

Please
return to
Ms. Turner

Freshman Year

Fall 1994

Entry 1 • Ms. Gruwell

Dear Diary,

Tomorrow morning, my journey as an English teacher officially begins. Since first impressions are so important, I wonder what my students will think about me. Will they think I'm out of touch or too preppy? Or worse yet, that I'm too young to be taken seriously? Maybe I'll have them write a journal entry describing what their expectations are of me and the class.

Even though I spent last year as a student teacher at Wilson High School, I'm still learning my way around the city. Long Beach is so different than the gated community I grew up in. Thanks to MTV dubbing Long Beach as the "gangsta-rap capital" with its depiction of guns and graffiti, my friends have a warped perception of the city, or L.B.C. as the rappers refer to it. They think I should wear a bulletproof vest rather than pearls. Where I live in Newport Beach is a utopia compared to some of neighborhoods seen in a Snoop Doggy Dogg video. Still, TV tends to blow things out of proportion.

The school is actually located in a safe neighborhood, just a few miles from the ocean. Its location and reputation make it desirable. So much so that a lot of the students that live in what they call the "hood" take two or three buses just to get to school every day. Students come in from every corner of the city: Rich kids

from the shore sit next to poor kids from the projects . . . there's every race, religion, and culture within the confines of the quad. But since the Rodney King riots, racial tension has spilled over into the school.

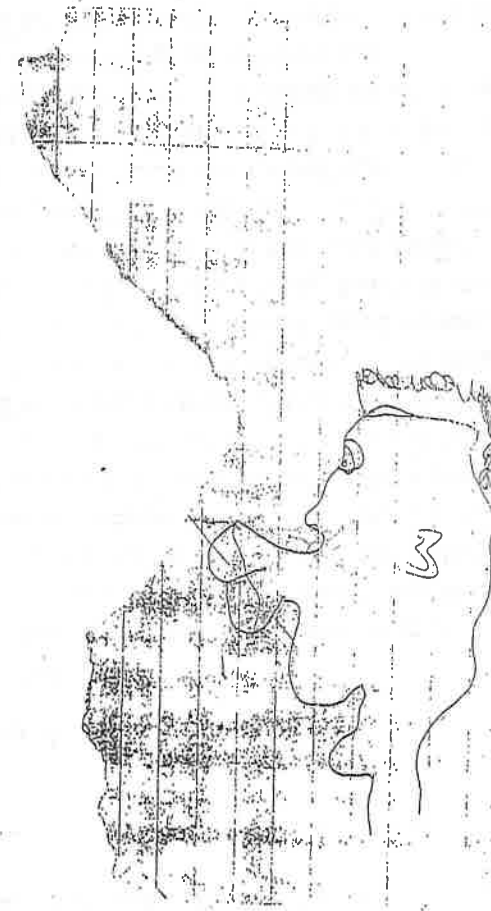
Due to busing and an outbreak in gang activity, Wilson's traditional white, upper-class demographics have changed radically. African Americans, Latinos, and Asians now make up the majority of the student body.

As a student teacher last year, I was pretty naïve. I wanted to see past color and culture, but I was immediately confronted by it when the first bell rang and a student named Sharaud sauntered in bouncing a basketball. He was a junior, a disciplinary transfer from Wilson's crosstown rival, and his reputation preceded him. Word was that he had threatened his previous English teacher with a gun (which I later found out was only a plastic water gun, but it had all the makings of a dramatic showdown). In those first few minutes, he made it brutally clear that he hated Wilson, he hated English, and he hated me. His sole purpose was to make his "preppy" student teacher cry. Little did he know that within a month, he'd be the one crying.

Sharaud became the butt of a bad joke. A classmate got tired of Sharaud's antics and drew a racial caricature of him with huge, exaggerated lips. As the drawing made its way around the class, the other students laughed hysterically. When Sharaud saw it, he looked as if he was going to cry. For the first time, his tough façade began to crack.

When I got a hold of the picture, I went ballistic. "This is the type of propoganda that the Nazis used during the Holocaust," I yelled. When a student timidly asked me, "What's the Holocaust?" I was shocked.

I asked, "How many of you have heard of the Holocaust?" Not a single person raised his hand. Then I asked, "How many of you have been shot at?" Nearly every hand went up.



I immediately decided to throw out my meticulous planned lessons and make tolerance the core of my curriculum.

From that moment on, I would try to bring history to life by using new books, inviting guest speakers, and going on field trips. Since I was just a student teacher, I had no budget for my schemes. So, I moonlighted as a concierge at the Marriott Hotel and sold lingerie at Nordstrom. My dad even asked me, "Why can't you just be a normal teacher?"

Actually, normalcy didn't seem so bad after my first snafu. I took my students to see *Schindler's List* in Newport Beach, at a predominately white, upper-class theater. I was shocked to see women grab their pearls and clutch their purses in fear. A local paper ran a front-page article about the incident, describing how poorly my students were treated, after which I received death threats. One of my disgruntled neighbors had the audacity to say, "If you love black people so much, why don't you just marry a monkey?"

All this drama and I didn't even have my teaching credentials yet. Luckily, some of my professors from University of California-Irvine read the article and invited my class to a seminar by the author of *Schindler's List*, Thomas Keneally. Keneally was so impressed by my students that a few days later we got an invitation to meet Steven Spielberg at Universal Studios. I couldn't believe it! The famous director wanted to meet the class that I had dubbed "as colorful as a box of Crayola crayons" and their "rookie teacher who was causing waves." He marveled at how far these "unteachable" students had come as a junior class and what a close group they had become. He even asked Sharaud what "we" were planning to do next year as an encore. After all, if a film does well, you make a sequel—if a class surpasses everyone's expectations, you . . .

