

I
kind
of just want a
white picket fence
and a nice house
and very modest
sort of things that
I didn't have growing up

Sara x T. Jahan

When I first came to this land
With a small sapling
Growing inside me
And a soft-spoken
Malleable heart

I gave birth to my baby
Here in the land of the free.

Cold frigid winds
Blew against my
Raw, exhausted body
Having given birth
To the american dream.

T. Jahan

when you're undocumented,
people are very hush hush.

But I've always been pretty
open about it since college.

I'm kind of
in your face about it.

Maybe it's annoying to people.

I think it almost normalizes—
anybody can be undocumented.

I have a master's degree.
I'm an architect.
I manage huge projects.

But **hey,**
I'm undocumented.

American immigration system is
fucked up.

It can happen to
anyone.

Normalize it. I'm a human being.

Nadia Habib x T. Jahan

I am a bird who has flown against the elements

| stopping to rest in this place I want to call home.

T. Jahan

The buddha plays cards

Do you know god they way i know god?
If you say no, then you don't know god at all

Is what they seem to say to me

Jesus will come train-hopping through the subway carts
To give me hope in a listless city with waves of discontent
Radiating from the masses of sardine-packed 6 trains

Moses will separate this sea of fish who will stand with their mouth agape
As a strange figure "casually" places his hand against the small of my back
But i think better me than the child beside me who gets asked,
"hon how old are you?" And i reply instinctively with a knowing glare
"Not old enough" tho he rebutts with a sweetnlow smile

The buddha plays cards while drinking something strange
Under the scaffolds of high-tall buildings
Not begging nor asking for change
tho looking for mercy and feel-good things
As the men with carry on luggages from penn station
Make their way to headquarters for meetings

And lord krishna looks over you in the all you can eat buffet
Indian restaurant run by bangladeshi muslims
The church of blank and the masons untouchable
From their rooms on the 16th floor eating
Seamless order foodstuffs with extra sauce

But why not read the millionth copy of the witness
Available in so many languages. It can teach you something
About family, and love, and the rest of the world.
Us New agers are happy to consume anything anyway

T. Jahan

realizing. I remember

there was a new *murti* in my apartment.
one of the bangladeshi girls came
and she was like,

Oh, What is that?

and i was like,

You don't know?!

That's when I learned about religion.

[*murti*: statue of a deity]

A. Mazumdar x T. Jahan

The thick, golden slumber of sorrow
Seeps into the delicate folds of her eyes,
Settling into a tattered heart of indigo blue.
As the dark night's wind caresses her freckled face,
She is tucked into old *sari* turned quilts.

Morning waits patiently for her to pray *fajr*
With inaudible counting and swaying, her eyes quiver
She prays for those who are rising from *asr*,
Whose sun dips into the waters to greet their sister.

T. Jahan

the kids that i grew up with
here in jamaica,
they were all muslim kids.
and we were real close.

when we would have *nimontrons*,
we just kind of never invited them.
they never invited us.

there was a
mutual understanding between us
that we could hang out with each other

but we can't mingle, we can't mix
our groups together.

i don't know. It felt weird.

it's almost like being friends in secret.

[*nimontrons*: an invitation for an occasion.]

A. Mazumdar x T. Jahan

what we did to help make ends meet
was apply for public assistance
and we subletted our apartment.

and what happened was:

we lived with different girls from India.
and some of them would front their caste.

and my sister and her sharp tongue,
she's like, "Well, you're in America and
nobody cares about your caste here."

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

What a bore to be born
In an age with roads
On GPS with the
One-ways and dead ends
And the fastest routes all figured out

On a portable device meant to talk
And write little letters to people
We care little about but not enough
To see them and look them in the eye
To say I love you, I miss you, I care
And maybe, I'm sorry I forgot all about you.

T. Jahan

Not how I see it.

It's just, it's just
a piece of paper.

It's just
a number.

To me, personally,
it doesn't mean
anything.

But to others,
it gives them -
it makes them
feel the ability to

dehumanize you.

...

It's how the
outside world
sees the word,

undocumented.

Not how I see it.

Nadia Habib x T. Jahan

the border is a tightrope

sweaty palms,
child in your arms

hard to breathe
but must breathe.

flames roar
go home slurs
below you.

just wanna move forward,

worn out
beat up
shoes

just want it to be over.

gotta take the jobs
they give
youse.

perforated lines
that you can
fall thru

but who's there
to catch you?

