

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

First Place

Nalini Dhiman

“Life Notes”

Our brains are constantly chronicling life through five distinct channels - sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. But memory is selective because it only captures fragments of our sensory storm. Of all these sensory imprints, it's the acoustic memories that seem to echo longest in my chambers of recollection. Each sound is a key that unlocks not just the memory of the noise itself but the entire moment in which it existed.

Thus, when I close my eyes and think of childhood, it is not the images that come but the sounds. These ghosts arrive uninvited and they carry with them entire worlds of context and emotion. Thinking of my father's gentle "Neha? I'm home!" resurrects not just his voice, but our brown door framing his dark blue shirt, my joy at his arrival mingled with sudden panic over forgotten chores. In that moment lives the scent of his cologne, the race to his embrace, and my brother and I competing to share our day's stories.

Scientists tell us that sensory memories last mere milliseconds as fleeting impressions that fade unless our attention anchors them into something more permanent. But some sounds demand attention without reason; they carve themselves so deeply into our consciousness that they become part of our inner landscape. Let me take you through some of the chapters in my life that have been randomly marked by these acoustic bookmarks.

In Gurgaon, electrical signals from sounds moved differently than they do here. The walls were thick, we were close to the ground, but somehow every noise found its way through. Morning began with the pressure cooker's whistle, four sharp whistles that meant *rajma* or *chole* were on the way, and my mother's favourite *bhajan*. I used to be bothered by the *bhajans*, but later I realized how it made me feel. As the house filled with positivity, steel utensils would clang against each other in the kitchen. It created a metallic hypnotic orchestra that meant comfort and home.

From outside, the street vendors' calls formed our daily soundtrack: the vegetable seller's singsong announcement of fresh potatoes, tomatoes, and the seasonal vegetable, the neighbouring-village's farmer who would send his son to ring our bell which became my cue to rush down with two vessels for fresh cow's milk, the evening ice cream man's distinctive horn that had my brother sprinting to call mama for cash. When I think of the passage of time, even in a day, I think of how time was marked by these sound-stamps instead of clocks. You would know it is 4:00 pm when the ice cream vendor came, and 7:00 pm when the milkman arrived.

Have you ever stolen something? I have, and it was memorable. My brother and I became thieves of teenager-y whispers. Pressed against the door's cool wood, we would eavesdrop on my sister's daily secret phone call with her boyfriend. Her laughter, so syrupy and unfamiliar

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

(and funny to us), would seep through the cracks as I motioned silently at my brother to take notes, and he scribbled furiously. I say furiously because I remember the sound of his pencil on my paper. We carefully harvested these secrets. Each word was meticulously catalogued in our Reporting Book, and all we asked for ransom from her was salt-kissed fries and premium 20-rupee chocolate. A fair deal if you ask me.

When the power went out, as it often did, the sudden silence would be broken by the collective groan of aunts in our building. The ceiling fans would slow to a stop, and we would begin to hear the smallest of things, such as the various birds outside and our deep breaths. Sometimes we would go stand in the shower until we heard the coughing of the generator motoring on.

Soon thereafter, a different kind of sound entered our lives. The beeping of hospital monitors, the squeak of nurses' shoes on polished floors, the whispered consultations outside my father's room... The landscape of illness has its own symphony, its own tones, and a painful recollection that I feel more in my heart than my brain. Time was marked by the sound of the pulse oximeter becoming as familiar as my mother's *bhajans* had once been. Its steady beeps were both tormenting and comforting; each electronic pulse was a reminder of illness, yet its very persistence meant that his heart was still beating. That is why I found myself dreading the sound and praying for it in the same breath, I knew that its silence would bring a peace I was not ready to accept. When that silence eventually and suddenly came, it stretched across continents and was broken only by the empty roar of airplane engines descending into Hong Kong.

If I listen very closely, I can still hear the silence at this very moment.

The transition to Hong Kong came with its own soundscape, so different it felt like learning a new language (which is both a symbol and a fact). The apartment buildings were taller and the spaces between them narrower. The loud coolers in India now replaced by the air conditioners which hum silently. The trains in India used to roar, announcing themselves with pride, while the trains here come gently.

My high school classroom was my first experience of peace within the noise. Twenty teenagers speaking at once, their Cantonese rising and falling like ocean waves, but to my ears it was all white noise. I learned to float in this acoustic limbo which was punctuated only by the occasional word I recognized. "Ngo" (I) and "lei" (you) became little lifeboats in this sea of sound. Though they were brief, they left me triumphant for the day.