. . . dismantle it! Yep, that's exactly what happened. Upon my return from Universal, the head of the English department told me, "You're making us look bad." Talk about bursting my bubble! How was I making them look bad? After all, these were the same kids that "wouldn't last a month" or "were too stupid" to read advanced placement books.

She went on to say, "Things are based on seniority around here." So, in other words, I was lucky to have a job, and keeping Sharaud and his posse another year would be pushing the enve-

lope. Instead, I'd be teaching freshmen—"at risk" freshmen. Hmm . . . not exactly the assignment I was hoping for.

So, starting tomorrow, it's back to the drawing board. But I'm convinced that if Sharaud could change, then anyone can. So basically, I should prepare myself for a roomful of Sharauds. If it took a month to win Sharaud over . . . I wonder how long it's gonna take a bunch of feisty fourteen-year-olds to come around?

Diary 2

Dear Diary,

What the hell am I doing in *here*? I'm the only white person in this English class! I'm sitting in the corner of this classroom (if that's what you want to call this chaos), looking at my schedule and thinking, "Is this really where I'm supposed to be?" Okay, I know in high school I'm supposed to meet all kinds of different people, but this isn't exactly what I had in mind. Just my luck, I'm stuck in a classroom full of troubled kids who are bused in from bad neighborhoods. I feel really uncomfortable in here with all these rejects. There aren't even enough seats. My teacher, Ms. Gruwell, is young and determined, but this class is out of control and I bet she won't last very long.

This school is just asking for trouble when they put all these kids in the same class. It's a disaster waiting to happen.

I had lunch before class in the high school quad and noticed that, like everywhere else, it was really separated by race. Each race has its own section and nobody mixes. Everyone, including me, eats lunch with their own kind, and that's that. There is a section known as "Beverly Hills" or "Disneyland" where all of the rich white kids hang out. Then there's "China Town" where the Asians hang. The Hispanic section is referred to as either "Tijuana Town" or "Run to the Border." The Black section is known as "Da Ghetto." Then there's the freak show in the middle of the quad that's reserved for the druggies, also called "Tweakers," and the kids who are into the Goth scene. From what's going on around me, it's obvious that the divisions in the quad carry into the classroom.

All my friends are across the hall in the Distinguished Scholars class. It's almost all white. The only people I'd have to worry about in that class are the really cool and popular people who

think that they're better than everyone else is. Other than that, I'd be safe with my own kind. In here, I already know it's going to be survival of the fittest. I'm just waiting to get jumped.

As soon as possible, I need to get out of this class and into the class across the hall with my friends. Right after the bell rings, I'm going to talk to my counselor and make her move me out of here. I'll lie and insist that there's been a computer error and that I am supposed to be in the Distinguished Scholars class, even though I suck in English and have a learning disability. I know she'll believe me 'cause I'm white.

I can't believe all this noise. I just want out of here. I hope the bell rings soon. I don't want to spend another minute in this room. If I stay in here, one of two things will happen: I'll get jacked or I'll die of boredom.

Diary 3

Dear Diary,

"Fuck!" was the first word that came to mind when I saw those stupid motherfuckers coming toward me today after school. I knew I was going to get my ass kicked because there were three guys and two girls against me. I wasn't afraid or anything. It's not like it was the first time, and I know it sure as hell won't be the last. But why today? It's the first day of school and I don't feel like dealing with this shit!

I knew I didn't wanna come to this school. My probation officer thinks he's slick; he swears he's an expert on gangs. That dumb-ass actually thinks that the problems going on in Long Beach aren't going to affect me at Wilson. If it was up to me, I wouldn't even be in school, but he threatened me, telling me that it was either Wilson or boot camp. I figure it's less painful to go back to school.

My P.O. hasn't realized yet that schools are just like the city

and the city is just like prison. All of them are divided into separate sections, depending on race. On the streets, you kick it in different 'hoods, depending on your race, or where you're from. And at school, we separate ourselves from people who are different from us. That's just the way it is, and we all respect that. So when the Asians started trying to claim parts of the 'hood, we had to set them straight. We had to let them know who the true OGs (Original Gangsters) were. We're the real O.G.'s And like I said before, everything penetrates through. Soon enough you have little wanna-bes trying to hit you up at school, demanding respect they haven't even earned.

That's why they got pissed when they hit me up, 'cause I refused to bow down to them. I looked at them up and down, laughed, paused, and then said, "*Mi barrio es primero.*" As I stood in the middle of the quad, I thought of how much they looked like the people they hated. They dress just like us, they act just like us, and they want the territory we own. For that reason, I have no respect for them or the so-called barrio they're willing to die for. I don't even know why they tried to come up to me, asking me where I was from. Those fools should know what happens when we get hit up—we get pissed off and all hell breaks loose, and the consequences can be deadly.

Latinos killing Asians. Asians killing Latinos. They declared war on the wrong people. Now it all comes down to what you look like. If you look Asian or Latino, you're gonna get blasted on or at least jumped. The war has been declared, now it's a fight for power, money, and territory; we are killing each other over race, pride, and respect. They started the war in our Aztlán, a land that belongs to us by nature, and by nature we will bury them.

They might think they're winning by jumping me now, but soon enough, they're all going down!