T. Jahan

not sure of the rules, not sure of the deals
not sure how to make my voice, to be heard for reals
not sure how to stop others from takin my envelope,
and puttin on their seals

T. Jahan

I don't think I understood the implications
of what it meant to have or not have

papers.

All I knew was that
it was good to have a

green card.

And that's all I knew.
And that's all I associated with it.

Must have been a scary time

for my parents--
To not have

papers.

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

There were not a lot of Bengalis,
there were not a lot of Bengalis.

We were living,
the four of us,
in a one-bedroom.

It was a struggle.

I feel like we all
kind of have that

backstory.

Most of us.

A. Mazumdar x T. Jahan

My parents write in Bangla

It's so beautiful

Like cursive

And excellent penmanship

And I just can't do it.

That big line on the top of everything

////////////////////////////////////

মাই পেরেন্টস রাইট ইন বাংলা

ইট'স বিউটিফুল

লাইক কার্সিভ

এন্ড এক্সসেলেন্ট পেনম্যানশিপ

And I just can't do it.

দেট বিগ লাইন ওন টপ অব এভরিথিং

A. Mazumdar x T. Jahan

run out of water.

did your mom do things
when you were growing up
that you realize that she
picked up from Bangladesh?

For example,
the water would always go away
in Dhaka, in Bangladesh,

with water,
it always runs out
and you have to refill it

or whatever. And ever
since I was a little girl,

(my mom stopped doing this) but

she would literally,
every morning,
she would wake up,

(we had 10 to 15 glasses on the sink counter)

and she filled up each one
and just leave it there.
and as soon as one was done,
she would refill it.

Thinking about it now

and I'm like, Whoa,

She did all this stuff
because she thought
we were going to
run out of water.

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

The translator
for my younger siblings
when they started going to
parent teacher conferences.
And I had to go with them.

I don't, I don't know what to do

Nikita x T. Jahan

I've literally
never been there.

I can
barely speak the language.

But that's literally
my identity
because of a piece of paper.

Culturally—
I am American.

But by birth—
I'm Bengali.
Bangladeshi.

I was there for the first 18 months of my life.
But the last 26 years I've been here,
So I think I'm more American than Bengali.

But then what does it mean to be American?

Nadia Habib x T. Jahan

Being a hyphenated-American
is such a complex thing.

I'm a person beyond where I'm from.
Like, stop tryin' to box me.

There is a certain kind of power
in looking racially ambiguous
because people won't box you in
if they're confused about where to box you.

But I hate when people try to box me
because there's so much more
to my identity
than the labels.

Know people without looking at
their skin tone,
their immigration status,
their education.

And I think for me
that's one thing
I'd like for people to know.

Sara x T. Jahan

A CONVERSATION ABOUT BEING AMERICAN // PT. 1

I watch the cashier trying to explain why the customer's coupon was declined in broken English. The customer then grows to speak with a manager. Out comes a tall and lean man who says, "How can I help you?" The words flow and there was no stutter.

I think to myself, **I KNEW WHAT THE CASHIER WAS SAYING**. Just because their English didn't flow, does that mean they can't be understood and tossed to the side? I wonder for those who immigrate to the U.S., do they feel valued here?

Sometimes how we are valued seems to be spelled out to us in how much we get paid, the opportunities available to us, and how we are treated by the world around us.

I have a colleague who I believe is brilliant. I see her thriving in whatever capacity she chooses to be in. She envisions herself going to law school in another country, traveling and consulting. Listening to her aspirations is encouraging. It encourages me to think even further on what I'd like to do after grad school. I look to her and tell her, "You're going to do great!" Then she responds, "First, I have to make sure my status is set before I make any moves." She's on a work visa. She's envisioning greatness for herself but she's limited because of her status. **I WAS BORN IN THE U.S. THEREFORE I HOLD THE EVER SO PRESTIGE STATUS**. I think about my prestige status and I feel guilty.

NAZEEFA HOSSAIN x T. JAHAN

the whole having completely different
human experiences from my siblings:

...

them being able to freely
go anywhere in the world they want
and not being questioned.

doing whatever they want:
going to school.
not having to worry
about financial aid.
getting their license.

you know, my thing is:

if I ever get arrested for something
it's an automatic deportation.

my siblings will never
have to think about that.

Eventually, you want to venture
Out into the world.

Which makes me feel I'm almost
imprisoned in the United States.

