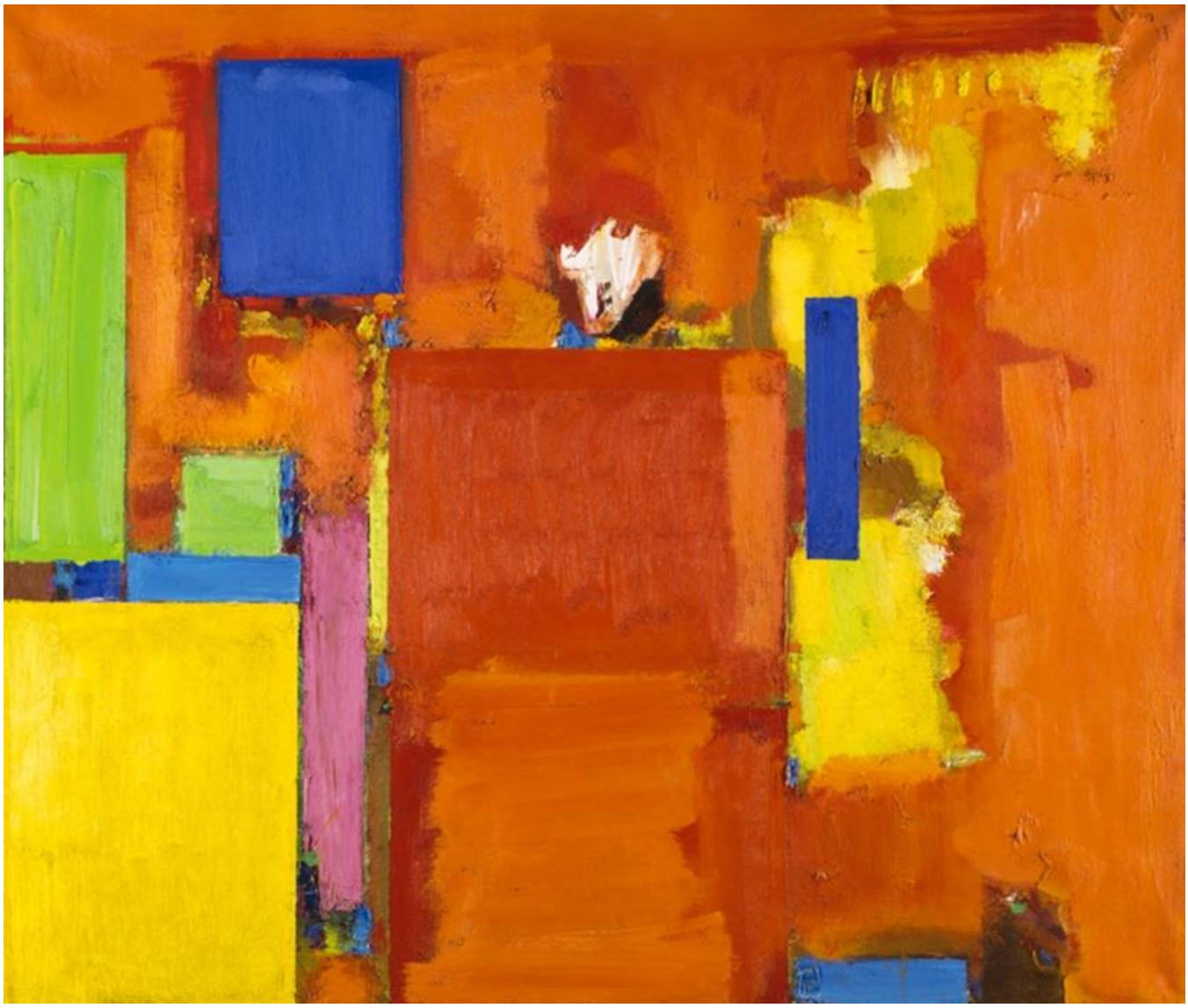
ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The American Dream: A Ticking Time Bomb

by Iris Pluie



THE GOLDEN WALLDATE. 1961, HANS HOFMANN. ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO OPEN ACCESS COLLECTION.

