A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

For the past three months I’ve had the honor of facilitating the ReWA Youth Democracy Institute with a group of teenagers in South Seattle. At the start of the Institute we read Martin Luther King Jr.’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail, and after hearing King’s powerful words, the youth felt inspired to share their own experiences with injustice.

Through a number of free writing activities and extensive interviews, I was able to collect the teens’ stories. In putting their stories to paper I did my best to preserve the authenticity of each narrator’s voice and vision. The stories have been edited for style and flow, but the content belongs entirely to the youth. To protect their privacy as minors, we’ve published the stories under the narrator’s first name or first initial and have changed the names of supporting characters.

Democracy asks that we expand our perspective and put ourselves in other people’s shoes. In publishing this newsletter, we hope to immerse readers in the lives of some of our city’s resilient young people so that their dreams can guide us toward a more just and equitable future.

Deepa Bhandaru, Refugee Women’s Alliance (ReWA)

UNDER MY DAD’S ROOF
by Gio

My dad comes from Oaxaca, a beautiful state in Southern Mexico with a rich culture. His family worked the land and when festivals happened they would invite people from neighboring farms to celebrate. They would make tamales and tacos al pastor and play music and dance.

Oaxaca is also one of the poorest states in Mexico, and my dad’s family was barely getting by. My dad started working when he was seven years old, like all the kids around him. Every day he woke up early to take the cows out to graze. Then he went to school. After school he came home and worked some more. My grandad earned money by working on a bigger farm, while my grandma took care of the kids and the family’s little piece of land, where they grew carrots, tomatoes, apples, and corn.

Their life followed the seasons, and if it didn’t rain, they didn’t have enough food. There were no luxuries because there was hardly had any money for necessities. My dad never had shoes.

In 2001, when my dad was still a teenager, he decided he couldn’t live like this anymore. His older brother had already left, and with my grandparents’ blessing, my dad made the journey across the frontera.

There’s a long history of oaxaqueños leaving the state for economic opportunities in other parts of Mexico and in the United States. The people from my community are hard-working and proud. They want to take care of each other, and sometimes the only way to do that is by leaving and sending money back.
My dad ended up in Seattle and cooked food in restaurant kitchens. He met my mom, who’s also from Oaxaca. She was working as a dishwasher. After a couple years together, they had me, their first child.

My parents believe their lives are better in America than they would be back in Mexico. That doesn’t mean life is easy for them. They always tell me they wish they had more education so they had better jobs with better pay.

Now that I’m 15 I want to get a job to help them out. When I told my dad I was looking for work, he shook his head. “As long as you live under my roof, you live by my rules. My kids go to school. That’s enough work.”

I don’t like seeing my dad sacrificing so much to buy everything for me and my siblings, but I know he’s trying to give me an opportunity he didn’t have. He wants to keep me safe and happy under his roof so that I can go to college and have a professional career.

When some people in America say negative things about immigrants, I feel misunderstood. They don’t know what our lives were like back in Mexico. They don’t know what my dad had to deal with.

When some people in America call us rapists and job-stealers, I know they’ve never met my dad. He’s respectful and kind to strangers. He puts his family before himself. All he wants is to work hard, raise his kids right, and help his parents.

I hope America lets him.

ONE FLIGHT AWAY
by Guula

It was the end of summer, and a lot of people were traveling. The security line at the Denver Airport was long, and as I waited with my mom and younger siblings, my mind wandered to the lake and the house we’d rented with my cousins. We’d been on vacation for a week, and my spirits were high. I was even looking forward to going back to school. Junior year, when I would learn how to drive and maybe get a job.

It took me a second to realize the TSA agent was leading his dog toward us. “I need to check your bags,” he said. I looked around, unsure who he was talking to. The dog poked its nose into the folds of my mom’s skirt. I’m terrified of dogs. When I was a little kid, living in Holland, a dog bit me. Since then I tense up whenever there’s one nearby. At any moment it could leap forward and dig its teeth into my skin.

