones who could not speak for themselves because we did not share a common language. I could no longer stay quiet. I was the commander of the crowd. As I spoke, a pulsing throng circulated among the crowd. Boos interjected, but not deterred. I passed through the gauntlet of my speech, finalizing it with an exhilarating exclamation. We are all human! We are all individuals!

In that final moment that day an exclamation to her life occurred. At that instant she limped in a thunderous collapse to the ground. She, like an animal, an innocent victim to an unjustly act. An act in that moment that would forever change her life. A moment planned to be a peaceful voice. A moment so eloquently planned. A moment she was destined for. A moment where she was the voice. Her voice was silenced that day, but her memory was defined. Her purpose was illuminated for the world to see. I glare out the window and take in the woman she was. The woman I loved so greatly and continue to love. The woman I strive to synonymously become. The landscape is offering details that I am nearing my destination. I prepare to close the book, but a page eludes the process by rolling up between others. It was at the back. I opened the book to provide assistance in straightening it and noticed handwriting on it. It was handwriting I
recognized, but not mine. It was her handwriting, but not written as attractively as in the rest of
the book. Handwriting that was inserted behind her last entry, the one I wrote so long ago for
her. I read the first line and tears bombarded my face. There was no stopping the waterfall as I
continued to read.

July 22, 2008

Dear Son,

If you are reading this, I have inhabited a star amongst the sky where I will stay
perched to watch over you until the day we meet again, which will be a long time
to come. Don’t worry, I am surrounded by love and Sam is here sitting with me. I
did everything in my power—such a strong word—to stay with you because there
is not anywhere I would rather be than with you. No matter where you are, I will
always be with you. My love, laughter and support created a multitude of
memories will always accompany you wherever your travels bring you and with
whatever life commands. Continue to smile, for your smile lights up a room, and
smile because we lived. Together we lived life to the fullest—trying new things,
moving mountains, having fun and loving. Every moment with you was pure joy
and I had the best job in the world—to be your mommy.

Enough of the soppy stuff…time for some real advice. Life is going to bring you
many great accomplishments: graduation, marriage, kids, careers - the list goes
on and on. Make sure you take your time through life, cherish every moment and make memories. Do not rush. You have a purpose and will do many great things. Make sure you love. Find someone to love and love them full-heartedly, for life is lonely and boring otherwise. Make sure it is someone who completes you and loves you for who you are and what you stand for. Stand firm behind your beliefs because they are the fortitude of your embodiment. They are the strong foundation that defines you and makes you stand out from the crowd. Change is good (and inevitable). Grow with change, embrace it. Pick a current and paddle hard, fight for the direction you want to go. Don’t let life make you too serious, have some fun.

Most importantly, always remember you have a voice. It is powerful. It is real. Don’t let your voice be silenced. Use it. Use it for good. Use it for what you believe. Use it to make memories. I envy the power your voice will become, for I know it will do great things. I wish I could be around to see it firsthand, but I know you will use your voice to change the world, to do good things.

You are forever in my heart and I am forever in yours!

I love you,

Mom

A voice is a right! You have a voice! How are you going to use your voice?
The train comes to an abrupt stop jarring my upper body forward and sliding my poster to the front of the seat. I wipe away the waves of love streaming down my face. It is time. The book closes for good. With a grip so tightly to not allow the book to sway, I fell into silence for the last time on this journey. Sitting in silence, I let the words sink in, weighing heavily on my consciousness. I rose up and began toward the direction of the exit. I glanced back at my seat to take in my emotional walk that led me to this point. I scanned to the seat across from me where I so nonchalantly laid the note I had written earlier on the fur coat. A moment later, I filed out of the exit door with my few things, book with the photo tucked carefully under my left arm and the poster clinched between my fingertips in my other hand. It’s my time. I am ready to embark on my mission…to be a voice. I am their voice! I am the voice!
CHAPTER 3: THE ONES WHO DON’T COME HOME
I often find myself sitting at this unfinished desk—missing a drawer—running the tips of my fingers across the etched graffiti scratches all over the top. It sits slightly slanted to the right, but I cannot bring myself to dispose of it to some waste field to be burnt or broken into pieces. Here I sit again at this desk—once my father’s—a father I never met, looking at the fingerprint smudges in the top corner. I caress my fingers over the ink stamps coming to a rest where they interlay in the prints. An emotional force thrusts its way past my fragile wall producing a reaction of tears painfully blinked, generating friction, pushing the droplets over the banks of my eyelids. Following the river down my cheek bones, the tears expressionistically splash onto the top of the desk—his desk, a desk many times sprayed with his tears. I don’t know what would be harder: growing up not knowing your father or knowing him during his worst times. I never got to meet my father, for I was not yet born when he decided he must go. With my fingers still interlaced in his prints on the desk, I feel him within me and know him because of the stories my mother has told me and through his writings to her. Writings that now call the box sitting delicately on the left side of his desk—their permanent resting place—my two most valued possessions. I gently slide the box in front of me, slip off the lid and pull out an envelope resting on top of the pile. An endless transaction between two individuals lies in this pile of letters—a communication of longing, friendship and love occurring miles apart. The main way they corresponded during my father’s stationed assignments throughout his two tours. I gaze at the handwriting adorning the envelope. My handwriting is so similar to his. I flip the envelope over, starting a pile on the desk next to the box. I grab a small handful of letters and add them to the pile, leaving the bottom envelope delicately laying on the desk in front of me. Gently, I open the envelope, not disturbing its authentic form, and slide the handwritten letter out. Unfolding the
aged, stained paper, I begin to read the words my father so affectionately scribbled to my mother long ago.

My Dear,

Every morning I wake up knowing I will get to see your beautiful smile soon is what is getting me through these last days of my deployment. It is quite boring these days because I am currently stationed where there is no action, so these days are slow and long. I know this makes you smile though! I am in good health and trying to enjoy what little time I have left here with my buddies. Please give everyone a hug for me. See you soon, I love you the most.

As I read this letter, the corner of my lips curl up in remembrance of the many stories my mom told me articulating how they met and fell in love, flooding to the forefront of my thoughts. There is nothing really special about how they met. Just two teens, both ready to graduate, running into each other (literally) in the mall. My mom was carrying a couple of shopping bags and after pausing to window shop at a store, quickly rounded the corner to catch up to her friends. Next thing she knew, there was a thud and her bags were on the floor. In startled disbelief, she peered up into what she describes as the purest baby blue eyes, which were meeting hers with an equally dubious stare. As the story goes...the rest was history. He helped pick her stuff up and she walked around with him the rest of the afternoon, ditching her friends. I
place the letter back into the envelope, set it upside down next to the box, and grab another one from inside. The stack of letters was lofty because my mom kept every single letter. I am surprised that she was able to keep all these letters pristine and intact.

My Dearest,

t'd sent you a special surprise the other day. It will definitely get there before you receive this letter. Hopefully these friendly reminders of home help you get through the last days of your deployment. A year is a long time to be away from you, but I am extremely proud of you and your commitment to this country. I cannot wait for you to come home and we get to spend time together once again. Stay safe and come home. I love you the mostest!

These two letters were written at the end of my father’s first tour, in which he found himself stationed in Afghanistan. My mom once told me that this deployment would change my father for the better and that his deployment during his second tour would change him for the worst. I do not have much knowledge of my father’s past prior to meeting my mom, for she would not reveal too much about that time, only hinting at some poor choices and a lost scholarship, which steered him to enroll in the army. He was running away from his life. Running away from everyone and everything. Meeting my mom right before he was to graduate high school and be shipped to training ruined this mindset for him. Initially, he was still running away, however he
could not help but stay linked to this little piece of home, my mom. I add this letter atop the stack sitting on the desk, then take a handful out and flip them over producing a taller stack next to the box. By doing this, the letters would remain in order by date. My mom was real fickle about keeping these letters in the correct order. I dare not mess up this immaculate uniformity. She would ever so often find herself reading through the letters—of course in order—reminiscing on the life she once shared with my father. I grab the next letter out of the box and begin to read.

My Dearest,

Today I walked through the field of sunflowers, running my hand along the tops of the flowers, where you proposed. As I wandered through this perfect panoramic of beauty, I could not help but find myself smiling as I reminisced about this special day. I never told you, but you caught me quite off guard that day. I was very surprised to turn around that day to find the love of my life bended to one knee proclaiming his love for me. I had not the slightest idea that you were going to propose to me that day on our picnic excursion that led us to this most beautiful scenic sunflower field. By the way—Great job on the ring! My mom did a great job helping you out. I just found out about that when she let it slip at dinner.

I have begun to eagerly plan for the wedding, looking in a few details, most importantly my dress. I think you will be pleasantly surprised by my choice. I knew if you were with me today, you would be bugging me for hints about it. Well, here goes...it’s white! That’s all you get! All the rest will be a surprise. Just know, you are definitely going to cry when you see me in it. Stay safe and come home—we need to have another picnic. I love you the mostest!
I place the letter back in the envelope and set it atop the pile. I recall the first time I heard this story. One night when I was younger, I was tired, did not feel very well and could not fall asleep. I would toss and turn, mumble and whine. My mom came in to check on me, put her arm around me to let me nuzzle against her and began to read me a story. The story she was reading was this very letter she wrote to my father while on his first deployment during his second tour. When she was finished reading, she then eloquently told the most beautiful rendition leaving out no detail of how he proposed. After that night, my mom would often read these letters to me before going to bed, for I was always requesting to hear another story about her and dad.

I examined the rest of the contents left in the box, a few more letters, some pictures, army dog tags and a forest green notebook, roughed up with scratches and dirt. I slide the notebook from the bottom of the box. A notebook I was not allowed to read until I was much older. A notebook filled with so much love, confusion, despair and demise. My mom really did not know my father wrote poems until after his passing when she found this notebook. There is definitely a forward progression with the poems etched in the notebook, moving in pace with my father’s life experiences in war and through post-war struggles. My mom often says, when talking about my father’s struggles, she wished she had come across this notebook sooner because then she would have better understood how much he was struggling and could have gotten him help. Maybe it would have been the difference for me knowing him. I flip open the cover and there in the top left corner in the most pristine handwriting is my father’s full name with an abnormally straight line crossed under it. Turning the page, I read the first few poems. Quite happy poems, expressing longing and love for my mom and to be home. A home once he was running from, but now desperately wanted to get back to. I turn the page and begin to read the next poem.
A Rumbling, an expansion of shredded light.

An ashtray filled with burnt cigarettes,
Taking in the smoke filled horizon;

A world traveler, I am;
Familiarized with war filled installations;

Lost in thought, I dream of you;
Gifting you my last name;

Dreams of love, laughter, you;
Filling my being with hope;

Thinking of you, longing for your touch;
A future is near sighted;

A Rumbling, an expansion of shredded light;

Every step away from darkness;
Every step closer to your heart;

Waiting for the moment;
Bringing me home to you;

An arrival filled with unclarity;
Prevented, seized, at an instant taken away;

Each stroke of the hand is passing;
Dividing distance to this recombining;

Each tick, the gap is closing;
Closer to you, to you carrying my last name;

A Rumbling, an expansion of shredded light.
This poem was written at the end of his first tour while he was still stationed in Afghanistan.

This deployment changed my father for the better. He was no longer running away from everything—his problems, bad life choices—and everyone. In turn, he was ready to be home and begin building a life with my mom. She had always said he had grown up enormously during this tour. He became mature, more stable. He was never really in harm’s way during these deployments, or that’s at least what he told my mom, but he did see from afar. Having an outside window to the realities of war really affected him and who he was to become, which he needed to see in order to become the man coming home to propose to my mom. Because of financial reasons, my father signed up for a second tour. Knowing that another deployment was in the near future, my parents wed in a quaint, small ceremony a few weeks before he was shipped out to Iraq. This tour would be greatly different for my father, for he was in the thick of war. I vaguely remember my mom sharing how my father came back acting differently. The words that stuck, were how she stated that the day he left, she kissed her husband goodbye, and a stranger came back home to her. He was a shell of a man upon his return. I flip to a different page in the notebook and begin to read the poems scribbled on the pages.

**PURE EYES PEERING THROUGH THE SCOPE**

**FINGER CLAMPED AROUND THE TRIGGER**

**TARGET IN SIGHT**

**HEART FIERCELY POUNDING**

**MOISTURE ROLLING DOWN MY CHEEKS**

**A CHOICE IS MADE; A LIFE TAKEN**

**AT A YOUNG AGE**

**BATTLEFIELD CRED IS EARNED**
A sinking pit erupts in my stomach, as it does every time I read this poem. I cannot fathom the fear consuming my father in this moment. The emotions that accompany having to take the life of another human—even if it is to save your own. Having to make this warranted choice at such a young age. A choice that most definitely changes one, has consequences. I gaze my eyes to another poem on the page and begin to read.

Sinking into the distant wall directly in front of where I sit at my father’s desk, I digest the words that he once sat in his quarters at camp writing. I meet my eyes back with his notebook, turn the page and begin to read again.
Fear has engulfed my inner being. I feel the synonymous trepidation of my father in these battle moments. Moments that bring an expectation of death—moments that death is all around—how lucky he was to survive. To see another day. A luck that did not grace many of his comrades, his friends. I graze my fingers across the last line: ‘Bullets etched with names, every last one.’ It was a miracle my father’s bullet never found him, because there were days bullets were spraying all
around him, in every direction. Using my fingertips to gently caress the corner of the pages up, I gently flip to a new page to begin reading another poem.

My father would be forever changed by this day. He only spoke of it once with my mother, who in turn shared the story with me. It was a normal start to his day; however, he said something just felt off for whatever reason that day. The atmosphere had shifted; an unnerving
breeze flushed up against his face, sending chills of anticipation down his spine. Routine street patrols were a regular part of the job, and it was common for Afghan children to wander to the sides of the soldiers as they walk these daily foot patrols. Every day the same boy would walk beside my father, fashioning an unlikely friendship, even with the communication barrier. Upon starting his daily patrol that morning, this young boy once again came running to my father’s side. He tried desperately to convince the boy to stay behind that day because something just did not feel right. The boy wanted nothing to do with this notion. Unwilling to adhere to my father’s request, he walked alongside him, ever so often offering subtle smiles in his direction. As my father’s unit closed in on an alley, the demeanor of this Afghan boy changed. He urged the soldiers not to walk down this particular alley. As my father stepped forward, the boy quickly established himself between my father and the alley entrance impeding his progress. Holding his hands up, motioning the soldiers to stay, he just kept saying: No! No! No! The boy turned and began to walk down the alley. My father once again stepped forward, only for the boy to turn and wave his hand in his direction for my father to stop. Halfway down the alley, he turned once more in my father’s direction and offered a comforting smile. With his next step, an explosion. It shook the walls surrounding the alley, sending dust clouds of dirt in the direction of the soldiers. My father’s eyes focused through the dust fog meeting the boy’s eyes—fear, pain, an unconsciousness—death. The boy staggered uncontrollably a few more steps, his body waver with unsteadiness. Unable to keep himself upright, he fell over, crashing to the ground. In that moment, with tears swelled up in my father’s eyes, a helplessness entrenched him as he could not help this child—this friend. All he wanted to do in that moment, was to run to the boy and hold him in his final moments comforting him till his death, but was unable to do so for the threat of more explosions. For the threat of his death. There he lay, nothing my father could do. He could
never get the boy’s face out of his mind. My mom believed my father lived with much regret from that day. Regret that he did not stop the boy from walking down that alley that day. Regret that he allowed this boy to do a grown man’s job—his job. While my father’s death was prevented that day, it was the cost that he lived and struggled with every day since. The price was this young, innocent boy’s life.

I softly wipe away the tears that have formed in the corners of my eyes. I could never imagine what my father went through in these moments, having seen this undeserving loss of life—the life of a child, one who was around the same age as his younger brother. One he became accustomed to interacting with daily, which brought on a sense of guardianship as they navigated the streets together. I continue to flip through the notebook reading more of my father’s poems.