An "Om" found me later, during my university years, when the cacophony of life-academic pressure, family worry, career dilemmas-became too much. During my yoga practice I discovered that sound could come from within, that it could resonate through bone and tissue until my whole body became an instrument, a vessel. My mother resonated with this too. In fact, it is due to her that I ever started my practice.

Sometimes, during video calls with mum, I could hear how empty the apartment felt, how her voice echoed slightly where it once had to compete with three children's and one father's

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

chaos (a sound I would hate because it disrupted my studies, now I yearn to hear it again). The pressure cooker still whistles at home, but only for two now. There is a loud silence... It lies in the space where my father's evening cough used to be. The missing sound of TV shows that once played in the background. The gap where my sister's outburst should be.

There are new sounds. My mother's iPad playing Western TV shows she has now discovered, it is a proud moment indeed because once upon a time, English was just murmur to her. New sounds describing home... My brother's iPad playing anime shows, the rice cooker's electronic pings, my mother's gentle chuckle when I tell her about my love life, then insane roars of laughter when I would tell her a funny story (this is my most favourite sound in the world), my brother's "but when did I ask?" jokes. Nothing remains the same, everything changes, and though this change is different, I love it still.

As you know, there was a time when I felt an endless void inside me. It was a deafening silence that echoed despite a life that otherwise seemed to shine. Then I found my best friend. First came a nervous laugh during Transformers, it is the movie forever etched as the backdrop to his surprising confession. Slowly, the silence you could only find if you dipped your head deep into the well in my heart started transforming into something louder, more alive. Heartfelt laughter that bubbled up unexpectedly, and even some quiet tears as I finally acknowledged the echoes of my past. I found myself resting my head on his chest and listening to his heartbeat. It was a steady rhythm, one that my mother, too, was grateful for because, for a long time, she had yearned to hear me laugh again. My inner world was no longer mute but a vibrant soundscape of laughter, whispers, and the irreplaceable sound of a loving heart!

These sound-filled moments are just fragments of my story, bookmarks in a life that keeps turning pages. As my university years, filled with an orchestra of sounds I will forever be grateful for, draw to a close, I find myself wondering what sounds will fill the next chapter. Life has taught me that change is the only constant, and change brings with it new rhythms and melodies. The same way my mother's *bhajans* gave way to hospital beeps, then emptiness transformed into the sound of ringing laughter, I know these familiar campus echoes will soon become memories. But I'm not scared. I am both nostalgic and curious. As these familiar sounds fade, new ones wait to be discovered. Isn't that the beauty of life, though? It never truly falls silent, only transforms, and in doing so it creates space to experience new notes. Sometimes, the most beautiful melodies are the ones we haven't heard yet.

Second Place

Suan Yeon

“The Violin and the Wheelchairs: Nine Years of Music at Life’s Edge”

Have you heard the squeaks of fifty wheelchairs moving at once?

It is surprisingly quiet, almost imperceptible unless you listen to it closely. And these people, unable to walk independently, rely entirely on the hands that guide them. Even if the room is filled with over a hundred people, they are dreadfully quiet.

And since the year of 2012, for nine years, I played violin for these quietly enduring souls. Here is why.

My grandmother was a pastor, but her church was unlike any other. This church had a special purpose: to calm the noisy, scared minds of people who were facing death. The church – located in Yeongdung-po, a bustling district of Seoul – was not far from my home. Around the same time, my mother, Yoonee, discovered that her eleven-year-old daughter had a knack for the violin after two years of lessons. So my grandmother, In-ja, had the idea to bring me onto the stage during her Sunday morning services. That is where it all began - my nine years at Cham Geriatric Hospital.

The hospital's chapel had an interesting structure as if it had never been intended to serve as a place of worship. It was a modest room with large windows, its only religious marker was an arm-sized wooden cross on the wall. It was evident that the chapel would turn into a common area where any other events continuously take place. Every Sunday, it filled with over fifty wheelchairs, each carrying an elderly patient. And on the first Sunday of each month, I would stand at the front of the room, facing those fifty wheelchairs with my violin.

Normally I would spend a week selecting a hymn to perform. In the beginning, Yoonee often chose the songs – favourites of hers that were easy to sing along to or play. I rehearsed each piece from start to finish, running through it at least ten times. I timed every detail: the walk to the stage, the bow to the audience, and the descent afterward. Given the five minutes allotted to me, I always printed the sheet music and marked where to cut, as I never had enough time to play the entire song. Recording my practices helped me identify the imperfections and the notes that needed refining.