“Open your bags,” the agent said. My sister was shaking, and the dog sniffed at her legs. I glanced up. There were hundreds of other people in line. It stretched so far back that I couldn’t see where it began. I noticed that my mom and my sisters were the only ones wearing hijab.

“I just need to check your bags for security reasons,” the agent said. I hesitated, wondering why we were the ones being stopped. We were about to put our bags and bodies through the security machines just like everyone else.

Other travelers narrowed their eyes, staring at us like we were outcasts. I unzipped my bag and pulled out two blankets, which the agent made me open in front of everyone. These were the blankets we’d sat on at the beach that week, and as I unfolded them, tiny grains of sand sprinkled to the floor.

The agent still wasn’t satisfied. He told my mom and my sister to open their bags too. My mom bent over and took clothes out of her bag. I felt so helpless, watching my mom, then my sister, pile their clothes on the ground. The younger kids were holding hands, their faces stiff with fear. They were focused on the dog, who was smelling the clothes.
“This is ridiculous,” a man standing near us said. He was carrying a little girl, his daughter probably. She had curly blonde hair that fell onto her forehead.

My mom and my sister stuffed their clothes back into their bags. The agent turned to me again. “You can’t take that past security,” he said, pointing to my energy drink. I nodded, too shaken to tell him I knew the rules about liquids.

When we finally made it past security, a sadness fell over us. My mom tried to cheer us up by buying food, and as I ate, my voice came back, and I started reminiscing about the trip, how much fun it had been. I didn’t want to talk about what had just happened. I wanted us to feel normal again. We were almost home, just one flight away.

But “just one flight” isn’t so simple anymore. After that experience in Denver, I dread going to the airport again. I hate that I have to be more careful, more flexible, more willing to prove that I’m a normal person like everyone else.

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SWALLOWING MY ANGER
by Hamza

For three years I had Miss Turner for science, and I always thought she was pretty nice. She took us on field trips and joked around when she was in a good mood. I knew she got stressed out a lot, because she had to teach so many kids. Every year the principal of my middle school said he was going to hire another science teacher, but by eighth grade it still hadn’t happened.

I could tell what Miss Turner was feeling just by looking at her face, and that day her face was pinched closed. When the bell rang she sighed and said the class before ours had put her in a bad mood, but no one was paying much attention. She stood behind her desk, her shoulders slumped, and tried to start the lesson.

My friend Abshir, whose desk was next to mine, was playing around. He tossed an empty water bottle across the room and another kid threw it back to him. As Abshir was getting ready to toss it again, Miss Turner raised her voice and told him to throw the bottle away. Abshir took it to the recycling bin, then walked back to his desk, where he noticed the bottle cap had fallen on the floor. He started kicking the cap around. He picked it up, threw it in the air, caught it, and laughed. I laughed too. Abshir spotted another bottle cap near my desk and picked it up. Now he was juggling two caps.

Miss Turner stomped over to us and shouted at Abshir to sit down. He dropped the caps and slid into his chair. She grabbed the corner of my desk and didn’t see the scissors lying there. The scissors flew onto Abshir’s lap, and he screamed. This made Miss Turner even angrier and she told Abshir to get out of her class. I pointed out that he was just scared about the scissors and she turned to me, her eyes red, and told me to throw the bottle caps away.

“They’re not mine,” I said.

She didn’t seem to care. “Throw them away.”

I could have done what she wanted, but I felt like I was being blamed for something that wasn’t my fault. My blood went hot, and my jaw tightened. “What did I do? I didn’t do anything. You’re the one who almost hurt him with the scissors.”

“Get out,” she said. “Get out of my class.”
She led me to the hallway and I stood next to Abshir while she yelled at us for disrupting her class. Then she turned and shut the door.

We waited out in the hallway for five minutes, ten minutes. I saw the handle turn and the door open. Miss Turner appeared again, her face covered with lines. I asked if we could come inside. She told me to be quiet and said she was going to call our parents.