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BATTLE WILL SWALLOW YOU
BURRYING YOU IN THE GROUND
FOR THE ALMIGHTY FREEDOM
ATTAINED ONLY AT A PRICE
BROTHERS AND SISTERS HAVE FALLEN BEFORE THEIR TIME
AN UNTIMELY LIGHT BRINGING THEM HOME
ALONE I AM STANDING WITH THEIR MEMORY
HERE SALUTING THE COLORS THAT VEIL THEM
FINGERTIPS SEALING IN FORMATION
EMBODIED WITH GUILT
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Death hangs over every soldier. As my mom waited for my father to arrive from his last deployment, she was overcome with excitement to put her arms around him once again;
however, upon doing so, she knew she was not hugging the same man. War had changed him. He lost many friends during that time, and many more after. His best friend was one of the soldiers who did not make it home from war. This loss of life hit my father really hard—a survivor’s guilt. Their unit was out on foot patrol. My father was only yards away when his best friend was struck by an improvised explosive device (IED), which resulted in the traumatic amputation of his right leg and arm, as well as severe injuries to his left leg and abdomen area. An explosion behind him, my father turned to see a lot of dust and dirt pushing in his direction saturating the air. He had no idea who was hit until he recognized the individual thrust into the air was his best friend, the slow motion of his body gliding, traveling through the air. My father watched him land in the crater created by the IED. By the time he reached his side, his best friend had already began triaging himself applying a tourniquet to his injured right leg. The rest of the Corpsman arrived immediately and took over first aid, placing additional tourniquets on his legs and right arm, packing the crater left in his abdomen. While waiting for the medevac helicopter, my father knelt beside his friend refusing to leave his side. There he knelt for what seemed like hours holding his hand and encouraging him that all would be fine. In those moments, his best friend shared with him that upon hearing the noise, he was worried it was my father who was hit before realizing in the air that he was the individual hit by the IED. My father told my mom that day he knelt there holding back his tears with each painful moan his best friend eased out. He knew it was bad and his best friend did too, because he requested promises from my father. Tell my parents that I love them. Take care of my sister for me. Thank you for our friendship. You are the best friend anyone could ever ask for. He was saying goodbye to my father that day. The medevac came and took his friend away. That was the last time my father would see him and talk to him until his funeral. Once everyone left the grave site, my father
gingerly walked to the gravestone, laid down next to it and finally allowed his emotions to overcome him. Knowing she was unable to console him, my mother waited on a nearby bench, allowing my father to have his final moments with his best friend. She later told me that in that moment of feeling helpless, she knew the enormous effect this loss was going to have on my father and there was nothing she was capable of doing to support him. I take the pictures out of the box and find the one of my father and his best friend. There they were, two young lads forever linked by unwavering friendship and a love for their country, about to embark on a life’s journey that would forever change them. Pure joy for the friendship attained. There they were, in a combat zone and in full military uniforms, my dad’s smile extending to the edges of his cheeks, while his best friend’s arm cupped his laughing. I stare off into the distance of the room thinking about what could have been said in that moment to get this lighthearted response from the two of them. I train my focus back on the next page to read the poem jotted down.

TEARING AT THE SEAMS,
FIGHTING FROM RINGING THE BELL.

TOGETHER WE GO,
TOGETHER WE FIGHT,
SEPARATED WE RETURN,
TOGETHER WE CHANGE,
TOGETHER WE STRUGGLE WITH GUILT,
SEPARATED BY THE BLANKETED FLAG.

TEARING AT THE SEAMS,
FIGHTING FROM RINGING THE BELL.
My father struggled dearly to fit back into the norm of life at home. Most days my mom would find him acting as if he were still operating back in the war. He would hear things, spring up from the dead of rest—sweaty, crying, screaming, moaning. The quietest of bangs would send him dropping to the floor. My mom would hear him talking to soldiers in his dreams. Eventually this took a toll on their relationship. My father became more emotionally unstable. He would drown his emotions in the bottom of liquor bottles and prescription pills. He fell deeper and deeper into depression. Into despair, into loneliness. Into uncertainty. Communication withered between them. Eventually he began to sleep on a couch in the garage for fear of what he would do to my mom in the terror of one of his nightmares. I flipped a couple of pages in the notebook and began to read more of his poems.

WENT TO WAR A YOUNG, EAGER BOY—TWICE.
RETURNING NOT THE SAME, A DIFFERENT MAN.
CAME HOME TO A FAMILY I'M SCARED TO BE AROUND.
SO IN THE GARAGE ON THIS COUCH I LAY.
A BREEZE PULSING MY FACE, I LAY AWAKE.
SCARED TO CLOSE MY EYES.

I scan my eyes to the very short poem scribbled on the next page. Focusing on the words I begin to read his writing.
Soldiers do not go to war with this state of mind; they come home with it. My father came home with it. Came home forever changed, forever threatened by the war he once lived. The cheerful, fun-loving man my mom once knew was no longer there. He was gone. He never returned other than in the physical sense. I flip the page and read the two poems written on it.

**MIND EXPOSED**
**RETURN TO SENDER**
**HIDING AWAY**
**WITHIN MYSELF**
**BROKEN, DAMAGED**
**NOT THE SAME**

**SOUND OF NOISES Erupt In My Head,**
**An Endless Audible Backdrop Of Reminders,**
**Boots Striking Ground, High Pitch Voices,**
**The Revving Of Protected Engines,**
**The Thrumming Of Helicopters Flying Overhead,**
**Automatic Dots Crackling In The Distance,**
**Mind And Ears Unable To Filter Out,**
**Unable To Breathe, No Calm Within,**
**No Resting Eyes, No Peaceful Night,**
**Your Love Unable To Cradle.**
My father really struggled post-war. Haunted, normalcy gone, nothing the way of old. Nothing the same as before. Unable to get back to this life—the life pre-war.

Oscillating fan in motion above where I lay.
I’m afraid of tomorrow, afraid of today—of now.
My candle still burning, even if unwanted.
Easier, I believe, would be one less day.
To bear my eyes closed, never to see again.

When reading my father’s poems, especially the ones at the end of the notebook, my mind is never at ease with the turmoil he struggled with. My mom never knew he was struggling so much with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression and survivor’s guilt because he would never talk about it. He would just keep everything bottled up inside, unable to bridge the gap of communication—the gap of asking for help. The gap of asking for forgiveness. Every time my mom would seek communication or help, there would be good moments; so, she thought he was on track to normalcy. Little did she know at that time there would never be normalcy again for my father. He would struggle with this his remaining days. Emotions tangled in his inner being constantly raging war among his thoughts—his outlook. Internally he was continuously breaking. He was defeated. I turn to the last poem written in the notebook and begin to read.
LEAVING, FOR MY SOUL IS LOST;
A MUST, I HAVE TO GO;
THIS 'BYE' IS NOT SO PRETTY;
HEARTS ARE GOING TO BE BROKE;
TO FEEL THIS WAY IS DEFEATING;
INSIDE I'M COLD, ALONE, FRAGILE;
THIS 'BYE' IS NOT SO PRETTY;
HEARTS ARE GOING TO BE BROKE.

I HOPE SOMEDAY YOU WILL FORGIVE ME;
AND REMEMBER ALL THE GOOD, THE LOVE;
TROUBLES WILL BE FAR BEHIND ME;
NORMALLY INSTILLED WITHIN MY SOUL;
ROUGH WATERS COME TO A STALEMATE;
MY MIND AT EASE, MY BODY AT REST.

LEAVING, FOR MY SOUL IS LOST;
A MUST, I HAVE TO GO;
THIS 'BYE' IS NOT SO PRETTY;
HEARTS ARE GOING TO BE BROKE;
TO FEEL THIS WAY IS DEFEATING;
INSIDE I'M COLD, ALONE, FRAGILE;
THIS 'BYE' IS NOT SO PRETTY;
HEARTS ARE GOING TO BE BROKE.

FIVE YEARS OF UNSETTLED;
NOTHING ESCAPES MY BEING;
FIVE YEARS OF SEEING, BREATHEING, LIVING;
EVENTS THAT TANGLED MY MIND;
FIVE YEARS OF MEMORIES EMBEDDED;
LEFT ME UNSTABLE, NEVER TO FADE.

LEAVING, FOR MY SOUL IS LOST;
A MUST, I HAVE TO GO;
THIS 'BYE' IS NOT SO PRETTY;
HEARTS ARE GOING TO BE BROKE;
TO FEEL THIS WAY IS DEFEATING;
INSIDE I'M COLD, ALONE, FRAGILE;
THIS 'BYE' IS NOT SO PRETTY;
HEARTS ARE GOING TO BE BROKE.
I grab the handkerchief from the box and dab away my tears, slowly caressing the moisture away from my eyes and cheeks. A cloth bathed in his tears. His good-bye. A reminder that his anguish and pain was too much. A reminder of love. A reminder of forgiveness. Something I have always wondered was if he knew about me, would he still have chosen to end his life. My mom came home from work that fateful day to find my father unconscious on the bedroom floor. By this time, he was sleeping back in the house, was communicating with my mom and even showed emotion and affection. Showed healing. Showed forgiveness. My mom truly believed he was on a better path. She never fully knew the pain he kept hidden underneath, masked by his robust exterior. My father came back from war fine on the outside, but not on the inside—and he never would be until his last day. My mom discovered she was pregnant with me a few weeks after my father’s death.

I gracefully close the notebook making sure none of the pages are folded within the hardcovers and place it back in the bottom of the box. Carefully flipping over small amounts of the letters at a time, I begin to place them back in the box on top of the notebook making sure they stay in the correct order. I pick up the pictures, dog tags and handkerchief and neatly tuck them away between the side of the box and envelopes. I slide the box back into its resting place on the corner of the desk and grab a sheet of fancy letter paper. Laying the paper in front of me I begin to scribe words to my father.
Dear Dad,

Growing up without knowing you has been the single hardest challenge in my life. Life events missed. Not being consoled by your hugs. Not knowing what your voice sounds like. I often found myself staring into the mirror talking in a deep voice. We share so many physical characteristics and I am constantly reminded of you when dissecting my facial structure; I thought for sure my deeper voice is what yours would have sounded like. Life has been hard without you. ‘Dad’ seems like such a strange word for me, because I did not have a dad for Donuts with Dad in Kindergarten—or a dad for the Father/Child baseball game at Church—or a dad to walk me down the aisle at my wedding. While you were not there physically—You were there! I feigned interest in those daddy/daughter moments at first, but then I learned to celebrate you on those days, by always carrying around your love and a piece of you, your dog tags. On my wedding day, these were wrapped around my bouquet and a picture of you was sewn into the hem of my wedding dress. I want you to know that I am not mad at you and never was—I just did not understand. I want you to know that every day I strive to make good choices, ones that you would be proud of. I want you to know that even though I never met you, you have positively shaped me into the person I am today. I want you to know that I grew up surrounded by a loving family, mom did a great job raising me and I have had father figures in my life who have helped me grow into the woman I am now, who offered advice when I needed to hear it, who have believed in me and encouraged me to strive for greatness and to work hard, and who have even stepped in for a dance or two in this thing called life. I want you to know that through circumstance, I have learned to fight for what I want, to be honest, independent and strong, and to love and celebrate life. I want you to know that I have memories of you and know you. Mom wouldn’t have that any other way. I know you loved her with all your heart and I know you would
of loved me with all of it too. I want you to know that I understand that your suffering was too much to bear and that you do live on within us. I want you to know that through the tears, the pain and the vacancy, I have healed and I am loved. I want you to know that I did well for myself, have a great job, support system and a loving husband. I want you to know that you are going to be a grandfather, twice! We have adopted a little girl who lost her parents in a tragic accident and recently found out that we were pregnant with a baby boy. A boy that is going to carry your name! I want you to know that they will know you and celebrate you, your life, your legacy. I always celebrate you and I will raise my children to do the same. Most importantly, I want you to know that you are loved. I Love You The Mostest!

I slide the paper off the edge of the desk to lay within the fingertips of my hands. I methodically roll one side over to the next, lining up the top and bottom edges of my letter. Once aligned, I force the crease in the middle and tuck it into an envelope. Licking the pasty flavor edge of the envelope flap, I seal the letter and pen in cursive lettering the word—‘Dad.’ A word that once brought pain and emptiness, but now celebration and love. I rest my letter atop the pile in the box, slide the lid into place sealing the contents inside to be viewed again another day—a day when my kids are older. I leave the box sitting perched in the corner on top of the desk. As I exit the room, I peer back at the box on top of the desk—my two most prized possessions and whisper, “I Love You The Mostest!”
CHAPTER 4: THE TALK

I Begin My Walk Today:

I move with a brisk pace to the front door, one foot rhythmically stammering in front of the other, only because it is brought on by my inability to arrive anywhere on time. A lateness brought on routinely because of the lack of motivation to arrive at the final destination. However, today I am eager—eager to get to school this morning. With my book bag holstered on my
shoulder, my hand fastened tightly around the strap, I grab my jacket and lunch box in one complete swoop of my opposite arm and swiftly run out the door to catch up to my friends as we begin our daily trek to school. Today is the day I have been waiting for all week, ever since our teacher announced we would be enriching our lessons with the dynamics of African-American music styles and art—thank you February! Lessons blended with funk, jazz, ragtime, hip hop—ones enriched with Bearden, Ringgold, Tanner, and Lawrence! I make eye contact with my friends to judge their excitement, but it is not reciprocated. Leisurly, I maneuver the path of my glances around their faces. As my eyes travel from face to face, connecting to the apathetic stares, I realize I am the only one expressing this excitement. I do not understand how they cannot show enthusiasm. We have the opportunity to do something uniquely different than our everyday lecture lessons with note taking. Are they so unappreciative of this difference that they cannot welcome the exciting variance from our normal educational routine? Eager with anticipation of what this day is going to bring, I hardly notice my friends veer off our normal route, opting to travel down a different, more secluded road to get to school. Spinning on my heels, I hurriedly pace myself to catch up to them again. Little did I know the journey that is about to unfold. A fateful redirection—one that would expose me to the harsh realities history has continually instilled on a culture—my culture. A path that would encourage me to embrace, to notice, to share. Walking in silence, we travel down the path this morning unaware of the realities we are about to embark upon.

As We Walk:

As I continue down the path to school this morning, I cannot help but notice all the inhumane destruction occurring around my group of friends. Each step brings a new difference—a new reality. My reality, not theirs. I abruptly cease beholding the vivid images that encase me
because I have lived them before, not in the literal sense, but through the eyes of my family and ancestors—the eyes of history. This continual suffering is displayed all around me—in front, to the left, right and behind—I cannot escape it as I lumber forward. The depiction of these merciless conditions is preexistentely embedded in my consciousness, therefore, I do not need to relive them visually through the instillation around me. So, I fixate my attention on where I am headed, to school. Nonetheless, I cannot help but wonder: do my friends also notice it? I want to look at them and diagnose what grabs their attention, but I cannot remove my eyes from straight ahead, shielding them from the madness that circumferences us all. These harsh realities are vividly displayed providing a notion of what African-Americans, both young and old, experienced before my time. Children and adults were exposed to this unjust treatment deriving from the color they bared. Finally, I turn my head toward some of these unpleasant realities then fix my attention on my friends, who do not even notice my painstaking grief as I look for comfort in their eyes. They are all detached from what is occurring around us. My eyes converge onto their faces, trying to read their expressions as a reaction to the shameful anomalies transpiring near us. The presence of their expressions is unmistakable—nothing, expressions enthralled with a lack of detection, a lack of seeing. Refocusing my attention straight ahead and away from the disorder around me—away from my friends—I stride toward the school.

To My Friends Walking With Me:

I encourage you to look around and embrace the parts our history bestows on you this morning on our walk to school. Do not close your consciousness doors to the reality occurring around us. Open your minds and see what history denied us. There is inspiration isolated in the mass of negativity on display, penetrating a sublime feeling inside my core, producing the interconnection of both positive and negative emotions. This sublime emotion engulfs my inner
soul as we travel through these ferocious acts of injustice and mistreatment. I could only hope you feel this same sublime feeling. I encourage you to be thoughtful and open-minded to America’s history and take on an empathetic ideal to the events unfolding around us today on our walk to school. To build a notion of understanding. Again, open your cognizant doors of acknowledgement and be aware of the chaos engulfing your emotions, because by doing so you are provided with an opportunity of awareness and softening. You are provided with an opportunity to learn and share.

**As We Walk:**

As I walk by I feel your desire to be noticed. I want to look into your eyes of disparity to provide emotional support, but I cannot muscle up the strength to do so, for I know I would eerily grasp the harsh reality of my great-grandmother’s features in the silhouette of your facial structure. I cannot look at you without seeing her damaged, inflicted eyes. So, I continue to look forward to veil that weeps harvested from the pain established. I cannot look, but I hear you!

**Please Notice Me:**

Just look this way. Let our eyes meet because if they do, you would see my melancholy gaze distinguishing sorrow and pain, both physical and emotional, deeply rooted through my core. You walk by with not even a turn of your heads; I go unnoticed except for the enraged man, my possessor, whose grip clings so tightly seizing my arm that I can feel the circulation run dry, no longer extending to my blue fingertips—fingertips etched with the roadmap of my life. A roadmap of nicks forging a path down to my fingers that show a long-term relationship I have had with cotton. Another roadmap charting my life’s path is scared across my back. Each etch inflicting pain—a wisp through the air, a crack breaking skin, a new track permanently marked.
His strength forces me to my knees, his arm rears back and seizes in my direction. Can you hear the whimpers escaping my lips when he inflicts such pain on me? I cringe at the blows as he bellows fiercely in my direction—the interlude of dance between his hands and my body—my face. A reality I face because of when I was born and for no other reason but the color of my skin. The color that I bear—the life and future I was entitled to. I feel the pain of his grip which does not compare to the pain that accompanies the numerous welts and scars, some fresh and others aged, scattered indefinitely along my back and arms. I’m in the grips of the devil, for who else would produce actions so hastily onto another. Slavery is an institution that prevents human beings from being human. In this moment I am treated as less—a moment which in turn is moments. My life is filled with these moments. Decimated by the power of another. I am powerless! I am a possession! Those books you carry so freely in your bags outline many of my current stripes. All I want to do is read and learn and be rid of the life I have for a better one. My heart still beats, but it is no longer mine, for the master discourse shudders mine into concealing itself. With each fingerprint indention and each stripe supplemented to the back of my body, I lose my heartbeat. I lose my identity because I lost myself in the presence of his dominance. At this moment I ask, does God know me? Am I truly his child? If I were, how could he allow this treatment—this inhumanity inflicted on one of his children? Does He know us, does he truly acknowledge our presence within society—the blacks of this society, because if He did, how could He allow us to be treated so maliciously? This servitude—this life sentence! That is why I desire your gaze, because it will remind me that I am a person, that I am human. You continue to walk without a glance. As you walk away, I gaze at you so and start to hum Go Down, Moses.
To My Friends Walking With Me:

A blitz of agony penetrates my senses rapidly as we walk by her. Do you feel this same despair? The color of her skin permanently marks how she is treated. My heart breaks for her, for she has been, and will continue to be, exposed throughout her entire life to malicious acts stripping away her dignity with the intent to deplete the power she has never possessed. So much hate! So much prejudice! So much abuse! History hides no secrets. It communicates the harsh realities African-Americans and others exhausted in order for America to stand tall where it is today. A long history of struggle between oppressors and oppressed. A struggle with culture. A struggle with language. A struggle with beliefs. A struggle with power. A struggle with color. How do slaves battle through this abuse? Numbness! It has to be! Pure numbness sheltered them from fracturing the world of the other. That numbness must embody her. That numbness embodied my ancestors. That numbness embodies me. While I continue to look forward because I cannot reap the pain that already protrudes from my bones, I ask you to note the unjust treatment and agony she, as well as others, endured in order to gain a better understanding of what society does to its own for fear of losing power and attaining self-affirmation—the fear of difference. Look deep into her tormented eyes, the eyes that shed tears of the heartbreaking story of a history of debasement in order to harvest the fruits of power. Her eyes express an abnormal fear, a fear we normally do not see in someone. As we walk to school today, I ask you to observantly acknowledge and interpret the socially harsh realities many of my ancestors were unwillingly exposed to throughout the amalgamating of diversified cultures in the history of society. For this is just the beginning of our walk. When you interpret the harsh realities exposed to you today on our walk, know that your cultural identity prohibits your interpretation being synonymous with mine. We are different. Separated by color. It is alright that our interpretations
differ. Our predetermined cultural identities from surrounding knowledge and experiences have a lasting effect on how we interpret life events. I want you to know that you are not to blame for the choices your ancestors made, just as I do not hold remorse that my ancestors experienced this dominating display of hatred and ownership. Do I claim unwanted pain from this part of history? Yes. It is hard to put the pain of loved ones on the back burner when they were treated with such malice. We cannot control choices society made prior to our existence. We can only accept those choices for what they are, whether right or wrong, and continue to move forward preventing the recurrence of past mistakes and mistreatment, while improving society as a whole.