Diary 4

Dear Diary,

Damn! It's the second week of school and I'm already getting busted up because of the people I hang with. A fight broke out today. I don't know how it started, it happened so quickly. Rumor has it that a little freshman got punked a couple of days ago and her gang was planning to retaliate. I heard people were even planning to bring bats to school with them. I was hanging out with a couple of friends when the fight broke out, and like every other kid on campus, I wanted to see it up close. I moved closer and closer until I got too close. Before I could move away, I felt a fist hit me straight in the face. What are you supposed to do when someone swings at you? Swing back.

After what seemed like hours (but I'm sure were only a few minutes), the fight continued to grow. By this point, my nose was bleeding, but other than a few bruises, I was OK, seeing as how I wasn't on the floor getting the shit beat out of me. Then I heard someone say, "Watch out!" Everything from that point on was in slow motion, like a low-budget kung-fu movie with bad voice-overs. A football helmet had nailed me and I blacked out. When I came to, everybody was shouting, "Run, run!" Run? Why? Then I saw half of the school staff running toward the scene of the fight. I wasn't about to stick around and get blamed for starting the fight, so I pulled myself up and ran.

It's kind of sad when you have to run away from something that isn't your fault. Since I'm Mexican and Mexicans were involved in this stupid race war, I figured no one would have listened to what I had to say anyway. I'm not a bad person, but because of my friends, I sometimes get blamed for shit I have nothing to do with.

I really don't know how I made it through the rest of the

school day; hell, I don't even know how I made it to my next class. I couldn't see straight, couldn't walk straight. All I know is that after the fight today, the shit's really gonna hit the fan on the streets of Long Beach.

Diary 5

Dear Diary,

For many, it's the start of a new day, but for me, it's the continuation of a nightmare. Every day before I leave my mom *me percina* with the sign of the cross, praying that I come home safely.

Going to school is less of a problem, 'cause that's when the city sleeps, but on my way home, it's a whole other story. I'm fourteen, and people think I should be scared because I'm surrounded by violence, but around here it's an everyday thing. The first thing I see when I get off the bus is graffiti on walls, beer bottles filling trashcans, empty cigarette packs, and syringes.

On the way home, I get chased mostly by older fools with bats and knives. I try going different ways, but they always notice me and chase me anyway. At first I didn't know the reason why they always hunt me down, but then I figured it out, it was simply because I was of a different race.

I figured I had to find a way to protect myself from these fools, and the only way was to get a gun. At school, some of my friends have been talking about a homie being strapped. I asked them where he got it from, and they told me that some guy sold it to him. With memories of my homies getting smoked and all my problems on the way home, I decided to get one. It's so damn easy to get a gun; it's like getting bubble gum from the corner liquor store. All you need is \$25. All I had to do was ask my parents for money to buy school supplies. It was easy, 'cause in the 'hood, for the price of a backpack, you can get a gun, a couple of rounds, and probably even have some money left over. The next day, I

met my friends in the bathroom and I bought a .22 caliber with a clip. I quickly stashed it into my backpack and left.

The whole day at school, I couldn't keep my mind off my new gun. I felt like a little boy with a shining new toy. When school was out, I began my journey home. As I got closer to my stop, I looked out the window and saw the guys were waiting for me. Then I thought to myself, "Damn, here we go again." I got nervous and my hands began to sweat. I opened my backpack, took the gun out, and put it in my waist, then I slowly walked to the back and waited for the door to open.

As I walked off the bus, they began to call me names. "What's up, *ese*?" "Wait up, fool." Fuck them niggas. I kept on walking. I checked out of the corner of my eye, and I saw that one of them was eager to catch up to me. Usually, I would have run, but this time I had a gun. I knew they were getting closer, so I turned around, reached for my gun, took it out, and pointed the gun at his head. Luckily, he ducked and ran, 'cause I didn't want to smoke him. The others were still after me, but once they saw I had a gun, they also ran. I put the gun back in my waist, and went home. No big deal, just another day in the 'hood.

The next afternoon, when I got off the bus, the guys weren't waiting for me. I didn't see them for the next few days. I didn't know if I had scared them off or not, but I hoped I had.

But my hopes were cut short, when one day, as I was walking home, I saw a guy mad-dogging me from across the street. We locked eyes, reached for our strap, pulled it out, and began shooting at the same time. The only thing between us was a major street and some parked cars. It was just like a movie, except in this movie when the characters bleed, the blood is *real*. I don't remember when I actually pulled the trigger; all I remember is shooting and waiting until I was sure the other guy was out of bullets. After the last shot rang through the air, he disappeared. We both ran, and have never met eye to eye again.

I'm not afraid of anyone anymore. Now I'm my own gang. I protect myself. I got my own back. I still carry my gun with me just in case I run into some trouble, and now I'm not afraid to use it. Running with gangs and carrying a gun can create some problems, but being of a different race can get you into trouble, too, so I figure I might as well be prepared. Lately, a lot of shit's been going down. All I know is that I'm not gonna be the next one to get killed.

Diary 6

Dear Diary,

A couple of days ago one of my friends was laid to rest.

His funeral was just like any other. Family members were crying. Someone said, "Not another one," while his friends were swearing that they would get revenge. "An eye for an eye . . . payback's a bitch."

There were not a lot of people at the funeral, but the friends and family who showed up were very proud of him. We're all going to miss him, but what could we have done to prevent his death? After he was lowered into the ground, our lives went on. His friends didn't talk about him anymore. It was as if he had never existed. When his birthday comes, presents will no longer be given to him. They will be replaced by flowers, which will be put on his grave. That's just the way it is.