Next to me I heard Abshir crying. “No, no, you don’t know my dad,” he was saying. “He’s going to send me back to Africa.”

I couldn’t think straight. I felt like I was choking. Miss Turner had backed me into a corner, and I had to defend myself, get her to see that I wasn’t to blame. If she called my dad, that was it. He would never listen to my side. He would say that she’s my teacher and I had to do whatever she asked.

I raised my chin and looked her in the eye. “I shouldn’t be the one cleaning up other people’s messes.”

“If I tell you to throw something away, you throw it away.”

“I’m not your slave,” I said. “And I have the right not to be forced to throw away other people’s trash.”

As soon as I said it, I knew I’d gone too far. She stuttered and put her hand to her chest. Her jaw shook and her eyes filled up with tears. She didn’t say a word, just went back to the classroom.

Abshir and I stayed out in the hall until the bell rang. After that we had one more class until school was over. When I got home that day, my older sister was waiting for me.

“Your teacher called me, crying, and said you accused her of treating you like a slave. You can’t say things like that, especially not to a white person who’s trying to help you. What were you thinking?”

This made me really angry. I wanted to tell my sister the whole story, how my teacher had accused me of doing something wrong. But my sister couldn’t get past the slavery comment. She kept saying slavery was a serious issue and I was old enough to know not to make light of it.

My sister told my parents, who are immigrants and don’t speak much English. As I expected, they took Miss Turner’s side. They didn’t even want to hear what I had to say.

The next week Miss Turner called a meeting with me and my parents. My dad told me to apologize, and I said I was sorry, which made Miss Turner tear up again. She said she was sorry too and then she hugged me. I didn’t want to be rude, so I hugged her back, but I felt cold inside. This was a person I’d trusted, a person I thought cared about my feelings and my point of view. During all of this she never once gave me a chance to explain myself.

It’s been half a year since I graduated eighth grade and left Miss Turner’s class. I’m in high school now, and I wish I could say the relationships between teachers and students are better here, but they’re not. I see a lot of conflicts where students are being disrespected, then disrespect their teachers back.

I wonder sometimes what it would be like to have a black teacher. In my middle school most of the kids were black, while our teachers were all white. It’s the same in high school. It’s weird that I’ve never had a black teacher before, and I think there might be a different style of communication between a black teacher and a black student. A black teacher might talk to me in a way that I understand and connect with more.

I regret what happened with Miss Turner and know I could have acted differently. I’m learning to swallow my anger and to accept my teachers’ authority, even when I don’t agree. It’s hard when I feel they don’t listen to me or care about my perspective, and I have to remind myself that their job is hard too, that they have a lot of kids to worry about. In high school it’s even worse because the teachers get the security officers involved. It’s really scary to see the police show up in class, and when it happens all I can do is keep my head down and hope our schools get better in the future.
WHERE WE’LL GO
by Liiban

My mom is from Somalia. She came here for a better life and has been here for 18 years—longer than I’ve been alive. I was born in America. It’s the only country I’ve ever known and until recently, I felt safe calling it my home.

Two years ago my perspective changed. I was in middle school then and one evening my mom and I were watching the news after my little sisters went to bed. Mostly I watch for the weather. I like to know if it’s going to rain the next day and if I need to wear a jacket or a sweater to school. Before the weather came on, there was a story about the Presidential election. That’s how I first heard about the Wall. I saw Donald Trump saying the Wall would keep us safe from immigrants, and it was confusing to me. My mom is an immigrant. Why did I need to be safe from her?

I looked over and saw my mom’s head bobbing to the side. She was falling asleep like she sometimes does at the end of a long day. She runs a daycare out of our house, taking care of other people’s kids plus me and my sisters. Her day starts at five in the morning, when she cleans all the rooms before the kids get dropped off by their parents. Then she makes breakfast for all of us and drives us to school. After school I help her with some of the cleaning and cooking. I really like to cook, and I know my mom appreciates it when I chop vegetables or boil rice.