**As We Walk:**

As we walk by her today, I ask you to offer her a glance of support, because I do not have the strength to mask my pain while looking over at her. I cannot bear her look of despair she offers in our direction. Please acknowledge her to recognize that she is a person, a human. I gaze forward and begin to hum to ease the pain rattling within my inner self. My friends’ attentions are distracted when I start to hum. Our eyes meet and I can see the unsupportive gaze acknowledging my humming choice. I sense you do not approve; however, how can you be focused on me while I hum during a time that social injustice is circling us? A time that offers awareness of how others historically were mistreated and harmed based on the color of their skin. Acknowledge her. Listen to her story.

**As I Pass The Madness:**

I am distracted from her and my friends by a hostile shout to my right. Did my friends hear it too? Distractedly, I glance at the youngest, his eyes still fixated on the school. I slide my eyes to the corner, sneaking a quick glance at my friends. The rebellious protest has grabbed
their attention for they are intensely looking in his direction. At first I do not understand the reason behind the proclamation of his yells. Filled with intrigue and curiosity, I try to grasp the meaning behind his exclamatory notions being publicly exposed. Mindlessly entering the realms of my peripheral view, I see it. Encased within the grips of his fingers swaying back and forth with an assertive manner is a Bible, but what is he yelling? Maybe I should look over for I might understand, but I am anxious by the thought of making eye contact with him. I must look. As my head brusquely wavers in his direction, I depict his monologue. I lift my ear intently to his preaching of equality amongst the unpaved path of reality. Amongst the group of marchers that follow him. He leads. He proclaims justice—equal rights.

*Please Notice Me:*

Thundered to the ground by a heavy weight colliding with my skull, I roll to a stop peering in your direction. I lay in pain. I lay bleeding. I know you saw. You had to witness this exposed hatred in my direction—hurting me, harming me. Blood seeps from my skull—aching, concussed. I cover my head from the stomping boots around me. Some clip me, bruising my skin with their tread. I peek up through the thundering of soles, through the blood hastily escaping the gap forged into my skull by something hard. Something that does damage to another—a Billie club. I know you heard the sound of that Billie club striking bone—my bone, my skull. A strike so fierce that it forced me to the ground. Laying in pain. Laying bleeding. Laying protecting. More sounds of strikes all around me. The pipes—the sticks. Whatever someone could get their hands on in this moment of hate. Sounds of metal hitting cement—hitting skin, hitting body. Sounds of sticks breaking because of the force they are applied against those bodies. More people fall to the ground all around me. A moment of hurt—to mangle, to kill—produced by a disagreement of equalness. A disagreement of constitutional rights. A peaceful march escalates
into a drastic impediment of one’s well-being—one’s safety. A war of hate raged upon this group. This group that walked undisturbed at first, but now is met with measures of whatever is necessary to prevent our forward progress. As we marched nearer, sounds of hate—anger—echoed in our direction. Yelling so profane to prevent our progress. Billie clubs slapping the palms of the hands of the ones who were tasked with this hindrance. A squealing whistling through the air and the clouds of tear gas circumferencing us. A charge forward, striking us with clubs, whips, and sticks wrapped in barb wire. Bystanders cheering—some participating. I lay here with blood pooling on the ground around me, protecting myself from the chaos instilled around me. The hurting. The harming. I seek your attention, your awareness. I seek your eyes meeting mine—I seek comfort, understanding.

_To My Friends Walking With Me:_

Without a glance over and with my eyes consumed with where I am headed, I feel his desire to be noticed as he lays there on the ground. My heart hurts. I hear you. I understand the pain that has been inflicted upon you in this moment. A moment that forever changed your life. I just cannot look over at you because of all the harsh depictions of cruelty occurring around you. To my friends gawking in his direction. Are you seeing or are you just staring unconsciously in his direction? Do not just look at him with your uneasy eyes, but acquire your understanding to critique the reality of this harsh history on display. It is important. I implore you to correlate the sights we see today with the synonymous depictions of the harsh realities of sinful acts occurring around us today on our walk to school. What is someone’s reasoning for being subjected to such callous acts of violence toward them and their culture?
As We Walk:

As we walk by him today, by all of them being attacked because of their pursuit for equality and the attainment of basic human rights, I ask you to offer glances of support. To acknowledge this wrong doing. This unjust attack on a group. Not only do I ask you to offer awareness—to offer support and understanding—I also ask you to continue offering these as we continue our walk and acknowledge the other injustices on display. I ask you to look—to pay attention, to notice, to learn, to speak.

As I Pass The Madness:

We continue to advance past all the highlighted racial strife, with our presence of mind unmistakable; we notice every harsh reality on our way to school, except for the youngest. Now we notice it for the vivid display of cruelty it is. Eyes wide open to the faults of mankind, we see it all. We see the cultural conflict among the white man and the slaves, the abuse portrayed throughout our walk, and the disparities of racial inequalities. We not only look to observe; we look to acknowledge the truth that lays in the depths of our society’s history. We acknowledge that it happened and that there are stories to be told. Our walk to school today has felt like a buildup of time slowly passing with each step we take. As bystanders today to the history prevailing around us on our walk, we note that history is an irregular and intricate rhythm which can offer confusing and sometimes emotional conflicts of interest among mankind.

As We Walk:

As I walk by I feel your glance resting on me. I urge myself to look in your direction. Our eyes meet. I see you! I hear you! I understand the sacrifice you have made in order for me and so
many others to freely walk to school today—to be provided a better education. I look at you and see the damage. See the pain.

_Please Notice Me:_

I walk just like you. I walk with books in my arms and with the hope of a better education. People are yelling profanities, such hurtful words, such damaging words. “My child ain’t going to NO school with a colored person.” I keep walking. Looking straight forward. More people yelling—spitting in my direction. Aiming to debase me with their words. Their hate. Fists of rage shaken toward me. If I step closer, they would surely greet my face, my body, with aggressive certainty. Throwing things in my direction, but I keep walking. I walk for change. I walk for better. As I walk today, I pass trees decorated with adornments representing the harsh realities that once represented this society—realities of not so long ago. Realities that still unjustly happen today. White masks of old yelling aggressively in my direction. Friendly reminders that we are not equal—were never equal—and seen as never to be equal. But, I continue to walk. Books squeezed tighter in the grips of my hands I head toward my destination. Toward the front door of the school building. A school where there are no students like me. I am different. I am unwanted. I am hated in this moment. A moment for social change—a moment for better. Striding forward, I grow nearer to that front door. Passing the unruly mob, I keep walking. Words cutting my being. Dirt splashing my clothes. Wiping the spit off my skin. I keep walking until I come to a dead stop at the front door. There I stand starring at the belly of a giant of a man. A man barricading the front door, impeding my progress. Not allowing me to enter the school—my school. My hands clasp tightly around the books I carry and a sense of a combination of scaredness and anxiety mixed in with discomfort invades my body. Once again I am reminded I am unwanted. I am hated. I am unequal. I am different. I peer back at the realities
experienced on my path to school today. With moisture beginning to well in my eyes, I ask you to please look at me. Take notice in the hardships of my walk today—the hardships about to be imposed with my experiences inside this door I stand in front of. I walk a much different path than you today. My path is unforgiving. My path was walked for change—walked for so many, walked for you.

**As We Walk:**

I pass you today and I feel your defeated gaze in my direction. I look at all the destruction around you—at the missing. At what once was. I notice all the loss that encases you on this day. You sit there covered in soot, ashes all around. Defeated. Everything you once were—gone. Everything you worked hard for—gone. Everything—gone.

**Please Notice Me:**

Here I sit hunched over on this metal skeleton frame of a chair, in the middle of the ash framework that was once a thriving theatre. A theatre filled with so much tradition and life—live music, films and so much more. One that was built and established through many years of hard work—my hard work. I sit here, dolled up in an elaborate dress, sparkly dangly earrings on and high heels that grew me two inches—covered in soot—in ash, blackening the pure colors of my adornments and my skin. Sitting right in the middle of this once affluent, prosperous black community. One where we stood established. Stood independent. Stood together. Stood tall. The streets once lined with black-owned homes and business establishments. It was a self-reliant black economy, one where the citizens pooled their resources together in order to have a better chance at economic growth—economic survival. This established community was built for black people, by us—black people. We were alone. We had no support. We had to do it on our own,
we had to do it together. The streets now are lined with ash. Black wealth, pride and unity all gone, destroyed among the ash—the ruins left of this community. Skeletons of the life once lived still standing tall above the remanence, ash coating the ground, veiling what was once there. Burnt frameworks of homes, businesses—school, bank, hospital, hotel, post office—every establishment still smoking, sparking cracks, still charring from the riot that ensued. Here I sit amongst the charred ruins of my city, bodies layered into truck beds and disposed in unmarked graves. One by one, lifeless bodies lifted from where they laid, piled up and moved—laid in their final resting place amongst a great mass. Racism in the face of jealousy, inflicted by our surrounding white communities. The community ransacked before daybreak. An angry mob, armed and charging, sprayed bullets throughout the air, connecting with anyone in the path. Men, women, children falling to the ground, unable to escape death, harm, injury. Setting afire anything and everything that could be damaged by the engulfing flames. Fire bombs thrown—dropped. Everything, everyone, encased in the chaos that ensued. Fighting back. Hiding. Running. Escaping the barricade of flames and gunfire. So many murdered. So many injured. So many in custody. So many displaced. Here I sit, homeless. Aching from this unjustly rage of hatred proclaimed on my community. Everything I ever had—gone. Everything I worked so hard for—destroyed. Here I sit, alive! How do I start over?

As We Walk:

As I walk by, I see your longing to be noticed. I acknowledge what is occurring to you in this moment. I understand it because I have seen it before—with my father, with my uncle, with my brother. The judgment. The accusation. The profiled. A continual cycle that occurs generation after generation. My eyes stay connected to yours. I hear you! I understand you in this moment!
**Please Notice Me:**

Here I stand, palms firmly pressed up against the textured surface of bricks. His hand in my back pocket, with the only thing separating his fingertips from my flesh is the jean fabric of my pants. Lined up, one by one, he methodically travels down the path of our back pockets, while we stand their vulnerable, frozen by barrels pointed in our direction. One by one, we feel his hand enclosed within the fabric of our pockets. Searching. Profiled as guilty—blameworthy, responsible. Profiled as expected to walk straight down the pipeline right into bars cemented permanently in front of us, around us. Containing us from the freedom of the outside world. Uncomfortable! Afraid! Angry—my fingers slouch against the bricks pressing harder on the wall I stare at. So many before me with a negative outcome in this moment. So many deaths unjustified, so many could have been prevented. So many fists connecting to bodies. So much abuse. I glance over my shoulder, peering at you. Wanting your attention as you walk by. Wanting you to acknowledge what is going on. Just a few minutes prior we were laughing, walking away from the music shop where we spent the last hour divulging into the latest albums, listening to clips of the hippest artists. Laughing. Having fun. Dreaming about a future in the music industry. With our love for music, we were known to often visit this store. We were regulars, never known to cause problems. Always frequent visitors with music on our mind. Coming here kept us out of trouble. Kept us from bad decisions on the streets, but here I find myself caught in a moment that defines me. A moment labeling me as delinquent. Guilty! Seen as a group of young black men up to no good. Here we stand—being searched. Searched for anything that would evidence trouble. That would strike a guilty verdict upon us with the conclusion of us riding in the back of a cop car with our hands cuffed in circle metal constraints.
All we were doing was walking to get some food from the local restaurant, but here we stand now—Guilty. Here we stand fitting the description. Here we stand—Profiled!

*To My Friends Walking With Me:*

As we walk today, we are not the focal point among the madness displayed. As we walk to school today, many stories to be heard are evidentially displayed. Each story sheds light on the history of our society. Each story to be heard is a part of the greater narrative to be told, acknowledged and understood for the actuality it possessed in shaping today’s society. Here we are, about to enter a school in an era that strives on the expectation of adjusting to a multicultural education that adheres to the needs of all culturally diverse students. Here we are entering a school where I can be socially accepted for my culturally charged identity with an open-minded attitude from my peers. I see your awareness of my cultural identity and the open-mindedness and acceptance to relate.

*As I Pass The Madness:*

We are almost there. With the harsh realities of social injustice we witness today behind us, we are on the verge of entering our safe haven, our school; but are those acts of inequality behind us? No, we must not forget what we saw and we should not want to forget. We need to share the stories told to us today on our walk to school. Stride in stride, I continue to walk to school with you by my side. With every step the harsh realities of a past negative society are on display, portraying that lack of valuing difference. The lack of equality. Today I have walked past abuse, death, injustice and mistreatment. I have walked past the debasement of a slave by her master. I have walked past a mass attack on a group of harmless marchers in search of their voice—their equality, their rights. I have walked past the degradation of a poor innocent child on
her path to school. A school where she was not welcome at because of the color of her skin. I have walked past the hateful demolition of an established, prosperous black community. Why? Because of racism in the form of jealousy—envy. I have walked past a group of innocent black men whose rights were violated because they fit the profile—fit the description. Death, mistreatment and inequalities are all around us, exposing the harsh realities of the history of racial strife and indifference in America. I walk by past. I walk by today. I walk by future. The pain is real. It cannot be hidden for it has a purpose and influences today’s America. This history has a direct influence on my current well-being and each historical event serves as a stepping stone that has brought society to where it currently rests and serves to identify how much more we need to improve.

To My Friends Walking With Me:

The experiences we witnessed today have culturally shaped society’s identity. The understanding gained from our walk is the harsh narrative difference has exposed on a culture. The inequalities that line history. What we just walked through is not our imagination, it is reality. It influences a new way of thinking. This reality did occur and is presented to us for our interpretation. It now becomes our inherited story. I urge you to share this story. It needs to be heard. Embrace the turmoil and unruliness that surrounded us today on our walk to school. Do not shy away to an unconscious state of mind. Do not shut your conscious door. Allow yourself to acknowledge the stories being told and accept an understanding that these unjust acts are a part of history and affect our cultural being. Appreciate their roles in America’s history without tolerating the idea that these were just acts. Do not let what we have witnessed and learned today escape your imagination, for we were exposed to it for a reason. We are a voice now.
As our walk to school is nearing an end, I relish in the vivid acclamations of history I witnessed today. I must acknowledge them. These malicious acts stirred emotions in me that I had either buried to keep my emotional self safe or did not know I possessed. Sometimes the best learning does not occur in schools, but through real-life encounters. I have learned today—we have learned today. Today, my superficial mind has expanded past the intellectual vacuum established for me by school. I have gained new knowledge simply through my action to walk to school today. Simply through fate taking me on a different path to school. The realities on display today, the stories will not be forgotten. To walk in my shoes each one of them had to walk first, making footprint indentions that paved my way. I glance back down the path I just walked. I see again. I hear again. I acknowledge again. Swaying my eyes left and right, not staying too long on a particular figure, I see it all again—I see the cruelty our society was capable of, is still capable of. I see the war, the bloodshed, the death and the devalued. I see the abuse handed to the weak, not because they are inadequate to stand strong, but because of skin color and the notions society has established against this difference. They are not weak; they are merely caught in society’s grasp of self-affirmation. I see racism. I see not only the colors of people, but the colors of destruction, America’s devastation. The omens followed to walk this path today opened up my conscious mind to understand and explore emotions tangled with the harshness society offers in history to certain cultures and people. These revelations exhibited on my walk are indeed adverse acts; however, through the despair of negativity shines a positive impact on our America. This positivity is not apparent in the moment, but their stories and experiences bring positive change in the structure of our society. Throughout history people have been afraid to lose. Afraid to lose life. Afraid to lose power and self-affirmation. Afraid to lose
oneself. Afraid to lose rights. Afraid to lose family. Afraid to lose personal delicacies. There is a loss of perspective concerning the harsh realities of history. Our perspectives of the occurrences happening today on our walk to school matter. I encourage you to share your perspectives on the stories we were delivered today for we have gained knowledge from them. I implore you to share the awareness of what we encountered today. Join me in sharing it because their stories are the real focal point and need to be told. With one last grazing swoop of my tolerant eyes I turn in the direction of my school and begin to walk.