I still remember exactly what happened the night my friend died. I was in the liquor store buying some candy. I was having trouble deciding what kind of candy I wanted. Then I heard gunshots. I turned to the door and saw that two of my friends were running into the store. When the first one came in, he dove to the floor; the other one simply fell. I looked down and saw that one of my friends had blood coming out of his back and mouth.

In a matter of minutes, his sister and mother ran into the

store. I stood in front of the candy rack and watched his sister drop to her knees and gather him into her arms. She was crying and calling out his name. His mother stood behind her, watching with her eyes wide open with shock. Tears were rolling down her cheeks, but she didn't bother to wipe them off. She stood there and didn't make a sound. It was as if she was paralyzed with pain. It broke my heart to see his mother standing there, unable to help her baby.

After the last police car left, the people in my neighborhood were still standing against the yellow police tape, staring at the trace of white chalk. Nobody moved, but everyone was talking about "the young boy," who had been taken away by the paramedics, but there was a lot they didn't know. They didn't know that he was my friend and that he had his whole life ahead of him. He was gunned down for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I didn't pay attention to what they were saying. I just stood there, looking at my friend's blood on the floor. He had never harmed anyone in his entire life. What were his parents going to do? What was I going to do?

It was late and I had to go to school the next day. I wasn't sure how the neighborhood was going to handle the death of a kid who was raised in front of everyone's eyes. I know that that night many of my neighbors, like me, went to sleep, thinking, "Another one . . ." Knowing that it would happen again, probably another drive-by, but when? Anytime, it could happen to me, it happens to everyone.

The next day, I pulled up my shirt and got strapped with a gun that I found in an alley by my house. I hate the cold feeling of the metal next to my body. It makes me shiver, and the shivers remind me of all the lives this gun has claimed, but sometimes it's the only way. I hurried to catch the bus, hoping the gun wouldn't fall out of my waist. I didn't worry about getting caught with the gun, because the only time the school's staff searched the stu-

cents was the day after the race riot. Now the staff only check every fifteenth student. All I had to do was pay attention and wait for the right time.

At school, I didn't say anything to anyone. I heard people talking about the shooting, but they didn't know the person who had been blasted. They didn't know the whole story. I walked into class just in time to beat the tardy bell. I went straight to my chair and sat down. I couldn't stop reliving the nightmare of my friend's death. I went through the rest of the day just sitting, not saying a word. I didn't even write down my homework. I kept closing my eyes, and I would see his face. I know he is watching me from wherever he is. And when it's my time to go, I know I'll see him when I get there. All I have to do is wait.

My friend shouldn't have died that night. He should still be here having fun and enjoying life with the rest of us. He's not the first nor will he be the last friend that I lose. I've lost many friends, friends who have died in an undeclared war. A war that has been here for years, but has never been recognized. A war between color and race. A war that will never end. A war that has left family and friends crying for loved ones who have perished. To society, they're just another dead person on the street corner; just another statistic. But to the mothers of all those other statistics, they're more than simple numbers. They represent more lives cut short, more cut flowers. Like the ones once placed on their graves.

Diary 7

Dear Diary,

Once again, flowers on another grave and cigarettes to another friend. These days, with so many of my soldiers either dying or going to prison, it looks like we're gonna have to start recruiting. We have to be real picky, though. The people have to

be down, they have to be willing to take a bullet or pull the trigger, but it's worth it. Life is easily given up to protect and respect the homies and the barrio we claim . . . the same barrio that we were born in, raised in, and hopefully, will be buried in. After we put *los tres puntos* on your wrist, it becomes survival of the fittest, kill or be killed. No wonder they call it *mi vida loca*. It's true, it is a crazy-ass life. Once you're in, there's no getting out. Sometimes I wonder if they know what they're getting into.

Every time I jump somebody in and make someone a part of our gang, it's another baptism: They give us their life and we give them a new one. All they have to do is prove they're down. It doesn't matter if you're a guy or a girl, you get your ass kicked, you can't show weakness, and you gotta pass either way. And we don't give a damn if you end up in hospital, 'cause as soon as you come out, you're considered a working soldier.

I remember when I got jumped in and became a member of the gang; I was in the hospital for over three weeks. I only had a broken arm and a broken leg, even though I could've sworn everything was busted. I had scratches and bruises all over my body. My eyes were so swollen, I couldn't even open them all the way, but it was worth it. To the soldiers and me it's all worth it. Risking life, dodging or taking bullets, and pulling triggers.

It's *all* worth it.

Diary 8

Dear Diary,

I told my friends I was going to pledge a sorority because it "looked like fun." I told my mom I was doing it because it was a "community service" sorority, but I don't think she bought it. I tried to justify it to myself by saying that it was only because my friends were pledging, and I didn't really care that much about the stupid club. However, I soon realized I was denying the obvi-

ous. I wanted to fit in just like every other high school freshman. Who wouldn't want to be in a prime club like Kappa Zeta? It's a predominantly white sorority, made up of mostly cheerleaders, rich kids, and the occasional Distinguished Scholar. All of the Kappa Zeta girls dress like they just stepped out of a Gap ad, their nails are perfectly manicured, their hair perfectly curled under at the tips. All of the upper classmen in Kappa Zeta are so elite that when they ask someone to do something, they do it. Even if it means doing something extremely degrading. So, when I received a flyer to attend a Kappa Zeta pledge meeting, I went without hesitation.