Trump shouted through the TV, and his loud voice made me feel afraid. I thought about waking up my mom but decided she didn’t need to hear the hateful things he was saying.

My mom is no stranger to fear. When she was a young woman a war broke out in Somalia, and she had to run away from her home. Her family spread out across the world, and my mom ended up far away from many of her relatives. She made a new family, and we’re the most important people to her now. But she’s afraid of losing us. She asks me and my sisters where we’ll go when we grow up, if we think we’ll move to another state or country.

For the last two years, I’ve worried a lot about being separated from my mom. I keep hearing about the Wall. It seems like our President won’t stop until he builds it. I hope America elects a new President so the Wall never comes up. I hope I can stay close to my mom and take care of her when she’s older.

THE RIPPLE OF A BULLET
by Uma

The last time I saw Ryan Dela Cruz was a Friday, fifth period, right before lunch. Ryan was my teaching assistant for accounting, and when I walked into Room 309, he was sitting on a wooden stool next to Ms. Lynch, eating the teriyaki he’d bought at the takeout place next to our school. He liked going to that teriyaki restaurant, either before fifth period or afterward, depending on whether he finished the work Ms. Lynch wanted him to do.

The smell of spicy chicken and rice met me as I passed by the teacher’s desk. I said hi to Ms. Lynch and stopped next to Ryan. We weren’t friends exactly. He was a senior and I was a sophomore, and there wasn’t much reason for us to talk, except when I had questions about assignments for class. But I was curious about him. Ms. Lynch told us that Ryan was planning to join the Marines after graduation. I didn’t know anyone who wanted to be in the military, and I asked him how he’d come to that decision.
He looked up from his food and smiled. “It’s what I’ve wanted since I was a kid. To save lives. And be strong.”

When the bell rang I said bye to him and left for lunch with my friend Lovely. It was Lovely who texted me two days later to tell me Ryan had been killed. At first I didn’t believe her. We just saw him at school and he was fine, I texted back. There’s no way he could have gotten shot. Lovely said it was all over the local news so I typed his name into my phone. My chest got tight as I stared at his picture and read the words gun violence over and over again.

I threw my phone on the carpet and buried my head under a pillow. People I knew didn’t get shot. That happened to other people, in other places. My heart beat faster and it was hard to breathe. Death felt so close, like it could take anyone at any time. Ryan was the same age as my older brother, Mohamed, the one I’m closest to. It could have been Mohamed. One day it might be.

The next morning at school, I listened to the principal’s voice over the loudspeaker. She said there were counselors on hand to talk to us if we needed. Then she spoke about Ryan and how he dreamed of being a Marine until that dream was taken away by a random bullet. He was just hanging out with his friends at a local park when somebody fired a gun and ended his life.

I didn’t meet with a counselor. It felt selfish, since I’d hardly known Ryan. There were people at the school who were actually friends with him. They would need the counselors more than I did. I forced myself through the morning, drifting from class to class, unable to concentrate. The bell for fifth period rang, and I dragged myself up to the third floor, my legs heavy with dread. Inside Room 309 the other students were huddled around Ms. Lynch’s desk. Before I saw her face I heard her sobbing. It was odd for me to see my teacher crying, and I didn’t know what to do besides hug her and tell her we’d get through it, even though I wasn’t sure how. The world felt so upside down. Our teachers were supposed to console us, not the other way around.

We all went back to our desks, and I glanced at Ryan’s stool, which stood nearby, untouched. A weird silence fell over the classroom, and Ms. Lynch played a news clip from the day before. Ryan’s parents appeared on the screen behind her. His dad talked about how he’d moved his family from the Philippines because he thought the United States would be a haven for his four sons. I thought about my own parents, also immigrants, who came to America to get away from violence. My parents had traveled from the other side of the world to make sure things like this never happened.