As We Walk:

As we near the school, I begin to notice a slow moving vehicle creeping in our direction. Almost like following us from the opposite direction—watching us. Watching our movements. Watching our actions. We are still a block away as it grows nearer. I side glance in its direction, weary as to why it is slowly moving toward us. I then identify the blue lights on top—the label of authority stamped across the side doors. I get anxious—far different from what my friends feel in this same moment—on this same walk to school. The police car slows to a stop next to us. You continue to walk. There I stand—alone—my hands raised high grabbing at the clouds of hope in the sky to look innocent—to remain unharmed. Why must I feel this threatened upon their appearance? Why am I looked at differently? Why am I awarded a second glance, a side eye, a judgement, an assumption? You continue to walk. I stand here reciting the words of my grandfather. Words I have recited before, words I will cite again. The words spoken to me when I was twelve years old. At an age when I was carefree and did not see color in the true manifestation it expunged itself in everyday experiences. When I was naïve to the unwritten rules for black boys and men in America. I did not understand. I still do not really understand. I will never fully understand.
Now son, the world has a way of being harshly cruel to people like me and you. You are of the age where I can no longer shield you from these cruel intentions—these cruel inequalities. I would love to sit here today and tell you skin color really does not matter. But that would be a lie! It does matter. It has always mattered. Your skin color is going to be the first thing someone notices about you—the first thing seen. Not how educated you are! Not what kind of family you come from! Not where you live! Not how much money you have! It will not matter what shade your skin tone is—that is all they see—you are black. You will be stopped. You will be judged. You will be accused. Simply because of the color of your skin. You fit the description. Whatever the description is, you fit. There will be misconceptions of you. You are wearing a hoodie. Your pants are sagging too low. You are walking alone at night. You are in a place you should not be. You are doing something you should not do. You look suspicious. Society is pigeonholed by its racial fascination of stereotypes and opinions. I do not want you to become another victim—another martyr for the cause. I want you to stay alive, not be the next face on a poster for justice. There needs to be a cultural change, but I do not want you to be the victim that incites this change. This mindset change is beyond just you. Beyond how you feel in the moments of prejudice, the moments of injustice, the moments of judgement, the moments of profiling. Beyond these emotions that engulf your inner being, ranging with uncertainty—with anger, with hatred toward them. The sheer thought of you becoming a victim in the midst of discrimination stops my heart. Just know that not everyone is against you, or out to misrepresent or mistreat you. Please take this next advice close to heart for it is highly important for your safety—for your life. These are the lessons that might save your life one day. Remember, do not become a victim. If a policeman nears
you, do not run. Do not run from a badge. You will be intimidated—scared, but do not run. Stand still. Be mindful of your hands, take them out of your pockets. Raise them up or hold them away from your body. Have them both on the steering wheel where they can be seen at all times. Empty your hands. Do not reach for anything! If they want something or think you have something, let them get it. If you need to move, announce exactly what your movement will consist of before you do it. Better yet, just don’t move. Sir or ma’am only, accompanied with yes or no. Don’t provide any additional information. Do not argue. Do not fight back. Do not talk back, even if you think you are right and they are in the wrong. Life is not fair, it is what it is, but know that there is no place for naiveness in a black boy or man in America. Always be aware. Aware of what is going on around you. Aware of your friends and aware of the police. In these moments, it is about your staying alive, not your feelings and emotions on the current situation or toward current people. I cannot be with you always, but I can prepare you for when these situations arise. Remember it is more than just about you. Stay alive. Your voice, your life means nothing if you are buried in the ground. You must shield yourself—protect yourself—from the cruel ways of society. From the cruel intentions inflicted upon you because of your skin color. You are the only one who can.

As the last words my grandfather recited to me ever so long ago escape my lips, I look at my son sitting on the couch across from me. He is twelve now. I tap his leg—offering hope, offering understanding. Offering the magnitude of importance these words behold. I shift my body from the folding chair it occupies, to the couch cushion pressing up against him. I put my arm around
his shoulders and draw him in tightly. Together we sit. A new generation exposed to the ideology of the unwritten rules for a black boy in today’s America.
A moment, that’s all it takes to change a life, for better or for worse.

Woken up by my choking on the dense smoke that has come to entirely occupy my bedroom, I gasp for a fresh breath only for the malignant smoke to permeate inside my oxygen-deprived body again. Seized with the thought of death, I am too frightened to move from my bed. With my hands swaddled into the top silk lining of my blanket, each finger interlaid in a tryst with the unraveling thread freeing itself from the mercy of being
shackled to the sewn edge, I parachute the cover over my face trying to trap fresh air inside to breath.

_A moment, that’s all it takes to shatter a life. Mine was shattered that day._

My life was forever changed that day. While I was rescued unscathed from the dangerous fire that engulfed the framework of my house, I lost everything that day. I lost my entire family. Now, I find myself in a bedroom—a bedroom in my fourth temporary home. I lie here staring up at the ceiling, dreading my first day at yet another new school. The sound of my alarm thrusts me into an upright position on my bed. I do not remember falling asleep last night. I reluctantly get up and begin the process of prepping myself to go to school. I walk downstairs and my
temporary family is already sitting around the kitchen table sharing a hearty breakfast. I slide into the empty chair and pile food onto my plate. There I sit silent, letting everyone else carry the conversation. When asked a question, I simply nod my head with the answer. After breakfast, I grab my jacket and book bag and head out the door to catch the school bus. As we wait for the bus to arrive, once again I find myself in silence. My foster sister bounced around from classmate to classmate greeting each with good mornings. I stood there silent, still, watching the interactions flourish. The bus arrives and everyone pushes to get on. I wait until the initial flurry of students get onto the bus, then stagger slowly up the stairs. As I reach the top step, I feel the stares—stares at the new girl. Stares knowing my story. Stares of charity—of I’m sorry. Without trying to make eye contact, I search for an empty seat—none. Then I see a hand waving me in her direction. My foster sister has saved a spot for me on the bench seat of the bus that she occupies. As I begin to sit, the bus rolls forward, propelling me into the seat. There I sat, in silence, reading the scribble on the back of the bus seat. Such hurtful words. Such mean words. Only the first callous words I would come across this first day at my new school.

The first half of my day has gone by smoothly—the easy part of the day. Now time is creeping near the most difficult period of the day, especially when you are the new kid—lunch. I sit at my desk, starring at the minute hand ticking closer to the bell. A bell that would release a frenzy of chaos with everyone heading to the cafeteria to quickly connect with their friends that they have not seen all day. I sit here dreading the moment—the moment that once again all eyes on me accompanied by no one to sit with, standing awkwardly alone. The only person I could think to sit next to was my foster sister, but we did not share the same lunch period. I lay my head upon my desk and stare at the handout I was supposed to be finishing for classwork. I could not concentrate. I am overwhelmed with a sense of anxiety regarding the dreadful lunch period.
Some time passes, and then the bell rings. I sit amongst the chaos in the classroom letting the initial rush die down before I even think about organizing my stuff to head to lunch. I methodically place my belongings in the zipper confinements of my book bag, sling it over my shoulder and head out of the classroom into the abyss of the main hall to the lunch room. As I approach the cafeteria, the noise thunders from within. It sounds like utter disorder inside. I grow nearer, following a few stragglers into the cafeteria. At the doors I stand, looking around at all that ensues. Everybody hunched within their groups, talking, laughing. Kids sitting on top of tables. Kids walking through the food lines, yelling back at their groups to save them a seat. I survey the room to see where I could possibly go to sit and eat lunch. I spot an opening. As I turn to head in that direction, in that instance it was gone. A group suddenly sat down preventing my progress to this area of the cafeteria. I turn around and exit the doors headed where I know I could sit peacefully, alone—not being judged or stared at—to enjoy my lunch.

Here I sit, a couple of hallways from the lunch room, far enough away to mask the noise within those walls. I slipped in unnoticed and find my seat at the end. I unzip my book bag, and grab the brown paper bag filled with the lunch my foster mom made for me this morning. I pull out my basic turkey sandwich, naked except for mayo and cheese. As I took a bite out of the corner, I began to inspect the walls around me. I have sat within these walls before at another school to eat my lunch, but these ones were a little different. The inside of the stall door is decorated with an abundance of graffiti. Once again such hateful words on display for anyone who enters this restroom stall to see—to read, to judge, to spread the rumor. Each scribble telling a story. A story of mistreatment, of hate, of disagreement. A story of dominance, of power, of difference. Each story singling out someone. Each story harming or discrediting character. Each story hurtful, devaluing. Each story with the same hurtful outcome, but each story different from
its counterparts—the scenes different, the characters different, the setting different, the climax different—the outcome the same, the harm the same, the mistreatment the same. So many stories scribbled on the inside of this bathroom stall.

I can tell you exactly how my story began. I was a freshman in high school who recently joined the theatre program. I landed a key role in the one-act play, one of the most important productions during the school year. We were on track to be very good this year, possibly earning a Region and State Championship with our production of Aida. At first it felt like a family. I was treated with respect even though I was a couple years younger than most of the cast. We put in tireless hours preparing our masterpiece of a show. One day, all the boys were in the dressing room changing into our costumes for the dress rehearsal. Out of nowhere, one of the seniors called me gay. This senior was cast as the lead role in the play and carried a lot of support and admiration from the rest of the cast. In this moment, I just brushed off the hasty remark projected in my direction. It did not bother me at first, I knew the assumptions that would be made being a part of
the theatre program. I loved acting and I would not let this discourage me from performing. See, I am very artistic. I play in the band, I can sing—I am just made to perform. However, this was not the last time a homophobic slur was cast toward me.

A few weeks went by, and this senior would subtly call me names. As he passed behind the curtain, he would brush shoulders with me and utter words: gay, fag, fairy, pansy. I would just ignore him—never wanting to stir up trouble or bring more attention toward myself. Eventually other male cast members got involved in the heckling. It was hard to escape the words constantly being thrown in my direction. One by one, these students were tearing me down, sucking the life out of my sail. I began to shy away at play practice, wanting to not participate. It dawned on me often to seek help, but then I feared the ramifications would be worse than this. Often, as I walked out of the theater classroom, these students would put rainbow stickers, fairy stickers, all over my book bag going unnoticed by me until I arrived at my next class and saw them when I put my book bag down next to my desk. There was even a time when they had homemade stickers to taunt me with. Ones that said: ‘if you didn’t know, I’m gay’ or ‘a faggot is carrying this bag’ or ‘my only function is gay.’ This tormenting went on for weeks and only got worse. In the confinements of our dressing room, these boys would verbally assault me. Talk about sexual positions I preferred with other guys. Talking about my private parts and how I used them. Thrusting their hips in my direction while producing pleasurable facial expressions.
Finally, enough was enough. I could not handle the constant posse teasing and harassment. It was breaking me down and affecting all aspects of my life. I confronted this group of boys, it turned out very badly. I just knew they were not going to change their ways. I just knew I was going to have to give up one of my passions. Why was this inflicted on me? Was it because I was the only non-straight guy in the theatre production? Was it because they felt threatened by my talent and abilities? Was it because since I was a freshman, I was an easy target? I would never know the true reasoning as to why I was bullied. My mom caught wind of everything that was going on behind the scenes and reported it to the theatre director and administration at the school. The next day I was taken out of theatre class and put into a chorus class. While I know these boys got a stern talking to from both the theatre director and administration, I truly believe they did not learn anything. I truly believe there will be another victim. While I do not know if I was their first victim, I am most certain, I will not be their last.

Suddenly I here footsteps entering the restroom and freeze in place, not wanting anyone to know I occupy the last stall. Not wanting anyone to catch me in my hiding space, the safety zone where I sit on this very difficult first day. There I sit, in silence, not moving an inch, buying time until the individual leaves. I shove the last bite of my sandwich into my mouth and bend down to quietly unzip the front pocket of my book bag and gently slide out my Sharpie marker. Slipping off the cap, I lean forward and scribble through the name, masking the ownership of this hateful remark. I fast twitch the marker back and forth, over and over again, until the name is illegible. This poor fella probably does not even know his name is inscribed on the inner walls of
this bathroom stall in the girl’s restroom. Unable to defend himself, to stand tall amongst the
ones who deem this statement to be true, I will stand up for him. I will scratch out his name,
mask the shame that someone is trying to inflict on him.

My story started with one bad decision. A bad decision that defines me—
my bad decision. I was new to school, just moved in from another state. We moved
often—too often. Both my parents were in the military and we were constantly
transferred to different bases. This is my third school in the last three years. I kind
of do not want to make friends anymore because it was only a matter of time
before my parents got transferred again and we were moving to yet another base.
This time was different—or so they said. We would be staying here longer, until I
graduated high school. Three years to build friendships, to feel a part of a school
long term. Join sports teams, join clubs. This excited me, for the first time in a
while, I was excited to go to school. It is always hard at first, being the new girl. I
was an outgoing teenager, but always hesitant at first not really knowing which
kids to trust. Settling into the new school year, I made a few friends quickly. A
A fateful decision to sit at a specific lunch table helped me acquire my closest friend. We would spend every day at lunch talking—talking about anything and everything! Boys, homework, movies, parties, bad teachers, other students. I shared with her things about my life never before shared with anyone else. I was finally building a meaningful friendship. See, I have never stayed long enough anywhere to build friendships, to gain a best friend.

Around Christmas, I was starting to receive attention from an older male classmate. We began to hang out often, eventually becoming boyfriend and girlfriend. I would still hang out with my small group of girlfriends, but more of my time was spent with my boyfriend. I started to receive a little backlash from my friends, hurling words at me, implying that I did not have time for them anymore. I chalked it up to jealousy—jealous of my relationship with my boyfriend. Jealous of my time. My boyfriend and I dated a couple of months before calling it quits. A short-term fling—a pretty meaningless fling. I was around my friends again more, hanging out at school, the movies, the mall, and each other’s houses. After a short while, I began to notice that my best friend was acting weird around me. I would catch her in lies. Come to find out she was now talking with my ex-boyfriend. A few choice words were said. You just do not date your friend’s ex, no matter what—off limits. It’s the girl code. Little did I know her actions and my actions would start a domino effect of harassment. She manipulated the rest of our group to avoid me—to not hang out with me. I was ostracized from the group. She would speak very poorly about me to others, calling me names, calling me a whore. I challenged these accusations and our friendship, which she did not take very well.
I eventually separated myself from this group of friends, singling me out as a loner in school once again. It was just better to keep my distance and not have any interaction with any of them.

A couple of weeks later, I thought all was done—that everything had died down. One day I was sitting in class and felt the snickers and stares in my direction. I looked around the classroom and everybody was smiling at me, looking at their phones, and smiling back at me. I was confused as to what was going on. Was there something on me? What did I do? Looking over at the boy in the desk next to me for answers, he waved his phone at me, encouraging me to get mine out. I pulled my phone out of my front jeans pocket and saw on the screen that I had a new message. I had received some photos. I opened up the attachment and saw me. Saw private pictures of me I sent to my ex-boyfriend a long time ago. Pictures that now were airdropped to everyone’s phone in the vicinity around me. My bad decision that defines me. My bad decision that forever changed my life. The decision to send my boyfriend at the time topless photos of myself. A decision I will forever regret—that I will learn from. I lift up my head in utter embarrassment and shamefully look around the room at everyone laughing, staring at me. My eyes meet with my old friend, his new girlfriend. Her smug grin piercing my being. In that moment I knew she was the culprit. She was the one that airdropped the photos of me to everyone around us. Somehow she got the pictures from my ex. She stole them. She convinced him to give them to her. Whatever it was, she got them. I stare at her. She stares at me back and mouths the words... ’you are such a shanky little bitch, I HATE you!’
It took quite some time for the ramifications of this choice to die down. I was constantly called names and laughed at for some time following the airdrop incident. I lost every friend I once had and now would never gain another one. I was embarrassed—embarrassed that I was not smarter, embarrassed that everyone had seen these vulnerable pictures, embarrassed that I did not have better judgement. I now walked around school alone. I would sit in the lunch room, no one would want to sit with me. Wishing that my parents would get transferred again. That us staying here until I graduate was not true—was not going to be my reality. A few weeks later I arrived home to some news from my parents, we were being transferred again. Another school, a new base, a fresh start. Thank goodness!

