

## Portfolio 2 | Familiar Essay

Value: 21% of your final grade (20% Essay, 1% CR).

Due: Assign 2.3 *Draft*—for *Tutorial*, eClass Feb 16-18, Assign. 2.4, **Final—eClass, Feb 23, 11:59PM. Note that this is in Winter term Reading week.**

Length: 5-6 double-spaced pages (no more than 2000 words), excluding works cited + CR

### Instructions:

- Compose a full *familiar essay* as per the requirements above. For this paper, your audience is “well-informed layperson,” Imagine writing for *The Globe and Mail* or *The New York Times* and their readership. Consult course models in matters of style.
- For this assignment, you are required to use at least two published sources (essays, novels, short stories, poems, and so on, as per 2.2), one scene (2.1), and include a *Beginning* and *Ending* for your essay. Your paper must show *movement* between sources and ample *thought-reflection*. You may include a third source and/or close off your narrative with a second (short) scene that acts as a resolution for your *Journey*.
- Essays of this type do not ordinarily call for a “Works Cited” list; citation is normally done within the text, without parenthetical documentation. For this essay, omit the parenthetical documentation within the text; write in your sources (as per Catalli). But include a “Works Cited” list at the end of your essay.
- Include an *epigraph* that helps illustrate your *Idea* or your solution.
- Bring one copy of your draft to your tutorial on the day your draft is due.
- Please review “Housekeeping” in the Syllabus for formatting requirements. Word or PDF format please!

### Please Note:

- You are not locked into a final scene or source until the portfolio is due. You may change your mind about your subject or source at any time. All Portfolio assignments must be completed once and uploaded to eClass.
- Remember the structure of *the Journey* and incorporate it into your work. Do you return and reintegrate (show evidence of growth and new understanding)? Remember, *the Journey* can be physical, spiritual, or both. Show us yours! Don’t forget the *moment of change*!
- Remember, if your *Journey* has not been completed, then this is not a good experience to discuss. Avoid traumatic, personal events, in favour of positive learning experiences. Avoid literally naming your paper “How I Learned to Be Awesome!” but that is the general idea. If you got to University, you are a success story. Tell us about it!
- Overall, your purpose in this paper is to use an example, experience, or moment from your life that illustrates a moment of growth or understanding for you. **Communicate this wisdom** to your audience using your *scene*, sources and *Idea* developed in prior assignments.
  - Take into account all the feedback you have received in order to help you continue to analyze and fine-tune your *Idea/Preferred reading*.
  - In other words, do not ‘tack on,’ **integrate** and develop. Be *recursive*. Your work should show evidence of an ongoing writing process.
- You may not use a newspaper article, blog entry, print or online study guide, or any sort of encyclopaedia to fulfill the “sources” requirement for this assignment. However, if you read

any of these sources in completing your assignment, you still must list them in your works cited, and reference them in-text appropriately.

- **For each pre-assignment that is missing from your final submission (including peer-reviewed drafts), 5% may be deducted from the assessed grade of your final draft. If you turn in nothing but a final copy, 15% will be subtracted from Assignment 2.4 (Final) Your tutorial leader may also choose to apply late grades to incomplete assignments.**
- Your TA may have additional advice for success on this assignment.

### **Composing Reflection #2**

- How did you arrive at your subject? Why did you choose it? If your scene does not make it clear, explain how your paper illustrates a *Journey (Self-reflection)*
- Why did you choose the secondary sources you did? How did they speak to you? (*Thinkers*)
- Was this easier or harder than Portfolio 1? Why? (*Reflection*)
- Has your writing process or how you think about your writing process changed since last term? If so, how? Discuss one specific element of the advice given on the course as applied to your work on this portfolio. (*Process*)
- Your TA will also assess if your work grammatically sound and readable (*Technical Soundness*)
- Your composing reflection is a separate piece of work from your familiar essay. Paragraph form is normal (i.e. 3-4 paragraphs) or you may use subheadings. Take care to answer all the questions!

## The Price of Freedom

*To be wounded by your own understanding of love;  
And to bleed willingly and joyfully.*

~ Kahlil Gibran, "On Love"

My mom and I are sitting on the floor of the basement, a shoddy cardboard box labelled PHOTOS in black Sharpie between us. Mom rustles through the box, retrieving a particularly worn maroon album. We sit in silence, the whisper of plastic settling between us as she flips from one page to the next. She pauses on a black and white photograph featuring a young woman posed for a portrait. She has a thick plait of dark hair, and dons two shiny gold hoops, and a floral *shalwar kameez*<sup>1</sup>. Her upturned eyes are lined with a liberal application of *kajal*<sup>2</sup> that gives her gaze an intensity, but still she possesses an exuberance revealed by her playful smirk. The resemblance is unnerving. I know that face. I look at it in the mirror every morning. Arched brows, the straight, stubborn nose, unremarkable mouth all packaged in a face I have always thought was too short. Finally, recognition sets in. The crinkled eyes that had always looked down at me with compassion stare back at me, encapsulated in time.