My sadness gave way to anger, and I was relieved to find out that our student government was organizing a rally to draw attention to gun violence in South Seattle. They got support from the school administration, and that Friday—exactly a week after I saw Ryan for the last time—I joined hundreds of other students to demand that our neighborhoods be safe. I’d made a sign in advisory that morning that said “Rest in Peace Ryan Dela Cruz,” and I held it up during the assembly, where Nikkita Oliver spoke about trauma in our community. During her speech I noticed Ryan’s parents were inside the gym with us, and I felt a lump in my throat.

We left the gym and spread out into the streets around the school, forming a giant ring that extended from Mount Baker Station past the teriyaki restaurant that Ryan loved. We held hands and shouted, “Keep the South End safe!” My friend Levera was standing next to me. Her voice broke away and started a new chant, “No more hate, keep us safe!” Cars passed us and drivers honked while passengers waved. Tears flowed down my cheeks as I chanted, knowing that people couldn’t ignore what happened to Ryan. The fear that had entered my life since he died began to disappear, and for a moment I felt powerful.
FAMILY VACATION
by N.

It was the second week of summer break, and one evening after dinner my family was sitting around our kitchen table. I asked my parents if they’d decided whether we could go to California to visit relatives we hadn’t seen in over two years. My dad clapped his hands together. “No, no I’m not risking going to jail and you kids staying here alone without us.”

I can’t remember the last time my family took a vacation. Whenever the idea comes up, my parents start fighting, and I get really sad because it feels like I’ve lived my whole life in the shadow of some stupid immigration law.

After dinner we went to the living room to watch TV. My brother and I squeezed onto the sofa between our parents, and as I settled in against my dad’s shoulder, I tried again. I knew California was out of the question so I asked about Oregon, where one of my cousins lives. It was a lot closer, which meant fewer chances of getting pulled over.

My dad shook his head and changed the channel, stopping on the news. My parents are obsessed with the news, especially with all the stories about the border and immigrants being detained. It’s getting worse, and when I see the kids being separated from their parents, I know why my dad is so afraid.

Lately I’ve been having nightmares about my parents getting arrested. When I wake up, I’m alone in my room, my cheeks red and hot. I cry out for my mom, and she rushes in and hugs me. I feel her strong arms around my waist, her fingers brushing my hair away from my sweaty forehead.

The news that evening wasn’t about immigrants, and I was glad we didn’t have to be reminded of the danger we faced. My dad changed the channel, and this time he stopped on a novela he and my mom like. It’s set in Mexico, which is the place I really want to visit. I want to see where my parents were born and meet my grandparents.

At the same time, I know it would be risky to leave the US. It’s risky just leaving the house. Sometimes we’ll see a police car parked near the grocery store we’re about to enter and we end up coming home without buying food.

My parents’ anxiety has become my own, even though I’m a US citizen. Seeing police officers at my school puts my stomach in knots. I’ve noticed how it’s getting harder for me to imagine my future. I really want to go to college and become someone important so I can make the world better, but I’m scared something will happen to shatter my dreams.

I’m not asking for much. I just want my family to be able to drive on the freeway and pass a police car and not worry. I want us to visit another state and come home safely so I can tell my friends about how much fun I had. I want to go on a family vacation where borders don’t matter and my brother and I can run on the beach while my parents hold hands in the sunset.

THE LONG WAY
by Karim

I’m lucky to have a group of friends who look out for me. We’re all East African. Some of our families are from Somalia. Others are from Ethiopia and Eritrea. They all ended up in South Seattle, and that’s where my friends and I call home.

We have a tradition of celebrating one another’s birthdays. When Efrem turned 16, my friends and I made plans to take him out to eat one day after school. There were six of us, including Efrem, and we rode the bus to Southcenter. When the bus dropped us off, I
looked at the giant parking lot that wrapped around the mall. The restaurant was on the other side, and we had to walk all the way around. Dawit started complaining about how long it would take and asked if we could go to a different place, but Jibril said he knew a shortcut. If we went through JC Penny, we’d get there in half the time.

