

Prompt:

(Common App) We offer transfer applicants the opportunity to include an additional essay for review.

Essay:

We usually sat in the front pew. My sister started to question but was quickly silenced by my tightened grip. I turned to my mom, looking for answers, but her pained gaze remained faithfully forward. I reckoned she didn't know, either, why such hatred leaked from the pious eyes of the congregation. It wasn't our fault he did what he did. My dad wasn't here — he wouldn't be attending today.

Focus instead shifted as a rickety man clad in religious vestments wandered to the podium. He spoke with otherworldly conviction, slowly and carefully, but his trembling hands painted the anger beneath. His tantrum doesn't deserve repeating, but know that his words dripped with venom and stained the soul. Through blurry eyes, my mom dragged us from the church, fiery condemnations close behind; her soft weeping told me we would not return.

In small-town Tennessee, second chances are never guaranteed. There's a moral line that must not be crossed, and my family and I found ourselves on the wrong side of tolerance. We fled to rural Mississippi, and I prepared to begin high school.

My transition to a new school was rough, and home offered no greater sanctuary; my soul led me to the water, and to that bridge. It's a simple bridge; it sits at the end of a residential canal, lichenous and moaning, and waiting. Most days, I can yank a largemouth bass from beneath the splintered dock limbs — more, if I'm lucky. Other days, I row behind a nearby reed bed and obscure myself among the bulrush — waiting, sometimes reading, always appreciating my moment of solitude.

There are only so many places you can run from yourself, and I knew this spot wasn't mine alone. My dad fished here, too, when I wasn't around. I tried to focus on other things.

People learn lots about nature when they spend their time soaking in it; mainly, that it's noisy as hell. People seem to think that nature is some sanctuary of silence, devoid of interruption — reality is not so kind. Nature is full of oddities — like how we can tell the moral

quality of a reed by the degree it bends to the wind. Even the best reeds among us never shut up, though, and they're always buzzing with the latest breeze. I guess this struck a nerve in me, because I decided to start screaming back — about my father, loneliness, anything at all. I screamed my despair and hatred to the reeds, and it fell among the stalks. I'm sure my message was lost in translation, but I'm glad they listened anyway.

My dad invited me to fish the bridge. The suggestion came suddenly, and every day thereafter. I'd return from school, and he'd be waiting on the dock — fishing pole in hand. It became a sort of ritual: his pained request, the iciness in my eyes as I declined, and my lonely row to that bridge.

I was prideful, but I was no monster, and my heart churned with the water behind each stroke of my paddle. I turned to the reeds, and they told me to bend.

Silence never hung in the air so thick as when I first shared that row with my dad. Lack of comfort brought room for action, and I struck first.

“ I forgive you. ”

And I wanted to, honest. I wanted to live in a world where I wasn't so wounded, where I could feel comfortable sleeping in my own home. This time, though, there was no response. Those three words were all I could muster — one simple lie to hear the end of it.

In reflection, my dad must have known the true nature of my words because I've never seen a man so dejected in victory. I watched as his eyes fell to the water, glistening and red, just beginning to see the true span of the gap between us. His eyes of then haunt me now, and that lie remains one of my deepest regrets.

I wish I could say that we started talking after that, but it took months, years, and many days of suffocating silence. I matured, though, and so did he — and so did the bond between us. It's not as if I've forgotten the sting of betrayal, or the origin of his desperation; still, for my dad to endure such resentment and remain steadfast in his pursuit of betterment — I imagine it took great courage. The divide between us remains, but now we share a bridge between us.

My life has recently become one of appointment, but, on occasion, I return to the reeds. The anger I sowed among them has sprung new life, and I spread a new message — one of compassion. I think my message is beginning to reach them, at least I hope so; the reeds whisper a little sweeter in the wind, but, then again, so do I.

I get the occasional odd glance, of course, it's not every day you see a tattooed twenty-one-year-old talking to plants. If there's anything I've learned from my dad, though, it's that we have to commit to what we believe in — no matter the circumstance. I'm okay with being a little odd, a little less than perfect; it's often in my greatest mistakes — found through my bumbling attempt at humanity — that I find the most compelling reasons to be kind; to forgive; to try again.

There are those who deserve to pay the full price of their transgressions. However, I find it infinitely more important that every person deserves the strength of heart and clarity of mind necessary to forgive those who do wrong.

As for my dad, just as there are those who need to be reminded of their crimes; so, too, are there those who cannot be made to forget. If I accomplish nothing else in life, I hope for the wisdom to make that distinction and the courage to confront my better judgment in the pursuit of grace.

I seek growth in knowledge and heart, that I may continue to foster the strength to forgive — each time praying it will be the last. I can only hope others will do the same for me, and the reeds know I need it.