Wow, I feel so bad for her. Girls can be so spiteful—so hateful. Always over a boy. I just do not know how she is able to live past this incident—so mortifying. I take my Sharpie and scribble through her name masking it from being read. She is no longer attending this school anyway. Why would this still be written on this bathroom stall or has this been written here since the incident? Moving was the best thing that could have happened to her. Hopefully, she truly did get a fresh start at her new school and learned from her moment of a lapse in judgement.
My story has been the story of my entire life. See, I have always been a lot smaller than the other boys—been less athletic. I always found myself in the same daunting position. A position that has come to be customary in my everyday life. A position that left me feeling the brunt of the bigger boys, whether through words thrown my way or not-so-subtle bump intos that would send me colliding into a locker, a wall, a door—whatever was next to me. I was always the last standing in line waiting to be picked at recess or in gym class. No one wanted me on their team—and let it be known in front of everyone why. I would stand in line looking down at my shoe laces, blankly starring at the shards of string that once were unbitten by the roughness of my play. A roughness only brought on by the inability to shed my clumsiness, my lack of grace and my lack of athletic prowess. Every day I would stand in these lines, unwanted, to be picked for a team. Every day I would be stared at by the other boys, be laughed at. Day in and day out, I would stand unchosen. I would sway my shoe across the dirt enriched ground,
slowly gliding the sole in a careful oscillating motion, smoothing the dirt that lay beneath. I would do this to break the stares, the laughter—to help me not pay attention to the panoramic ridicule around me. I always stood lastly waiting to be picked, identifying with the dirt that is different, being manipulated and oppressed in the manner chosen for it beneath my shoe.

The longer I stood in these lines waiting to be picked, my body draped even more, a useless pawn in this upcoming game...a useless pawn in the game of life. I always felt defeated. I always felt unwanted—devalued! Why did I always have to stand in these lines anyway? Why was I being forced to participate? Every day I would stand in these lines waiting to be picked—picked last. A selection process would ensue. Each day as the rhythmic selection stammers in pace, it would slow with a deep sigh of disgust, for there are only a couple left to be picked, the chump change, the ones who stand in this position every day—I am one of them. Every day I stood the last one left, and the two team lines plumped with kids would be piercing me with their stares. I would stand there listening to the captains who were engulfed in an auction of trading me, like property. Neither wanted me on their team, both tried to force the hand of the other to take me.

In these moments standing here alone waiting to be picked, all eyes fixed upon me, suffering at the mercy of others while I inhabit this purgatory state, I am exiled. I am different. I am unwanted. I am dirt. As if standing alone in line, not being picked for a team was bad enough, this aloofness continued in the games. I always felt picked on. A group of boys would gang up on me and throw the dodgeballs all at once, preventing me from escaping the assault. They would aim
for my face. Strategically devise a plan to inflict the most connections of the balls to my body. In flag football, I would get tripped—oh, sorry, it was an accident! I would get tackled. In soccer, I would get elbowed, cheap shot after cheap shot. In baseball, I would always get hit by the pitch. I just don’t know why they just did not pitch to me—I would have struck out every time. Everyone on the other team would try to purposely hit the ball in my direction, for they knew I could not catch it. I was laughed at a lot. I was called names. I was pushed often—just a part of the game. A game I did not want to be a part of. This was the game of my life—the story of my life.

Feeling so much sympathy for this boy, I methodically scratch through his name with my Sharpie marker making sure not to leave any clue of the name once scribbled underneath the coloring.

If you know what’s best for you:

Don’t associate with freak I... good time. Dumb Ass

When does my story start, you ask? I can’t tell you. It has been happening for so long that I cannot remember when it started. You see, I have always been
laughed at a lot. Called many names. I have always been different—been treated as different. I cannot tell you the first time I was laughed at. The first time I was hit or pushed. The first time I was called a name by my friends. The first time my own friends betrayed me or hurt me. I can’t give you any details, because when the bullying did begin, I did not even realize my friends were doing it to me. I remember some small things, such as walking up to my friends at lunch and all of them turning their backs to me. Previously engulfed in conversation, my presence now brought on silence. They would not look at me. They would not talk to me. Just yesterday, I was sitting with them, laughing, having a good time. What had changed overnight? Or had it been changing for some time now and I was too naïve to notice? As I walked away from the table, I could hear rumblings of laughing and whispering behind me. I turned around to look at them and the tallest of my friends was standing directly in front of me, peering down at me, intimidating me. She grabbed my shoulder and pushed me away from the group. More laughing and whispering ensued. In this moment, I was confused! I was upset. I ended up spending the rest of lunch, crying in a bathroom stall.

I remember other little things such as getting a drink from the water fountain and feeling the palm of a hand square on the back of my head preventing me from lifting it. Pushing my face more into the stream of water, pushing my head into the fountain. As I kept my distance from this group of girls, I would often find myself in compromising positions with them encasing me, bumping into me, calling me names. This bullying followed me to high school. Unfortunately, I could not escape the wrath they had been unleashing on me since middle school.
During freshman year, while I was changing for PE class, one of the girls took a Snapchat video of me and sent it to everyone. I was mortified. From then on, I would change in one of the stalls. I would wait until everyone was changed because I was scared she would do the same thing, but this time from under the stall door. I was tardy almost every day to PE class, just because I wanted to make sure everyone else was gone. Eventually I wound up wearing gym clothes to school, looking like a bum, and go to my next class sweaty just to avoid this confrontation.

By the time my junior year rolled around, I thought the bullying had played out its course. I figured the group of girl’s found a new victim. I had established a new set of friends. It was only a couple, but I trusted them. Truly believed that they would not turn their backs on me as my previous group of friends had. Everything was going great until one day we arrived at school and my past snuck back up to haunt me. Taped to my friends’ lockers was a still screenshot of the video that was taken a couple years prior when I was changing in PE. Accompanying the photograph were such hateful words, including a threat to my new friends. A fierce warning to my friends stating they stay away from me. If they knew what was best, they would not associate with me, would drop me as a friend. Once again I was mortified. Who knows how many people saw this before we got to school? Once again I thought I was going to be hurt by my friends. My friends tore down the paper, ripped it up and discarded it into the nearest trash cans. They turned around to the gathering crowd, up in front the group of girls who were my constant bullies stood. They stared them directly in the eyes, without
saying a word, put their arms around me and we walked away. No words were needed. I knew where they stood, whose side they had chosen that day. Because of them I was stronger—mentally, physically, emotionally. Right then and there I realized that these girls were my true friends. I might not have had many, but they were real and cared about me.

Once again, I find myself consciously concealing the name accompanying these hurtful words written on the door of the stall. Just like each name before, I carefully etch my Sharpie across the letters so that the name is so completely concealed in order to prevent someone from being able to read it.

My story begins with the animosity of two girls in my class—they possessed so much manipulation and exploitation in order to destroy another. In order to reap the benefits of making someone else look bad. Lacking a solid friend
base, I, allowed myself to be their third wheel. A very unhealthy relationship. I was shy and quiet. I had a hard time opening up and making friends. I was a little overweight—and was constantly fighting off a case of the ugly duckling syndrome that had overshadowed me these past couple of years. At first, I enjoyed their friendship. I was glad to just have friends since I had a hard time making them. They were nice and fun to be around. I truly believed we were friends by the way they acted around me. However, in reality I was in denial. I was in denial that they were truly bullying me. I was so relieved to finally have friends that I looked past the bullying tendencies, chalking them up to what friends do—they just pick on each other, tease each other sometimes. At the time, I did not recognize it, but they were manipulating me and isolating me from the other friends I had—intentionally separating me from the other kids in our class. They would drag me away from the group, isolate me—calling me names such as fat and ugly, stupid. Any time I was not successful at something, I got called out, snickered at, and criticized. They would make fun of my appearance and how I was overweight. Making slick comments at snack time about eating a healthier snack, or better yet, not eating anything at all so I would lose weight.

They often told me that I needed to lose weight. That I would never be pretty this fat. Or would never have a boy who likes me. They would force me to play tag knowing I was unable to catch anyone. I would run around in circles, gasping for air. Everyone laughing and pointing at me. My lunch would mysteriously go missing. My homework would go missing and I would have to come up with some lame excuse as to why I did not have it. Their bullying
continued throughout middle school. Sometimes it got physical, but most damage was done with words and actions, prompting embarrassment. At the end of our eighth grade year, I finally was receiving attention from a boy. This really stirred the pot with those two, causing torment at a totally different level. It got around to them that I shared my first kiss with him. Then the manipulation really started.

How could someone like him be attracted to you? It had to be like kissing a cow? What was he thinking? If I could go back, I would not have kissed him because of the rumors about me that would infiltrate the school afterwards. I would hear whispers and snickers all the time. These two girls spread rumors that I was easy, would spread my legs for anyone. For a good time call me, I would surely make sure you had fun. They wrote my number on sheets of papers and passed it around. I was receiving so many prank calls, I had to change my cell number.

Thank goodness they went to the rival high school; however, their torment haunted me all through high school. I remained extremely shy and awkward, which prevented me from making friends easily. I struggled daily with my self-confidence and continue to struggle today. These girls achieved what they wanted, but thankfully I have gained an understanding that I deserve better and a love of me for who I am. In time I have slowly begun to embrace how I look and be confident within my strengths. I am not the assumptions these two graced upon me. Life is full of hate, judgement, but these are only obstacles impeding my life. They are not going to define me, they are not going to hold me down. I have learned to embrace myself and to not let society’s ills standardize me. To not let these norms and stereotypes define me and define how I will live my life.
With the scribbling out of the last graffiti name on the bathroom stall, I decided right then and there that I was going to make it my mission to try to be an upstander. I slid the lid back onto my Sharpie and placed it inside my bag. Swinging it onto my shoulder, I grab my brown lunch bag and discard it in the trash on my way out. Now I walk differently. I walk tall, engaged with those around me. I step through the threshold into the chaos occurring in the cafeteria. In this moment, I feel eyes staring, penetrating my well-being. I stand affirm, stand tall peering around the lunch room, looking for my destination. My eyes come to rest on two loner students, sitting together, isolated, and not having a conversation. I walk toward them, set my bag on the table and sit down. I have been the new girl. I have been the different girl. That is not new, but today I am going to be a girl inspiring change. I open up a discussion among the three of us. Hopefully preventing these two from being the next names graffitied on the bathroom stall.
CHAPTER 6: LIFE’S LYRICS
With my shirt twisted in his grips pulling me closer, he swings his other arm in my direction until it crashes against my cheek. Swing after swing—connecting and missing and then connecting again, the force weighs me down to the floor, ripping my shirt from his grips. I peer up at him to see a different man—a man I do not know. A verbal shake down ensues. With his fist raised high screaming a threat, he steps in my direction. In one fluid motion, I roll to my feet and scurry away from the yelling—from the crashing that is still unleashed behind me. My socks slip across the smooth wood plank floor, leaving me unbalanced, forcing me to slide on my knees, then side, in the direction of my bedroom door and rolling to a stop at the door frame. I hastily pick myself up from the floor afraid he is following me—afraid he will catch up to me—I disappear through my bedroom and into the nook of my closet corner. Tucked away in the dark, shadowed by clothes masking me, I gently wipe the tears away from my swollen cheek with the cloth of my ripped shirt. Here I sit, alone, scared—hiding, hurting. Cupping my ears with my quivering hands to drown out the screaming, I slink further into the corner of the closet, hiding in the darkness. Hiding to go unnoticed. Hiding to dilute the screams. I tug at the layers of clothes overhead, allowing them to parachute over my body. Layers upon layers, I keep tugging them off the hangers. I keep tugging them to build up my guarded veil—the thickness protecting my weakness—until no more are suspended above me. Leaving them all draped over my body—layers to conceal me, layers to incite a sense of disappearance. I pull my knees deeper into my chest, holding them in place with a bear hug from my arms. I lock my arms within each other, gripping tightly as to prevent the extension of my legs, preventing the unfurling of my body. Overwhelmed with an array of emotions, I have a hard time grasping what just took place—for this never happened before. I do not understand! Where did it come from? What caused it? Was it me? Was it my mom? They fought often—too often, but it was never physical, until today (or
at least never physical toward me). This was the first time his hand struck my body, my face—not just once, but over and over again. This was the first time he had a physical outburst directed toward me. Something snapped in him—something causing an adverse reaction than normal—an action of physicality directed toward me. Thank goodness for cheap clothes. If my shirt had not ripped, I most certainly would have succumbed to more substantial assaults from his fist thrown in my direction. My cheek aches. Each pulse trembling more intensely—each pulse throbbing more viciously than the previous. I gently caress my fingertips across it, being careful to not press too hard—for my cheek could only handle the slightest touch of my fingertips against it.

My cheek would most certainly bruise. I began to concoct what lie to tell at school the following day. It had to be realistic—something believable. Wrapping my arms tighter around my knees, I feel another dull ache extending from my arm, another bruise from where his fist connected to my body. I cower more, sitting there, hiding. Sitting there weeping from the pain inflicted upon me—the physical, the mental, the emotional pain that engulfs my entire body. I am weakened by the brute force of this pain. A weakness I would feel often in my life. In this moment, I was unaware that I would have to lie often. In this moment, I was unaware that this would be the last time I saw him. A last where he so fiercely laid his fist upon my face, marking me, emotionally and mentally scarring me. Glass breaking, furniture flipped and dispersed into multiple pieces. Thuds against the wall separating my bedroom and the chaos. Muffled sounds of an open hand hitting—a closed fist into the wall. A few more screams and crashes occur, then a violent slamming of the door. That was it. He was gone—gone for good. I never saw my father again, which you would think would be a good thing, but in reality only started the domino effect of hardship and struggle known as the lyrics of my life. It took some time for me to realize, but later
on in my life I became aware that on that fateful day I also lost my mother. In this moment my life stood still—but life really never stops moving.
The slamming of doors became a regular rhythm caressing the arguments confined within the inner walls of my so-called home. A home broken—unable to love. A home that has changed so much—a different roof, a different size, different furniture—a different location. So much
difference—so much change with each home—my home. My physical home changed, but my HOME was my mom. It was always where my mom was. My mom was my constant. The initial blow of my father leaving was not so bad. There was no more fighting—no more brokenness, crashing—no more pain. I was happy. I felt loved again, getting much needed attention from my mother. We were happy at first—just my mom and me. The two of us taking on life. We spent many hours after school hanging out. She would help me with my homework and then, alternating who chose, watched movies with a bucket of popcorn. There we would be, snuggled up against each other laughing at the comedy, hiding from the horror, closing our eyes from the suspense. She would pull me in tighter, hugging me close with her arms. I nuzzled my head upon her shoulder, enjoying the love that was given. She was around all the time, always involved in my life. This was great! I felt loved! This was a façade—an outward presence that blanketed our reality. I did not understand it in that moment. As each day passed, I began to realize that my father was not coming back and I was fine with it because we were happy. There was no more verbal or physical destruction occurring all around me within the walls of my home. When my father left, he took nothing but three suitcases packed with his clothes. Everything else he left—only taking the essentials he needed for his new life. A life without us. After he left, there was always an apprehension that he would return—a worry within me and I believe in time a hope within my mom.

After a very short while, we had lived out our means. We were in a constant state of never quite enough—not enough money, not enough space, not enough food, not enough water—just not enough. See my mom never worked, just took care of me. My dad was the breadwinner of the family. Unfortunately for us, my mom continued to not work after he left. Supporting us on merely what money she had left, racking up credit card debt with an abundance
of swipes. All swipes living outside our means. Reality came fast—money disappeared quickly. Life drastically changed for us. What did my mom do all day? Until this day, I have no idea how she spent her time while I was at school. Each day we would leave the house and split paths—me to school and I was under the impression her to work. Eventually I could see a change in her and synonymously a change in our lifestyle. I became aware that we were becoming financially disadvantaged, which was brought on by the eventual acrimonious divorce of my parents and the lack of my mom holding a job. We were slowly becoming financially unstable. Living off generic peanut butter and eggs, my best meal came at my school. Sometimes that was my only meal in the day. If I did not go to school, I may not have a meal that day. I was always hungry. My stomach always rumbled with emptiness, echoing noise in the silence in the room. My kitchen cabinets were always empty, except for the few cockroaches that had died on the shelves. The fridge was also empty because we did not have enough money to pay the electric bill. Never could keep my growling belly full. I would rotate my attire based on five outfits, often going long periods of time without them being washed. No quarters, no soap—no clean clothes. One per day of the week. In order to mask the poorness, I would wear these clothes only at school to keep them looking nicer—cleaner. I would not participate in physical education or recess, for I did not want to sweat in my clothes, to keep them smelling nice. Every day, I hoped that no other students would notice my day of the week routine, but in reality, I know they saw beneath my vail. My teachers sure did. They noticed my pants were high waters and a little snug. Thankfully because of my petite diet, I was not outgrowing my clothes in width, only in length. At snack time, I would excuse myself to the bathroom, pretending I did not feel well, because I had no snack to munch on. While all the other students would enjoy their snack, I sat neglectfully in the bathroom passing time with my daydreams. We never had money for snacks. My teachers would
sneak snacks into my backpack when the class was at recess. I would sneak snacks taken from my classmates’ lunches to my book bag. I felt so bad stealing these snacks, but I was hungry. I would leave them tucked away in my book bag to save for my nightly stomach rumblings. I felt badly because I would sneak mouthfuls of these snacks when my mom was not paying attention to me (which was often) and was focused on her boyfriend, but I was hungry and neglected. I was embarrassed by the fact that she never would send me to school with a snack. I would quietly unwrap the snack that I hid under my pillow, masking the crumbling sound with my humming in order to not reveal my indulgence. You quickly learn to live without the little things, for these were delicacies—indulgences—not necessities. Using the bathroom outside, simply because we did not have enough toilet paper or did not want to waste a flush. At night, filling large jugs with water from my neighbor’s spigot in order to fill the bath tub or toilet, or more importantly boiling water to drink. Going multiple days in a row without a proper shower. My classmates would talk about parties, new adventures, the latest stylish trends and what cartoon they watched the night before or in the morning before school. I started off pretending I knew what they were talking about so I could fit in. Pretended that I had cable and also watched the shows. Pretending that my mom would take me to the zoo or the movies, in hindsight I never did any of this. I never went on any adventures with my mom. I never was able to afford the newest style shoes or cool Marvel t-shirt. Most of my clothes I claimed from the Lost and Found at school when no one else wanted them. Most of my time at home was spent alone, entertaining myself with whatever I could muster up, which was not much. A lot of the time I spent reading. Books were the one thing I could get in abundance for free—thanks to my school library. I would never go to any birthday parties, coming up with some lame excuse as to why I could not attend. My mom has to work! I do not feel well! I will be out of town! In reality, the reason I
would not go was because I was ashamed that I could not afford a present and discomforted by my presence in the grungy clothes I would have to wear. Everyone would be dressed to perfection and I would surely stick out, getting snickers and disapproving looks from parents and kids alike, from strangers. Eventually I did not get invited anymore to birthday parties, which was just fine for me. Eventually I would stop pretending I could relate to all these life indulgences because I could not and no one could relate to me and my situation. We were poor, well below the poverty line—oppressed by the cloak of poorness carried around my neck. I eventually just kept stood alone.