A sheen of moisture appears over Mum's eyes, and I place a gentle hand on her shoulder. Something about the picture prompts her to tell me about my grandmother's, my Nani's, childhood, her personality, and her life. Nani was an orphan who was pulled from school at the age of ten. At fifteen, she was married and lived with her husband across the border from the country of her birth and her remaining family members. It was not a life of her own choosing. I cannot help but notice the similarities between Nani and my mother. Mom went to university,

---

<sup>1</sup> A *shalwar kameez* is a kind of ethnic attire worn in South and Central Asia featuring loose trousers, a long tunic-style top, and a scarf.

<sup>2</sup> *Kajal*, or *kohl*, is a cosmetic product consisting of black powder that is worn around the eyes in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

but was never allowed to work. At twenty, she was married, and from that point on, her life mirrored that of my Nani's. A cycle of women having their agency stolen, making sacrifices in the name of duty, family honour, and better for their children.

Silence falls between us once again. Before I can ask her a million more questions, my mom interrupts my thoughts, "Can you clean all this up?" Her body language is relaxed now, almost peaceful. I nod dazedly in response, and she turns to leave the room, her retreating footsteps muffled by the carpet.

I find it hard to accept that this is the legacy of my mother, and my mother's mother. My throat closes, and I have a sinking feeling in my stomach. I remove Nani's photograph from its plastic covering, taking care so as to not disturb its rough, weathered edges. For the first time, I feel the burden that is freedom of choice. How can I ever be worthy of that magnitude of sacrifice?

Rummaging noisily through the box, I hunt for my parents' wedding album. Finally, I find it, concealed beneath the bulk of various other albums, and loose photographs. The album's cover is my mum's favourite - navy blue. Despite it being close to three decades old, it appears brand new, as if the pictures it houses are from a time no one cares to revisit. Gently, I open it to reveal the first image, which is of my Mum. She is wearing a heavily embroidered *lengha*<sup>3</sup> in the traditional scarlet hue, henna adorns her hands, and rubies sparkle around her neck. She is decked out in finery, yet her eyes are downcast, her nose red, and her shoulders slumped. My unease still not abated, I search for more pictures, though I am unaware of what it is that I am looking for. I seize the black folder that I had banished to the side of the box earlier. My high

---

<sup>3</sup> A lengha is a traditional form of ethnic attire worn in South Asia for formal occasions, which comprises of an ankle-length skirt, a blouse, and a scarf.

school graduation photos. A portrait of me as I set off to university in the fall, following my dreams like no woman in my lineage could. I stare up at the ceiling, the light fixtures appearing to be duller now. Wordlessly, I ask the heavens if this is any kind of justice at all.

I wonder how Nani and my mom spent their lives swallowing the words they would have rather spoken. How they mustered the resolve to abandon their own dreams. How they became accustomed to the shackles disguised beneath the thin veneer of social convention. Absent-mindedly, I twist the gold ring that I have worn on my finger for the past nine years. It belonged to my mother, and originally her mother. Another piece of my lineage that I carry with me, more evidence of lives spent giving. Am I deserving of any of it?

I cannot bear to sort through the clutter of my mind and my surroundings. I feel complicit in the thievery of other women's dreams; guilt weighs on me. So, I trudge upstairs from the basement, my feet leaden, and slip out the front door. A dull, sunless sky awaits me as I emerge from the porch. Dense, gray clouds hang low overhead. Following a route I have travelled a thousand times before, I traipse along.

Were Nani and my mum's lives as joyless as they seemed? The question plagues me, accompanied by a sense of dread. Suddenly, the awareness of the pitter patter of tiny feet scampering by breaks my train of thought. I look around, trying to orient myself in my environment. I am in the local park. Wood chips line the ground, and the cherry red slides and sunflower yellow monkey bars sit in wait of little park goers. A bright blue bench is not far off from where I stand, and I plant myself on it, wanting to take advantage of the fresh air.

Grateful for the brief reprieve, I look on. The little girl that was scampering past me earlier catches hold of a metal swing, her mother in hot pursuit. The girl's mother is dressed in a pantsuit and clutches a cellphone to her ear with her shoulder as she catches up with her

daughter. She plops her daughter into the swing and tucks her phone away into her pocket. The mother pushes the girl on the swing, propelling her higher, and higher, and the air is filled with the sound of the girl's amused, high-pitched giggles.

As I sit there, observing the scene, my earlier train of thought takes hold once again. Was the promised wellbeing of their children enough for Nani and my mum to make the choices they did? In her book titled *Secret Daughter*, Shilpi Somaya Gowda writes of the decision of a young mother, Kavita, to make the greatest sacrifice - give up her newborn daughter, Usha, for adoption:

At least this baby girl will be allowed to live—a chance to grow up, go to school, maybe even marry and have children. Kavita knows, along with her daughter, she is forsaking any hope of helping her along the path of life. Usha will never know her parents, but she has a chance at life, and that will have to be enough. Kavita slides one of the two thin silver bangles she always wears from her own frail wrist and slips it onto Usha's ankle.