A calm wave of asynchronous applause.

Some clapped quickly and energetically; others slowly, and deliberately. A few would clap for what felt like forever, their faces lit with wide, genuine smiles that I interpreted as excitement. I always waited for the last echoes of their applause to fade before lifting my violin, placing the bow on the string, and beginning to play. I observed the patients' faces as I played. Completely unconscious of how they looked, they were fully immersed in the music. Their reactions would vary depending on their moods, level of pain, or age. Some swayed

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

their heads and clapped along, others sang softly, their voices catching the melody even if it was their first time hearing the hymn. Some would cry. Maybe it was subtle like sobbing – wiping their tears with their hospital scrubs, or as dramatic as breaking into tears.

At first, it was hard for me to understand their emotions. No one explained them to me. For me, it seemed like they had a constant anxiety about death, which they thought coming to the church and listening to biblical stories might set them free from. I heard that patients often think about how their lives would end and regard dying in sleep as the most desirable way, although it is something completely out of their control. And perhaps I was afraid – that I might have stirred something painful, if I had inadvertently reminded them of their mortality. What if the lyrics of the songs brought them face-to-face with their fears? What if I had made them think of the end they so desperately tried to avoid?

After each performance, I would return to my seat at the back of the chapel, where my family sat. My father, Momo, often dozed off – a fact he would later deny. A month would pass in a flash, and I am back at Cham Hospital.

The raw, unpolished sound of my violin mingled with the serene melodies of the hymns.

I scan through the faces of the patients in crammed wheelchairs. I see their closed eyes, peaceful faces, smiles, tears, and sighs. In those moments, it wasn't just a performance; it was a conversation. Music, after all, is a language that needs no words.

After an hour-long phone call with In-ja, Yoonee told me that we were moving to a new branch of the hospital in Seongbuk-dong. Momo told me that Seongbuk-dong was the old version of Gangnam, a place once known for its affluence.

The sound of high heels clicking against polished marble floors echoed through the halls.

It was fresh and clean, almost sterile, and the chapel was grand. A proper sanctuary with a stage, a crystal-coated podium, and a wooden cross illuminated by dramatic lighting. There were light and sound-controlling stations here and there. Of course, there is a keyboard and a drum with designated places for them. The first time I was there, I felt a new kind of pressure, but also a thrill. The chapel was designed with the patients in mind. There were no chairs or tables, only open space to accommodate the wheelchairs that would fill the room. After the service, the empty chapel became a playground for my sister Jian and me. We would run around, banging on the drums and plinking at the piano, blissfully unaware of any divine or parental repercussions.

The sound of tires scraping against gravel filled the car, the vibrations rattling everything inside.

Every first Sunday of the month, my dad would drive me to the hospital, which was nestled deep in the woods. The journey took about two hours. The hospital was almost at the top of the mountain, thus we needed to drive round and round following the unevenly paved road in the mountain.

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

It gave me this peculiar feeling with my Momo's relentless driving skills – as if it would almost puncture a hole in the tire. Over time, we grew accustomed to the noise, the bumps, and the sharp turns. When the air grew cooler and the scent of trees replaced the city's smog, I knew we were close to the Hospital. As Momo parked the car, I would retrieve my violin from the trunk, slinging it over my shoulder like a backpack.

Knock-knock. My finger knuckles hit the firm, wooden door of the pastor's room.

In-ja greeted us with her usual jokes about the weather, or sometimes the assistant pastor would answer – a role that seemed to change every six months depending on In-ja's whims. Exactly at 10 a.m., the service would begin. Right after her opening prayer, In-ja announced, "There will be a special music performance. Give a round of applause." Even though the patients knew I would be performing, they always clap as hard as they can.

Over the years, some patients were especially fond of my music. They are the ones who would ask their spouses to record my performances on their phones, who would never miss a first Sunday, and who would bring some snacks to give the 15-year-old kid. After the service, their children – around my parents' age – would approach me with different types of sweets and kind words. Listening to what the patients were going through, I felt a whirlwind of emotions. It was unexplainable. Am I being arrogant to feel sorry for them? Who am I to judge their feelings? And why do we chase after trivial things – money, fame, love – when we all face the same inevitable end?

One event marked the end of my brutally sceptical phase.

