

**PRATT YOUNG SCHOLARS
COLLEGE ESSAY EXAMPLES**

I

A Place Where Ideas Are Free

I used to run around Colombo Tracts in Sri Lanka with my friends, exploring wild landscapes covered with rugs of green leaves and giant ghost-like trees. One day, we came upon a crowd of uniformed school students. They were strangely silent. I pushed through the crowd. In the clearing stood a man beating two students bloody with a tree branch. After some twenty minutes, he turned and addressed the crowd in a grating voice. "You see, boys and girls," he explained, "this is what will happen to you if you dare to fall in love with someone who does not share your ethnicity, who does not follow your religion, who does not look like you." I stood there quietly among the other children realizing that I had learned a new lesson. I was ten years old.

During my youth, unjust lessons of racism, ethnic division, and gender roles were imposed on me every day. But in my small world in Sri Lanka, this was all I could possibly know. I was born in a small hut, surrounded by a beautiful river, rolling hills, and endless fields of golden crops. Everyone at home was expecting a baby boy. They were sick of my mother giving birth to an endless succession of weak and unworthy daughters. I was her eighth and final child: a daughter, and thus a disappointment in everyone's eyes. Most of my youth was spent in the fields instead of the classroom. I watched the birds and animals hunt; I would try to write the word "bird" with a broken piece of brick in the wall, coloring my writing with spinach fruits. But my village was unable to satiate my curiosity to write, read, and learn about the wonders of the world, all because I was a girl.

Still, sometimes I would dream. My sister and I would look at the dark sky and watch the shimmering constellations wink at us, naming each star. I recall the first time I saw the Milky Way. I told my sister that I would one day travel out into the sky and wave at her from the moon. She smiled melancholically with the knowledge that my dreams were futile; our society would not allow a girl to continue her education, fall in love, or marry of her own free will.

In 2013 I came to the United States, bruised by the oppressive lessons of my youth and determined to keep them to myself. Everything in New York was mysterious. I saw people of different ethnicities sharing tables and women wearing hijabs associating freely with people of different faiths. I was stunned! It was a slow process, unlearning the many cruel lessons of my childhood, but through countless sleepless nights and days, I began to craft new lessons.

With the help of my ESL teacher, I learned English. For the first time, I studied history: it was a turning point in my education, empowering me to understand the wrongs that occur in my village. I fell in love with science and math, which were as clear as my childhood was murky. And I discovered my talent for art. In art, I found a way to finally share my story with the world. With each painting I make of the village, of the blinding stars and golden fields, I keep my memories of Sri Lanka alive. I remember both its natural beauty and its social persecution and utilize them as a source of inspiration for my future goals.

In a recent dream, I was back among that crowd on the hill, but this time it was me standing in the middle, teaching lessons pulled from my own life. Someday I will surely return to Sri Lanka, find a little farm girl who has been taught that she is worthless, and tell her a new story, this one drawn from a country where ideas are free.

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**II
Owning My Hands**

Every morning I looked at my hands and the patches of skin I had scratched open unconsciously while I slept. There were still blisters that begged to be scratched, ridges that dented my nails and open cuts that left my red blood vessels exposed to the world. They burned when I wrung my wet towel to wash my face in the morning and cast a shadow on the day ahead. I disliked these burdensome hands that seemed only to cause me stress, that stubbornly interfered with even the most domestic tasks like writing a research paper or braiding my younger sister's hair.

For much of my life, my hands were a source of deep insecurity because they physically prevented me from doing certain activities, and I blamed myself for this shortcoming. I thought everyone's hands were better than mine because they didn't have eczema, itchy inflammation of the skin, like me. Whenever anyone asked me about my hands, I stared blankly ahead and could only manage to utter chopped words because I didn't feel comfortable sharing this personal conflict.

I desperately tried to fix this problem by applying hand cream and ointment everyday as my dermatologist advised. It relieved the itchy skin, and for a while, I felt like a normal person. I didn't have to hide my hands in long sleeve sweaters or be afraid that others would ask me what was wrong with my fingers. I wanted to keep these hands forever, but eczema was like a mosquito that kept coming back.

