

**Penn State ILL
OCLC Article**

ILLiad TN:3188248



Call #:

F868.S156H78 2022

Location: **LEISURE**

Journal Title: Stay true : a memoir

Volume: **Issue:**

Edition:First edition. New York : Doubleday,
[2022]

Month/Year:

Pages:

Article Title: All front matter including photographs
until page 58 |

Article Author: Hsu, Hua



ILL:237787533

BMC

Interlibrary Loan

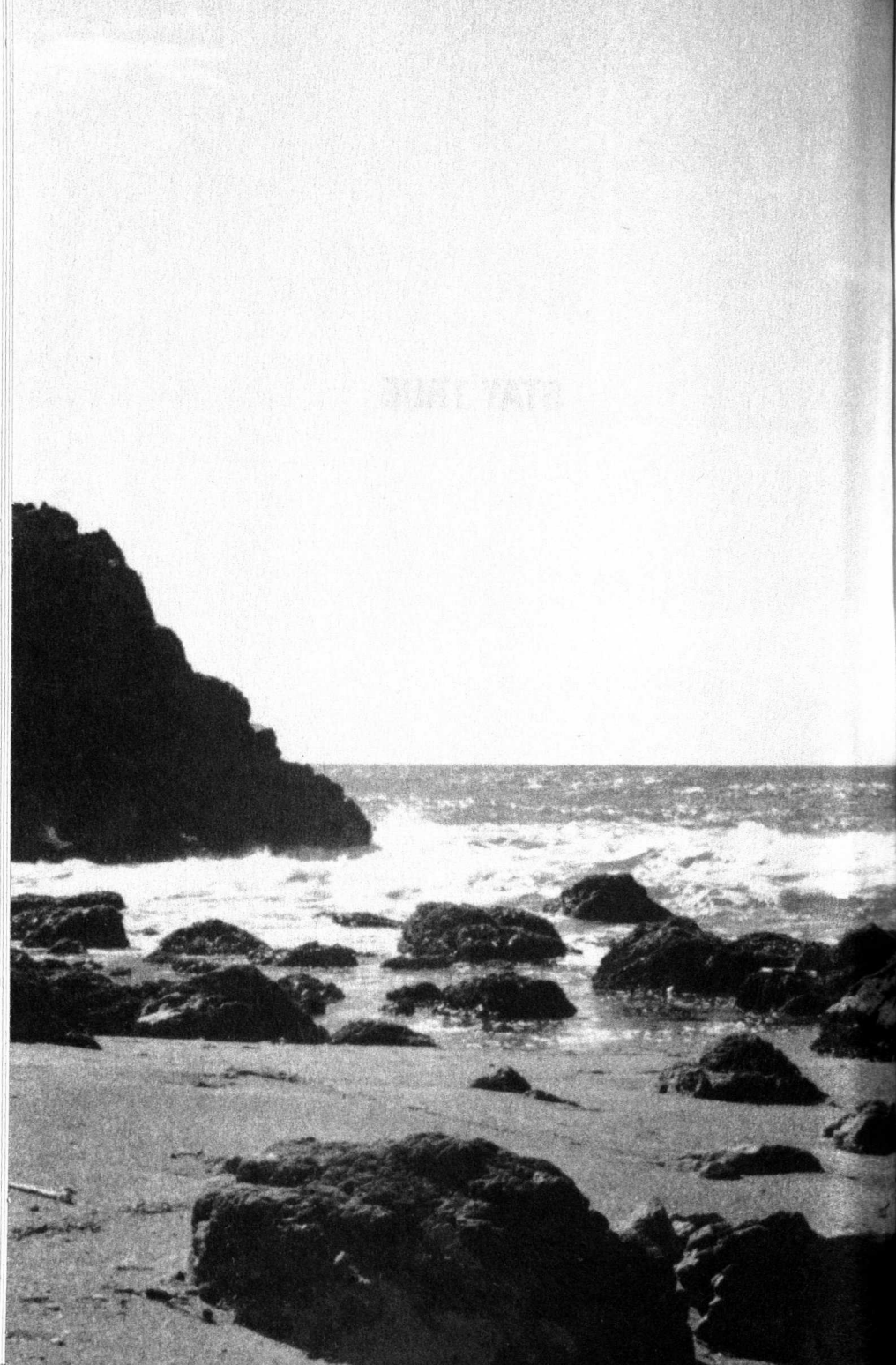
Odyssey:206.107.44.113

Email: bmcill@brynmawr.edu

**Notice: This material may be protected
by copyright**

Notes: Local holding not found on RAPID: ERROR Invalid ISSN
Must specify year or volume /
In Process: 20260903 | 9/3/2026 3:15:55 PM

STAY TRUE





BACK THEN, there was no such thing as spending too much time in the car. We would have driven anywhere so long as we were together.

I always offered my Volvo. First, it seemed like the cool, generous thing to do. Second, it ensured that everyone had to listen to my music. Nobody could cook, yet we were always piling into my station wagon for aspirational trips to the grocery store on College Avenue, the one that took about six songs to get to. We crossed the Bay Bridge simply to get ice cream, justifying a whole new mixtape. There was a twenty-four-hour Kmart down 880 that we discovered one night on the way back from giving someone a lift to the airport—the ultimate gesture of friendship. A half-hour drive just to buy notepads or underwear in the dead of night, and it was absolutely worth it. Occasionally, a stray, scratchy pop tune would catch someone's attention. *What's this?* I'd heard these songs hundreds of times before. But to listen to them with other people: it was what I'd been waiting for.

Passengers had different personalities. Some called shotgun with a neurotic intensity, as though their entire sense of self relied on sitting up front. Sammi flicked her lighter all the time, until one afternoon when the glove compartment caught on fire. Paraag always ejected my tapes and insisted on listening to the radio. Anthony, forever staring out the window. You might come no closer to touching another person than in a cramped backseat, sharing a seat belt meant for one.

I had taken my parents' fear of blind spots to heart, and my

head constantly bounded from side to side, checking the various mirrors, noting cars in neighboring lanes, in between sneaking glances to see if anyone else noticed that Pavement was far superior to Pearl Jam. I was responsible for my friends' safety, and for their enrichment, too.