At first, pledging was really fun. All of the members were really friendly, and they gave us gifts and sweatshirts with the sorority symbol on it, like they were trying to lure us in. But after the novelty wore off, things started getting hard. The members held a traditional interview called "Questioning." They'd take us into a room in twos and ask the most embarrassing questions imaginable. As my partner, Sarah, and I waited to go in, we saw previous couples come out crying. We soon found out why. Fortunately, I am practically sinless. Everybody knows that I'm the girl who's really shy and practically faints at the *sight* of a boy. So when the members started asking about our sexual experiences, I had nothing shameful to say. But Sarah's boyfriend is a senior, and all of the members knew the kind of things the "senior men" did with freshman girls. The second they brought up Josh, Sarah started crying . . . bawling, because she knew what they were going to ask her. You'd think the members would have tried to comfort her, or at least stopped asking about him, but they just ignored her tears. I guess the point of questioning is to see how strong (or weak) the pledges were, so they just kept probing her with personal questions and rude comments. They couldn't have cared less that they were really hurting her. They had even prepared a baseball cap with "slut" painted on the front, that the

girls who had boyfriends had to wear at school. After "Questioning" a lot of the pledges dropped out, including Sarah. They blamed it on their parents or the club being stupid. Maybe it was, but after Sarah quit, things were different. We weren't really friends with her anymore. It wasn't intentional. I guess it was just because we were all going to be in Kappa Zeta, and she wasn't.

The rest of the pledges and myself thought the worst was over. Little did we know the worst was yet to come. Pledge night was the scariest part because the guys got involved. Technically, they weren't allowed to tell us what to do, but they did anyway. We had to listen. If we didn't, it meant dismissal from pledging. I was really scared to go to one particular pledge night, because they told us to wear clothes that could get messed up. That night we met at the fountain in the park at eight o'clock. As soon as everyone arrived they made us lie down on the ground and "sizzle like bacon." I thought, "I can live with this, it might even be fun." I was perfectly content with sizzling like bacon, but as I looked to the right I could see my friend Shannon. I presumed she must have been given specific instructions because while we sizzled, she kneeled in front of David O'Neal, a popular junior boy. I couldn't make out exactly what was happening, but he was holding something in front of him that looked like a bottle, and I think she was crying. Then her head started moving back and forth, and as a crowd of rowdy boys gathered around them she started to cry really hard and they started yelling at her. Just as I started to go help her I was pushed back to the ground as a voice screamed, "Where do you think you're going, whore? Did I say you could get up?" It was one of the members. I realized then that it was going to be a long night. I hoped I wouldn't have to pretend to do something to a boy, like Shannon.

When I came home that night my mother almost cried when she saw me. I reeked of beer that had been poured on me multiple times. The combination of beer and the raw eggs smashed on

my head were a putrid mixture. There was a retched taste in my mouth from food coloring the members used to make us remember their names, and my clothes and face were stained green. They made us run a mile from the park to the beach, so I was covered in sand and still gasping for air. Then I started to cry. Not because of the smell or my stained clothes, but because there was no way out. I had gone through so much already that it would have been pointless to quit now. Besides, I didn't want to end up with no friends, like Sarah. I reminded myself that soon it would be over, and that I wasn't even treated as badly as some girls. I heard that one girl had to lie on the ground as Matt Thompson, a senior I used to think was cute, peed on her.

Now that I've been initiated, and I'm officially *in*, my only concern is parties and stuff. All of the older girls drink and really "party." And like I said, I'm practically sinless. I've never done that stuff before. I guess everybody in high school drinks, though, so it's not too bad. I'll get used to it, I hope. I guess now that I look back, it was worth it. All the humiliation, the shame and embarrassment . . . yeah, it was worth it. The members are nice now that it's all over, and I get into Kappa Zeta parties free. We all get to wear our Kappa sweatshirts to school, and go to meetings and everything. Maybe if I would have had to do something *really* bad I would have dropped out, but I doubt it. It's just a matter of how far you'll go to be accepted.

Diary 9

Dear Diary,

Ms. Gruwell just asked us to write or draw a picture describing our neighborhood. I can't believe she's allowing me to draw. I wonder if she knows how much I hate writing.

I hate my neighborhood. It's surrounded by gangsters and drug dealers. There are too many opportunities that seem out of

my reach. What goals do I aim for? I don't aim, because I don't have any goals; instead, I deal with what comes. Raised in a shitty neighborhood, I have had to adapt to what is happening around me. During the day racial tensions rule the streets, at night gunshots are heard from drive-by shootings, and twenty-four hours a day, the gangs and drug dealers control the block, trying to hold down their territory. I can never ignore it because if I do, I will only become part of the problem, or I will become the next victim in this undeclared war going on in our streets.

I got into tagging, because bangin' and dealing drugs or kickin' it with gangsters was not my thing. I started to hit up on walls with markers or cans. Kickin' back with the homies, smoking bud, and fuckin' shit up. I went to school, but I never really hit the books. My teachers always said, "I'm here to help," but when the time came to start helping they were never dependable, so what I do at school is what I do out on the streets. Every day I bring my markers to school. I ditch my classes, hide from the staff, and go to the restroom to kill it (write all over the walls). Who cares if I get caught? My mom won't do anything and my father is always too tired to give me a lecture.

Tagging is what gives me a thrill. The chance to express my talent. To hear people talk about my art gives me the "ganas" (strength) to continue what I do. I never do any of my classwork, so I spend my time in class sketching on my notebook, handouts, backpack, or on anything in sight. I'm an artist and I love what I do. I know it sucks for the people's property, but getting away with it is a part of the thrill. Getting smoked out with my homies, then going out and canning walls is what I call a day.

