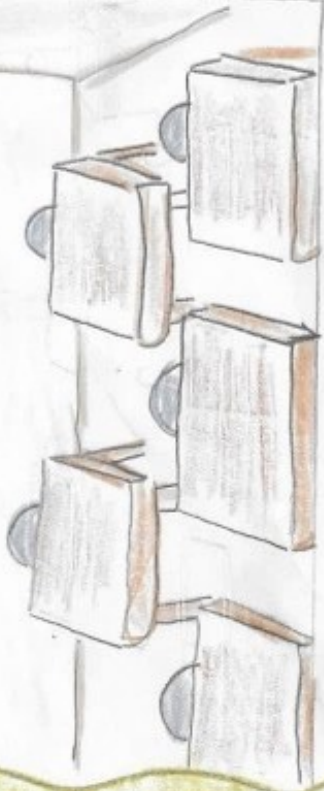
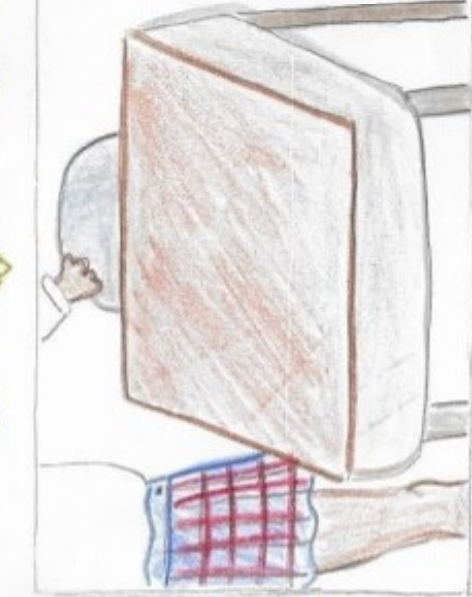


I sat in the rightmost corner in the first row of his classroom



To avoid the weight of my peers' heat & anxieties piling atop the already heavy air, I sat in the front, left-hand corner...

The chalk dust-laden air mixed with the aroma of handed-down English textbooks made the atmosphere sink so close to the floor I nearly suffocated that first day.



I suppose I chose this seat for a number of reasons. I remember feeling the room would be hard to breathe in before I stepped inside.

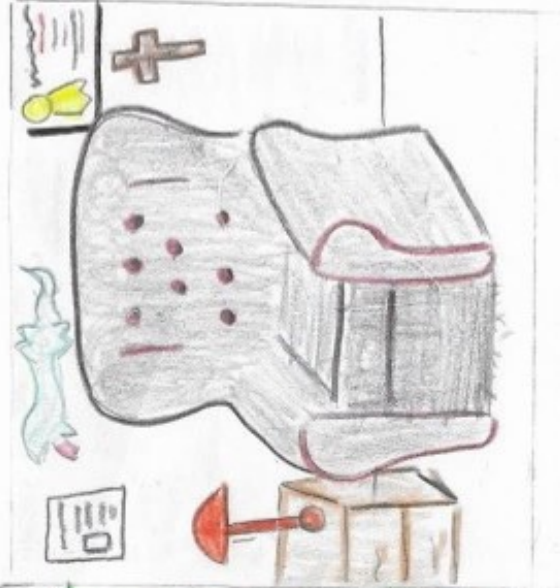
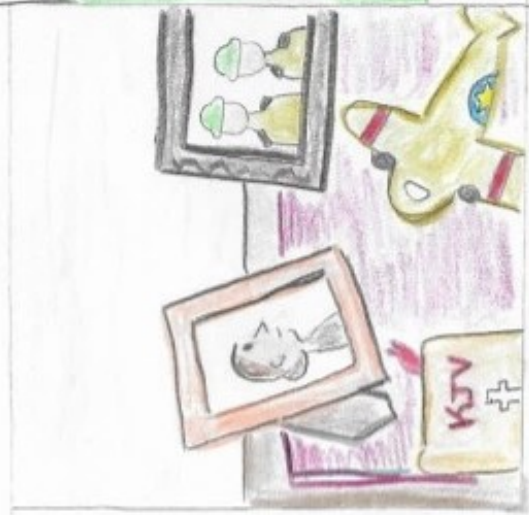


breathing my own air from the open space between me and the door.



Even in this limited space, my breathing was strained by the anticipatory still of trying to inhale the details of a new environment all at once

Rich & busy brown walls ornamented with storied knick-knacks & photographs



Before I could mentally condense my surroundings into a less daunting form,



I found my summer reading essay - graded - on my desk.

I got an A.



I didn't feel good.



Writing that essay, and many others like it, was an experience fueled by the fear I carried into the first day of Junior Year English... fear of being not enough, not accepted, misunderstood.

So much of my zeal to write has been inspired by my own self-doubt to measure up against whatever was assigned for me.

I eventually learned to swim in this environment.



In high school, I took my time writing to compensate for what I felt I lacked + prove myself.



I learned to analyze the choices of long dead authors - to translate the words of foreign dialects.



To focus on the lifestyles of others from a distance.



This tension was relaxed only once I learned to value the voices nearer to me



as much as I did the ones further away.





Instead of comforting myself
to understand



I sought to be understood.



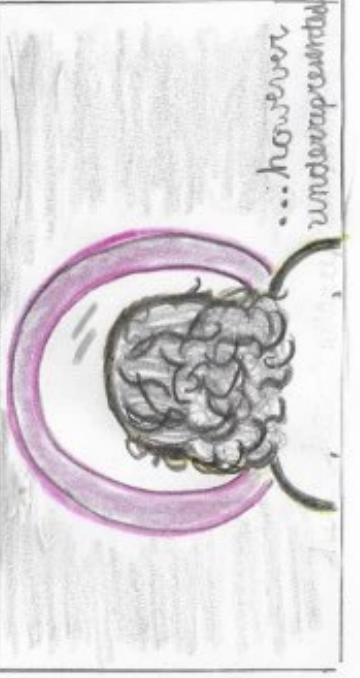
In the words of writers like bell hooks,
Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison



Those hard to read writers...
not made so by my pretension



but by the strength of their voice,
their ability to convey their perspective



...however
underrepresented

These writers - their books made me
feel safe and read



validating my reality by writing it in fiction

School taught me how to read,



but these authors taught me
the meaning of language
and how to use it to find myself