Especially
when you have
siblings that are all citizens,
parents that are citizens.

It's like, Wow, I live a

completely different
human experience

Nadia Habib x T. Jahan

When I was growing up,
I was the only citizen
in my family.

I was an anchor baby.

And the story is always that
you're not allowed to have
women who are pregnant
in their third trimester
flying on planes.

But, obviously, my mom
travelled in her third semester
just so that I could be born here.

So I feel like the citizenship thing...
I always have felt like there was that
significance that made me an outlier.

At the end of the day,
I was on the cusp of things.

And I think being a citizen, the definition,
afforded me a sense of stability or safety:

I belong here.

that other people
who might not have had citizenship
were always questioning.

Sara x T. Jahan

jackpot baby
sweet you are, cradled over
the curves of the anchor

family desperate
to stay, and to pray
in this land of the free
that won't hold you for free

that green little book
took us eighteen years
to finally breathe

T. Jahan

A CONVERSATION ABOUT BEING AMERICAN // PT. II

SHOULD I FEEL PROUD THAT I'M IN A CITY WHERE I CAN WALK DOWN THE STREETS WITHOUT WORRY? OR SHOULD I FEEL GUILTY?

citizen or not, permanent resident or not, I know I need to have some sort of identification with me walking down the streets. Otherwise, I'm setting myself up for trouble. I learned that the hard way.

There was a summer between semesters in undergrad, when I was outside without any ID. I normally go out with it, but for some reason, that day, I just walked out of my apartment without it. My friend called me out to smoke some bud. And you could say that we let our guard down 'cause I was in my neighborhood. Plus I didn't even see anyone on my block. But of course, some undercover cops were in a car and came at us from about a block away. They caught us, cuffed us, and we were arrested. You're probably wondering, why would you get arrested for smoking weed? Such a minor offense in New York city. Well, it wasn't always that. And I'm not gonna front and say that we weren't doing anything wrong. Anyways, according to the cops, though, it was because we were "too obvious" about it. I guess two young kids of color smoking bud in a low-income neighborhood is an "obvious" no-no. And it was worsened by the fact I didn't have ID on me. I couldn't prove to them who I was. And they would not let me go.

It's weird, but I think for the first time in my life, it ended up being a good thing to have been a survivor of violence. I convinced the cops that I could prove to them who I was because I was already in that precinct's system. Y'know, as a crime "victim." So I spent a couple of hours handcuffed to a bench while they processed the arrest, and eventually they found me in their system. They were able to match me up and let me go. And that's how I was able to get out the clink. That's how I was able to prove my identity.

But I think back on it, if I was undocumented and I got caught smoking bud, and I got arrested, I probably would have been deported. So that's where the guilt can come in, too.

NAZEEFA HOSSAIN x T. JAHAN

a lot of immigrants have a very risk-averse attitude towards life.

there's a fear of authority and a fear of law enforcement even if you're not doing anything wrong

because
you're susceptible,
you're vulnerable.

people can find
something wrong,
or some sort of excuse.

that fear and
that risk-aversion
can actually be a detriment
to you, your future,
and your kids' future

because you have to take up
some risks to achieve.

I think that provides for
a dynamic sort of foil
to the expectation that
immigrant children
have to succeed and
achieve the american dream.

On one hand,
you have to be very
risk-averse and very careful.

On the other hand,
you have to achieve without
taking risks.
So, it's just a
very tight, tunneled path
to success.

Sara x T. Jahan

my dream - I feel

as a child of immigrants
with low-income
who were unskilled laborers -
they were on their feet,
manual labor type stuff
All day.

the vision of success
that I was taught
...

the vision of success
for me was always

having a desk job.

Not having to stand while working.
A very modest goal, I think,

Looking back on it.

Sara x T. Jahan

I tell them.
I tell people all the time:
My dad was a cab driver.

I'm not going to be embarrassed.
I'm first generation and an immigrant.

This is not something that I'm going to be ashamed of.

I think that scares people sometimes and
I think it should not scare people.

But normalize that conversation amongst people
who are coming to the country now.

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

This being alive and present is a protest.
Because I have a voice even when there is silence.

T. Jahan

all the people
that left their countries,
what they're familiar with,
to a brand new place,
and just start over.
made the sacrifices.

and we don't really know that much
about their experiences.

What did they go through?

I wonder,

What kind of racism or
discrimination they faced
that they just never talk about?