We followed Jibril into the store and walked around and around. “Are we lost?” I said, but Jibril was confident he knew where he was going. Yonas and Mustafa joked that whenever we let Jibril take the lead, we ended up somewhere none of us wanted to be. We walked some more until it became clear we weren’t making any progress. It was my idea to ask one of the store employees for help.

We walked up to the counter where an older blonde woman in a cardigan was standing in front of a register. She smiled at us and we greeted her politely. “Do you know where the nearest exit is?” I said. Before she could answer one of her co-workers tapped her on the shoulder and asked her for change. After she handed her coworker a wad of bills, she turned to us again. “What was it you wanted?”

This time it was Jibril who spoke up. “Wh- wh- wh-” he said. Jibril stutters when he’s nervous or put on the spot. We all know this about him, and when it happens, it’s hard not to laugh. I giggled, and Dawit, being Dawit, said, “Why are you stuttering? It’s not like we stole anything.”

All of a sudden the cashier’s expression changed. Her smile disappeared and she was squinting at us, eyeing our backpacks. I stood up straighter, on alert, my palms sweaty.

The cashier walked over to her coworker and whispered, glancing at us from time to time. I could feel my friends shifting uncomfortably around me. I glared at Dawit, and he hung his head regretfully. I heard an anxious laugh behind me. It was Efrem, and while I wanted to turn around and tell him to chill, I felt like it might make us seem more suspicious.

In a matter of seconds, we went from being a bunch of schoolkids goofing off at the mall to a gang of criminals. I felt angry, helpless, frozen inside the cashier’s stare. Before I knew it two security guards appeared at my side, and I clutched the straps of my backpack in defense. “No way,” I heard Yonas say. “You’re not checking our bags.”

The guards were giant guys—over six feet tall and covered in muscle—and they stood over us, frowning. “If you’re innocent,” one of them said, “you’d let me look inside.” Dawit, who was next to me, got bold and threatened to fight back if the guard laid a hand on him. The guard shouted at him and Dawit shouted back. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that the other guard was already going through Jibril’s backpack, pulling out the stuff inside and opening up his wallet. When Jibril thought the search was over, he squatted down to gather his things. The guard grabbed his arm and pushed him against the wall. Efrem lunged at the guard, who must have weighed a hundred pounds more than all of us. The guard who’d been yelling at Dawit rushed at Efrem and tackled him down. Yonas leaped forward and pushed the guard off of Efrem.

The six of us stood side by side and faced the guards. I was shaking, my heart beating hard, my eyes burning with rage. “Get off the premises now,” one of the guards shouted. I noticed other shoppers had gathered behind the guards. No one said anything. No one came forward to protect us.

Adrenaline pumped through me. I wanted to stand my ground and show the guards they couldn’t disrespect us and then expect us to listen to them. I knew if we gave them a free pass they’d get in the habit of pressing other black kids, who had as much right to be here as everyone else.

Then the fear kicked in. Things had spiraled out of control so fast, and it was easy to imagine how they could get even worse. The guards could bring in the police. We could be falsely arrested and end up with criminal records. The weight of the situation seemed to hit us all at once. I heard Mustafa say, “It’s not worth it.” Everyone agreed, and we left.
Outside in the parking lot, I punched the air in frustration. Dawit wondered if we should call the police to report the store for harassing us. Jibril and Efrem had been hurt the worst, and I looked at them to see their reaction. Their faces had gone blank. The anger had drained away and all that was left was pain.

“It would be their word against ours,” Mustafa said. “No one would believe us.”

“The security cameras would show what really happened,” Yonas said. “That they pressed us for no reason.”

As the others added their opinions, I thought about my mom and how stressful it would be for her to find out about this. She might think twice about letting me hang out with my friends. She would be afraid every time I left the house. I shared what I was thinking with the group. Everyone agreed it was best not to involve our parents, so we decided not to go to the police.

A dark mood took hold of us. Efrem dragged his feet across the pavement. “I think I’m going to head home,” he said. He started walking to the bus stop. Jibril followed him.