I have a photo of Ken and Suzy sitting shoulder to shoulder in the back just as we're about to embark on a short road trip. They're chewing gum, smiling. I remember nothing about the trip except the excitement of leaving for someplace else. Finals were over, and before we went our separate ways for summer, a bunch of us spent the night at a house a few hours away from Berkeley. The fun, minor danger of driving in a caravan, as though on a secret mission, weaving through traffic, carefully looking in the rearview to see that everyone else was still behind you. Swerving from lane to lane or tailgating when we were the only cars on the road. I probably spent more time making the mixtape than it took to drive to the house and back. We wouldn't even be gone for twenty-four hours. But there was the novelty of sleeping bags, no homework, waking up in the morning somewhere unfamiliar and new, and that was enough.

In general, I wasn't used to seeing Ken in the backseat. We spent a lot of nights driving around Berkeley, his leg propped up on the passenger side door, his eyes scanning the horizon for undiscovered coffee shops, some out-of-the-way dive bar that would become our haunt once we turned twenty-one. He was always overdressed—a collared shirt, a Polo jacket, things I would never wear—but maybe it was just that he was ready for adventure. More often than not, a song's drive to 7-Eleven for cigarettes.

At that age, time moves slow. You're eager for something to happen, passing time in parking lots, hands deep in your pockets, trying to figure out where to go next. Life happened else-

where, it was simply a matter of finding a map that led there. Or maybe, at that age, time moves fast; you're so desperate for action that you forget to remember things as they happen. A day felt like forever, a year was a geological era. The leap from sophomore to junior year of college suggested unprecedented new heights of poise and maturity. Back then, your emotions were always either very high or very low, unless you were bored, and nobody in human history had ever been this bored before. We laughed so hard we thought we'd die. We drank so much we learned there was a thing called alcohol poisoning. I always feared I had alcohol poisoning. We stayed up so late, possessed by delirium, that we came up with a theory of everything, only we forgot to write it down. We cycled through legendary infatuations sure to devastate us for the rest of our lives.

For a while, you were convinced that you would one day write the saddest story ever.

I remember listening to the Fugees. I remember the chill of the air. I remember the morning after, when everyone emerged from their own corner of the house, and Ken stepped out onto the deck, holding a mug of coffee. *How does he know how to make coffee?* I thought to myself. *I should know how to do that, too.* I have a photo of him still as he looks out toward the morning, clouds reflecting in his glasses. He wore glasses only on occasion, in a manner that made him seem serious, grown-up—never a nerd.

After breakfast—what could we have possibly eaten?—we ventured out to the white sand beach, though the weather was no good. I wore a thrift polka-dot button-up with a frayed collar, a brown cardigan, and a striped yellow-and-black beanie. Only my taupe Vans had been manufactured in our lifetime. There's a photo where I'm squatting down like a catcher, pen-

sively looking for seashells. Ken stands behind, leaning over me and waving gaily to the camera. He wears a flannel-lined navy blue jacket, tastefully baggy jeans, and brown boots. In another picture, he's perched coolly on a tall rock. "Take one of me and Huascene," he asks Anthony. He's affecting a debonair look, while I'm leaning next to him with a goofy smile.

Back then, years passed when you wouldn't pose for a picture. You wouldn't think to take a picture at all. Cameras felt intrusive to everyday life. It was weird to walk around with one, unless you worked for the school paper, which made picture taking seem a little less creepy. Maybe if you had a camera, you used it during those last few days of school, at parties or as people were packing up, the logic of last-minute cramming applied to the documentation of memories. If someone tried to take your picture, even if it was meant to be silly or spontaneous, you still fussed and awkwardly posed, because there was a finality to it, one or two snaps at most, any more would seem obsessive. A moment would pass, unremarked upon, until months later, when you developed photos you had taken at a concert or birthday party, a proper event worth chronicling, and you discovered some images of friends getting ready to go out, or else a slice-of-life candid intended to burn through the end of the roll. You'd forgotten about this. Later, when photography became ubiquitous, pictures were evidence that you existed at all, day in and day out. They registered a pattern. Looking back, you began to doubt the sequence of events. If, in the absence of proof, anything had happened at all.

Here, Here is the answer:

$$y = \overbrace{(1.20 - 0.02x)}^{\text{price}} \overbrace{(50 + x)}^{\text{number}}$$

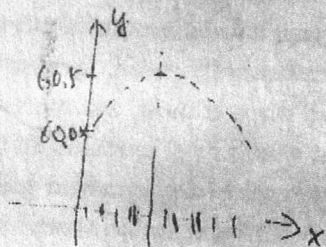
come

~~price~~ number of increase
sale

$$= 60 + 1.2x - x - 0.02x^2$$

$$= 60 + 0.2x - 0.02x^2$$

draw a graph



$$\text{At } 1.2 - 0.02 \times 5 = 1.10 \text{ per cell}$$

her income will be maximum

at 60.5

$$y = 60 + 0.2x - 0.02x^2$$

$$\cancel{60.5 = 0.02(x-5)^2}$$

$$= 60 - 0.02(x^2 - 10x)$$

$$= 60 - 0.02[(x-5)^2 - 25]$$

This year's
World Series was
very exciting.
Wasn't it?
Lots of special
play and always
down to the last
at every extra

y	x
60	0
60.18	1
60.32	2
60.42	3
60.48	4
60.5	5
60.48	6
60.42	7
60.32	8
60.18	9
60	10

Dad

WHEN MY FATHER MOVED to Taiwan, my family bought a pair of fax machines. In theory, this was so he could help me with my math homework. I was starting high school, where everything, from what instrument I played to the well roundedness of my transcript, suddenly seemed consequential. A few years earlier, in seventh grade, I tested *just* well enough to skip two years of math, and I was now paying for it. I had peaked too early. In fact, I was very bad at math. Like many immigrants who prized education, my parents retained faith in the mastery of technical fields, like the sciences, where answers weren't left to interpretation. You couldn't discriminate against the right answer. But I preferred to spend my time interpreting things.

Faxing was cheaper than long-distance calling, and far less pressure. There were no halting, wasteful silences. You simply dialed the recipient and fed a sheet of paper through the machine, and a facsimile printed out on the other side of the world. The time difference between Cupertino and Hsinchu was such that I could fax my father a question in the evening and expect an answer by the time I woke up. My homework requests were always marked urgent.