Or what was it like being the
few South Asians in this area
at that time?

How different did it feel?

How aware of it?

Or did they
—not shut down their emotions—
but how did they ignore it all?

Nikita x T. Jahan

They all lived through war.

... That's something that
they don't really talk about.

My mom told me that
during the war,
they actually hid.

They went in the village and
Pakistani soldiers were going
door to door

and they hid
in a basement.

They were really lucky to have survived.

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

A CONVERSATION ABOUT BEING AMERICAN // PT. III

Would you ever feel guilty about being paid minimum wage? To stand on your feet, six days a week, for over 10 hours a day, looking all prim and proper in a suit, to sell overpriced trinkets to the affluent?

For those without work permits, the reality can be harsh.

I used to work at a gift shop set in a luxurious hotel in the heart of New York city. I'm talking formal, the whole black blazer and dress pants. Y'know, gotta match the atmosphere of the hotel. The hotel patrons and guests didn't know that the gift shops inside these hotels were owned by someone else, though.

Needless to say, the owners were a bit shady, a bit sus'. But at the time, I was unemployed, job-hunting, working an unpaid internship, and looking for some cash. Off the bat, they asked me if I had papers. I showed 'em my proof. They offered me minimum wage, under the table, cash. I took it. And while working there, over time, I came to realize that most of the workers in the other hotel gift shops were immigrants who had recently come to the United States. Some were college students here on student visas, some overstayed their visitor visas, some were being sponsored by their American spouses, the list goes on. Point is, almost all of them didn't have work permits.

Without coincidence, the majority of these workers were being paid below minimum wage. But that wasn't even half of it. They weren't getting paid on time. The owners would tell 'em they should feel lucky to even have a job. That they were doing 'em a favor. I had no idea about all this until a coworker stopped by on a rainy day to help me stock the store with umbrellas. We chatted and I learned a bit about how they got to this country. And eventually, I learned about the difference in our wages. You see, there weren't many encounters with the other workers. We just manned our own stations and passed the baton on to the next person for the next shift. For the most part, we were all isolated and away from each other. How could I know that their work experience was so vastly different from mine? Plus, not a lot of people go around outing their immigration status and that they're being paid below minimum wage.

So isn't it ridiculous that these workers basically had to project this image of affluence even though they were getting paid less than \$9 an hour? And imagine, your boss is treating you like shit. I'm talking, calling you in the middle of the night to yell at you for not counting the money right knowing you might not even be able to prove it. I'm talking, having to make you feel so small for not "staying in line."

I felt guilty for being paid minimum wage. For being paid on time. For having normal, polite encounters with the owners. And I knew this stark difference in treatment was simply because I had papers.

But even without a work permit, New York city is a sanctuary city. We have our rights here. We all deserve to be paid a fair wage. And I often told my coworkers this when I could, as I learned about their situations. But, they were fearful and didn't want to go through the "hassles" of reporting to agencies like the Department of Labor or NYC's commission on Human Rights. No one considered reporting an option. The reasoning: They had worked so hard to get here. To risk losing their job would mean not being able to feed their children, send money back home to support their family, pay for their studies... you get my drift.

In a way, they really did believe the owners were doing them a favor. And I'm not saying I agree or disagree with that. I struggled with it, too. Here I was tryna keep my nose clean while at the same time resisting the urge to report 'em myself. But I kicked the savior complex to the curb. It's not what they wanted. And I chose to respect that.

I worked there for a little over a month. But I kept in touch with one worker. They didn't have a work permit but was in the process of applying for one with the support of their veteran spouse who was unemployed. So they didn't have enough money to pay for the application fee. A real catch 22.

This worker eventually stood up to the owners once they realized that a lot of the other workers were being treated like shit and not getting minimum wage. It just hit 'em one day: The owners were clearly in the wrong and they were exploiting everyone. So, they told the owners in writing that they deserved to be paid minimum wage, at the very least. And part of the reason that they were able to fight for it was because they knew their rights - despite being without a work permit, despite being without papers.

Soon after, during one of their shifts, one of the owners took this worker into a tiny room, a real closed off space, and began the confrontation. It was obvious that it was retaliation for the written request for minimum wage. But this worker had it on lock; they pressed record on their phone before entering into the room. And at the end, said something along the lines of: "I recorded everything and I can report you because what you're doing is wrong." Well, needless to say, the owners were scared shitless. As they should have been. And I was really proud of the worker for standing up for not only themselves but for their fellow co-workers. The owners, not wanting any "trouble," decided to pay back all the money they technically owed. Economic justice, ftw. But it sure didn't come easy.