Baseball made me feel good. I couldn't recite Shakespeare, but I could hit a baseball thrown at 75 to 85 mph. I even got the chance to play as first baseman in the Little League World Series Championship. I couldn't believe that the same kids who laughed at me and called me stupid were now cheering for me as I hit a grand slam in the Little League World Series. Imagine my surprise when I found out that my hero, Nolan Ryan, is dyslexic, too.

On my first day of high school, I met Ms. Gruwell. She's my English and reading teacher. I've learned a lot from her. She doesn't call me lazy or stupid. I have learned that reading can be fun. It is still difficult at times, but I don't get that knot in my stomach when I read out loud.

Ms. Gruwell has also encouraged me in my one true love—sports. She told me that a lot of dyslexic people do really well in sports to overcompensate for people laughing at them in the classroom. Now I know if I work hard in school and in sports, I can succeed in both.

Diary 12

Dear Diary,

The past couple of days in Ms. Gruwell's class we have been reading a book called *Durango Street*. *Durango Street* is about an African American teenager named Rufus, who was just released from juvenile hall. Before he left, he promised his probation officer he would stay out of trouble.

Most of the people in class can relate to Rufus. If they haven't been in jail, they have a cousin, brother, or friend who has. Before reading this book I was ashamed of having gone to jail. I was afraid Ms. Gruwell would hold it against me. Rufus had problems with a gang called the Gassers. They were always picking on him. I had a similar problem when I was in junior high.

I was waiting for the bus after school when three wanna-be gangsters approached me. They started trying to make me angry, calling me names. It wasn't what they were saying that made me mad. I was angry that they chose to pick on me because they thought I would just take it. As far as I was concerned, the fact that they were all bigger than me was not important. I had to prove to them that they did not have the right to pick on me because I was smaller than they were.

One of them swung at me, and missed—that was "his bad." When I felt the rush of air from his fist whizzing past my face, I went crazy! I started kicking him in the head! The only thing that made me stop was when I saw his eyes roll back in his head as though he was dead. I didn't realize I had done something really wrong until I saw the flashing lights of the police and the paramedics coming.

The police took me to the vice principal's office to make a report. The vice principal called my parents to come to the school and pick me up, but no one was home. The police officer asked if there was any one else that could pick me up. There was no one. Then they asked the vice principal, "Do you want us to take him down to juvenile hall?" The vice principal answered, "Since his parents aren't home, that would probably be the best thing to do."

When I arrived at juvenile hall it was scary. They treated me like a criminal. They even took a mug shot. This was my first experience setting foot into a caged place. I was unlike any of the people surrounding me. Caged like beasts were murderers, rapists, gangsters, and robbers. The first night was the scariest. I heard sounds I had never heard before. Inmates banging on walls, throwing up their gang signs, yelling out who they are and where they are from. I cried on my first night.

I didn't get in contact with my parents until my third day in

jail. Every day I worried about when I would be free. I stayed in juvenile hall for five long and stressful days. It's true what they say; being in jail is no way to live.

When I got out, I was paranoid. I didn't want to go out and have fun with my friends. I still felt like a caged animal. Two weeks after my release from jail, I had to appear in court. The judge told me that I would be on probation for three years and have to do community service for a month and two weeks. I also had to pay the restitution of \$1,500 to the boy I had beaten up. I haven't gotten into any trouble since that day. Like Rufus, I turned my life around.

Diary 13

Dear Diary,

Ms. Gruwell has some pretty amazing teaching methods. Our class just read a book called *Durango Street*, and now we are making a movie of it. The book is about a young African American teenager named Rufus, who gets out of juvenile hall, lives in the projects, and tries to find his biological father.

When we found out that we were going to make a movie, both my friend and I wanted to play the part of Rufus. I wanted to play the part of Rufus because I live in the projects, too, and like him, I've never known my father. I couldn't for the life of me fathom why my friend, this clean-cut guy who seemed to have no problems in the world, wanted to play the part of Rufus. At first I thought it was because he could act. After a while I finally asked him why he wanted to play Rufus so badly. He told me there was no specific reason. I didn't accept such a neutral answer. I felt he was hiding something from me.

I ended up playing Rufus because Ms. Gruwell thought that Rufus and I have a lot of the similarities. Even though my friend pretended he wasn't upset, I knew something was wrong. The

next day I asked him why he really wanted to play Rufus. At first he was hesitant to answer. We walked in silence for a while before he told me about the first time he met his father. He was only four years old. His father walked toward him wearing an orange jumpsuit with his prisoner number across the chest. Behind him, he dragged the burden of heavy shackles. They didn't even have a chance to speak; the police took him away.

I felt sorry for him. I knew how hard it was to grow up without a father. Finally, I understood his need to play Rufus. He wanted to express his pain through this character. Ironically, Ms. Gruwell chose him to play Rufus's probation officer.

Not only did this movie give us a better understanding of *Durango Street*, we also learned a lot about one another. We began to understand the true meaning of not judging a book by its cover. When we showed our movie to other English classes, lots of the students who had made fun of us for being in a remedial English class began asking how they could get into the class.

After we made our movie, Ms. Gruwell took us to see *Hoop Dreams*. It's a documentary about two boys from the Chicago projects who had a passion for basketball. The characters were a lot like the characters in the book—but more important, they were a lot like us. Like Rufus, most people didn't expect them to do well. They proved everyone wrong. I guess it just goes to show that if your passion is deep enough, you can do anything.