He carefully explained the principles of geometry in the margins, apologizing if anything was rushed or unclear, as he was very busy establishing himself at his new job. I skimmed the explanations and copied down the equations and proofs. Every now and then, I rewarded his quick, careful attention by interspersing the next set of math questions with a digest of

American news: I told him about Magic Johnson's announcement that he was HIV positive, I narrated the events that led up to the Los Angeles riots, I kept him up to date on the fate of the Giants. I told him about cross-country practice, made honest commitments to work harder at school. I listed the new songs I liked, and he would seek them out in Taipei's cassette stalls, and tell me which ones he liked, too:

I like the November Rain by Guns N' Roses. The Metallica is also great. I couldn't enjoy the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Pearl Jam. The old songs reinterpreted by Mariah Carey (I'll Be There) and Michael Bolton (To Love Somebody) are marvelous. The MTV's "unplug" is a great idea!

As a teenager, I ultimately had better things to do than fax with my dad. He seized upon anything I mentioned and barraged me with questions. I described one of my classes as boring, and he interrogated my use of the term, observing "lots of 'challenges' are emotional 'boring' but reasonable 'useful.'" I mentioned that we were covering the 1960s in history class, and he asked, "You are convinced that Oswald alone killed JFK?"

He always asked me what I thought about things. Maybe it was his attempt to prolong our back-and-forth. He brought up sports, something I didn't think interested him at all. We were like two guys trading small talk at a hardware store.

Redskin is too much for Bill!?

How's the Nicks? [Knicks]

It's Jordan vs. Buckley! [Barkley]

This World Series was spectacular.

Whenever there was a weeklong break from school, my mom and I flew to Taiwan to see him. Sometimes, I tried to seem consumed by schoolwork so that maybe it made more sense for him to visit us in the Bay Area rather than us going all the way there. This never worked. We spent summers and winters in Hsinchu; weeks would pass when the only people I spoke to were my parents and their middle-aged friends.

I always dreaded these trips. I couldn't understand why my parents wanted to go back to a place they had chosen to leave.

My father left Taiwan for the United States in 1965, when he was twenty-one, and he'd be nearly twice as old before he set foot there again. In those days, you left if you were able, especially if you were a promising student. A dozen other physics majors graduated alongside him from Tunghai University, and ten of them ended up pursuing careers abroad. My father flew from Taipei to Tokyo to Seattle to Boston. He scanned the crowd for the friend who'd come all the way from Providence to pick him up at the airport and drop him off in Amherst.

But his friend didn't know how to drive, so he, in turn, promised to buy lunch for another guy, a man my dad didn't know, in exchange for a ride to the Boston airport, then Amherst, and finally back to Providence. The two young men greeted my father at the gate, traded backslaps, and rushed him to the car, where they stowed the sum total of his worldly possessions—textbooks and sweaters, mostly—in the trunk. Then they set off for Boston's Chinatown, a portal back to a world they had left behind. Camaraderie and goodwill were fine enough reasons to drive hours to fetch someone from the airport; just as important was the airport's proximity to food you couldn't get in small, northeastern college towns.

In the years that followed, a willing maroon far from home, my father acquired various characteristics that might have marked him as an American. He lived in New York, witnessed and participated in student protests, and, according to photographic evidence, once sported long hair and vaguely fashionable pants. He arrived as a devotee of classical music, but within a few years his favorite song was the Animals' "House of the Rising Sun." He subscribed very briefly to *The New Yorker*, before realizing it wasn't meant for newcomers like him and requesting a refund. He discovered the charms of pizza and rum raisin ice cream. Whenever new grad students were set to arrive from Taiwan, he and his friends piled into the nearest available car to pick them up. It was a ritual, and it was a type of freedom—on the road and possibly eating well—that was not to be passed up.

If Americans at the time knew anything about Taiwan, it was as an obscure island in the vicinity of China and Japan, where cheap plastic things were manufactured for export. When my mother was a child, her father set up a chalkboard in the family's kitchen where he would write a new word in English each day. World War II had interrupted my grandfather's medical studies, so he became a civil servant. He wanted slightly more for his children. My grandparents had my mom and her siblings choose American names, like Henry or Carol. The children picked up the basics of English, this bizarre, new language, which they might use to speak a new future into being. They learned about the rest of the English-speaking world through a subscription to *Life* magazine, where my mom first discovered the existence of something in America called Chinatown.

When she arrived in the United States in 1971 (Taipei–Tokyo–San Francisco), the family who picked her up had the decency to wait a day, so she could recover from the long jour-

ney, before taking her to eat Chinese food. She was on her way to study public health at Michigan State. Soon after she got to East Lansing, signed a lease, enrolled in classes, and bought a stack of nonrefundable textbooks, she received a message from her father. It turned out that as she was making her way to Michigan, a letter had reached the family home in Taipei informing her that she'd been accepted to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, her top choice. So, my mother recovered whatever tuition she could from Michigan State and quickly departed for Illinois.

In the 1960s, communities of students from throughout the Chinese-speaking world found one another in these small, relatively remote college towns. Most of them adapted to the changing seasons, a different register of conversational pleasantries, the rolling fields and endless highways. School anchored my mother to the Midwest, but she roamed freely: a job at a community center in Kankakee, where she was the only person who wasn't Black—her first up-close glimpse of America's racial divide; a summer spent waitressing, where she ate ice cream every day for lunch. But some of her classmates couldn't deal with this radical new context, or maybe it was a lack of one. She still remembers one girl who stopped going to classes altogether, spending her time drifting around campus. Even at the peak of summer, the girl wandered around, wearing her heaviest winter coat. All the other Taiwanese students kept their distance from her.

There were the potlucks with friends, when my mom would make lion's head meatballs, road trips to famous landmarks or grocers that carried bok choy, the bustling communion of dorm life. You could identify a Taiwanese student by their Tatung rice cooker. My mom took up painting, much of it abstract and surreal, color patterns that didn't reveal a discernible mood. When

I later asked if she'd been on drugs when she made them, she assured me she never smoked weed back then, even though she still remembered what it smelled like.

After two years at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, my father transferred to Columbia University. From there, he followed his academic adviser to the University of Illinois, which is where my parents met. They married at a student center on campus; if they had lived closer than three hours from the nearest Chinatown, they could have hosted a restaurant banquet. My mom's brother, who'd left Taiwan as a merchant marine and ended up in Virginia, was the only person from their combined families who was able to attend. At least they had their friends. One of them was an artist, and he drew pictures of Snoopy and Woodstock on cardboard and arranged them in the grass outside the student center. Everyone brought their favorite dish.

Immigrants are often discussed in terms of a push-and-pull dynamic: something pushes you from home; something else pulls you far away. Opportunities dry up one place and emerge somewhere else, and you follow the promise toward a seemingly better future. Versions of these journeys stretch back hundreds of years in all different directions.