There was an elderly man, around 85 years old, who always secured a spot in the first row of the room. I remember him so clearly since he was the only one who wasn't in the wheelchair. He was on a roll-away bed, as he was in a critical condition. Without any facial expression or physical movement, it seemed like he and his wife had a special way of communicating. His wife would lean close, listening to the faint tremors of his lips and responding with laughter or whispers. She always recorded my performances, playing them back into her husband's ears on repeat. I saw him every month, until one day he was gone. I couldn't see the roll-away bed anymore. Tap-tap. A gentle pat on my shoulder. It was his wife. "My husband passed away," she said. "In his final moments, he was listening to your music. He left in peace. Thank you."

Sometimes when I overheard In-ja and the assistant pastor's conversation, I got to know the patients who have recently passed. I grew numb to the reality that the faces I had seen just weeks ago might be gone the next time I visited. Some of the patients seemed like they were in their 40s – far too young to be in this geriatric hospital where the average age was around 70 to 80. They wore knitted beanies to cover their bald heads as they were going through lonely, painful chemotherapy. During prayers, I heard their resentful cries, why they were already too near the heaven gate.

"This is a hospital for the wealthy," someone once told me. "They all seem pretty helpless, huh? When they were younger, they used to be powerful. You know, big shots."

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

And yet, there they were, listening to a kid who was younger than their grandsons and daughters play the violin, their bodies frail, either fighting or fearing death. After all, they are all humans. When it comes to a matter as simple as life and death, we go back to the starting line. And in those vulnerable moments, what I could do is to see them not as titles or statuses, but as human beings whose pain might be eased, even briefly, by my music.

There were two middle-aged volunteer musicians – a drummer and a vocalist. One day, the vocalist, Kim, suggested we form a small band and visit the hospital rooms. In fact, there were a lot of patients who were too ill to come to the chapel on the first floor, and he wanted to bring the music to them.

The ICU definitely had a colder atmosphere that gave me chills. The only sounds were the clinking of spoons against the ceramic bowls and the hushed whispers of family members to the patient's ear. If I listened carefully, I could hear faint moans – sounds of pain that escaped despite their will. The patients were in worst conditions, so bad that I asked myself – "Am I even allowed to be here?"

Some patients were paralyzed, with only one or two parts alive in their bodies. Two of them were not covering their legs with the blanket for some reason- and the legs were merely bones, without any flesh covering them. Necrotic legs and arms were everywhere. Many relied on oxygen respirators to breathe. Some looked so still, so lifeless, I couldn't tell if they were alive or already gone.

Ama-zing-grace. How-sweet-the-sound...

A few of the patients and their families in the ICU began to sing along to our music. Awfully off-key and out of sync, yet somehow harmonizing in a way. After a few times of entering the ICUs, I started to notice the smallest reactions. The fact that they were not entirely paralyzed made me focus on their limited movements and how grand they meant. Their small flicker of a finger was equivalent to them dancing, singing, or perhaps screaming. As we started to play the music, they would raise their eyebrows, or make unrecognizable murmurs. What do they want to express? Gratitude? Sorrow? Fear? Glory of God? Happiness?

For those ten minutes, they seemed so free. Their pain and worries were momentarily forgotten. And I thought, if my music has a therapeutic effect on them, be it calming them down or reviving their memories of childhood or their long-lost parents, how beautiful is that?

The dreary beep alerts the ICU as the graph of the patient monitor changes to a flatline.

"Get out of here! Immediately!" the nurses shouted. Loud, hasty steps of the white coats. The room erupted into chaos, doctors and nurses rushing in with urgency. I stood frozen, my heart pounding, as they wheeled in a cot and a white sheet. From right outside the ICU, I watched as death entered unannounced.

The last thing the patient had heard was my music. Who wouldn't fear death? Who would welcome it? In my nine years at Cham Geriatric Hospital, I saw not just patients, but souls –

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

fragile, resilient, and profoundly human. And in their stillness, I realized that music, like life, is not about perfection, but about connection. The moments when a single note can bridge the gap between joy and sorrow, between life and death, and the fact that even in our most fragile states, we are never truly alone.

Third Place

Ariel Migliorini Mercado

“Echoes Of The Hush”

Prelude: Primordial Echoes

What if every silence we encounter—from our first breath to our most devastating goodbye—teaches us the more profound language of living?