The worker that fought for a fair wage no longer works for 'em. And they have their work permit now. But I remember that they really hoped that others would stand up for themselves too. And this is part of the reason why I feel guilty for being a documented person in the United States. Because there are folks out there that take any job that they can get. And with that, there can be so much abuse alongside it.

We were struggling here too.

I remember the first time
I went to Bangladesh,
When I was 16,
My dad's sister had the gall to ask my mom,

“Can Bhaiya send money
for Kushul to buy a motorcycle?”

*He's not paying for my college education.
Do you think he's going to give your son money
To buy a moped?
Get out of here.*

I was so mad.
But I didn't say anything.
I just sat there fuming.

We send money home.
Which has its pros and cons.

It has its pros because
We're helping folks back home.

But it has its cons because
How are we building up our own income?

And secondly,
you know this family back home?
Are they using the money sent
in an efficient way?
To grow their income as well?

You know what I'm saying?
So it's problematic in that sense.

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

good-minds drained
wastelands reclaimed

increase output
double the hands
to work the soil

decrease input
so many mouths
to feed back home

T. Jahan

It's just really mind boggling to me
because a lot of these Bangladeshis
who back home were sort of wealthy
and they come here and they're like,

Oh shit.
I had a master's degree there
and it doesn't mean anything here
and now I have to go back to school.

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

when I was growing up, everything financially
was determined by the uncertainty
of whether or not we would get

green cards.

we can't invest in real estate
because we don't know if
we're going to stay here

long-term.

this sense of
everything is just temporary,
which made it very hard

to build your roots.

there are so many stories of
people who spent, who invested time
in building their roots, and then

had to leave or were forced out.

Eventually, even though
they did get green cards,
the fact that they had

spent so much time

in this place of uncertainty
and that, even after
obtaining citizenship,

they had to start all over.

There wasn't any sort of
financial foundation.
All of the money was funneled

back to the country they came from.

because they just weren't
certain about whether or not
they could stay here.

And so, the assets were never

absorbed or
appreciated or
enjoyed by people living here

which I think is a shame.

Sara x T. Jahan

why are we so concerned
about lucrative careers?

so we only end up being
doctors, lawyers, engineers?

I think it's a product of our parents
having to survive famine culture.
I think that's it.

They don't have
the space for emotions.

Famine culture, yeah, you kind of know,
from colonialism - resulting in
lack of food and resources.

So, famines.
So, they really just had to
band together and survive.

Even though they are able to get out
of that situation and come here and,

of course, colonization
is not really a thing over there anymore,
the effects of it still remain very much.

And the effects followed them, our parents,
here, in America. And they are still not open
to really having emotions. They are still like,

No, we need to be a pack.

A. Mazumdar x T. Jahan

security and stability. Because
I think a lot of immigrants
come here with

uncertainty

about their status,
about earning money, or
about making it.

It's been so deeply ingrained into us,
as children, as immigrants,
to seek that

security and stability. Because it's
something that inherently
you don't have
when you're pending

11 years for your green card.

Sara x T. Jahan

alot of immigrants limit themselves,
especially if they are low-income.
Their dreams are modest because
their field of vision is modest.

Right?

junior year of high school.
one of my friends casually
brought up how much his parents made
because we were filling out financial aid forms.

And he was just like,
"Yeah, they make 350k together,
375 or something."

I was shocked.
And I was just like:

"What do you mean?
You're just a normal kid.
We hang out together.
We're friends.

Like,
you're not wealthy,
you're not rich,
Right?"

I realized
that my perception of
wealth and poverty
was very skewed.

Sara x T. Jahan

They wanted me to be a doctor.

But I'm like,
But you don't want to be a doctor.
My dad hated that I changed majors.

And I'm like,
I am a writer like you are.

Even though he was a cab driver
for much of his time here,
he wrote for a couple of the bigger
Bengali newspapers in New York City.

And I'm like,
Where do you think
I get my writing skills from?

I mean, it's definitely learned, but
You know, I watched you

take pictures at different events.

And now,
I'm one of the
photographers at my agency.

You know, I watched you
stay up all night writing.

And that's what I do.