In the nineteenth century, the British and Chinese were amicable trade partners, the British exchanging silver for China's tea, silk, and porcelains. But the British sought an advantage. They began cultivating opium in India and transporting it to China, where it was then transferred to smugglers who distributed it throughout the country. The Chinese eventually tried to wean themselves off the substance, stoking British fears that Chinese ports would one day be closed to them. The ensuing

Opium Wars devastated southeastern China, right around the time when cheap labor was needed in the American West. In the 1840s and 1850s, shiploads of Chinese men left the war-torn Guangdong province for the U.S., lured by promises of work. They laid railroad tracks, mined gold, and went wherever they were needed. Yet this was the limit of their mobility. Sequestered in the cities' most run-down districts by byzantine legal codes and social pressure—and without the means (and sometimes desire) to return home—they began building self-sustained Chinatowns to feed, protect, and care for one another. By the 1880s, the American economy no longer needed cheap foreign labor, resulting in exclusionary policies that limited Chinese immigration for decades.

These dynamics of push and pull were still in play when the Immigration Act of 1965 relaxed restrictions on entry from Asia, at least for people who might have something concrete to contribute to American society. There was a perception among policy makers that America was losing the science and innovation side of the cold war, so the country welcomed grad students like my parents. And who knew what the future held in Taiwan? In the New World, things seemed in a constant ascent. My parents weren't drawn to the United States by any specific dream, just a chance for something different. Even then, they understood that American life is unbounded promise and hypocrisy, faith and greed, new spectrums of joy and self-doubt, freedom enabled by enslavement. All of these things at once.

My parents took a long road trip from Illinois to the East Coast for their honeymoon, snapping photos along the way. The only real account of this trip comes back to them in flashes since

they lost all the undeveloped rolls in Manhattan when someone broke into their car in broad daylight.

I was born in 1977 in Urbana-Champaign. My dad had wanted to become a professor. But after he couldn't find an academic job, we moved to Texas, where he worked as an engineer. The suburbs of Dallas afforded us plenty of space. One could get lost in that vastness. A few years ago, I found a small square of brittle, yellowed paper that dated back to the early 1980s—an ad my mom took out in the local classifieds:

CHINESE COOKING LESSONS—learn to Cook exotic dishes using ingredients and utensils readily available.

\$12 per class. For further information call Mrs. Hsu at:

867-0712

Nobody ever called. When I began speaking in a drawl, and begging for cowboy boots and an American name, and after they had been told that the local steak house wasn't for "their kind," they decided to try their luck elsewhere.

My parents' previous addresses are a history of friendships and acquaintances: a spare room in someone's attic, visits to family friends whom they'd only heard about but never actually met, a summer job in a small town a few hours away, a work opportunity in an unfamiliar, emerging field. They didn't dream of the big city so much as they mapped out proximities to friends, Chinese food, a good school district, a senior citizens' home. So, after Texas, it was either Delaware or California, and they chose California.

Cupertino was still in transition when we arrived in 1986. There was a huge factory downtown, farms, and a few Apple buildings that seemed a joke. Nobody used Apple computers.

Suburbs are about the leisurely conquest of space, an alterna-

tive to the uncomfortable density of the city. They seem to run free from history itself, offering a sense that nothing was there before. But the illusion of tranquility frays at the edges: the neurosis required to maintain so neatly manicured a lawn, the pristine sidewalks that nobody walks on, the holy wars fought to keep one municipality from oozing into the next. Suburbs suggest stability and conformity, yet they are rarely beholden to tradition. Rather, they are slates that can be wiped clean to accommodate new aspirations.

As Silicon Valley flourished in the late 1980s and early 1990s, more Asian immigrants moved to places like Cupertino. All of my grandparents relocated from Taiwan to the South Bay, and most of my parents' brothers and sisters settled there as well. Taiwan represented but a distant and imaginary former homeland. Silicon Valley's suburbs were amenable to a kind of meandering, gradual transformation; flagging businesses were remade by new waves of immigrants, while strip malls began turning, store by store, into crowded islands of Chinese food and the latest in asymmetrical hair art. There were bubble-tea cafés and competing Chinese bookstores, parking lots mazy with modified Hondas and moms hoping to preserve their pale complexions with full-face visors and sleeve-length driving gloves.

Vestiges of what stood before remained, the cycles of use and reuse: Cherry Tree Lane, where an actual orchard was once the best possible use of free acreage; the peaked roof of a former Sizzler turned dim sum spot; the kitschy railroad-car diner turned noodle shop. Chefs from Hong Kong and Taiwan joined the waves of engineers coming to California. The pressure to appeal to non-Chinese shoppers or diners casually disappeared. The concept of "mainstream" no longer held. Neck bones and chicken feet and various gelatinous things, VHS dubs of the

latest Taiwanese dramas, Chinese-language newspapers and books: all could pay the bills and then some.

I realized how long my parents had been away from Taiwan when my mom began complaining about the newer immigrants from China—the way they would leave their shopping carts strewn about the parking lot of the Asian grocery store. The distinctions between a Taiwanese immigrant who came in the 1970s and someone who came from China in the 1990s were probably imperceptible to anyone outside the Chinese-speaking diaspora. They looked roughly the same, and they probably both had accents. But they also related differently to American culture and the question of where you fit within it. These new, ill-mannered immigrants probably didn't even know there was once but a single Asian grocer in the area, and it wasn't even that good, and you had to drive half an hour to get there.

Among the items that survived my parents' frugal early years are weathered paperback copies of the best sellers *Future Shock* and *The Pentagon Papers*. A pamphlet of Theodore Allen's essay "Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race" with "C. HSU" written across the cover. A book on Nixon's visit to China, another on African American history.

Maybe this was what it meant to live in America. You could move around. You were afforded opportunities unavailable back home. You could refashion yourself a churchgoer, a pizza lover, an aficionado of classical music or Bob Dylan, a fan of the Dallas Cowboys because everyone else in the neighborhood seemed to be one. For a brief spell, my father toyed with anglicizing his name and asked to be called Eric, though he soon realized that assimilation of that order didn't suit him. You were free to

name your children after U.S. presidents. Or you might name them something unpronounceable, since they would never be president anyway.

From Amherst to Manhattan to Urbana-Champaign to Plano to Richardson to Mission Viejo to Cupertino: there were always the records, an old record player my father had soldered together himself, a pair of Dynatone speakers. He started building his music collection as soon as he arrived in America. At first, he used a mail-order LP club, the kind where you overpay for a few, and then get a dozen more for a penny. It was mostly classical music back then. But he grew accustomed to Bob Dylan's strained rasp blasting from a neighbor's apartment sometime in the 1960s. He started buying Dylan records, learning to appreciate that voice, thin and weird, perhaps even more than he ever came to understand the words.