Dawit called after them. “I didn’t come all the way down here just to be racially profiled by some bitch-ass security guards.”

He started walking the long way around the parking lot toward the restaurant. Yonas, Mustafa, and I were right behind him. After we’d covered some distance I turned around and saw Efrem and Jibril trailing us. We slowed down so they could catch up, and the six of us walked in silence the rest of the way.

BANNED

Dear Donald Trump,

My family and I moved here in July 2016, the same month you became the Republican nominee for President of the United States. I was 15 at the time and had been waiting for a permanent home my whole life. My mom left Somalia when the civil war began, and I was born and raised in Kenya as a refugee.

My parents split up when I was young, and my mom raised five of her six children alone in Nairobi. My older half-brother, Zakariya, grew up away from us, with his dad and stepmom in Somalia. By the time he left Somalia and moved to Kenya to live with us, we had already spent years on a wait list to get asylum in Europe or North America. If my mom filed a new asylum request that included Zakariya, we could have been in limbo for more years to come. She figured that once we were settled abroad, she would apply for Zakariya to be reunited with us. In the meantime, he got an opportunity to study engineering in India, and he left for a university in Hyderabad.

Ten years after my mom applied for asylum, we were finally given visas to go to the United States. I hadn’t heard of you then. I’d only heard that America was a free and open country and that Americans were generous people who shared their good fortune with others.

We first moved to St. Louis, where people were kind but where we had no friends or relatives to help us make sense of life in the West. After several months we moved to Seattle, where there’s a bigger Somali community that connected my mom to a better job and supported us kids as we enrolled in school and college.

We were living in Seattle when you were elected President. Within a week you signed an executive order that banned people from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States. One of the seven countries you listed is Somalia. And one of the people you banned is my brother, Zakariya.
I didn’t pay attention to clothes until my first day of high school in Seattle. I’d missed my bus and showed up late, and as I climbed a flight of stairs to check in at the attendance office, I passed by a group of stylish older students. Boys in ripped jeans and hoodies, girls with lipstick and false eyelashes. On their feet they all wore puffed-up sneakers in every color of the rainbow. They stared me up and down, and I remember how the wide blue eyes of one of the boys stopped at the hem of my khamiis. The silky fabric hung to my ankles, and I suddenly became aware of my socks, visible under my sandals.

The night before I’d been excited to join a real high school. My family had just moved from Dallas, where I spent a year at a transitional school for English language learners. In Dallas I dressed the way I’d always dressed since I was a boy in Mogadishu. The other Somali kids dressed like me too, in long and loose clothing. The kids from other parts of the world wore the traditional clothes of their home countries. It was rare to see a brand name or logo.

Inside the attendance office I panicked. The secretary was on the phone, and she motioned for me to take a seat. I slumped into a chair by the wall, closing my eyes. The ground felt like it was shaking, and all I wanted was to be alone, far away from anyone who might judge me. For the rest of the day I kept my head down, my eyes glued to the floor or a book. I was afraid that if I looked up, someone would say something, remind me I didn’t fit in. As soon as I got home, I yelled at my mom. “Why did you let me go to school like this? I need money—a lot of money—for new clothes.”

My mom thought I was joking and laughed at my despair. I was so upset I didn’t talk to her for two days. Eventually she felt guilty and gave me $400, but the money didn’t buy very much. Two pairs of sneakers, jeans, a couple of t-shirts, and a hoodie.

When I arrived at school in my new clothes, I felt a rush of energy. Would people notice? What would they say? I jogged up the stairs and through the lobby, looking other kids in the eye. For a moment I felt shiny, like someone other people admired.

You said the Muslim Ban would keep America safe, but all it’s doing is keeping people who love each other apart. Families want to be together. My mom wants all her children in one place. She knows Zakariya can serve as a positive role model for us. He’s educated, hard-working, kind, and funny. My brothers and I look up to him.