According to most people I know, that's what I'm living right now: the American Dream. My mother, my friends, every single one of my relatives--they all think that it's just so cool that I'm here, and to be honest, it is! I'm happy that I'm here. I'm happy to be in New York. I've been dreaming of getting out of my hometown since I was a kid. I truly love it here.

I grew up in a small town on the edge of one of the world's most populous cities. All my life, I lived in a gated community, where everyone seemed to know each other. All the kids in my kindergarten class were still with me when I graduated high school. The local shop owners, the gossip mongers, even the street dogs--they all knew me, if not by name then at the very least by my face. It was fun, for a while--to grow up with my best friends, to see them whenever I want, to have a girl I knew in the third grade at my 16th birthday party--but it was never my goal.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted more. I grew up with ambition that, while fueled by blind hope, was backed by an equal amount of passion. I knew I could make a good life for myself where I was. I was a good student. Personable, good writer, charming speaker. I could have stayed in my small town, close to my family and comfortable in the house I've lived in since I was five. I could've gotten a 9-5 job at a local business and pretended the backhanded compliments and judgmental stares from the middle-aged ladies in sport shoes didn't bother me. I could have been *comfortable*.

But that's not what I wanted.

It might sound egotistical, but I dreamed of *more*. More fun, more success, more than what my tiny town had to offer me.

That's why, the day I received my official acceptance from Brooklyn College, I knew my life would never be the same again. I was drowning in the excitement and anticipation of my future. It was like the universe had finally aligned with what I had been wanting all this time.

What I wasn't expecting, though, is how scary it feels.

Since the beginning of the process--which was the day I went in for my visa appointment--I've been nervous. From the intimidating security at the gate of the United States Embassy, sternly telling everyone to leave all items except their Visa documents outside, to the visa agents with their stern gazes colder than February in New York. They like to refer to it as "straightforward," or "simple." It's either a yes, or a no. You have to accept your fate and move on. There's nothing you can do to change their minds. Nothing you can argue. If it's a no, it's a no.

I had been cool the entire week leading up to my interview, but I was shaking, sweating, and close to tears right before my turn at the window. There were so many things running through my mind. What if they say no? What am I going to do? What's gonna happen to my deposit? Will I apply again? Can I afford that?

Thankfully--and I really am thankful--I didn't have to think about that. Against all odds, only four weeks before Trump's re-election, my visa was approved. I was officially going to be a student in the United States for the next four years.

My first few weeks in New York, everything was great. January was freezing and I was still on the hunt for an apartment, so I wasn't exactly comfortable, but I was happy. I was getting to do the things I had been dreaming of doing since I was a little girl. I was going to concerts, exploring all the beautiful sights in Brooklyn, going to museums, and doing everything else I could think of to distract myself from how homesick I was. There was talk starting up about how immigrants were being threatened, some people even having their green cards revoked, but I wasn't worried. Why should I have been? I'm a student, on a perfectly legal student visa. No one can kick me out.

Or so I thought.

On the 25th of March, 2025, I woke up to a video of Rümeysa Öztürk being kidnapped by ICE officials going viral. According to CUNY CLEAR, the Turkish student getting her PhD at Tufts University was targeted by the Trump administration due to an opinion piece she co-authored in her student newspaper last year (CUNY CLEAR).

I convinced myself that my situation was different. I told myself things like, "She's probably an immigrant, not on a student visa," or "her visa must have expired; she must have some invalid documents." However, as the days went by and more students were detained, I couldn't lie to myself anymore.

All Rümeysa Öztürk and Mahmood Khalil had done was speak up for what they believed in (Khalil). If I dared to take a stand, would I be punished like they were?

I had always thought that no matter what the political situation, it wouldn't affect me; but now, I had to admit it. It can affect me. I'm just as vulnerable, as at risk as all the people who were forcefully removed from the country.

> I wonder, if I could have had a glimpse into the future the day I was granted my visa, how I would feel then. Would it dim my excitement? Would I think the future is bleak?

Walking home to my East Flatbush apartment, working late at my on-campus job, or strolling through Manhattan at midday--every time I see a cop, my heart stops. It feels like an exaggeration, but I truly hold my breath until I've walked past them. It's terrifying to walk around the city you dream of belonging to, knowing that someone casually strolling the street might have the power to kick you out. It makes me wonder how immigrants, undocumented citizens, and international students must have felt during Trump's first few months in office. Were they scared? Angry? Disappointed?