“I'm sorry I cannot give you more, beti<sup>4</sup>,” she whispers into her downy head.

Kavita is deeply distraught at the idea of giving away her daughter, but she knows that this choice will guarantee Usha many more opportunities than she could ever provide. For Kavita, that possibility more than compensates for the pain that she will undoubtedly suffer in the absence of her only child. “Higher, higher!”, the little girl shrieks from the swing. Her mother complies, and this time, it's both of their laughter that punctuates the air. Yes, I decide. Perhaps, Nani and my mum found some measure of joy in their selflessness.

Despite the hardships of their lives, Nani and my mum were not bitter people. My mind flashes to the image of the half-finished pink sweater, knitting needles still hooked through the

---

<sup>4</sup> Beti means daughter in Hindi and Urdu.

yarn, that was found by my Nani's deathbed. She spent her final days working on it, a gift for her granddaughter, while having terminal cancer. That was not the product of envy or resentment. A chilly breeze blows around me. Still, I feel a comforting sensation of warmth, enveloping my body like I imagine that sweater would have. And I know now, what it is to be loved from beyond the grave.

I rise from the bench, deciding to take the journey back before the streetlights come on. The sky is more overcast now, the wind picks up, and there is a slight chill - unprecedented for a May evening. The temporary peace I felt earlier is now replaced with anxiety. I feel the first faint raindrop on the back of my neck. Crap. I have to get home before I get caught in the rain. I pick up the pace, cursing myself for my lack of foresight.

Despite the love of Nani and my mum - or because of it - I am a disappointment, that much I know. I am a daughter born to a family who wanted a son. And I have spent every breath since compensating for my first. I reflect on the young bride in that album, so different from my mother, a woman who raised me on devastating comparisons, pointed words, and the threat of a tight, stinging slap.

Pitiful trickles of rain here and there have turned into a torrential downpour. The ground is wet and slippery, and my poor new sneakers make a splash with every step. I jog half-heartedly, careful to not step in any puddles, but eager to arrive home.

As I make the journey there, I cannot help but let my mind wander. It is difficult for me to comprehend my mom's intention behind controlling every miniscule detail of my existence. Did she think her sacrifice would only be worth it if I lived my life the way she would want me to, if I became her version of a success? In her poem, *Killing a Dancer*, Nazik al-Mala'ika writes

in her mother's voice to herself about how she should proceed in the aftermath of her mother's death:

To the girl with the sacrificed heart, dance and sing  
and rejoice, for the wound is a dance and a smile  
ask the victimized dead to sleep on for a while  
as you dance, beautiful, reassured, dance and sing.

Through her writing, al-Mala'ika awakens herself from her grief-stricken state, and envisions how her mother would want her to cope. She would have wanted al-Malaika to live, free and unburdened.

The streetlights have come on now, casting a warm glow on my path home. Their radiance evokes memories of weekday evenings back home with my mother and I at the kitchen table. Inevitably, the power would be shut off after sunset, and my mom would tutor me under the golden luminosity of a camping lantern. "What use is it to teach a girl?" the neighbourhood aunties would ask mockingly. But my mom, otherwise endlessly obsessed with saving face, still sent her daughter to the expensive private school across the city. She chose my future over her comfort. I know my own mother would want the same for me that al-Mala'ika's mother wanted for her. A love like that could not be so selfish as to demand anything in return. I thought I owed it to her to be her idea of a perfect daughter, worthy of the sacrifices she had made for me. Really, I owe it to her to be happy. To make my own choices. To bask in all the freedoms she was deprived of. But, more importantly, I owe it to myself.

As the realisation dawns on me, I turn onto my street, sighing a breath of relief. I shiver with the cold, my wet clothes clinging to my form and my hair dripping. At last, the clatter of my chattering teeth registers and I pause mid-step. It's too late to get home before being drenched.



So, I look heavenward, letting the rain pour over my face, washing me of my inhibitions. I jump into a puddle, sending water sloshing, and now my socks are wet too. I smile giddily, feeling weightless. The puddle ripples fervently, and the reflection before me is distorted. Yet, I see, with my Nani's and my mother's big almond-shaped eyes, *our* dreams coming to fruition.

*Finally.*

The expectations of the people we love can be suffocating. When they have given up so much to make us who we are, how could we not feel indebted? Oftentimes, their expectations are fuelled by their unwillingness to relent on our happiness. And all we can do to honour their sacrifice is to have our fill of this life like they could not.

## Works Cited

Drumsta, Emily. "Poems from *At the Bottom of the Wave*". *Revolt Against the Sun: The Selected Poetry of Nazik al-Mala'ika*. London, Saqi Books, 2020, p.116

Gibran, Kahlil. "On Love". *The Prophet*. Bsharri, Alfred A. Knopf, 1923, p.8

Gowda, Shilpi. "A Long Journey". *Secret Daughter*. New York City, HarperCollins Publishers, 2010, p.26