When we left Kenya, I thought we were leaving the stigma of being refugees behind. I thought Americans would see us as individuals, not as members of a race or a religion. I wish it didn’t matter where we come from. What should matter is how we live our lives and treat other people.

Last year Zakariya got married and we recently received news that his wife is pregnant. Being separated by screens and walls is no way for a family to live. I want my niece or nephew to know the warm arms of grandparents, aunts, and uncles. That child should believe America is a free and open country, just like I once did.

Sincerely,

Bahja
Except no one cared. No one complimented me. No one even commented. I made it all the way to first period without a word from anyone. Days and weeks went by, and my new clothes became old. I would see a kid at school wearing a new brand of sneakers or a new style of jeans, and it made me feel like I was missing something.

One day a girl in my math class told me that I’d changed. “You used to be,” she hesitated, “weird.” My face got hot and I turned away to hide my shame. She sensed that she might have offended me. “But you’re OK now. You’re cool.”

When school ended I found a summer job, and in July I got my first paycheck. The other high school students who worked with me used their money to buy clothes, and after I saw them in their new t-shirts and sneakers, I went to the mall and spent $700—more than half of what I’d earned. This time I was sure my life would change. People would treat me differently. They would know I had money, and if they talked behind my back, it would be to say how jealous they were, how much they wanted what I had.

I returned to work in a new pair of Nikes, slinging a new backpack over my shoulder. The rush lasted five seconds, maybe ten, while the other kids eyed me and my friend Mo said he’d wanted my backpack all year but didn’t have the money. I can’t lie. It felt good hearing I had something other people wanted. I thought the rush would last, but by the end of the day, no one was talking about my new things anymore, and I felt drained, like it would take another month just to get to the top again.

The next day at work, the empty feeling was still there, and when I got home, I asked my mom for money. “Don’t you have a job?” she said. I was desperate and complained that my job didn’t pay me enough to buy all the things I needed. She threw open my closet door and started counting the shoes, the shirts, the jeans. Soon she lost track and her face turned dreamy as she reminisced about our lives in Africa. Back then I wore a uniform and only bought new clothes for festivals, twice a year. Listening to her made me realize how much time I spent worrying about my image. Before moving to the US I’d never gone to bed at night wondering what I was going to wear. Now my dreams were filled with clothes and shoes and electronics I couldn’t afford. What had happened to me? Who had I become?

I decided I wouldn’t buy any more stuff. I had enough, at least for the coming school year. On the first day back I tried not to pay attention to everyone’s new clothes. I kept telling myself I looked fine, that my grades were more important than the brands I wore. At lunch I joined Mo and some other kids at a table near the windows. I dropped my backpack on the floor and Mo pointed down. “Haven’t you had that for awhile?” he said. I shrugged, then saw his backpack resting on the chair next to him. It was new and cost $90, more than mine.

That night I couldn’t sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I would hear Mo’s voice saying I was broke. On Friday after school I went straight to the mall and bought a $115 backpack. I waited all weekend to feel that rush again, and on Monday morning, as I walked past Mo, I raised my chin and let him feel the sting of my new purchase. The following weekend I spent $1,500—everything I’d saved over the summer—on new clothes and a new speaker.

I could see what I was doing was pointless, that I was chasing a tail I would never catch, and when I looked around at the other kids in my classes, I saw that we were all in the same situation, comparing ourselves to an impossible standard. My new history teacher, Mr. Morris, gave me a name for our problem. Consumerism, he called it. And whenever one of us wore something new, he called us out. “Do you feel good?” he said. “Because the company that took your money feels good. And they don’t care about you. They don’t care about any of us.”

He’s right, I know, and still I can’t stop buying things. Sometimes the pressure is so strong, and I imagine the companies as vampires, who suck our blood and steal our energy. We’re neglecting our education and the future of our communities because we’re worried about having the things these companies tell us we need.
Young people feel the pressure the most, and while garlic works to keep vampires away, I wonder how we protect ourselves from consumerism, which doesn’t just come out at night. It’s with us all the time.