His records would stay protected in their original shrink-wrap, if possible, to avoid wear to the cardboard sleeve. He would peel back part of the plastic to stamp his name—Hsu Chung-Shih. Some of his records were given away over the years, but the core remained: Dylan, the Beatles and Stones, Neil Young, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles. A few by the Who, Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, some Motown collections. A lot of classical music. Blind Faith, because, when my parents were graduate students, an older faculty member from the West Indies had pulled out his violin during a dinner party to play the solo from "Sea of Joy." There were John Lennon and George Harrison solo albums, but none by Paul McCartney, so I assumed his post-Beatles career was awful. No Beach Boys meant they were probably awful, too. There was no jazz, except for a lone Sonny and Linda Sharrock album that's still sealed. They played *Thriller* so much that I assumed Michael Jackson was a family friend.

latest Taiwanese dramas, Chinese-language newspapers and books: all could pay the bills and then some.

I realized how long my parents had been away from Taiwan when my mom began complaining about the newer immigrants from China—the way they would leave their shopping carts strewn about the parking lot of the Asian grocery store. The distinctions between a Taiwanese immigrant who came in the 1970s and someone who came from China in the 1990s were probably imperceptible to anyone outside the Chinese-speaking diaspora. They looked roughly the same, and they probably both had accents. But they also related differently to American culture and the question of where you fit within it. These new, ill-mannered immigrants probably didn't even know there was once but a single Asian grocer in the area, and it wasn't even that good, and you had to drive half an hour to get there.

Among the items that survived my parents' frugal early years are weathered paperback copies of the best sellers *Future Shock* and *The Pentagon Papers*. A pamphlet of Theodore Allen's essay "Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race" with "C. HSU" written across the cover. A book on Nixon's visit to China, another on African American history.

Maybe this was what it meant to live in America. You could move around. You were afforded opportunities unavailable back home. You could refashion yourself a churchgoer, a pizza lover, an aficionado of classical music or Bob Dylan, a fan of the Dallas Cowboys because everyone else in the neighborhood seemed to be one. For a brief spell, my father toyed with anglicizing his name and asked to be called Eric, though he soon realized that assimilation of that order didn't suit him. You were free to

name your children after U.S. presidents. Or you might name them something unpronounceable, since they would never be president anyway.

From Amherst to Manhattan to Urbana-Champaign to Plano to Richardson to Mission Viejo to Cupertino: there were always the records, an old record player my father had soldered together himself, a pair of Dynatone speakers. He started building his music collection as soon as he arrived in America. At first, he used a mail-order LP club, the kind where you overpay for a few, and then get a dozen more for a penny. It was mostly classical music back then. But he grew accustomed to Bob Dylan's strained rasp blasting from a neighbor's apartment sometime in the 1960s. He started buying Dylan records, learning to appreciate that voice, thin and weird, perhaps even more than he ever came to understand the words.

His records would stay protected in their original shrink-wrap, if possible, to avoid wear to the cardboard sleeve. He would peel back part of the plastic to stamp his name—Hsu Chung-Shih. Some of his records were given away over the years, but the core remained: Dylan, the Beatles and Stones, Neil Young, Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles. A few by the Who, Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, some Motown collections. A lot of classical music. Blind Faith, because, when my parents were graduate students, an older faculty member from the West Indies had pulled out his violin during a dinner party to play the solo from "Sea of Joy." There were John Lennon and George Harrison solo albums, but none by Paul McCartney, so I assumed his post-Beatles career was awful. No Beach Boys meant they were probably awful, too. There was no jazz, except for a lone Sonny and Linda Sharrock album that's still sealed. They played *Thriller* so much that I assumed Michael Jackson was a family friend.

My father's record collection only had the effect of making music seem uncool to me. It was something that grown-ups took seriously. He listened to Guns N' Roses, whereas I listened to baseball games on the radio. He was the one recording hours of MTV on one VCR and whittling his findings down to a greatest hits tape on another VCR. He was the one who always wanted to go to Tower Records and browse the aisles, picking up old favorites in whatever new format was available. He bought *Rolling Stone* and *Spin* and carefully copied their lists of the year's or decade's best albums, and then he searched for the ones he thought he might enjoy.

Once I started middle school, I realized that my dad's record buying had prepared me for the social hierarchies of recess. I started watching MTV and listening to music on the radio, picking up on things early enough to never seem like a poseur, which I feared more than anything. I acquired the pop chart know-how that is the teenager's surest commodity by reading my dad's magazines and memorizing band names, reference points, miscellaneous trivia. And I now tagged along on his after-dinner trips to the record store. We seemed to spend hours apart, occasionally intersecting in some unlikely aisle. Everything seemed a possibility, a clue, an invitation to experience new, unprecedented emotional realities. We were enthralled by the same music, but it showed us different things. I listened to Slash's flamboyant, searching guitar solo on "November Rain" and heard liberation, a suggestion that crazed, committed vision could carry you away, somewhere else. To my parents, Slash's greatness was evidence of virtuoso skill, the product of thousands of hours of study and practice.

As Silicon Valley boomed in the early 1990s, so, too, did Taiwan's semiconductor industry. Soon, my parents' friends began moving back after decades away, maintaining homes in

two countries so their children could finish high school and go to college in the States. By the late 1980s, my dad had risen to middle management in America. But he wearied of the corporate ladder, where advancement to the uppermost strata seemed tracked to arbitrary forces, like the color of one's skin, the subtle quivers in a voice. My parents eventually decided that he would move back to Taiwan, too. A job as an executive awaited him. Never again would he have to dye his hair or touch his golf clubs. We bought two fax machines.

I sometimes ran into classmates at the airport and realized that we were all there to drop our dads off at work. We lived in one of the only cities in America where this was not a hard arrangement to explain. It was a bit like the "Gold Mountain," a Chinese folktale of American opportunity that had endured since the gold rush. Except in those days, the men would cross the Pacific in search of work in America, not the other way around.

. . . .