I often found myself lying in bed at night unable to sleep for the noises coming from the other side of the house and for the squeaky springs from my thrift store cot poking me up and down my spine. Never finding a comfortable positon to sleep in, I often lay awake at night listening to the noises that surround me. Different noises than the popping of electricity in the lights causing a spasm of shadow or the slow dripping of splashes landing in plastic buckets so meticulously placed around the house. Tonight I lay in just my underwear listening to my stomach growling. By now we had lost our home and were shacked up in a rundown two-bedroom apartment, still barely making ends meet. We had pawned everything of value we owned out of desperation for money. My mom did take a minimum wage job to pay the bills, mainly the rent, water and electricity. We still did without much and always with the ultimate choice of what is more important when we finally had a few dollars to spend. I constantly lived with the burning mortification that I would be seen by a classmate cashing in all the change, much of it picked up off the ground. Someone else too lazy to pick up what they dropped. What someone else discarded so easily was so beneficial and appreciated by me. Or that I would be seen at the grocery store with my mom using food stamps to purchase our food for the week. Or
coming out of a store or gas station with my pockets stuffed with toilet paper because we did not have any at home or with my hair wet because that was the only place I could rinse off due to the water bill not being paid. My mom had a lot of boyfriends during the time we stayed in this apartment. I never learned their names for they did not stick around long. Divided up like a deck of cards amongst the players of the game, my mom passed herself around from boyfriend to boyfriend during this time. Some would come by more often than others—regulars. At first, I just gave them numbers…boyfriend #1, boyfriend #2, boyfriend #3. I was never really allowed to converse with them. They would come knocking at all hours of the day and night. When they did, I got sent to my room and closed the door behind me. It eventually got to the point that when I heard a knock, I went to my room. Besides, I knew whoever it was, was not there for me—I did not have friends anymore. It got to the point with so many knockings that I just stayed in my room, only leaving to go to the bathroom. They were in and out, short-time stayers. I quickly caught on that all her boyfriends helped her pay the bills. That was very nice of them to care about my mom that much and wanting to help. I would peek through the crevasse of my partially cracked door sometimes and see the exchange of stacks of money as her boyfriend would slide the bills into her hands.

One night as I laid in my bed, I heard a slow steady knock on the door. A knock and then a pause, a knock and then a pause, repeating itself over and over again. Another boyfriend coming over. My mother opens the door and I hear anger. A bottle clinks to the ground crashing into multiple pieces. I scurried out of my bed and crack open my bedroom door. There is a giant of a man, one I have not seen before grabbing my mother’s arm and tugging her in the direction of the couch. My mom pleading with him to stop. Terrified for my mother, I race to her side in the living room and fling myself onto this man. Clawing at him to let her go. He flings me to the
ground, bringing my body still after crashing through the table in the living room. Splinters have pierced my arm and side. He grabs for me, but my mother tugs him closer to her. She yells at me to go to my room and close the door. I scurry away to my room across the glass shards sprayed on the floor, shut the door and lock it. My foot aches and blood liquefies my heel. Shackled in the living room are more yells and crashes—some whimpers, some pleas. Then quiet. The front door slams and I hear nothing. I slide out of my bed and tip toe to the door to slither a small crack to peer through between my bedroom door and frame. I see my mom, sitting on the couch, broken table in front of her, just staring at the wall. Sitting there with moisture in her eyes, tears beginning to roll down her cheeks. A few bills thrown in her direction, scattered on the floor at her feet. I walked out of my room to check on her and she yells at me. Blaming me for not being able to pay the rent because I ran off her boyfriend, threatening no food for the week. As she turns my way throwing harsh words in my direction, I see her face. A face now decorated with a bruise forming beneath her eye. I step closer going in to hug and console her and she lashes out at me, yelling, screaming, blaming. Pushing her arms forward in my direction to impede my progression toward her. Tears form in my eyes and I turn on my heels to scurry back to my room. Slamming the door, I crawl into my bed and parachute myself under the sheets. Shaking with chills occurring not only from my emotions, but from the frigid temperature in my room, I lay there quietly sobbing. Sobbing for my father (who knows where he is). Sobbing for my old life (was it really any better having parents who fought all the time). Sobbing to have a normal, better life—sobbing to be loved. Sobbing to not be different from my peers. Sobbing because this life thrust upon me is so hard and undeserving. This was my reality—my reality until one day I came home from school and there was an eviction notice on the front door of our
apartment. A thirty-day grace period—thirty days until we have to find a new home—as if this was a home!

We jumped around from apartment to apartment, dodging bills and money owed. Each one worse than the previous. Each one seeping with unhealthy conditions and a meek lesser quality of a home than the previous. Each one brought on new troubles. I began to travel with less and less with each move. Moving was often. Moving was spontaneous. Moving was fast. Sometimes it was a hassle to pack all of my belongings. Sometimes we left so fast that I did not have time to pack everything. There was a point during all these moves when I thought things were going to get better. We settled into a new apartment. My mom got a new job at the local
Walmart. She worked many hours and did not have many boyfriends. I was home alone a lot during this time, but that was alright because things were getting better. I was starting to feel loved again. Even though things were seemingly going uphill, I would skip school often. With all the moves, I got behind in my academics and struggled. Did not fit in. Did not make new friends with every move. Kept to myself, for I always knew in the back of my mind that at any moment we would pick up and move again, without any warning. Besides, my mom was never home and little involved in my education. However, after a short amount of time I realized that I needed to attend school solely for a good meal. At first I was attending school merely for lunch, but slowly for the first time I began to let my guard down just a little bit and found an appreciation for my learning. After some time, we fell into a routine. My mom was around more. She would have conversations with me. Ask about my life. Ask about school. We started to build a connection and mend a bond that had been broken for so long. Things were definitely improving.

With my new-found reality, I wanted to continue to bring positive change. We were forming a family again. I wanted to do better, help my mom out with the bills. I got a job at a local fast food restaurant. I donated plasma solely to bring in a little extra cash. I attended school daily and for the first time in a while began to put forth the effort to be successful. I would go to school all day, arriving early in the morning for extra tutoring and to get caught up, and work all night. In hindsight, I did not see my mom too often during this time. We were both so busy, but when we did see each other, it felt like we were finally a family. I had not felt this in so long. I began to do better in school with the help of my teachers. Still did not have any friends and kept to myself, but I was doing better. That would come for sure I thought. My life was turning around—life was improving. Positive change was happening. My mom and I were getting close again. Life was getting better—until it wasn’t!
After a late night at work closing the restaurant, I came home to a new reality. Reality has a funny way of creeping up on you and changing in an instance. There she was, sprawled on the floor, unconscious. I had noticed a slight change in her over the last month. Less time spent with her. Fewer conversations. Scarcer hours spent at work—which she would excuse with I was not put on the schedule. A new boyfriend. A new set of problems. I picked her up, carried her to the bed to lay her down and tried to cover her with a blanket. Incoherent, she slapped my hands.
away and mumbled at me such hurtful words. The next morning, she did not remember a thing. This was just the first night I would lift her dead weight body off the floor and delicately place it in the bed. Once again I have an absent mom. Once again I am learning to live without. Once again I feel the grips of despair and the harsh realities of my life. Once again I begin to doubt there is better. I began to fill my day with busyness, anything to get me out of the house and stay out of the house longer. I would go to school early, opting for tutoring instead of the usual morning after a high encounter with my mom. Most of the time she was still so strung out in the morning that I would be able to leave the house unscathed from this uncomfortable reunion. I joined a couple of clubs to bide my time in the afternoon before I had to be at work. While I was hiding from my mom by joining these clubs, I ended up benefiting greatly from them. I made a few friends and finally was involved in something at school other than academics. I picked up more hours at work, opting for the late shifts—for closing the restaurant would keep me longer from home. Eventually it got to the point where I would not come home a couple nights a week—choosing to crash at a friend’s house on the couch instead of in my bed at home. Most of the couches that I called home for the night were more comfortable than my bed anyway. I knew which days to pick to opt out of staying at home. My mom had established a sound routine, and I knew which days to not dare to return home. When I did see my mom, there was no hearty welcome, just a stiff request for a handout—for money. With what little I was making at the restaurant, I was using it to pay the bills as best as I could. I did not have extra money, or at least that is what I let her know. I was donating plasma to earn a little extra, which I would put into my secret bank account that my mom did not know I opened. But to her, I gave the appearance that I was broke, just like her, and I did not feel badly about lying to her.
After a long day and late night at work, I stumbled up the stairs exhaustedly to my apartment. There it was again—a sight I had seen often. Another eviction notice. Another thirty-day grace period. Get the rent paid, or on the streets we go. We could not afford another apartment. This was the cheapest one we could find in town. We were already living quite lean and I highly doubted we could find enough money to pay rent. Tearing the sign off the door, at that moment I decided that all the money I earned during this thirty-day grace period, I would put in the bank. Reserve it—just in case, especially because I highly doubted my mom would put in the effort to prevent this rehoming. Following my same routine—school, then work, then home—each day passed faster and faster to the untimely end of our stay. On day twenty-nine, I pack up my bag with only my most important valuables, which was not much. I threw my school book bag onto my shoulders and with my right hand picked up my bag filled with my clothes, what little I had. My mom grabbed her two bags and we walked out the door of our apartment into the threshold called street life. This would be the last home I would share with my mom. We walked to the nearest homeless shelter, five miles away. A very long walk carrying multiple bags. Upon entering the building, I was nervous about what was going to be bestowed upon us. We sat for what seemed like hours waiting in a cold, lonely room to find out if there would be enough beds for us to stay the night. Our names were on the list, but did we get there early enough. We ended up getting a bed that night—the first of many we stayed at the shelter. We split up that night, boys in the left room, girls in the right. As I walked into the boy’s wing, hugging my bag tight, I canvased the room for an empty bed. Hopefully one up against the wall or in the corner. By now most of the beds were claimed. Fearing everybody was staring at me or that someone might recognize me, I briskly walked to the nearest open bed and lay down on the bottom bunk. Nights were cold and lonely in the shelters. I would lay awake at night tightly
hugging my belongings in the dorm-style sleeping arrangements—never able to sleep with all the strangers around me. Not able to trust my environment. For now, I was somewhat safe—warm—it was my best option. There were strict rules when staying. Specific times for when meals were served, lights out, curfews, when to be home. Only certain hours of the day could be spent in the common areas. This limited time was when I would get to see my mom, spend time with her. We would have breakfast each morning and then it was out the door—me to school, her to who knows where. I would never leave anything of mine behind. At school I would stuff my clothes bag into my locker and retrieve it at the end of the day. The whole time we stayed at this shelter, it was instilled in us that this was not a permanent residence and could not be.

It shortly became another ex-residence for me. One day I had to work later than usual and got back to the shelter after curfew. I was not allowed in. Assuming my mom was in there for the night, I did not want to stray too far; so, I hunkered down a block away from the front door in the alley. As a storm was brewing and it was quite windy, I perched myself in the corner between a dumpster and the brick wall to prevent the wind from hastily whipping my body, sending cold chills throughout it. I sat there balled up the entire night, waiting for morning to arrive. Upon sunrise, I rested myself on the front stairs of the shelter, waiting for my mom to exit after breakfast. Did she notice I was not there? I waited and waited. She never came out. Everyone had to be out by a certain time. Where was she? I grabbed my bags and began to search for her. Missing school that day, I felt it was more important to find my mom. After searching several locations known for homeless occupancy and drugs, I found her sleeping under the bridge at the local park. I placed my bags next to her, and hesitantly placed my two fingers on her neck under the jaw line to check for a pulse. A sign of relief invaded my body as I realized she was breathing. I laid next to her, resting my head on my bag of clothes and sliding my arm through
my school book bag. In and out of consciousness, we laid there all day. This was the first day of many that I would spend finding shelter over my head on the streets. We often stayed here, under this bridge. After a few days, I was able to scrape up some small supplies, a tent, a blanket, some candy bars. We had our own little home again right here. I would freshen up in the park bathroom or at the gas station down the street before heading to school. My mom would search for jobs, or at least that is what I thought. Nights were getting cold and wet. It was a very isolated lifestyle—us living under this bridge. One evening upon returning to our nook under the bridge after work, my mom was not there. I sheltered in for the night waiting for her to return. Come morning, she still was not there. To no avail I searched around for her before going to school. I returned again after work and synonymous to the night before, my mom was not there. Each night I would come home hoping she would return; each night I was disappointed by her absence. I never saw my mom again.
Now I was really living an isolated life. Living on the streets, rough sleeping wherever I could find a spot. A spot to stay dry. A spot to stay warm. Soon I lost my spot under the bridge. This home was gone. My stuff was stolen because I could not bring it with me to school. School was my only out, I had to maintain that hope. One day I came home, and the area had been confiscated by numerous drug addicts, looking for their next fix, strung out and laying lifeless all around. With a little bit of fear, I did peer around the group looking for my mom—not really sure if I wanted to see her. It was time to move on. I went back and stayed in the shelter every time I could get there before curfew. Other nights I would lay on the cold concrete under a park bench, or an overpass. I was sleeping anywhere and everywhere—if you call it sleeping. I would take warm clothes—jackets, sweatshirts, hoodies—out of the lost and found at school. No one would miss them anyway and I surely needed them. Needed them for warmth. Needed them for a pillow. Needed them for comfort. I would sit in alleys with cardboard over my head hiding from the falling rain, waiting for the restaurant workers to throw out leftover food at the end of the night. On nights that I worked, I would take some of the leftover food with me. I would try to make it last—eating stale French fries two days later. I would sit in the local waffle house, order a cup of coffee for hours doing my homework. As long as I ordered something, I could stay in the warmth, in the light—studying, doing homework. Any time I could, I would couch surf, staying anywhere that provided warmth and a roof over my head. Quite often I wondered if my mom was struggling as much as I—but in reality, I assumed she was dead. Fallen addicted to the street life and eventually succumbed to it.

I tried to mask my reality as best as possible from my teachers and peers. I know some of them knew the reality I faced day in and day out. One teacher took special notice of my situation. At first she would do subtle things, such as slip me a twenty dollar bill. Just in case you are
hungry later. She would offer me one of her husband’s old coats or sweaters. She would arrive at
school extra early and allow me to come into her classroom to do school work, just so she knew I
was safe. Just so she knew that I was inside and warm. I would sit in her room after school doing
my homework, while she was tutoring other students. I would stay in the comfort of that
classroom as long as I could before I had to report to work, or until the point that she needed to
leave and take care of her family. One afternoon, quite a stormy one, I pretended to leave the
school but circled around and went into the bathroom. As the school locked down, I hid in that
bathroom. There I stayed the night, laying on the cold tile floor, but it was still warmer and dryer
than anywhere I could put my head down for the night. I bounced around rough sleeping
anywhere I could lay my head down for the night for some time—until my life changed for good.
It was getting late and I was still sitting in this teacher’s classroom, hanging onto every minute I
could still be under the roof of the school. I could feel her looking in my direction. I felt that
having to leave was nearing. I looked up at her and could see a different look in her eyes. A look
of despair, of personal struggle, of her heart breaking. I could sense it was all directed toward
me. Finally, breaking the silence, she just asked me…where are you sleeping tonight? Do you
have somewhere to stay? Embarrassed, I brushed it off as a yes. She knew better. That day she
took me in. She brought me home to her house, with her family. We sat around the dinner table.
A home cooked meal—the first I had in years, a hot meal. I made sure to mind my manners,
trying not to reveal my starvation and how I lacked eating often. As it was getting late, I began to
gather my things to head out for the night. As I was thanking them for the wonderful meal, she
abruptly asked me what I was doing. She grabbed my bags from me and led me to the spare
bedroom. That night was the first night I slept in a real bed, the first night I took a real shower in
a very long time.
This was my new reality. I now had a home. Had a family who supported me. I stayed with this teacher and her family until I graduated. They were at my graduation. There is a picture of all of us in a black frame on their mantel today. With their support I enlisted in the military. That was the best choice for me—such a good choice because I had nowhere to go and no hope of paying for college. My new family offered, but they already had given me so much. I could
not ask for more. They offered me a hand-up, the offered me love—offered a way out of my circumstance. They took me in when life’s struggles were dealing me blow after blow, holding me down, preventing a rising up. I go home for holidays, for Father’s Day, for Mother’s Day—Thanksgiving and Christmas! They gave me a home when I most needed it the and let me continue to be a part of this home. They are my home. I used to think that my home was where my mom was, but I was wrong. Blood does not make a home. These days I still do not know where my birth mother is—whatever happened to her. I often wonder if she is still alive. But I do know that after having a broken home for so long, I have a stable place to call home and it feels nice. I have loving parents, loving siblings. I am loved—I love back! Today I stand in front of this crowd, sharing my experiences, and opening up hope for others. It took me quite some time to get to this point—to get here. I struggled fiercely growing up. I was abandoned by my parents. I was neglected by my parents. I found a new family—or, they found me. They showered me with love. They gave me hope for a better future. Today I stand cutting the ribbon to this At-Risk Youth Homeless Shelter with my family standing beside me. With the hope to provide for others in the manner I could not receive. To provide hope that our circumstance does not define us. That we can do better. To provide hope for survival, to offer survival—we can survive.