I was three years old, perched on the edge of our couch, when my mother decided I should see the videotape of my own birth. The grainy VHS flickered to life, capturing a hospital room awash in a fluorescent haze, walls glowing antiseptic white. Then came the moment: my newborn cry, raw and resounding, slicing the air with startling force.

Even at three, I sensed this cry bore more than a baby’s wail—it felt like a primordial chord, both miraculous and burdensome. Tears slid down my cheeks in tandem with that tiny figure’s lament, as if we were bound by an invisible thread. That is my earliest soundscape memory: the low hum of videotape, distant machine beeps, and a primal lament introducing me to existence.

Sometimes, I wonder how I’d describe that cry—its agony and hope—to someone who has never heard a single sound. Later, I discovered heartbreak hush to be just as inexpressible: an absence so immense it devours words and leaves only silent questioning in its wake.

Movement I: Family Orbits

Our home pulsed with overlapping voices, each room spinning in its own orbit. My grandmother spent her mornings enraptured by mythic audiobooks, the crackle of old cassettes drifting through dim corridors. My mother quietly played her cherished ballads in the kitchen, their gentle refrains imbuing our daily routines with warmth. My little brother’s laughter, bright and undulant, poured through doorways like a gentle waterfall, offering a steady current of joy.

If I stood at the threshold of the living room with my eyes closed, I could identify who was where by the timbre of their sounds—like instruments composing a domestic symphony. Sound was never mere background; it was how we recognized one another, comforted one another, and occasionally inflicted wounds.

But the note that lingered most belonged to my father. He often disappeared on “adventures,” returning on Sundays to pick me up with few words and a distant stare. Sometimes, he hushed my questions—not harshly, but as if he feared what the answers might reveal. Late at night, I heard him humming a wistful tune beneath my door, drifting in and out of my dreams.

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

What kind of father teaches his child the power of listening, only to slip away without a single word—HUSH?

In those early years, I believed every family thrived on such layered orbits of sound—my mother’s gentle music, my brother’s laughter, my father’s hush. I never imagined these overlapping voices would ultimately prepare me for a silence far vaster than I knew possible.

Interlude I: Two Faces of Hush

For all his inconsistencies, my father taught me reverence for silence. We embarked on “hush hunts” in forests and alongside winding streams. “We hush so the world can speak,” he’d say, pressing a finger to his lips. We would crouch, attuning ourselves to the faint patter of insects on damp soil or a distant frog’s hesitant croak. Sometimes, we notice the crackle of sunlight crossing leaves—a subtle sound many never realize is there.

That hush felt sacred, a gateway to wonder: calm, sylvan, and brimming with potential. My father’s eyes lit up whenever we detected a nearly inaudible shift—nature’s hidden symphony. This hush brimmed with awe, a gentle presence that nudged us to listen beyond our usual thresholds.

Yet hush had another, darker face, which my grandfather recalled from his youth: the catastrophic hush at Maracanã Stadium when Uruguay’s sudden goal crushed Brazil’s near-certain victory. “It was like two hundred thousand people losing their breath at once,” he said, describing how thunderous cheers collapsed into a shared, stunned gasp, a silence ringing louder than any cheer. One hush illuminated shy miracles; the other devoured hope in a single instant. I never imagined these hushes would collide within my own life, forging a heartbreak hush so deafening it could rival that stadium’s despair.

Movement II: City Crescendo & Intimacy

When I left home for a new city, new country, I entered a vast, brash orchestra—car horns battling street vendors’ cries, neon signs pulsing with crosswalk beeps, and a hundred languages mingling under looming skyscrapers. My father’s hush hunts had trained my ear to untangle subtle rhythms within the din.

That was how I met you—our collision felt like two wandering melodies syncing seamlessly. It began in a neon-lit club: glasses chiming in casual toasts, ice cubes rattling in syncopated echoes. The bassline throbbed so powerfully I felt it reverberate in my ribcage, as though the entire building shared one pulsating heartbeat.

You leaned in, your voice threading beneath the surrounding clamour. Our laughter tangled with the swirl of bodies, spilled drinks, and neon flashes overhead. When our lips met—tentative yet electric—it felt like stepping onto an open road beneath endless stars. Suddenly,

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

I viscerally understood Walt Whitman's "body electric"¹—physical poetry coursing through every nerve ending. I was incandescently alive at that moment, animated by the city's vivid pulse.

I fell in love with my life right then, cocooned in the hush between songs. I never suspected heartbreak hush was waiting at the edges, poised to unravel it all.