The first generation thinks about survival; the ones that follow tell the stories. I often try to spin the details and small effects of my parents' lives into a narrative. How did they acquire a sense of taste or decide which movies to see? Would they have recognized themselves in *Future Shock*? And who was the influential Eric in my father's life? The things around them were like the raw materials for new American identities, and they foraged as far as their car or the subway line could take them. Back then, it required a small fortune and months of careful planning to return home. It took weeks simply to schedule a long-distance phone call and ensure a quorum of the family would be available on the other end of the line.

They had come to study at American schools far superior to their Asian counterparts, though the reward for such a mad pursuit had yet to come into focus. They had chosen the occasional loneliness, the meandering lifestyle, the language barrier. What they hadn't chosen was identification as Asian Americans, a category that had only been coined in the late 1960s. They had little in common with the American-born Chinese and Japanese students organizing on the other side of their campuses for free speech or civil rights; they knew little about the Chinese Exclusion Act, Charlie Chan, or why one should take deep offense to a slur like "Oriental" or "Chink." My parents and their cohorts wouldn't have recognized that they were representatives of a "model minority." In fact, they hadn't even planned on becoming Americans. They simply didn't know such identities were available to them. Their allegiances remained to the world they had left behind.

How sweet and musical those phone calls must have been. What was it like for them to leave home and cross the Pacific, with only the haziest plans for return? In the absence of available connections, they held on to an imaginary Taiwan, more an abstraction—a beacon, a phantom limb—than an actual island. The available technology delivered them there only on special occasions. So, they searched for traces of home in the faces of their classmates; they heard it wafting above the din when they shopped for groceries.

Now my parents were free to come and go as they wished. My mother spent a lot of the 1990s on airplanes. They learned about Taiwan all over again. We lived in Hsinchu, a small coastal town about forty minutes south of Taoyuan Airport. Hsinchu was mainly known for its gusting winds and seafood meatballs. It was still slow and sleepy, only there was now a large high-tech campus off the highway, where all the semiconductor

companies were headquartered. Giant malls started popping up downtown.

On weekends, my parents drove to Taipei to seek out old tea shops and movie theaters they remembered from the 1950s and 1960s. They didn't need maps. Decades away hadn't dulled their memory of which stalls served the best *baos*. My parents grew younger in Taiwan; the humidity and food turned them into different people. I sometimes felt like an interloper as we sat on weathered, wooden stools and silently ate giant bowls of beef noodles that, were this America, would have prompted a romantic soliloquy about their childhood memories.

I spent two or three months of every year in Taiwan. I always insisted on listening to ICRT, an English-language radio station, for Casey Kasem's *American Top 40* show, which offered weekly dispatches from a more recognizable reality. My parents had fond memories of listening to the station as teenagers, back when it was part of the Armed Forces Network. Over time, my father lost interest in new music, and listening to the countdown was partly my attempt to connect with him, to remind him of the American splendors to which he might one day return. It took me a while to understand that this was our life now—that my parents had worked hard in order to have a place in both worlds. Becoming American would remain an incomplete project, and my father's record collection began to seem like relics of an unfollowed path.

There's a telos of self-improvement baked into the immigrant experience. As a teenager, I busied myself with the school newspaper or debate club because, unlike with math or science, I thought I could actually get better at these things. You flip through your father's old physics notebooks, and you know

in your bones that these formulas and graphs will never make sense to you. But one day, you realize that your parents speak with a mild accent, and that they have no idea what passive voice is. The next generation would acquire a skill on their behalf—one that we could also use against them. Commanding the language seemed like our only way of surpassing them. Home life took on a kind of casual litigiousness. The calm and composed children, a jaunty bounce to our sentences, laying traps with our line of questioning. The parents, tired and irritated, defaulting to the native tongue.

I spent a lot of time with my mom. She drove me all over the South Bay to cello lessons, cross-country meets, debate tournaments, record stores, listening as I regaled her with the minute details of my life. In return, I waited patiently with a stack of magazines whenever she went shopping for blouses or shoes. She watched whatever weird movies I brought back from the library, and she taught me how to shave. Every Friday, we went to Vallco, our local mall, starting at Sears and working our way to the food court for dinner. If anyone in a store wanted to talk to you, she said, you replied, as cheerfully as possible, “I’m just browsing,” and they left you alone. I would explain what everyone else was wearing at school, and then we would figure out where you could possibly buy that stuff.

There comes a moment for the immigrant’s child when you realize that you and your parents are assimilating at the same time. Later, I understood that we were both sifting, store to store, for some possible future—that we were both mystified by the same fashions, trends, and bits of language. That my late-night trips to the record store with my dad had been about discovery, not mastery. Later still, I came to recognize that assimilation as a whole was a race toward a horizon that wasn’t fixed. The ideal was ever shifting, and your accent would never be quite perfect. It was a set of compromises sold to you as a

contract. Assimilation was not a problem to be solved but the problem itself.

Like millions of other people, my first glimpse into the prospect of “alternative” culture came when I listened to Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit” in 1991. I was thirteen. It was one of the greatest songs I had ever heard, mostly because it was the first great song I had chosen on my own.

I believed that I’d happened upon a secret before everyone else, and I was addicted to this feeling. I heard the song late one night on the radio. The next day, nobody knew what I was talking about. There wasn’t even a video yet. I patiently awaited the release of *Nevermind*.

At the time, I didn’t know that “alternative” was a marketing concept, or that Nirvana had an album before *Nevermind*. I was clueless that *Nevermind* was the result of a major label bidding war. My only guide was my exhilaration. I remember staring at the tape deck as I listened to the album for the first time, amazed that each song seemed better than the last. And I was mystified by the way they chose to express themselves, undermining their own, innately catchy songs with layers of menacing noise or mischievous snarls. I carefully studied any magazine and newspaper articles I could find about them, copying down the references they made to other bands. I wrote a letter to the fan club listed in the cassette’s booklet expressing my singular grasp of their values.

One day, Nirvana was a relatively obscure band from an unfancied part of the country. Then everyone saw the light. Kids at school began showing up with the same Nirvana T-shirt, puffy yellow ink on black. Was this a sign that the same secret could be cherished by everyone? That we would remake the world in our own image?

I was drawn to Nirvana mostly because they didn't seem like a bunch of morons. They made everything else on MTV appear barbaric and instantly irrelevant. Mainstream rock music fit within a limited gradient of American machismo, from fun-loving buffoons to the serious and virtuosic. Nirvana represented everything else; the fringe territories were infinite. When Kurt Cobain, their lead singer, was young, he read an article about punk rock and concluded that this was the music for him. It was the mid-1970s, and it would be a while until he actually heard any punk records. He later recalled being disappointed that the music wasn't as aggressive or vital as he'd imagined it. His own, imagined version of punk drove the band's career. He seemed hell-bent on redirecting his newfound fans toward the music he loved: Shonen Knife, the Raincoats, the Vaselines. He led us down a trail, pointing us toward out-of-the-way landmarks. Casting about for those other territories became my reason for being.