Diary 14

Dear Diary,

We started reading a short story in my English class called "The Last Spin." This story is a trip. I've never read something in school that related to something that happened in my life. In the story, the main characters, Tigo and Dave, were rival gang members. One of the gangs shot up a candy store in the other

gang's territory. Instead of having a war in the city, the gang leaders decided that Tigo and Dave were going to settle it one on one.

Tigo and Dave settled the war by playing a game of Russian roulette. As they were playing they began to talk, and they realized they had many things in common and that playing Russian roulette to settle a beef between their gangs was stupid. They decided to take their last turn and end the game because neither one of them wanted to die. Dave took his last turn and then he passed the gun to Tigo. What was supposed to be the end of the game ended up being the last game of Tigo's life. The fact that Tigo died because of a senseless act reminded me of the way a guy in my neighborhood had died.

Four guys from my neighborhood were chilling in the living room of an apartment; one of the guys had just bought a gun off the streets. Two of the younger guys had never touched a gun before but wanted to see it anyway. The owner of the gun took the clip out and handed the gun to them. Unfortunately, he forgot that he had cocked the gun back and he didn't check to see if there was a bullet lodged in the chamber.

One of the guys who had never seen a gun before grabbed it. He and the other guy started to fight for the gun. The gun accidentally went off and hit one of them in the forehead. He died instantly. Everyone started to panic. One of the guys picked up the gun and cleaned off all the fingerprints. He then made sure that the fingerprints of the dead boy were all over the gun. They left the room without touching anything.

When the police arrived, they found a dead body, a puddle of blood, and the gun. There were no witnesses, so they called it a suicide. The boy's parents didn't believe their son would commit suicide; they didn't believe the story the police had told them. They knew their son wouldn't do something so drastic; they were positive that he didn't kill himself. The boy who was holding the

gun when it went off has not been seen in the neighborhood since that day.

I knew all of the guys who were there the day the boy died. The dead boy was a bit older than I was. I didn't talk to him much because he was a bully and he intimidated me. He would pick fights with the younger kids in the neighborhood. I almost got into a fight with him myself, but luckily, he walked away. Even though he was a bully, he didn't deserve to die, especially because he was just playing around.

and picking me up from school would prevent me from contacting my boyfriend and that I'd forget about him. It didn't work.

Just like Juliet, I found a way to see my boyfriend. I ditched my classes and would call him from the public phones on campus. My mother didn't have an idea of what was going on until I got caught by one of my relatives. My aunt was on the same bus that my boyfriend and I were riding.

My mom was ashamed to hear that her own relative saw me kissing my boyfriend on a bus. She didn't know what to do. Finally, my parents decided that I could be with my boyfriend under one condition. That my boyfriend and I waited until I turned fifteen (this is a tradition from my culture, indicating that when a girl turns fifteen, she is a woman and mature enough to take serious responsibilities). Since I thought I was so in love and would do anything to be with my boyfriend without sneaking behind my parents' back, we both agreed to wait. So, we stopped seeing each other, just before my class got to the end of the story.

I hate to admit that my parents were right all along. How can we both believe that we were so in love with each other if we didn't even take the time to really know each other? I was too young and stupid, like Juliet, to fall in love. Luckily, I didn't kill myself and have a tragic ending like Romeo and Juliet did. I guess I wasn't that desperate.

Diary 17

Dear Diary,

In Ms. Gruwell's class today, we played the "Peanut Game." The rules of the game included one piece of paper and a description of a peanut inside and out. I wrote about the peanut and said it was small, round, and dirty. On the other side of the paper I stated that even though it looked terrible, it tasted fantastic! We categorized all of the peanuts by mentioning their different exte-

riors. I soon realized the "Peanut Game" was similar to the situation I had about my weight.

One day in junior high, I was getting off the school bus from a seat in the back. It is a seat where no one likes to sit and is always empty. I heard people shouting, "Hey, Fatsol!" "You big buffalo!" A group of obnoxious girls screamed such awful comments that I, an "obese" twelve-year-old girl, will sadly remember for the rest of my life.

"Oh no, not again! Please not again!" I thought to myself as I stood up to get off the bus. I had tried to ignore the girls' name-calling the entire ride home. Now that we were at my stop, I knew I had to face them before getting off. In order to leave the bus I had to walk through a long crowded aisle and face the obnoxious girls. As I stood up, the girls followed. They crowded together, and approached me as if they were ready to strike at me. Why did they want to take their anger out on me? What did I do to them? All of the sudden, the girls began to kick and sock me repeatedly. I could feel the pain all over my body but felt defenseless. I did not fight back.

They continued to hurt me as if there was nothing more important to them than to see me in pain. The last few kicks were the hardest; all I wanted to do was to get off the bus alive. My friends were staring at me, hoping that I would do something to make the girls stop. Why? Why didn't my friends help me? Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, I was able to release myself from their torture. I got off the bus alive. Imagining that the worst had already passed, I began to walk away from the bus and the girls stuck their heads out the window and spit on me. I could not believe it! They spit on my face!

The feeling of their spit striking me, running down my neck, and their germs accumulating on my face, felt disgusting. I heard paper crumbling in their hands, and then they threw it at me. I began to walk faster as the bus was on its way. While I was clean-

ing my face with a napkin, I could still hear the girls laughing. When they waved good-bye, my nightmare was over.

Today in Ms. Gruwell's classroom, I realized that a peanut is still a peanut even if the shell is different. Some taste better, others look fresher, but in the end they're all peanuts. Ms. G's analogy, "Don't judge a peanut by its shell, judge it by what's inside of it," made perfect sense to me. As long as I know that I am a human being, I don't need to worry about what other people say. In the end, we all are the same!