Movement III: The Heartbreak Symphony

It happened on a rainy night at the cinema, where we went to watch a concert film by your favourite singer, who you insisted "understood your soul." Outside, raindrops tapped a lullaby on the roof; inside, a hush of anticipation spread among the audience. Halfway through, as the singer crooned of unspoken love, my mother's voice echoed in my mind—sometimes confession is our only truth.

I leaned closer, heart pounding. "I... think I'm in love with you," I whispered.

One syllable. One planet collapsing.

"No."

The word fell softly but shattered something irretrievable inside me. Everything else vanished—popcorn rustles, the film's soundtrack, the faint murmurs of the audience. It felt like my grandfather's stadium hush: an entire world suspended in disbelief. Your brow creased with regret or pity; I couldn't tell which. The upholstery beneath my fingers felt painfully coarse, each fibre needling me awake to the devastation.

I stumbled into the corridor, ignoring your gentle attempt to catch my arm—afraid even your kindness would deepen my wounds. Rain hammered the exit doors in time with my unravelling thoughts. *If all of that just meant goodbye... maybe it's better I walk away*, I told myself, yet part of me silently ached for you to stop me. At that moment, heartbreak hush slammed into my chest—a personal apocalypse shared by no stadium crowd.

Interlude II: Electric Silence & Cosmic Reflections

In the aftermath, heartbreak seeped into every corner of my days. I felt stranded in a deaf season, my sense of hope muted. Oddly, this hush amplified my awareness of my own heartbeat—each tremulous pulse echoing that moment of collapse. Heartbreak hush felt like the wind—intangible yet bone-chilling, ephemeral yet forceful—reminding me we persist even in devastation.

Late at night, I lay awake while my roommate conversed in a foreign language. The swirl of incomprehensible syllables magnified my loneliness. "Why am I here? Does any of it

¹ Whitman, Walt. 2017. *Leaves of Grass*. Penguin Classics.

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

matter?” I asked the darkness. I realized heartbreak hush wasn’t merely an end but an invitation to listen differently, to confront emotional depths I’d never examined. Like John Cage, who composed from ambient silence, I realized this hush wasn’t emptiness—it was the gentle breathing of unanswered questions.

Sometimes, I recalled the hush hunts of my childhood—how different this hush felt, a hollow ache instead of childlike wonder. Yet, in that contrast, I discerned a seed of transformation: heartbreak hush might one day guide me toward a more intense empathy.

Movement IV: Friendship & Renewal

A few glimmers of light cut through my gloom. My hometown best friend sent me long, affectionate voice messages—warm, meandering monologues about her day. I replayed them, letting her laughter fill the cracks heartbreak hush had made. Even a single text, “You’re beautiful—believe it,” could dissolve an entire morning’s anxiety. These affirmations acted like melodic threads, transforming hush into renewed harmony.

Meanwhile, my mother carried on with her beloved soap operas, a corny theme song drifting from the TV. Oddly, that once-sappy tune felt comforting now. My little brother, enthralled by an astronomy live stream, squealed over newly discovered star clusters—reminding me that hush can be cosmic wonder, not solely sorrow.

One afternoon, a friend insisted on taking me out for coffee. Amid the busy café—the hiss of espresso machines, clinking cups, strangers’ chatter—I felt my heart mend slowly, each slight, familiar sound a careful stitch in my recovery. I sipped my latte, transfixed by the swirl of foam that resembled galaxies, bridging the micro and macro with every rotation. Gradually, heartbreak hush loosened its constricting grip.

Movement V: The Soundscape of Love & Loss

Yet one question lingered: How fragile is love if a single hush can erase it? I replayed nights we drove aimlessly, our music playing so loud we practically became its lyrics. Now, that memory felt sweetly painful—your voice, once thunder, receded into the hush of unanswered calls. And if hearing another’s heartbeat while laying the head in the unsheathed chest, lingering calmly admiring the beauty of another’s voice — that channels the exuberance of classical poems —, be all ears to those three words that form the most beautiful sentence, could all bring the sound of heartbreak; if those are not the sounds of love, what are the sounds of love?

Sometimes, Lana Del Rey’s whispered lines from the audiobook I gave you haunted my headphones—“I decided to do nothing about everything forever.”² Through them, I witnessed heartbreak hush shift from a crushing wave toward a gentler acceptance. Love doesn’t always

² Del Rey, Lana. 2020. *Violet Bent Backwards Over the Grass*. Simon & Schuster.

find reciprocation, yet heartbreak hush sculpts empathy precisely through the cracks it leaves behind—ebbing, flowing, never fully resolving.