At this all-time low, I had a talk with my older sister. When she said, "but there are also problems that we aren't at fault for, yet we are still responsible for," I felt like I was freed from my cage because I realized that eczema was not something I should've blamed myself for. Eczema wasn't something that I could control but the way I saw my hands was. It was silly of me to see them as a burden when they had actually allowed me to reach my potential.

The same hands that were the source of my insecurity were the source of my creativity and expression. I looked at my hands again and thought about the flower painting that caused my art teacher to notice my attention to detail and color mixing, how he had my painting displayed at the Brooklyn Museum and helped me get accepted into a scholarship program at Pratt Institute called the Pratt Young Scholars.

Slowly, I began to see my hands in a whole different light; my hands were not victims of eczema but reflections of the greatest moments in my life. When I look at my hands now, I see them diligently hot gluing one piece of basswood next to the other to create a model of a glass structure that I envisioned extending outside the facade of a library window. I see my hands curl around the lense of the film camera to adjust the depth of field so that I can capture an image of sculptures that dance across Pratt Institute's main campus. I see my hands washing the acrylic paint off paintbrushes as Groundswell artists depart after spending their day after school to paint a beautiful mural depicting the diversity of Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. These are the very same hands that hold onto the warm handle of the cooking pot and spatula while my grandma sprinkles in spices to flavor the yellow cauliflowers she is preparing for dinner.

In all these instances of my life, I now see beautiful opportunities that came out of my ownership of my hands. I realized that eczema was never something that held me back, instead it was just my mindset. All I had to do was look past the physical condition of my hands and see that there's so much more to my hands than eczema.

III

My Portrait Tells Stories

My portrait tells stories. They hide in the pulp of the paper, in my colors and lines. First there is the story of the hard work I put into this large piece of paper that was once an empty valley. Its color, a dark turquoise, has a story too. At first, I had trouble finding a color; none of the existing blues seemed right, so I decided to mix my own. Then there's the subject: me. The girl in this portrait isn't concerned about how she looks; she's becoming comfortable in her own skin. This is the portrait of a girl who has sometimes struggled to balance her many roles—a sister and a student, an artist and a devoted daughter, a Hispanic and an American—but has persevered and even thrived.

At the age of ten, I became a sister to the first of two brothers. Over time, caring for them would become a responsibility I'd share with my parents. When it came time for my brother Vale to start kindergarten, it was my job—as the only fluent English speaker in the house—to make sure he was properly enrolled in school. As I phoned each school to which we had applied, I grew frustrated. No one had received the application. It came down to me to figure out a solution. My mother and I went to the school closest to us and explained our situation to the administrators. To my relief, Valentin got interviewed for the school and was accepted.

I am now sixteen, preparing for midterms while I keep an eye on the kids. My brothers are no longer those crying babies whose diapers had to be changed; they now developing their own personalities. I remember calling to my brother as he got home from school one day.

“Valentin,” I shouted, emphasizing the accent in his name.

“My name is Valentine, not *Valenteen*” he replied. I frown, thinking of what my dad always says: “See how kids forget Spanish when they go to school? Be aware of what is around you.” It's a statement that sticks with me despite its many variations. It has become part of me without realizing. Spanish language and Mexican culture have always been present in my life. They are inseparable from me, and I hold them dear. “Don't be ignorant like your cousins who can't even understand when they are spoken to in Spanish,” harsh words I have heard my father utter since I young. Words that—despite cutting (for shaming my cousins whom I love dearly)—have become engraved in my head.

My parents. My brothers. My language and history. They are all rolled up into my portrait. Art is a translation of thoughts and feelings for me. It's a place where inspiration comes to me through a vast range of vibrant colors. It's where I can admire forms and no longer worry about the many roles I must balance. I can let myself get fully immersed and get lost in the creative process that comes along with creating. And as I keep creating and keep developing my skills as an artist, I also along the way grow as an individual not only for my family but for myself.