Naturally, the day came when far too many classmates were wearing Nirvana shirts. How could everyone identify with the same outsider? It wasn't the band's fault. Cobain seemed nonchalant, even hostile, toward his fame. I couldn't blame him for the adoration foisted upon him. He was, after all, good-looking and charismatic. But I would ensure that I'd never be like the poseur in my civics class who started humming "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and then singing the words "And it smells like / teen spirit." Everybody knows that's not how the song goes.

I began making a zine because I'd heard it was an easy way to get free CDs from bands and record labels. But it was also a way to find a tribe. My worldview was defined by music. I cultivated a pose that was modest and small, sensitive and sarcastic, skeptical yet secretly passionate. I scoured record stores and mail-order catalogs for 7-inch singles that sounded quiet and loud at the same time. I thought I had a lot to say, but I felt

timid about saying it. Making my zine was a way of sketching the outlines of a new self, writing a new personality into being. I was convinced that I could rearrange these piles of photocopied images, short essays, and bits of cut-up paper into a version of myself that felt real and true. It was a kind of dream about what the future could hold—something that came into focus with every pun-filled, reference-packed sentence. Of course, there were many sentences that I couldn't yet write.

I used primitive page-layout software I'd persuaded my mom to buy because it would help me with college applications. Using four or five fonts per page communicated the sense of emotional chaos I hoped to project. I illustrated my zine with collages using images ripped out of driver's education manuals, magazines, Chinese textbooks. I wrote a lot about music, but I could have been zealous about anything—film, literature, art. I fell in love with anything I felt I had discovered. I wrote long, admiring essays about Pavement and Polvo because those were the first LPs I bought on my own after finally getting my driver's license, and I listened to those records obsessively until everything strange and dissonant about them began to sound normal. But I could have started browsing in the *R* section instead and fallen under the spell of other bands just as easily. What I prized was seriousness. I wanted to apply it to some small world, hidden in this larger one.

My zine was earnest yet cynical. *Wasn't this thing that had fallen out of fashion actually great? Why does everyone dress this way, rather than that?* I would write breathless odes to foreign films I'd never seen, passionate and overlong dissections of whatever 7-inch indie rock singles I could find at Streetlight in San Jose. There was *X-Files* fan fiction, screeds against our rote homework assignments. But I saw coolness as a quality primarily expressed through erudite discernment, and I defined who I was by what I rejected, a kitchen-sink approach to negation that

resulted in essays decrying *Beverly Hills, 90210*, hippies, private school, George Bush, braided leather belts, the police state, and, after they became trendy, Pearl Jam. I knew what I was against, but I couldn't imagine what stood on the other side.

Maybe those were the last days when something could be truly obscure. Not in the basic sense that a style or song might be esoteric. But there was a precariousness to out-of-the-way knowledge, a sense that a misfiled book or forgotten magazine could easily be lost forever. Learning about something a few minutes before everyone else converted to a kind of niche social capital, and I was a diligent scholar. I knew all the bands that sounded a bit like Nirvana that nobody had heard of yet. I prized research: the excavation of arcane tributaries, secret knowledge, and conspiratorial anecdotes, building new religions around has-beens or never-weres.

I explored the less trafficked aisles of the comic shop, rummaged through my grandparents' apartment for old flannels, mohair ties, factory lab coats. I'd beg my mom to drive me to Berkeley, marveling at the college students as they angled enormous slices of pizza into their mouths, novels, notebooks, and records tucked under their arms. Any magazine article about cyberpunks, ravers, or animal rights activists suggested a new, totally plausible path for me. It was exciting to meander and choose who you wanted to be, what aspects of yourself to accent and adorn. You were sending a distress signal, hoping someone would come to your rescue.

It's hard enough to read tone in writing, and maybe even more so with a fax, which is printed on smooth thermal paper. You can't make out the imprint of the pen. Faxes arrive with a faded and distant look, the advice already ancient. My dad was curious about my zine (which he referred to as my "publications") and

asked if I could fax a copy to him. I explained that it wouldn't be the same.

He often implored me to apply some of the energy I spent memorizing sports statistics or writing record reviews to my schoolwork. I just had to study my textbooks the way I studied my cherished magazines. I could tell you what albums were slated for release next month, but I couldn't, for the life of me, pass the written portion of the driver's test. "Don't take this as a negative comment. Only we love you and know your weakness, so we like to guide you. Your goodness and strong points are always in our hearts although we are not always saying them." Whenever he wrote something that came across sterner than intended, he quickly followed up, unprompted, to clarify:

Last Friday, I overemphasized the toughness. Don't be scared. The life is full of excitement and surprises. Handle it and enjoy it. Just like you said that you like the cross country exercise. After climbing the hill, looking downward, you feel good. That is the point I would like to make. Don't feel frustrate climbing climbing, also don't pick a too high mountain to climb in begin with. You need drill the small hill first. Learn from the exercise. Even a tumble can teach you how to climb next time. It's sweating, but enjoy the process.

Mom and I have been proud of you. Not only on your accomplishment but more on your happy personality. We'll support you whatever you choose (most time! Ha!). Don't feel bad if sometimes we are too nervous. We just hope to give you all our guidance and help to make your decisions simpler. We might put too much pressure on you but that's not what we mean. Be relax but arrange your time to handle priorities.

I feel sorry that I cannot be around all the time to support you whenever you need. But I feel comfortable since mom can do good job and you are quite mature. But if there is any thoughts

or problem, call me or fax to me. If it's class work and you cannot get my timely help, please tell us. We can arrange some tutoring. 10th and 11th grade take more sweat but I hope you enjoy them.

Love, Dad

The tutors didn't really help. They were usually twentysomething immigrants from Taiwan studying at the local community college. My haplessness at abstract math concepts was so deep-rooted that they often had no idea where to begin with me. I would scrutinize the way they dressed and spoke, and wonder if this is what my parents had been like decades ago.

By junior year, I'd finished every math class my high school offered, sustaining damage to my GPA along the way. But I was now free to devote myself fully to the school paper, my zine, and the debate club. I figured that I had to be really good at these other things to make up for all the Cs on my transcript.