Had I rewritten my melody daily, inventing new tones just to keep you content? I had silenced myself so often, forgetting my voice had value too. Perhaps love can't survive on one person's endless adjustments. Even so, the hush that sprang from your refusal taught me not to erase my own voice for someone else's comfort.

Movement VI: Resonance of the Nowness

The city hasn't changed—but it sounds altered, as though tuned to a slightly different key. Crosswalk beeps transformed into a gentle metronome urging me onward. Street musicians still offer haunting melodies, but now they sing of bittersweet memory rather than carefree wanderlust. A deserted alley at dusk felt less foreboding—more like a secret stage inviting me to reflect on everything I'd survived.

I realize I am hush-hunting again—no longer in a forest with my father but in the mundane corners of urban life. Heartbreak hush had softened into curiosity, prompting me to find hidden wonders everywhere. The echo of a departing bus hinted at journeys yet to be taken; the late-night banter of drunks, raw and unfiltered, felt oddly honest compared to polished small talk. Voices drifting through cafés seem strangely muted—familiar, like someone I've stood next to a thousand times, yet entirely different because I stand alone now. But thank you for teaching me how to listen deeply and bear witness to all these subtle shifts, these delicate vibrations of eternity threaded through everyday noise. Though changed, these sounds remain beautiful, endlessly reflective, and endlessly resonant. Not every noise was gentle, but all of it was undeniably alive.

My father's hush hunts once guided my ears to nature's fragile calls; heartbreak hush taught me to honour my own inner reverberations. Both hushes nudged me toward empathy and renewal. And Whitman's insight reverberated again: "If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred."³ We ache, we hush, we sing—and somehow, we endure.

Interlude III: Reflections on Silence & Existence

Our ears capture vibrations, yet our hearts perform the fundamental act of translation—shaping meaning out of intangible resonance. Silence, too, harbours infinite possibility: it can cradle nature's hidden murmurs or swallow entire crowds in disbelief. My father's hush hunts, my grandfather's stadium hush, and my own heartbreak hush emerged like distinct movements in a larger cosmic chord, each revealing a different dimension of stillness and survival.

³ Whitman, Walt. 2017. "I Sing the Body Electric", from *Leaves of Grass*. Penguin Classics.

2025 Morningside College Essay Competition

From a newborn's cry to heartbreak hush, we trace the body electric—a living instrument pitched between euphoria and despair. In that tension lies our capacity to love, to yearn, and to heal. Every hush points us to the subtlety of being alive, forging our stories in the quiet spaces between noise.

Final Movement: Reconciliation & Gratitude

Eventually, acceptance took shape, quietly and without ceremony. Though devastating, heartbreak hush claimed a vital page in my personal soundscape—showing me how deeply I could love. My father's hush once drew me toward nature's hidden pulse; heartbreak hush taught me I could endure personal cataclysm without relinquishing my compassion. I forgave you, silently but wholeheartedly, for not loving me as I had hoped, and I forgave myself for placing so many illusions upon an unsteady bond.

Sometimes, hearing “No” is the clearest, harshest way to discover a more honest path forward. In the hush that followed your refusal, I found renewed reverence for every breath, every footstep, every subtle note in the daily music around me. My father—flawed though he was—had shown me hush's dual power: wondrous or crushing. Grandfather's stadium hush revealed how entire crowds freeze in collective heartbreak, while you demonstrated that heartbreak hush can be a solitary crucible, quietly reshaping a single life from within.

Coda: A Luminous Refrain

My first cry echoed with raw fear and infinite possibility; now, my final hush resonates with understanding and quiet grace. Perhaps hush is never emptiness but an invitation—a luminous refrain beckoning us to listen more deeply. If heartbreak hush once erased my sense of self, it ultimately nurtured a new compassion, moulding me into someone more attuned to life's delicate, electric beauty.

Anyway, I do not have any perfectly poetic way to end this narrative—except to say that from all these hushes—birth hush, forest hush, stadium hush, heartbreak hush—I've grown into who I am. Embracing them, I remain fully alive and open, ready to sing—without fear—the following note in this ever-unfolding symphony we call existence. Not every silence is empty. Not every hush is an ending. In the quiet between moments, I hear the next note forming—even in silence, I have found music.