In April of 2025, a Brooklyn College student came up to me at an event on campus and handed me a flyer for a protest that was happening the next day. It was in support of Palestine and Mahmood Khalil, the student who was detained and stripped of his degree from Columbia. It felt good attending the event. It felt good to voice out loud, how much we hate the politics in the country, how angry we are at the leaders who are supposed to represent our voices.

It felt good to yell, "NO MORE ICE!"

The protest was as peaceful as it could have been. Still, over 50 cops showed up. They almost outnumbered the students and faculty attending the protest. I noticed that most of the international students had masks or head-covers, to ensure their picture doesn't end up in *The New York Times*. I was concerned, because this isn't something I had thought to do. What if they already had a picture of me? What if a cop had profiled me? What if they followed me home?

With a million thoughts in my head, I tried my best to stay calm and not overthink the situation. I left with a friend, and I got home safe. Deep breath in, deep breath out.

The very next day, I was invited to a zoom meeting for students on an F-1 visa by Brooklyn College. I joined the meeting at about 10:09 A.M., still lying in bed, groggy from sleep. I rubbed my eyes and tried to pay attention to what the international student representative was saying. She was giving us safety tips, advice on how to avoid any conflict with our visa status, and more.

Then she said, "Strictly do not attend any protests. Stay as far away from them as you can." My ears perked up. My heart sank.

I had been at a protest less than 24 hours ago.

The representative was talking about students who were arrested after being identified through facial recognition that ICE was using to scope out students that were at pro-Palestine protests. Hell, there were even people simply walking past protests that were arrested.

What I thought would be a relaxing, restful Saturday had turned rather restless. I remember trying to go about business as usual. Get up, get dressed, head out, work on assignments, come back home, eat dinner, go to bed. I was actively distracting myself. I put on music, I tried to get my mind off it, but every time my phone buzzed with a notification, I wondered if they had found me. I wondered if by next week, I would be one of the people "self-deporting."

I've never been much for staying home. I like having a place outside my room that I feel comfortable enough to spend the entire day in. I find that I'm more productive that way. Prospect Park had become that place for me. It's a twenty-minute walk from my apartment. All these days, it had felt like the perfect getaway. That day, though, I wondered if I'd enjoy the walk I had been looking forward to all week. I wondered if I would be able to ignore the cop car that's always parked right inside the park. I wondered if I'd really get any work done through worrying.

I thought back to middle school, when I was still at the top of my class. It was a rarity for me to get anything less than an A on my report cards. I was doing well academically and keeping up with extra-curriculars. I felt like a well-rounded child, but my dreams were bigger than that. I didn't want to be well rounded, I wanted to be more. My incessant self-belief has kept me over optimistic about my life, but I like it that way.

As I got older that started to change. I don't even know how it happened, but I somehow went from being at the top of my class to failing most of my exams. I didn't get it. I was putting in the exact same amount of effort but every year my grades got worse. I wondered if my parents had made a mistake enrolling me into the most difficult board of education in the country. I wondered if it was because my dad didn't live in my house anymore. Mostly I wondered if I just wasn't smart enough anymore. Whether all these excuses just came down to it being my fault.

I was diagnosed with ADHD when I was in the 9th grade. I was scared, but I mostly felt relief. I had found an explanation to why my performance rapidly went down over the years. It doesn't matter now that I was never medicated for it, or that I never had an honest conversation about it with my parents. I knew then that to achieve my dreams I would have to work harder than the rest of my peers. It's fine. I got this. Now that I know what's happening, I can fix it.