One day, my dad faxed me. It was raining in Hsinchu. "California's sunny day also influence the 'thinking and behavior.' Make people thinking 'bright.' Do you think so?" I didn't get why he was always writing me about my moods. Maybe he was concerned that I would succumb to the American disease of boredom, or worse.

It felt a little anticlimactic when Kurt Cobain died in April 1994. We had already mourned his passing the month before. Someone had heard that he died of an overdose while on tour in Italy, and the rumor spread through my high school. We didn't find

out until the next day that Cobain was still alive, by which point we had already cycled through various stages of grief. I was in journalism class, and I cut a picture of him out of a magazine and glued it to a pin, declaring that I would wear it for the rest of my life.

When Cobain really did die, I wasn't particularly surprised because his health had seemed so precarious in the preceding years. He often spoke of his debilitating stomach issues. A history of depression ran through his family. The pressures of fame and all the nonstop touring seemed to exacerbate whatever it was he was feeling. His ragged voice and hunched frame weren't just affectations; they were physical manifestations of his discomfort. It's said that his heroin addiction became a coping mechanism for all of this. He died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound at his home in Seattle. His passing seemed instantly significant, like when our history teacher subjected us to stories about Kennedy's assassination. Cobain had been representative of something, but maybe not something of which I felt a part. He was outside the system, only I felt further outside it. I faxed my dad the night it happened. I couldn't understand Cobain's death by suicide. My dad wrote back:

Kurt's death was also on 7pm news here. I heard it in Uncle "Spock's" home during dinner time. It's sad. Right now, MTV has a special to pay the memory.

I agree it's a society tragedy, too much pressure. If he felt that it's beyond his control or creativity or else, it sometimes led to the conclusion of suicide, especially for talented artists. He felt that the sense of living disappeared. So sometimes, the "normal" people is more easy to adapt to the reality which fills with not ideal situation and needs compromise. That's the dilemma

of life: you have to find meaning, but by the same time, you have to accept the reality. How to handle the contradiction is a challenge to everyone of us. What do you think?

After his death, there were articles and news segments about Cobain's nihilism, and what his choice suggested about America's youth. Even though he grew too popular for me to covet a T-shirt, I made a scrapbook of articles about Cobain. I answered one of the prompts on my French AP exam with a diatribe about what society had done to Cobain, praising the stand he had taken against racism, sexism, and homophobia. It was *tragique* that we swallowed him whole. I failed the exam. Clearly, the establishment would never understand us.

His was a persona that was more thoughtful, conflicted, and unguarded than those we were used to seeing. Maybe what I mistook for coolness was unease, a fear of growing too vulnerable. Maybe you can never be loved for the reasons you think you should be loved. Maybe the seeds of your rebellion will always be forgotten.

A couple weeks later, I faxed my dad a copy of an article I wrote for the school paper about Cobain's death and what it said about our generation. I was using the term loosely, since Cobain was ten years older than me. I believed there was something exceptional about our time, the pressures we faced, the struggles to remain content in aimless times. There were all these terms that seemed unique to us, like "dysfunction," "dystopia," and "angst." I tried them on, but nothing stuck. I watched the news and saw fans dressed in black, maintaining a vigil in a park near his house, crying for days in the arms of strangers. That was a deeper level of feeling I couldn't grasp. Still, I was a persuasive enough writer to concern my father.

I think your article do have many good points. Important one is whether a person is loving the life or sometimes hates himself and can not take it. Every generation has its own problem. For the young, being idealistic and feeling helpless at the same time is normal and necessary for the society to progress. But the problem is that life is and has to go on. Every generation has to face the problem and live through and try its best to overcome the frustration. In the 60's, society is quite rich but the immoral Vietnam War triggers the problem. Liberal thinking is a positive force for the society. Desegregation, human right, and anti-war were also very "frustrating" situation. Some survived and still active like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Neil Young. Some didn't, like Hendrix, Joplin, and Morrison.

What I want to say is that we have to have ideal thinking, heart, feeling about the society, environment, etc. But we also need to accept that there must have a way to change the world, or surrounding, to be better. It might take many years, or even generations, or many deaths. But still, emotion alone will not change the situation. Real work will. Kurt is talent. No doubt about it. And he is important. His death need to be analyzed very seriously. Our society to have problems. But don't paint the generation with stereotype such as "lost." I think that's true for all generations during a certain period of their life.

What do you think? In reading your article, I found that my English is very poor. What's the meaning of "dysfunction"?

Again, we have to have emotion that differentiate human being with machine, robot. But we also need to know how to control it and will not be carried away by it. Do you agree?

I was sixteen, and I wanted to be carried away. I would leave for college the next fall. I fantasized about going somewhere strange and new. Los Angeles wasn't far enough. San Diego was lame. Seattle was far enough but in a useless direction. I didn't like the idea of being landlocked. I felt too young for New York. Boston was lame, too. I was drawn to Johns Hopkins until I realized I wouldn't be nearly as enamored with a school called "John Hopkins." Actually, the novelty of flying had evaporated after one too many trips across the Pacific. My dad wanted me to start considering my options. "Berkeley is a good school with a good campus," he wrote. It was affordable, close to home, and less elitist than the "Ivory Tower" schools back east, not that it would be an issue if I wanted to apply to those schools, too. The only drawback, he explained, was its "neighborhood." He wasn't just talking about Oakland, though that was certainly part of it. Berkeley wasn't a bubble, like nearby Stanford. The campus bled into the world around it—the gnarly street punks and homeless people who lived in People's Park, the hippie burn-outs who still wandered Telegraph. Just a few years earlier, in 1990, someone had taken hostages at a campus bar, leading to an all-night standoff with the local police. One student died and several were shot before the person was killed.

Life had delivered my parents thousands of miles away from their families. They had turned the other cheek, made the most of bad situations, answered to close-enough versions of their name. Then it somehow took them back to where they had come from, only, by then, their families had slowly moved away to be closer to one another in the Bay Area. My parents craved a kind of routine stability as they whittled the risk and variables out of their lives. They wanted me to acquire recognizable

skills; they wanted me to be just accomplished enough to seem well-rounded. Berkeley was a good school with a good campus; on this point, we agreed. But I was desperate to go there because of the enormous slices of pizza, the left-wing bookstore tucked inside the parking garage, the weirdos yelling about free speech or abortion on the quad. I was matriculating into a world of abundance, where there was at least three of everything—used bookstores, record stores, vintage boutiques—within a four-block radius.

I was an American child, and I was bored, and I was searching for my people.