This song was not written overnight, it took my lifetime to write.
A relationship occurs between a piece of literature and the literary experience of a reader; or an artwork and the viewer. Both are significant in character development and moral strengthening. They hold capacities of providing opportunities to be exposed to and building an
understanding of difference by cultivating imagery of realistic experiences of another. “There must be a revolution in the way we see, the way we look” (hooks, 1995, p. 4). The viewer identifies with the imagery illustrated in both forms of art. An identification that opens awareness, both to oneself and to another. Learning occurs both in one’s experiences and through the exposure of another’s experiences. A reflection, a re-experiencing, an awareness evoked—all generated from artwork correlating and sharing social experience. Simulations of ourselves, as well as others, in the social world are vividly put on display. They segue a change of perspective, helping to develop empathy, social skills and the diminution of inequalities within the social norm of everyday experiences. These art forms are an abstraction because they offer replicas of the social world and interactions through the portraying of ideas in forms of simplification or compression—distorting the portrayal minutely from real life. However, even in their most abstract form, the intent is to represent real life social experience. They are a simulation to understanding by offering realistic models of social experience and relations—they model real life, they observe real life, they comment on real life—ultimately supporting an understanding of life in terms of human interactions, realities and differences. Social experience, depicted in fiction and illustrations, functions as a recording and communication vehicle of multifaceted social realities in a manner that offers personal involvement demanding the viewer interject themselves in the experiences being embodied. Interjecting the reader into the ‘otherness’ of another being, a difference because of language, of mentality, of color, of hardship or of power. A difference because of domination. “Domination can be exercised by men, by nature, by things—it can also be internal, exercised by the individual on himself, and appear in the form of autonomy” (Marcuse, 1991, p. 221). Societal relations, experiences and actions are fully enriched with the ideal of domination—have fallen prey to this ideology, this reasoning.
“Precisely in those actions which in their totality are socially and historically significant, human beings general behave in quite typical manner, that is, in conformity with a definite scheme of motives which are characteristic of their social group” (Horkheimer, 1991, p. 176-77).

_Differenced by Language (Animals)_

“Animal is a word that men have given themselves the right to give” (Derrida, 2008, p. 32). Animal cruelty is ever heightened—heightened at the hands of others, the hands of humans. “Never before in human history have so many animals been subjected to horrific slaughter, unconscionable abuse, and unthinkable living conditions” (Calarco, 2008, p. 76). Beliefs that are brought on by the assumption of a difference in morality. Humans are moral, animals are not. “Humans can think, animals cannot; humans can use language, animals do not; humans have souls, animals do not; humans feel pain and suffer, animals do not; and humans are rational, and animals are instinctual” (Snaza & Weaver, 2015, p. 2). Often described as unequal because animals are seen as lacking morals, emotions and the ability to communicate, in reality they do possess these attributes. In reality, the only difference between animals and humans is language. Unable to communicate with each other, but equally moral. “Morality is a broadly adapted strategy for social living that has evolved in many animal societies other than our own” (Bekoff & Pierce, 2009, p. 3). However, animals are still treated poorly, seen as other—seen as objects. “People complain that we treat animals like objects, but in fact we treat them like prisoners of war” (Coetzee, 2004, p. 104). They live in terror—being mistreated, starved, compacted with enhancers, human experiments—a servitude life. “When an animal crafts a gesture with a purpose for an audience, she or he becomes a maker” (Moe, 2013, p. 4). They live to entertain, to amuse. They live in overcrowdedness. Physical abuse raged on them daily. “They are innocent beings, and they could not want such things” (Despret, 2012, p. 206). Moral transgressions are
deposited upon them often. “Moral transgressions are more serious, and their wrongness relates to harming others” (Bekoff & Pierce, 2009, p. 15). Humans are doing the harming—the mistreatment. Animals are devalued in relation to humans. Deemed not as important. ‘Whose lives count as lives’ (Wolfe, 2013, p. 18)?

“We have created a world that is morally, spiritually, and emotionally out of balance” (Shapiro, 2006, p. 62). Through their stories, fiction and artwork expose a wider audience to the ideals of how the human race treats animals in an effort to establish compassion and empathy to create equality in the coexistence and relationship of humans and animals. “No one can deny the suffering, fear, or panic, the terror or fright that can seize certain animals and that we humans can witness” (Derrida, 2008, p. 28). Fiction and artwork are both vessels to provide insights of animal cruelty and help establish ethics towards animals. Many artworks seek to open up discussion dialogues and change conversations regarding animal rights by using the influential communication outlet of fiction and illustrations to display the realities of what animals endure and are continually exposed to. “The belief that humans have morality and animals don’t is such a longstanding assumption it could well be a habit of mind, and bad habits, as we all know, are damned hard to break” (Bekoff & Pierce, 2009, p. 10). Fiction and art are used to help break these habits. They are used to help build an understanding of similarity, that human and animals are not so different. Readers immerse themselves in tales that expose humanity with regard to animal treatment, deviling into descriptions that shine light on the suffering animals are forced to endure at the hands of humans. “One can be somebody only if someone else is something” (Haraway, 2008, p. 206). Animals are declared this something. Detached from humanity. Vividly displayed in fiction are the very attributes that humans use to justify themselves as different, superior—the animals display morals, emotions and communication skills. The very things that
deem them as ‘other’—as not as important, unequal—because of a belief they lack these attributes. Fiction encourages change. Encourages empathy and compassion. “We often have compassion for creatures whose experience we know we can never share; most compassion with animals has this feature” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 330).

Fiction serves as a bridge to negate this weakness brought on by human ideals toward ‘otherness’—toward the animal. Depicting human-to-animal relationships, as well as animal-to-animal relationships, fiction provides vivid imagery not only exposing the harsh realities of animal and human coexisting, but engages the reader to think about the current ideals and ethics toward animals. It simulates human and animal experience in an effort to open understanding, to teach moral and practical lessons related to the human world, and to provide a voice and animal perspectives—to humanize animals. Fiction can power improvements of attitudes toward animals and their welfare by exposing the reader to an alternative viewpoint from the animal’s perspective, through its senses. “An animal—and we are all animals—is an embodied soul” (Coetzee, 1999, p. 78).

_Differenced by Mentality (War)_

Imagine being awakened by the sound of claymores and machine gun and rifle fire in the pitch blackness that is suddenly lit up by flares and tracers. For a split second you don’t know where the hell you are, then you fire your own rifle into the night. Then the weapons stop, and there is a new sound, but one heard before: Low moaning, somewhere out in the night. And it is black. Black until dawn.

But you aren’t there anymore. You are in your bed at home, nearly 30 years later. And your bed and pillow are drenched with sweat. (Wizelman, 2011, p. 1)
The active conflict of war has an extremely long-standing relationship in human societies. If one were to compile the historical accumulation of wars in years and compare them to the time of human civilization, the numbers would be extremely lopsided in favor of war-enriched years in comparison to peaceful years. War has a monumental effect on the well-being of individuals involved. These individuals are exposed to realms of cruelty and inhumanity that no one should witness. They witness and participate in acts of violence, brothers’ and sisters’ last breaths as they succumb to the ills of war, and tests of fate and survival. “Suicide and stress disorder represent the negative externalities/collateral damage of war” (Koven, 2017, p. 509). They come home changed—different—not the same being as when they left. “The mental health of military personnel returning from war is an issue of profound social, ethical, and economic consequence” (Koven, 2017, p. 500). Some veterans come home with physical scars, while others come home with invisible scars. “When something is well hidden it is hard to find” (Wittgenstein, 1984, p. 29e). Many veterans are successful at hiding their invisible scars, veiling the mental struggle raging within them from others—from the ones they love. “PTSD is a mental health disorder that is the direct result of exposure to a traumatic event” (Weisenhorn, Frey, van de Venn, & Cerel, 2017, p. 162). Soldiers face traumatic events head on in war. They are harmed. They witness harm. They lose comrades. They see hate and death. All of which can take a heavy toll on the mental psyche of a soldier when returning home after the war. They come home carrying loss. They come home carrying guilt. They come home carrying fear. “We know its ability to isolate, immobilize, demoralize” (Whitaker, 2006, p. 91). Back in the real world, they can feel isolated, stuck in an unhealthy mental state. Their life not the same. Sometimes stuck back in war. Sometimes reliving the trauma. “A ‘trauma’ involved actual or threatened death or serious injury and is of an extreme nature or catastrophic magnitude” (Wizelman, 2011,
This actual trauma or witnesses to trauma forever alters a soldier, causing them to have mental disorders, negative thoughts, anxiety, stress—they blame, have guilt, are hopeless. Death hangs over every soldier. Their self-esteem and mentality can be affected negatively. “Many veterans who are fortunate enough to return home devoid of visible disabilities have acquired invisible scars that negatively affect them throughout their lifetimes” (Koven, 2017, p. 500). These invisible scars engulf the everyday experiences of veterans, affecting them negatively, unable to live normalcy, or live how they did prior to going to war. “Mental health disorders, divorce, alcoholism, drug abuse, homelessness, depression, unemployment, underemployment, and criminal activity are only some of the more observable manifestations of the human costs of military service” (Koven, 2017, p. 500). Grief is not a straight line.

Just as there is a long standing history of wars, there is a rich antiquity of fiction and art illustrating the realities of these wars or the realities war has on soldiers. Using current societal conditions as inspiration, vivid depictions of war transverse through storylines exposing the audience to the harsh realities occurring during war and the equally harsh realities brought home from war. While fiction and art articulate portrayals of war-themed content to bring awareness to the realities war can have on someone, there is also a resilient shift in using art as a form of therapy for soldiers who suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or any other mental conditions carried home from war—helping them deal with their daily struggles that activate negative emotions. Literature is art in the form of a verbal context that allows depictions of the realities of war along with the tolls it takes on those involved. Stories are compelling, drawing the reader into a world that many cannot truly identify with unless they were in the trenches of war, or might have an emotional connection from the outer banks because of family members or friends who were there. There is an unveiling of what these soldiers carry, in the sense of
mentally, emotionally and physically, both during and after the war that can be revealed through storylines to the audience. “They all carried ghosts” (O’Brien, 1990, p. 10). During the war they were surrounded by death and fear which impacted their thoughts, emotions and actions. How lucky was a soldier? Luck seemed to play a vital role in one’s untimely death. The ghosts are their comrades, their victims, their emotions—all which continue to be carried postwar. All of which can take a drastic toll on a veteran’s mental stability. Fiction and art help to bring awareness, help to identify, to understand and open dialogues of discussion related to the struggles soldiers face mentally, physically and emotionally when they return home.

_Differenced by Color (Race)_

With every powerful moment of progress associated with positive social change in racial equality, there is another tragic moment of narrow-minded views and assumptions bringing discrimination and the lack of equality back to the forefront. “We define racial formation as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi & Winant, 2004, p. 117). Racial discrimination in society is the result of racist behavior, which generates a multitude of negative consequences, including neglect, avoidance, harassment, exploitation, exclusion or oppression to those deemed to be different and inferior. “Oppression means, first of all, the oppressor’s hatred for the oppressed” (Memmi, 1991, p. xxvii). Racial discrimination—racial behavior is generated in social experiences. Racial boundaries are present in today’s society. “The oppressed grandchild repeats the suffering of their grandparents” (Freire, 2017, p. 13). Racism is poignantly passed down from generation to generation. “Segregation is still the norm in social relationships” (hooks, 2017, p. 54). Racism and segregation is still alive in current societal conditions and experiences. Human rights are infringed upon, leading to unfair or unjust treatment—inequality within social contexts. The
breach of a person’s human rights not only affects their physical well-being, but also disturbs their cultural, social, and emotional well-being as an individual and within their community. “We are not racist; we become racist just as we may stop being that way” (Freire, 2017, p. 44). When it comes to racism, the roles of the oppressed and the oppressors are passed down the generations. ‘Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons—not by those who are oppressed, exploited, and unrecognized’ (Freire, 2004, p. 13-14). This violence enlists social conflict in everyday experiences—social conflict that arises from the social injustices of authoritative power established within the hierarchy and ideals of race. History is repeating itself—the history referred to stems back to the servitude days when continual debasement and empowerment of one culture was inflicted by another culture believed to have more authoritative power. Believed to be superior. Deemed to be the norm, the standard—unreachable by ones of a different skin color.

“Racism is pervasive to the point that we take many of its manifestations for granted, believing ‘that’s life’” (Yamato, 2004, p. 64). This cultural segregation, exclusion and violence created by the dominate culture is manifested institutionally, interpersonally and internally. “The conscious actions of many individuals daily contribute to maintaining and reproducing oppression, but those people are usually simply doing their jobs or living their lives, and do not understand themselves as agents of oppression” (Young, 2004, p. 39). Fiction and artwork document the daily struggles and injustices of racism, inequality and segregation—serving as a historical, figurative, and realistic snapshot of an anti-utopia take on society and descriptively detailing the historic struggles of the African-American social class. They serve as a vessel scripting the hardships of how one race defined how another should endure life. “Our careers, even our lives, are threatened because of our color” (Bell, 1992, p. 3). They offer a glimpse into
these realities—these discrepancies. They share history. They navigate the viewer through masterful dwellings of stories of ‘the other,’ using characters, settings and storylines to tell the realities of inequality, both in the past and in current day. They critique modern society in correlation with social evolution while highlighting socioeconomic injustices and everyday circumstances within society. ‘Hate, prejudice, abuse, and violence are certainly pervasive aspects of human societies since time immemorial’ (Shapiro, 2006, p. 46). These stories expose the audience to the complexity and cruelty of racially charged stereotypes of African-Americans during a time when there was consistent push for slavery, segregation and discrimination - offering a poignant look into the dehumanization effects. They articulate the anger, frustration and hope felt by African-Americans in response to social and racial injustices. “You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 7). They share a rich history of growing up unequal in the eyes of society; as well as reflecting on black nationalism and proposing a solution to the racial conflict. “The only way to rid society of race would be through amalgamation—for Americans to become a blended people” (Takaki, 2008, p. 121). Fiction and art offer an inside view of the African-American culture by detailing stories that question social situations and norms, by illustrating fights in the face of racism, by offering an awareness of this continual history of debasement and a hope for change. The viewer is taken through racial tensions and individual biases carried by one with storylines depicting prejudice, injustice and inequality throughout the portrayal of lived social experiences. They offer truth. They offer the pursuit to do the right thing even when facing adversity in the form of discrimination, ultimately exposing the audience to the ideal of fighting against the injustices in the world—injustices brought on by a difference in skin color. They offer an awareness that racial profiling is customary in today’s society happening
frequently and is fueled by racial borders and tension. The root of societal struggles and discrimination is directly linked to skin color ideas of inferiority, power and intolerance. They encourage the social power of a culture to contest the old way of mistreatment and challenge themselves as a culture to struggle and fight for a change, to embrace a pursuit for fairness and justice no matter what social conflicts and disparities are thrown in their way. Fiction and art not only share a rich history on inequality, but also criticize America’s ideals of equality, liberty and freedom in relation to discrepancies among races, as well as offer hope for change—a change that is still happening today. A change that still needs to be acknowledged—that still needs to happen. “The terrible fact is that social injustice still characterizes this society” (Greene, 1978, p. 136). By binding the audience to the content being illustrated, fiction and art open an awareness to the historic context of social experiences with racism and inequalities and how these experiences are still present in social situations and relations—while opening dialogue and offering new ways of thinking and seeing. “People should be treated as individuals, not as members of groups, and allowed to form their lives freely without stereotypes or group norms” (Young, 2004, p. 44). Fiction and art help to achieve this ideal by exposing audiences to the realities of this mistreatment in today’s society, as well as throughout history.

