

Dear Maya Angelou,

I grew up with harrowing immigrant narratives of religious persecution, risking-it-all escapes, and endless searching for freedom and security. The stories of those around me exposed me to the chained hands of an artist who yearned to paint but was restricted by communist laws against creative expression, the beautiful heart of an activist who participated in a Revolution because she believed in freedom, and the worn eyes of a wanderer who roamed every corner of the Earth searching for home. They suffered injustices and horrors, but from those depths came my inspiration to always have hope.

"Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise"

My parents are immigrants who came to the United States of America from Romania facing great struggles. I am a second-generation American born in the grasp of poverty but nurtured with endless and unconditional love. I did not have new clothing and school supplies but I had walks in the park, lullabies at night, and hands holding mine throughout my entire life. I did not have English language mastery when I started school or parents who knew American traditions, but I spoke Romanian fluently and recited by heart the poems of Mihai Eminescu.

"I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,"

I was blessed in many ways by this background, but so many times I would hear the discriminating words of hate spoken by others and feel the humiliation of exclusion. When I went to school, my name was changed from Iulia to Julia because Iulia was too foreign, too hard to pronounce, and too different. I couldn't speak English well but I understood "Why can't she talk?" and confused stares so well. As I grew up, I heard people tell my parents to lose their accent, the very thing that identified them with the place that they came from and helped me distinguish their voice in a sea of hundreds. I heard people who didn't know I was a second generation American argue that immigrants were bad for the economy, as if my family's liberty and security could be quantified with dollar amounts and as if my family's volunteer hours, civic participation, and donations to local organizations could never be enough for us to be considered good citizens.

"You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise."

When I heard your recitation of your poem, *Still I Rise*, I was in a place of identity formation, searching for passions, values, and characteristics I wanted to embody. At the ringing of your eloquent and powerful voice, I felt a flame of self-love and Romanian pride reignited in myself. I saw my own ambition and hope reflected in your words. You inspired me to not only accept my background, but to celebrate and honor it.

"Just like hopes springing high, Still I'll rise."

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Sincerely,

Julia Tofan  
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