

Never Dreamed

I have spent a great amount of time thinking about Dreams. No, this is not quite the equivalent to dreaming. To be able to Dream means you can imagine yourself existing outside of any given moment; to Dream means your mind is able to soar beyond the four walls you are currently confined in; to Dream is to be an American citizen because Dreams are simply not for the poor immigrant family. They are not for the Aliens lured to the United States with promises of opportunity and instead given fear as a tablet to be taken every morning. Instead, the mind of the immigrant only processes the fee of being alive in a country determined to claim their sanity in return for citizenship. As for me, my mind stays imprisoned, inevitably chained to the USCIS office, where I truly understand what it means to be a Dreamer, a DACAmented* student forbidden to actually Dream.

The walls of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) office used to be white. I imagine when its doors first opened, the sterility of the small room seemed fitting. Foreigners being examined under fluorescent lights, faces awash in all that white light, feet planted shakily on even whiter tiles. Now, however, the walls are a bleak beige, the lights are disturbingly yellow, and the tiles covered in skid marks are an unruly black. The coloration of the office, the way it bleeds the immigrant colors, is tantalizing; however, reality reminds me that the gloves the workers use are white, the papers I sign are white, and the backdrop upon which I am photographed is white. I notice these variations as I sit waiting, in my white chair, to be called. My mind begins to drift not up and away, but it sinks. I imagine my body melting into the floor, and how little time it would take to clean the stain my body makes. How little life I've lived for myself. If only I knew when I was younger that my life would not be my own, maybe I would

*DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) is a U.S. immigration policy that allows individuals who entered the country as minors without legal permission to remain there.

have willingly put myself on a plane back home to Venezuela. How poorly adaptable the American Dream is that it pushes me towards dictatorship rather than democracy. It's too bad that I was only five when the choice was made, but DACA was supposed to make up for that, was it not? DACA was supposed to mean Dreamer. Instead, this life feels like an itch I can't quite scratch, an uncomfortable pain. Except if I were to scratch it, my hand would come away bloodied, the branding of "US property," not fully healed yet. To be a Dreamer is to be indebted.

The USCIS workers seem different too. I imagine when the doors first opened, the crew, now so familiar to me as worn out shells, must have been at the very least sympathetic to the harshness of the white room. I imagine they applied for their positions as young adults, wanting in an abstract way to provide comfort to those in an uncomfortable situation. Maybe some were motivated by activism, but after years of being puppets in charge of scanning fingerprints and snapping mugshots, their eyes have become blank. They motion us one by one, mouths uttering broken Spanish phrases regardless of the face they are shouting at. They do not realize that the family in front of them is from the Republic of the Congo, nor do they notice the family behind them is Vietnamese. Instead it is our job to decipher their words, to speak their language. I will never forget the clouded blue eyes, the paper thin blonde hair, the pursed red lips of the woman who asked me in stilted words "Do yo-u sp-eak En-glish?". As if not speaking English was a crime, or as if not speaking English was equivalent to a disability, a handicap. I nodded my head in compliance, allowing her ignorance to silence me. Her validation is a trigger for elementary school memories of being thrown in and out of ESOL classes. I was told ESOL stood for English as a Second or Foreign Language, yet I remember being handled as hazardous waste, being carefully displaced into an alternate classroom during standardized testing. I did not yet know that checking the "not a U.S or naturalized citizen" box was an indication of inferiority. Instead, I swallowed the pain of my friends hardened stares as I left my regular classroom. I did not let my eyes wander once in the room of misfits.

I feared finding confirmation of leprosy in our shared tongue. To be a Dreamer is to be a subordinate, a stepping stool for the citizens. The USCIS office should be a simple place. A small office in which immigrants have their fingerprints scanned, their pictures taken and a receipt given, a small promise that you will be able to maintain your work permit, the key to your livelihood. Instead, that small office is a stage, a prison, and a courtroom. In this small space, I act as I am expected. I act as if I've never spoken coherently, never stood up straight, never held my head up. The audience is a harsh critic, and I must impress them. In this small space, I am a prisoner. I am a number on a paper, a body to be moved. I have no name; I have no story. They do not even allow you to smile for your work permit photo. They showcase our misery instead, stripping away our smiles as if they were weapons. In this small space, my life is on trial. Whether I am able to work another day, sustain my family another week is this small office's main discourse. It is debilitating to live in someone else's fantasy, to be a minor character in someone else's movie. The fantasy is that of the American Dream. This Dream proclaims the United States is a land of equal opportunity; however, they do not ask citizens to showcase their life, to plead to be able to work. They ask us immigrants to start at the bottom rung, the one below sea level, and expect us to be happy to wash up on the shore after years of drowning. They ask us to be happy about being DACAmented; they do not understand why Deferred Action is a death sentence. To be a Dreamer is to live in limbo. To have one foot on dry land and the other slipping on the ocean floor.

I have spent a great amount of time trying to Dream, trying to fit myself into the grand scheme of American culture. I still find myself entrapped in this moment — both literally and mentally. Every two years, a biometric notice is sent to my family that informs us it is time to renew our work permits, to start the cycle over. My body is physically ensnared in those four walls. My mind is confined to its ethics. I am not allowed to live an uninterrupted life. The American Dream, as defined by an immigrant, is not a Dream at all. It is a bleach stain on tan skin. It is an ultimately

white room, regardless of the dirt-stained handprints smearing its walls. It is years of prejudice — an irrational fear of living life the wrong way. It is being shaped and molded into someone you do not recognize, a straight faced, pale version of yourself. To be a Dreamer is to be dreamless.

by Marian Hernandez