_Differenced by Power (Humans Create Weakness)_

They are not just words! “Humans are the animals that manufacture weakness” (Rowlands, 2009, p. 103). People are constantly using their words to devalue and weaken others. Words can hurt; they can play with, alter, and dishearten emotions. They are used to push others down while in turn lifting oneself up, often taking an evil form. Bullying is such a common problem with social interactions today that recent events these last few years have resulted in an anti-bullying movement. “There is no symmetry in this conflict” (Said, 2002, p. 447). Individuals
often find themselves with no safe place to hide from the bullying. It can now follow them anywhere, especially with the continual growth in technological advancements. Through bullying one suffers exile. “One suffers exile when his or her conscious body, reason, and feelings—one’s whole body—is touched by it” (hooks, 2011, p. 219). Children are vulnerable and tend to take words thrown in their direction at face value. This continual debasement can have a significant effect on the psyche of a child—the well-being of a child and the future of a child. Bullying does not discriminate among its victims. It does not matter your race, your gender. Everyone and anyone can fall victim to bullying. The effects of bullying can alter how one identifies with oneself—how their identity is labeled, how they believe others view them. “For our identities are defined in relation to how others identify us, and they do so in terms of groups which are always already associated with specific attributes, stereotypes, and norms” (Young, 2006, p. 43). It is these attributes, stereotypes and norms that are picked apart during bullying—or the reasoning why hurtful words are inflicted, physical boundaries are crossed. It is these that determine how one identifies another. Abusive interactions and relationships are far too common in social encounters. This inhumane destruction has no age limit, is not defined by gender, and can happen to anyone, anywhere. They come in the form of fits of rage by throwing fists and words. They are inflicted because of one’s dominance over another. They affect one mentally, physically and emotionally. Overwhelming emotions filled with fright, discomfort and hurt are embedded within one. “Feelings, feelings, feelings: all of them personal, some almost overwhelming” (Rowlands, 2009, p. 182). Both children and adults are exposed to this degrading and unjust treatment at the hands of another. This continual social construct is ever present in society. “It is reality now and the reality of the future as far as we can see it” (Coetzee, 2004, p. 141).
Accompanying the increased concern of bullying and drawing awareness to it in an effort to stop bullying has been an overwhelming surge of artwork to bring alertness to this troubling element so common in the social context of interactions and relationships. This serious social problem has served as a main topic of fiction and art helping to bring awareness to the plight individuals are entangled in while grappling with these experiences and interactions. Books offer a window for others to see the realities that bullying bestows on individuals. A reader can travel through the bullying experiences portrayed and cannot help but feel the pain—the isolation of the character—especially knowing that many of these events do actually occur in today’s social interactions. Fiction brings awareness to a variety of different types of bullying, abuse prevalent in modern society. Fiction opens discussion dialogues that allows the victims of different types of abuse to acknowledge this mistreatment as unwarranted and allows a creative outlet to organize and express the chaos overwhelming their emotions; as well as allowing the viewer to build an awareness regarding the epidemic of bullying. Fiction serves as a bridge of understanding to what one endures while continually suffering trauma from continual bullying, while also inspiring hope for social and cultural change. Trauma experienced in childhood can have a direct impact on lived experiences and individual choices made in adulthood. Our experiences shape who we are, how we think, and how we do things. Fiction is a detrimental segway that provides the harsh realities of bullying and the effects it can have on its victims, including the overall psyche, social interactions and relationships, and life choices.
“Culture has us before we have it” (Garrison, 2010, p. 39). This can be said of individuals who find themselves in the constraints of poverty. It is a monumental task to move up social classes, often moving lateral or to the top of the class, but not too frequently being able to rise above the class line into the higher end social class. Poverty is frequently identifiable with the concept of being generational, for a family’s culture experiences have sustained poverty generation after generation. Poverty can be influenced by a circumstance. Most individuals who live in poverty struggle to survive month-to-month. Poverty does not discriminate—it includes a diverse group of individuals ranging in age, race, educational level, mental ability and gender. Poverty is endured by many, whether because of physical or mental illness, alcohol or drug misuse, a trauma or running away. “The notion of understanding has something to do with thought” (Morris, 2016, vol.2, p. 24). It is through works of fiction and art that thought is stimulated. Windows for understanding are presented for viewers to step into another’s experience with poverty. Through portrayals of human suffering depicting the anguish and plight of impoverishment, viewers are exposed to the universal problem of poverty. Fiction is used to poignantly highlight the capacities of homeless, impoverished residents on the streets of society, including ones who find themselves in shelters, not limited to just homeless shelters, but also domestic abuse shelters and teen runaway shelters among them. They can highlight groups of poverty-stricken individuals seeking necessities of life that is limited to them, which synonymously can be taken for granted by others—food, water, clothes, warmth, a roof over their heads.

Fiction serves as a vehicle of understanding by inviting readers into raw testimonials of realistic portrayals of actual life in impoverished communities—ones that mobility out is
handcuffed by expectations to fail or by the lack of support and means. It can depict poverty as a family tradition, poignantly inviting the reader to build an understanding of the magnitude of growing up in a poor, abusive—expected-to-fail—society. Fiction can portray the harsh realities and a vivid portrait to the sharp differences between social classes relative to needs and necessities, contrasting upper class ideas of necessities as really being unnecessary indulgences and lower class ideas of what is necessary which is very minimal in comparison. Poverty and class struggles are continually associated with one another. Fiction serves as a vehicle of understanding by inviting readers into raw testimonials of realistic portrayals of actual life in impoverished communities—ones that the mobility out is handcuffed by expectations to fail or by the lack of support and means. It can depict poverty as a family tradition, poignantly inviting the reader to build an understanding of the magnitude of growing up in a poor, abusive—expected-to-fail—society. It portrays the harsh realities and a vivid portrait to the sharp differences between social classes relative to needs and necessities, contrasting upper class ideas of necessities as really being unnecessary indulgences and lower-class ideas as very minimal in comparison. Fiction is used to provide an awareness and insert an understanding of the realms of poverty—the causes, the effects it can have on someone, the physical constraints of it, the tough-lived experiences within this social construct to which one is exposed. Many people are truly unaware of the restraints and toll of poverty. Fiction and art help to identify, help bridge an understanding of the causes and effects of poverty, and open discussion dialogues of social and cultural change in the face of poverty.

_Differenced by Being: Changing Perspectives_

The metaphorical phrase, ‘don’t judge a book by its cover,’ is a historical cliché bounded within society’s memoir, enriched with judgment, difference, mistreatment, and injustice. The
antiquity of society’s judgment, based on identity markers—book covers—affects human experiences in everyday life relative to social relationships and power structures. The process of lived experiences succumbs to the personal views of another. “It is a process that is shaped by culture, influenced by language, impacted by beliefs, affected by values, and moderated by the distinctive features of that part of ourselves we sometimes describe as our individuality” (Eisner, 2002, p. 1). Although this idiom encourages one to resist the notion to prejudge the value of someone based on external appearance—we look, we perceive, we judge. “We perceive and imagine, we compare and contrast” (Eisner, 1991, p. 18). We label, we isolate—there is always a discrepancy with how one views another, with how society views one of its own. Isolation from one another, strengthened by difference, is an unfortunate fact of society and humanity. Fiction seeks to bridge this difference by enlightening one to the realm of cultural diversity governance in society as to how individuals and groups are different and isolated. How they are mistreated, or devalued, unequal. It seeks to captivate individuals to see, to understand, to sort through, and to confront the quite often demoralizing issue of being different.

Fiction is a powerful form of communication filled with a vast untapped well of information that provides an opportunity to see the world from a different perspective through the eyes of a character whose experiences simulate reality, which might or might not be similar to the reader’s reality. It connects one to truths, to differences—to notions, realities, and ideals ever present in society. Truths that define a life, a culture. Truths that are harmful and oppressing—ones that have a traumatic effect on a being, a culture. “It is through the perception of qualities—not only those we can see, but those we experience through any of our senses—that our consciousness comes into being” (Eisner, 1991, p. 1). It is this consciousness that becomes wide awake through engagement with literature—the engagement with a literary lens, an artwork
which tells a story, shares a reality, a life. “Consciousness thrusts toward the world, not away from it; it thrusts towards the situations in which the individual lives his or her life” (Greene, 1978, p. 14). So many preconceived notions and societal forces are compressing awareness to the realities of otherness because these forces in culture create misunderstandings, underpinning of difference, injustice and inequalities. Not only does fiction help establish an identification of difference, but it also supports an understanding of the world around us—and helps us understand ourselves and our individual reality in comparison to others. “To see, to perceive, is more than to recognize” (Dewey, 2005, p. 24). Fiction helps one to maneuver through the recognition stage and into the seeing, perceiving and understanding stages by forming a sense of compassion, sympathy and empathy by the readers toward a character, environment or situation in the narrative. It is in itself a social experience that helps us step away from our limited perspective, by generating life within the depictions of conditions that hinder the construction and devastation of the future guided by the past. Fiction allows us to identify, to become aware—to empathize, to strive for social change, for better.

Fiction, through its power to provoke imagination, leads to the evolution of emotions that develop a conscious awareness of another’s world, perspectives, and feelings. It has the ability to grasp the reader’s cognitive and emotional psyche exposing the reader to worlds quite different from his own. “To be ignorant is to lack knowledge or to know little or nothing about a subject” (Doll, 2000, p. 25). Fiction teaches us, connects us, exposes us to a realm of characters entrenched in a vast array of topics and experiences by tugging not only at our heart strings, but also at our awareness, our thoughts, by opening our eyes to differences and change. It teaches us about a larger curriculum of culture and life. It forces us to recognize barriers, chip away at them, break them down and build new ones. “Books make a great impact on our identities” (Morris,
They connect us, expose differences, prompt us to think differently and activate an identity of understanding others better and seeing the world, other’s realities from a new perspective. Fiction disrupts our known, or established. Its depictions and dissections of cultural and social meanings shed light on the harsh realities that encompass such to a whole new concept of transferring ideas, messages, and understanding. It has the power to insert us into someone else’s life, mind, and experiences—revealing facts and realities unidentifiable to oneself. “It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one’s own thoughts and intentions” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 5). Fiction—books, novels, short stories, poems—serve as windows that graze the outer banks of our consciousness, imagination and understanding. The reader can unlock these windows, slide open the glass, and walk through with his imagination and desire to become a part of the world created inside the cover by the writer. Desire to look at a world, very different from his own, through a removed perspective—allowing the reader to see how all things, different things, in our world fit together. “Entering other worlds involves distance—collapsing it, shrinking it, ignoring it” (Wear, 2006, p. 71).

When a reader steps through the glass door with his imagination, the distance is being manipulated. When we cross the threshold into another world, we are shedding our skin, our identity markers, our power, our assumption and beliefs for that moment. While they are still present within us, they are vulnerable to the world we are exposed to and subject to be influenced, altered and expunged. “To be yourself is to be in process of creating a self, an identity” (Greene, 2000, p. 20). As we read, our identities are exposed to the possibility of change—the possibility to evolve. Our identities change, mature—become open to awareness, understanding and empathy. “The world we live in can be seen in a variety of ways” (Eisner,
It is through fiction that we get to see the world in multiple ways—we get to learn about the world.

*Differenced by Reality: Out of Mind, Feeling Something*

“Language is so obviously the force of creativity” (Bachelard, 2002, p. 143)! It is this language used by writers that enthralls the reader in a story, setting in motion an emotional connectedness with characters and the archetype of their story—their situation, their emotions, and their realities. Frequently, as we read, we come across characters that we see similar traits of ourselves in or that remind us of someone or a situation—an experience. We read into them based on our emotions, knowledge, experiences, assumptions and desires. Our imagination runs rampant allowing us to emotionally and mentally connect to the character. “It is imagination that discloses possibilities—personal and social as well as aesthetic” (Greene, 2001, p. 65). It is one’s imagination that sets in motion an engagement with the characters—that allows us to stand next to them, enthralled in the scenes as if we were there, enthralled in their individualized emotions. We connect to them. We feel for them—with them. It is our imagination that helps develop our ability to see humanity, to see humanness in difference and in daily life encounters. “Unlike historical work, literary worlds typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 5). One’s imagination engages with characters—gives us hope, pieces of advice, new knowledge, criticism, self-consciousness, and an advocacy for change—all while stirring emotions within our being, forming a bond, a connectedness.

“Our society is full of refusals to imagine one another with empathy and compassion, refusals from which none of us is free” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. xvii). It is fiction that implements
an exposure to the social complexities and realities of others in hope of bridging gaps of understanding secured by the role of difference in society’s refusals by building compassion. “Compassion requires the judgment that there are serious bad things that happen to others through no fault of their own” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 405). It is compassion that institutes the reader’s empathy toward a character. It is compassion that opens an awareness to bad things, harsh realities, that happen to others. “Empathy is a means to understanding, and strong empathetic feelings may provide deep insight into what others are experiencing” (Knowles & Cole, 2008, p. 6). Observing a character interact with the world around him is powerful because it offers an escape route for the reader to shed layers and step into another’s shoes—ones that can be quite different from his own. “In order to relate to a character who is not like us means that readers understand the concept of difference” (Morris, 2016, vol. 1, p. 394). It is this concept of difference that allows a reader to see the world from a different perspective and to establish empathetic emotions toward difference. To be empathetic, the imagination has to be unlocked and entrusted to maneuver in participation in the reading. “The imagination has to be involved, and more—ignited” (Welty, 2007, p. 114).

Empathy for a character is derived by the ability to use one’s imagination to recognize and share the emotions of another person. Fiction abstracts limitations by extending, breaking or reinventing them in the representation of characters and the story lines enthralled within. This is done by making the characters relatable, encompassing traits similar and identifiable to the readers or others they encounter in daily experiences. Fiction provides the reader with the opportunity to travel inside a foreign reality—realm of another—producing empathetic emotions toward another because the reader forms an understanding of the underlying reality, emotions and way a person feels in daily interactions and experiences in the environment they serve in.
“We believe that such empathy is a necessary condition for deep forms of meaning in human life” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 3). To have empathy, one must maneuver in range of another’s experience—to imagine oneself in another’s position allowing clarity and understanding of the inner life, feelings and well-being—to manifest into the ability to see from their perspective. To have empathy, one must sympathize. Fiction ignites a reaction to the plight of others that produces a feeling of concern for someone else. It establishes the perception, understanding and emotions to share the humanity of another by being able to look into their psyche and their soul—to understand their individuality, including their viewpoints and emotions in their daily encounters and experiences. “The thickness of our boundaries is a part of who we are” (Wear, 2006, p. 7). Fiction exposes its readers to alternative realities while providing them with opportunities to stimulate feelings of empathy toward characters entrusted in diversity and difference, which enables possibilities for boundaries to be bridged with understanding and for change. Once exposed, the reader no longer remains blind—the reader is conscious and aware.

_Differenced by Experience: Empathy Shoes_

Fiction has a long and rich history of providing readers the opportunity to slip into another’s shoes, tie up the laces and walk around in their world—their reality. The shoes readers slip into are owned by individuals classified by an array of identity markers and have embarked on their individualized life journey—no one walks the same path. These shoes walk through different social constructs and are diverse in relation to lived experiences. Some have walked through social injustice and inequalities—marched through social change. Some soles have trampled adversity, while others have been so encased within it that cement prevented them from moving forward, or they were the ones who established the adversity. Some shoes seek to understand and analyze social dynamics that shape one’s world views, searching to expose the
harsh realities and underlying societal and relationship truths. Some suppress others for power and some forge the power, while some kick back breaking down barriers to give power to the powerless. Some shoes walk headstrong through differences and some stumble over differences, serving as a trip wire to alter the forward path. Some are the trip wire. Some shoes are scratched and battered by oppression and discrimination, falling apart at the seams from their path to equality, while some shoes are clean of inequalities. Some walk for change—some walk to prevent change. Some shoes provide new insight and knowledge, while some simply provide a new perspective or outlook. Readers have been walking in the shoes of characters—slipping into another’s skin—identifying with them, learning from them, and embracing empathetic emotions for them throughout the historical past of literature.

Fiction is a powerful tool utilized to communicate human condition—realities, insecurities and differences. While these characters may not actually exist, the readers who slip on their shoes and walk around in their realities, experiencing their emotions, bring them to life not only in their minds but also in their hearts and in themselves. There are many powerful characters in fiction that provide the mind with change, that are tied to human condition, to social realities and experiences. Readers put on these shoes and walk step-by-step through the grief, anger, action and deliverance of characters. Walk through adversity, despair and hope. Each shoe decorated with different experiences, each shoe stepped into by the reader allowing the process to walk with a character through their experiences. Each shoe opening a new conscious door that breaks down borders, boundaries established by difference and societal norms, which falsify security. “Boundaries do create security—but for whom” (Whitaker, 2006, p. 22)? Fiction has a way of hiding extraordinary things within its pages, within its details. So many extraordinary things—extraordinary experiences, insights and knowledge are hidden in the shoes of literature
characters. “There is no linear path from ignorance to knowledge” (Held, 1980, p. 181-182). The reader just needs to step into the shoes and see where they take him. The reader needs to have an openness to use his imagination to see difference, to see humanness and to appreciate daily encounters others live who are quite different from us or even who are similar. “We must insist on the possibility of change in spite of difficulties” (Freire, 2016, p. 27). While these shoes we continually step into cannot completely solve social issues and realistically indulge the entire story of difference present in society’s constructs, they can serve as a bridge to cultural and social awareness in the form of understanding a new perspective, seeing through another’s lens.

“The truth is that the future is created by us, through transformation of the present” (Freire, 2016, p. 39). There are many shoes to step into in order to transform the future, but an understanding of the past is needed, and understanding of thyself—so walk in the shoes of another, learn while in these shoes. There are so many shoes, characterized by style, color, and shape that I have mentally slipped into and walked around in their world, their environment, their reality. There are so many good shoes I have missed out on walking in. And…there are so many more impactful shoes yet to be written—for me to have the opportunity to slip my feet into and walk in that new world. Whose shoes will I put on next? Whose shoes will you put on? Let’s learn! Let’s go for a walk!
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