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

Sara x T. Jahan

A CONVERSATION ABOUT BEING AMERICAN // PT. IV

My parents would stress how lucky I am to be born here. I don't have to worry about finding an attorney who will work with me to get status. I don't have to take on shitty jobs that give shitty pay. I can continue my education without ever having to worry about overstaying and going back home. How lucky I am to hold such a prestige status. Though, I don't feel a sense of prestige. Many times I feel guilty for holding this status. **I LOOK AROUND THE MANY PEOPLE WHO HAVE TEMPORARY STATUS, FIGHTING TO HOLD STATUS, AND ARE UNDOCUMENTED, AND THEN I ASK MYSELF: SHOULD I BE PROUD?**

It's a complicated thing to sit in front of people who don't have papers and are in the immigration process. When they find out that I'm a citizen, the dynamic changes. They think that I'm so fortunate and blessed. And in a way, I am. Because I know what I had to go through to finally get to this place. I know that I can go to almost any country in the world as an American citizen. It took a while, but now I'm at this point. I know that I can apply for fellowships, scholarships, and teaching abroad opportunities. In general, going abroad is no longer a problem for me. But it's a problem for those who are undocumented. Heck, it's even a concern for folks with permanent residency. Because it means that there is a possibility of never coming back to the place they so badly want to call home.

I listen to myself when I speak English and it flows smoothly. I can have a conversation for hours and people can listen to me without squinting their eyes or moving their head closer, emphasizing they don't understand. It's hard to put in words, what I feel inside me. Now, I wonder about what it means to be proud as an American. Like, seriously, what does that even mean? There should be a class on that, haha. But y'know, **I DON'T WANT AN UNDOCUMENTED PERSON IN FRONT OF ME TO FEEL LIKE I'M BETTER THAN THEM OR I'M LUCKIER THAN THEM OR I'M MORE FORTUNATE THAN THEM.** None of those things technically feel true. Sometimes I so badly wish that they could find an avenue to get some sort of permanent residency or citizenship too. Or at least a work permit. But in this country, in order to get papers, you often have to go through some really, really hard times. I think that the immigration process is one of the hardest things.

I'm aware that I hold a level of hierarchy over others. Should I feel proud or guilty? I wonder how others would perceive this guilty feeling? Would I be a spoiled brat or cry baby for speaking about the guilt? **I WOULDN'T WANT TO BE CELEBRATED EITHER.** I had no choice in where I'd be born. Since I was born in the U.S., there was the expectation that I would be the one to achieve the **'AMERICAN DREAM.'** I never wanted this yet it was given to me. **I FEEL GUILTY FOR NOT WANTING IT.** I think about the comments I could get for speaking on this, "Do you know how lucky you are?" "How could you even feel sorry for yourself?" Thinking about these comments, I feel guilty for feeling what I feel.

There are people who put so much time, work, and struggle, to become a legally recognized individual in this country. And yet, the prize of citizenship or permanent residency seems to be out of their grasp. Then there are folks who are born with it. But the immigration process is a part of their life too. Because your mother might be in the process, your partner might be in the process, your co-workers may not be able to move onto another company because of the process... you get the idea...

civic leadership class.

I'm trying to kind of see what it's about.
But, also,
it's not something that would happen now.

It'll probably be
20 years.

because
you need to become a citizen

and then
you need to wait a couple of years

and then
you can run

and
blah, blah blah.

But it's something I think
is very important because

I feel an undocumented Bangladeshi woman
from Queens becoming
a part of Congress or Senate—

It's mind blowing.

It's representation
That we have not seen,

That I have not seen
Or felt.

And I kind of want to do it myself.
Just like fuck it.

There's nobody doing it.
I'll do it.

Y'know cuz no one's going to understand
the problems that we face in Queens
other than someone who's been raised here.

Nadia Habib x T. Jahan

make structural change from the top
to bring more people of color,
more socio-economic diversity.

not kill them with kindness but,
defeat them with yeses. say yes
to everything even if you mean no .

and then rise to the top.
and then you can institute change.

when I became a journalism major

Sara x T. Jahan

tumi to shada der subject e portecho.
(but you're studying a subject
meant for white people)

And I was like, America is 70% white.
It still is mostly a Caucasian country.
I'm not gonna hold myself back and be like,
Well, I'm only going to go into a field
where it's mostly South Asians.
That's holding myself back.

I'm not afraid.

You came here,
you learned English.
You defied these odds and
you are helping the family come up.

