My name is Asma Rahimyar.

When my mother was preparing for her citizenship test, she used the English letters of my name to practice her handwriting; soon enough, the entire expanse of empty page would become riddled with dozens of carefully measured Asmas. When I won my town’s annual poetry contest, my mom was sitting in the fifth row—she stood up even before I translated the verses into Dari, and my nerves were quelled at the sight of her familiar smile. When my birthday comes around, my mom will leave a card on my desk before I wake up—they are often bright pink, frequently adorned with flowers, completely void of words and always brimming with her love.

When my father knows I will be staying up to study for an exam, he makes me a cup of coffee, puts a blanket around my shoulders, and prays two extra rakat; when I come home from school, my dad will make sure I finish my dinner before we discuss Plato’s Republic or Kant’s Categorical Imperative—and when I fall asleep in the midst of thumbing through flashcards, he will turn my light off and replace my book with a pillow. When I ask my dad why he works weekends, why he has made a copy of each 100% score I’ve received, and why he wakes up at 4 a.m. each morning, he responds with a wink: bareh tu, hazar dafah. For you, one thousand times over.

When you decide whether to invest in my education, I want you to know that I am a sophomore at Southern, double majoring in political science/philosophy and minoring in English; I want you to know that I hope to pursue a career in human rights law, and I want you to know that a Southern education has allowed me to converse with ambassadors at the United Nations, extoll Rumi with Khizr Khan, and explore the full extent my curiosity without the oppressive weight of debt; I want you to know that I carry a folded-up postcard of Kabul wherever I go as a testament to who I could have been, who I aspire to be, and who I am due to the sacrifice of parents who broke their own hearts to give my brothers and I a chance at knowing wholeness.

My parents fled Soviet-occupied Afghanistan before I was born; my mom once played the same card game five times in a row, as if the monotony of it were enough to distract from the airstrikes overhead—her dreams of becoming a journalist were lost in translation and sometimes, underneath a cloudless sky, she tells me to live out the dreams she never could. My dad lost nearly half of his graduating class; as the rows of empty desks increased in length, my dad continued to study; as the tortures raged in the basement of his medical school, as his friends disappeared, and as he became afraid of saying goodbye, my dad retained the stubborn hope needed to return to deserted libraries, and the quiet courage to believe that it would all be worth it. It is because of his fervent commitment to education that one of my brothers graduated with a degree in information technology, that the other is pursuing a Ph.D. in mathematics, that the youngest, still in seventh grade, dreams of becoming an engineer, and that I fall asleep with ink smudged across my palms each night.
My brothers and I have all attended Connecticut state schools, and I want you to know that when you invest in our education, you are not only allowing for families such as mine to send three children to college at once; you are investing in the wildest dreams of a man and woman whose prayers once revolved around staying alive. You are investing in the little American girl of a grandfather buried an ocean away, and you are investing in moments when I leave class after having compared Adam Smith and Karl Marx’s economic theories, when I look up at the expanse of limitless sky above me, and when I am struck by the miracle of my life’s trajectory.

When you invest in Southern students, so, too, are you investing in my friend, whose eyes light up at the mention of Oscar Wilde and who struggles to pay bus fare; you invest in the student I tutor, who stays up till three a.m. each day to complete her assignments after having spent the day supporting her disabled mother—English isn’t her first language, and yet no language barrier can impede the passion with which she dreams of becoming a doctor; you invest in the student who works three separate jobs to pay for the chance at a better future, and you invest in the middle-aged woman who needed my help correcting the grammar of an essay she wrote about the death of her sister—she was adamant about the placement of her punctuation marks, lest they shift the focus away from her hope.

Please know that increasing the price of tuition will mean the stunting of our passions, the endangerment of our futures, and the forsaking of a basic human right. The last time I was in this city was for my parents’ citizenship ceremony; I am here, eight years later, to tell you that our students are the bearers of legacies, the manifestation of prayers, and the carriers of folded-up postcards; I promise you that we are worth the investment.

Thank you.