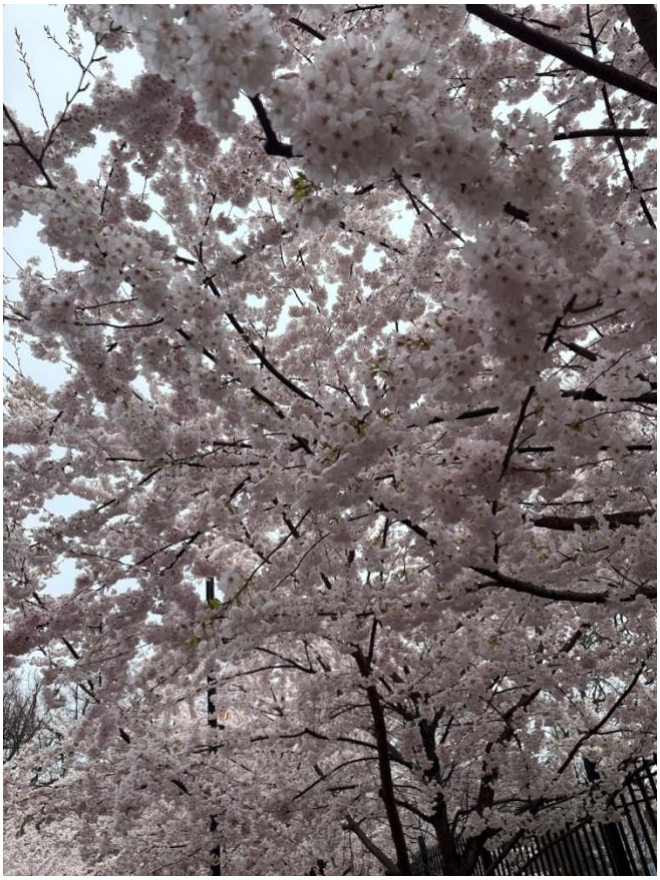
Regardless of my dwindling grades, I had decided in the 8th grade that I would pursue an education overseas. It was a year of reminding myself of my big dreams. Remember? More, better, and bigger? This meant that I had to start doing more than every one of my classmates. Participate in every activity, pull my grades up, prepare myself for applications. It was 4 years of daydreaming and worrying. Will I make it? God, I really hope I make it.

The average international student spends about four years preparing to just apply to colleges abroad (Bista). From participating in extracurriculars to stellar grades, you have to be on top of the game. According to *U.S. News and World Report*, the average acceptance rate for international students in U.S. universities is 29.1% (Cole). On the contrary, the average acceptance rate for local students is a whopping 73%. Against all odds, I was lucky enough to be one of the 29.1% who managed to pass standardised tests, write a convincing statement of purpose, and get recommendation letters good enough for my educational institution to deem me worthy of being a part of it.

According to the *Journal of International Students*, the effect of international students studying in the U.S. can be felt beyond campus boundaries. We contribute around $22 billion to the United States economy annually, making us a vital source of revenue (Bista). This is because most international students are paying double the tuition fee that our local counterparts pay, devoid of any government funding or aid. There are also fewer scholarship options for international students, meaning that most of us pay out of pocket. Our economic contribution to the country surpasses those of the gaming industry, the weight loss industry, and the domestic movie and music industries combined. Yet, this year it seems that we are being hunted like endangered animals with an expensive bounty on our heads.

Today, I stood inside Brooklyn College campus and stared at the clock tower from across the quad, a cherry blossom lending her shade to me. Her pink petals would be all gone in three days.

The way time blurred, I am unsure of how long I stood there, simply staring, with the same song looping over and over. What I saw in front of me was so many things all at once. It was my future. The place where I would get my



CHERRY BLOSSOM AT BROOKLYN COLLEGE, APRIL 2025. GRAPHIC COURTESY OF AUTHOR.

education and start my career. It was dreams actualized. A picture from my computer screen picked and dropped in front of me. It was a paradise of learning, filled with books and professors that would teach me everything I needed to know to excel in my field. But this dream was a ticking time bomb, because it could be snatched away from me at any given moment.

I stood there and thought, "Here I am, living the American dream. I wonder when it'll stop feeling like a nightmare."

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Author's Note

Writing this piece was one of the most cathartic experiences I've ever had. I am immensely grateful to Professors Entin, Aja, Theoharis and the Mellon Foundation for giving me and my fellow writers a chance to take our darkest fears and turn them into community and art. I would also like to thank Professor H for referring me for this project, and lending her shoulder to me while I was going through the difficult transition to accepting this reality. My hope is that, when someone young dreams of leaving their hometown that they grew out of years ago, they feel encouraged to fight the cruelty rather than get disheartened by it. I hope this piece serves as an offering of truth and resilience. If you are reading this, thank you for being here. Dream big enough to crush any resisting force in your wake :)

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