So let me do what I need to do
and enter whatever field I want,
not on the basis of the ethnicity
of the people.

Isn't that strange? But it is what it is.

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

A CONVERSATION ABOUT BEING AMERICAN // PT. V

I walk past street vendors who work under the rain and sun, look at the cab drivers who are waiting for a fare, and study with students who have bags under their eyes. I won't assume but I can only imagine I'm surrounded by folks who do carry the burden of being worried. I can go anywhere within the city and walk as far as I want to without worrying someone will come after me.

Should I feel proud for being born in the U.S. and being automatically granted status? Or should I feel guilty because I never had to work for it?

When I was growing up, my parents and I didn't have quote unquote papers. I saw them have to work for it. Hiring an immigration lawyer, taking days off work to go to immigration court, filling out paperwork in a language that they were just starting to get familiar with, and on top of that, towing me along. I didn't really understand what it all meant or what was going on. I knew it meant not telling teachers where I was going when we had an immigration court appearance. Definitely no telling any authority figures. And I knew it meant staying out of trouble because if I got in trouble, I would be risking everything. That's a lot on a seven year old, looking back on it.

Should I feel proud that I can fill out forms checking off the citizen box without hesitation? Or guilty that I have it so simple?

I remember when I was a junior in high school. We were getting ready to take the PSATs in a week. We were required to fill out forms that asked about our demographics, parents' education background, and status. I remember when I got to the status part, I checked the first box without hesitation. After I finished filling out the form, I looked at the girl sitting next to me and saw she checked off the second box. From that moment, I started to realize **NOT EVERYONE HAD IT AS SIMPLE AS I DID.**

I remember standing in front of an immigration judge, and I remember the judge questioning whether I was a boy or a girl. I remember my parents frantically trying to find a headband to put in my hair to signify my gender. To say, she's a girl. Haha, even then, I recall the judge's face - not amused.

I remember feeling very, very uncomfortable because I had to stand on my feet for a long time. And it was painful because I wore my shoes on the wrong feet, so my left shoe was on my right. And my right shoe on my left. And I remember that I knew I couldn't say anything to my parents because it was such a hard and grave moment for them. I remember them being so, so nervous and scared. 'cuz we didn't know what the judge would say.

NAZEEFA HOSSAIN X T. JAHAN

another thing, actually.
I wanted to be white.
I thought it was easier.

And the definition of beauty:
it was a white girl with
blonde hair and blue eyes.

So I always thought, you know,
oh my God, that's what I want to be.

...

I wish we had Bengali Barbie dolls
or something, you know,
more dolls wearing hijab.

I think they came out with one.
But when we were growing up,
there was none of that.

Nikita x T. Jahan

immigrant children
that I grew up with
are striving towards
this vision of whiteness,

trying to fit into this society.

everyone I know,
including myself,
has gone through this
period of internalized racism

where you kinda rejected
your own identity in favor of
fitting into this world

because
it was easier
to be successful
or to be accepted

if you rejected one part of yourself.

and then at a certain point,
through age, time, and maturity,
you come to embrace the other side.

And I think
that's a cycle
that everyone
goes through,
and struggles with,
and grapples with.

Sara x T. Jahan

skin, body, and life
when they touched
my skin in a way
i had never
touched theirs

let alone my own,

that's when i realized.

this black and brown
skin, body, and life

T. Jahan

if my mom made
her own money

she wouldn't have
stayed with my dad
for so long in the
beginning.

I guess somehow
they learned to
live with each other
over the years.

if she were to work
that could have been
different.

I don't know how that would have
been
for us... 'cause she was always there,
which is nice, but

she needed to
have her own money.

Nikita x T. Jahan

It's hard being
a brown girl.
It really is.

I think I saw this thing
on Instagram where
people make fun of
brown girls

not being able to go out
and stuff.

But think about
all the girls
that were
actually

hurt or
abused or been
forced into marriage.

Nikita x T. Jahan

ekta chele saathe chilo baire.
(outside with a boy.)

And *they'll* be like,

"well, who was the guy?"

"was he your boyfriend?"

"was he your brother?"

you know what I mean?

why is the idea
of a woman who is
by herself
and educated
and **unapologetic**

somehow threatening?

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

Amar oi hoyse. -- 'It' happened.

I hope that the future generation
talk to their daughters
about what a period is
so they're not confused.

We don't usually give it a name.
Sometimes we say period,
but sometimes we're just like,
Amar oi hoyse.