Diary 18

Dear Diary,

This game is stupid; I'm not a peanut! And what the hell does world peace have to do with peanuts? All these thoughts rolled though my mind as I tried to piece together a puzzle consisting of people and Planters. What was the message? Today Ms. Gruwell and I were not on the same continent, let alone the same page. At first I just sat there trying to glue together any two thoughts that seemed to even break surface, but still I found nothing.

There I stood with both feet out the door, on the brink of tears, and quickly closing in on insanity, when something played out in my mind. I remembered a saying that I had heard: "It's not the messenger, but the message." Slowly my peanuts began to take form. I wasn't afraid because they weren't accompanied by a tophat, tap shoes, and a corny jingle. Instead they began to have purpose, they began to set goals, dreams, and ambitions. My peanuts, before my very eyes, changed into human beings. Short, long, fat, thin, and otherwise odd, but nevertheless peanuts. Brown, black, white, yellow, and all in between, nevertheless human. So why is it we don't care about the contour of a peanut, but would kill over the color of a man?

The more I thought about this, the more the concept overwhelmed me. I began to analyze and reflect on my life, my many encounters with injustice and discrimination. It sounds strange, somewhat on the line between irony and absurdity, to think that people would rather label and judge something as significant as each other but completely bypass a peanut. I think this is one of the most important realizations I've ever had. World peace is only a dream because people won't allow themselves and others around them to simply be peanuts. We won't allow the color of a man's heart to be the color of his skin, the premise of his beliefs, and his self-worth. We won't allow him to be a peanut, therefore we won't allow ourselves to come to live in harmony.

Diary 19

Dear Diary,

I can't believe what happened in Oklahoma City. 168 innocent men, women, and children had their lives cut short by one man who was angry with the government. Out of anger, Timothy McVeigh decided he would take his frustration out on others to give the country a wake-up call. Unfortunately, it was a deadly one.

Ms. Gruwell made us write a report about what occurred in Oklahoma. Writing about it made me realize how susceptible we are to violence. Unfortunately, not all the students at Wilson got this message. Fights still break out at lunch, during passing periods, and in other classes for stupid reasons like somebody walked through a group of people who were different than them. Fights based on race or the way someone dresses are just ignorant. Fights don't solve matters, they just make things worse.

There are many Timothy McVeighs around us every day, and it is very surprising to find out that it is the person you least expect. They are just like walking time bombs waiting to go off,

prince isn't gonna carry me off on his white horse, or anything. That's OK, 'cause I don't like horses anyway, ever since I busted my ass on one! But for this fairy tale, he'll do.

The prince is John Tu and the castle was this enormous hotel up in L.A.—the Century City Marriott. I wonder if the hotel Ms. Gruwell works at is as nice? There was crystal everywhere and the bathrooms even had real towels. There was no paper wads on the ceiling or ashes on the floor, and there was no stall doors missing like the bathrooms at school. Even the toilet paper felt good, unlike the sandpaper that could send students to the school nurse. I never knew going to the bathroom could be such an enjoyable experience!

But the bathroom was nothing compared to the dinner. There were more courses than O.J. has alibis. My napkin looked like a centerpiece and my food was too damn perfect to touch. The biggest treat of all was when John Tu sat at my table. Here was this man who had so much to say, but wanted us to do all the talking.

When I introduced myself to him, I was really nervous. Why would he pay attention to me? After all, no one, including my dad, ever has. Since my dad left, I've always felt shunned and that it was my fault. I've always felt like I don't have anything important to say. But here was this man who actually paid attention to me. He wanted to know what I thought about the movie *Higher Learning*. Who was my favorite panelist? Which part did I like best about *Farewell to Manzanar*?

How could someone who doesn't even know me be so interested in me? Here's this gazillionaire treating me as if I'm belle of the ball, when my own dad is treating me like I don't exist. John Tu gave me more attention in seven minutes than my dad has given in seven years.

As wonderful as everything was, when I got home, I realized I'm missing out on a lot—not the material stuff like the fancy

chandeliers and the full-course meals, but bonding with a dad. In a weird way, I'm envious of his kids. They can keep the money, if I could have him as a dad. I hope they don't take for granted all the little things he does, like say "Good morning" and "good night." Or just asking about what they did in school that day. That would be the perfect Cinderella story for me—no glass slipper, just a "how was school today?"

Diary 23

Dear Diary,

I have learned so much my freshman year, and one important lesson I've learned is that people do change, because I did. It all started in the beginning of this year. I came back to school from my own little "three-week vacation" when Ms. Gruwell asked me, "Why have you been absent so much?" I didn't know what to say. How could I answer? Should I lie and tell her I was sick or should I tell her I hate school and I was ditching? Ditching gave me power. When I ditched I was my own person. I could do anything I wanted to and not have to answer to anyone. Besides, when I *was* at school, nobody paid attention to me.

I told Ms. Gruwell, "Nobody cares about what I do, so why should I bother to come to school? Why should I waste my time when I have better things to do?" When I told her this, I could see the hurt in her eyes. "What 'better things' do you have to do?" she asked. This question was even harder to answer than the first. I didn't do much except sit at my homie's pad and smoke. That was all I did when I ditched—chilled and smoked. I told her, "I have family problems and I have to stay home and help out." I chickened out. I couldn't tell her what I really did. Then she asked me, "Is there anything I can do to help you? Should I call your house and talk to your parents?" I immediately said, "NO! They will get mad at me." My mom obviously thought I