I sit in the rightmost corner in the first row of the classroom.

To avoid looking at my peers' heads, I put my head down. It helps.

The chair squeaks as I move it closer to the floor. I wish I could sit closer to the floor, but I can't. The floor is too far away.

I suppose it's because of the noise and the close proximity of my peers. I wonder if I should study in here. I think I would be more productive in a quiet environment.

I suppose I chose this seat for a reason. Perhaps I need to work harder. I need to prepare better. I need to study more. I need to focus more.

Even in this limited space, my breathing is strained by the environment. I'll have to find a new environment. A quiet environment. A peaceful environment. A relaxing environment.
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 ability 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 spent time writing to compensate for what I felt I lacked and 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.
I sought to be understood.
In the words of writers like Bell Hooks and Zora Neale Hurston, but by the strength of their voice, their ability to convey their perspective, however uncomfortable.

School taught me how to read, but these authors taught me the meaning of language, and how because it finds itself.

Instead of comforting myself to understand, those hard-to-read writers... not made so by any pretension.

These writers—their books made me feel safe and real.