Nikita x T. Jahan

*you're not fair skinned,
you're not very
blah, blah, blah
you're so fat.
...*

I'm hoping that
a lot of the girls
that we grew up with,
that they don't grow up
to be moms like that.

moms that are critiquing their kids
or critiquing other people's kids.

you don't need to say everything
that you're thinking.

Nikita x T. Jahan

men in the conversation.

We **need** you to be our allies
because at the end of the day,
especially in a place like New York City
where there are more men than Bengali women,
we need these Bengali men to also rise up and be like,
Hey, ay, bhai, apne je apner bou er saathe erokom eta tik na.
(Hey, yo brother, the way you are with your wife, it's not okay.)

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

In high school
I was a nerd

I was on math team,
and stuff.

Boys were not nice to me,
But I was good at math.

And so, eventually, whatever,

I became someone
who was also known
to be good at math

and it was kind of okay.

And then they all cheated
off of me on the Physics exam.

A. Mazumdar x T. Jahan

Tumi ektu norom hou.
(Soften yourself a bit)

And I was like, what?
What does *norom* mean?
What are you trying to tell me?

And she literally told me that
I'm too much like a man.

She said,
I work out too much,
I go out too much,
I talk too much.

And I'm like,
Well, who am I learning this stuff from?

My mom is the oldest of ten kids.
Two of them passed
when they were very young.

She was the oldest.

And after my grandmother died,
(my mom's mom died)
my mom was the head of household
because my grandpa's business had failed.

And that's when she was like, Alright.
She dropped out of school.
And she was 18.

She became a flight attendant.
And she was the one who was running around,
she was the tallest one in her crew.
They would all look up to her
and be like, *Oire baab. (Oh my.)*

She would party in grace
with all her cool friends
and all this stuff.

And I'm like,

The apple does not fall
far from the tree.

And you want me to soften myself?

I think

Bengali moms are bad bitches
and they get mad at us
for trying to be bad bitches.

Bushra Mollick x T. Jahan

as annoying as my mom could be,
I guess she can also be

supportive.

So I would want
to be some level of supportive that she was.

Not giving up on her kids.

I guess that's also good. Hmm.

Yeah, those are probably the main ones.

Being there.

You know? Things like that.
I don't know if I'll ever have as much

patience

as her.

Yeah, those are the things.

Doing nice little things for your kids

...

Sometimes she'll cut fruit.

You know?

It's a small thing but it's nice.

Who else is going to do that for you?

Nikita x T. Jahan

A CONVERSATION ABOUT BEING AMERICAN // PT. VI

would it be right to keep these feelings to myself?
would keeping these feelings make me feel proud or guilty?

IT'S OKAY TO FEEL GUILTY, THOUGH. I DON'T THINK IT'S A BAD SORT OF GUILT. IT'S PART OF BEING AWARE. For me, I could have easily been in that unfortunate circumstance where for some reason, things didn't go through, things didn't work out. It can depend on the political situation, who's the individual in office, who's the judge in court, who's the immigration attorney, and the list goes on. There's just so many factors beyond your control and all you can do is sit and wait and wait and wait.

waiting is probably the hardest part of the journey. And that's the struggle that I see in many immigrants who are in the process. It's the uncertainty. The agonizing limbo. Today, when I help fellow immigrants whether as a case manager, or a counselor, or as a friend, I feel guilt. Because I know it's not easy. I know it's not easy to wait years and years and years. For me, it took 17 years. Looking back, I got really lucky that I didn't "age out." Y'know, being part of your family's immigration application as a dependent but aging out because you turned 21, therefore no longer a dependent. **WE AGE FASTER THAN THE IMMIGRATION PROCESS.**

I never knew you could age out. Not until years later, when I met people out of status or relying on student visas because that's what happened to them. Basically, they're in the country without papers even though their family members are citizens or permanent residents.

I realize that some of them are in this situation because perhaps the judge didn't see their immigration case favorably or something weird happened with the paperwork. Something just got messed up and they aged out. When I meet those people, I feel guilty because they're basically around my age and they were in exactly the same place as me at some point in their lives, but it just didn't go in their favor. So that's part of the reason why I feel guilty about being a citizen. I feel guilty because I know that I can still be considered one of the lucky ones.

I ask someone who is an American, whether you're born here or were naturalized, do you feel the same?

NAZEEFA HOSSAIN X T. JAHAN