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Poems in Our Hearts: the *Literacy Review* in the Adult Education Classroom

This year marks the eighth year that the *Literacy Review* gathers writing by adult literacy students in a literary journal to share with their peers. So this year, project founder and advisor June Foley asked teachers to share the impact that the *Review* has made on their writing and reading instruction. In the words of Wendy Wen: “As everyone knows, writing is hard and creative writing is harder. In spite of difficulties, our students are happy to write. This is because they have poems in their hearts, and so do I. Thank you, *Literacy Review*. You have given our adult immigrant students a podium from which they can make their voices heard!”

In this year’s *Review*, student writer Ming Xian (Cindy) Lin reminds us, perhaps surprisingly, “School is my blissful time.” The *Review* allows our students access to that blissful time in many ways. It inspires students to write by providing a reflection of themselves (“Just one look at an issue and the students want to be published!”—Tamara Kirson); it allows them to be experts for their peers (“. . . everything from the correct pronunciation of the author’s name to the current political situation in Myanmar”—Elaine Roberts); and it fosters a love of reading and writing with exciting new material each year (Terry Sheehan). It offers ideas for journal entries and an online forum for listening to authors read (Diana Raissis); it provides models of how to use grammar or writing strategies like direct speech (Caryn Davis); and over the years it has provided a resource for teachers seeking meaningful and accessible writing samples on topics important to students’ lives (Bonny Hart).

The more experiences with writing that students have—and the more experiments they do—the more they begin to feel confident in their abilities to be an author. Elaine Roberts summarizes the result: “Their enjoyment of the reading and their exposure to different styles impacted their writing in a pronounced way. What began as a few short obligatory sentences in response to a writing prompt grew into thoughtful, lengthy, and many times surprising, prose.”

As usual, this year’s *Review* contains many writing models that can inspire students...
to experiment with the choices that authors make to entertain and surprise. In a fun poem about mud (“In the Beginning”), Edward Seabron conceals the identity of the speaker until the last line. Borrowing this idea and some of the author’s phrases, such as “You can find me . . .,” “I can . . .,” or “I am . . .,” students can create their own riddles describing something significant from their lives.

Tania Espinoza’s poem, “A Bird Outside My Window,” is a great example of a writer carefully using the five senses to document what she observes—first what she hears, then feels, then sees. Rashel Minevich and Rose Covington show us that observations don’t have to be lengthy to be moving. In three short lines, reminiscent of haiku master Basho, they share details from their worlds: feelings inside, the weather outside and someone who makes the author’s soul smile.

In “A Mi Lindo Ecuador,” Carlos Tixi remembers where he is from, with the hope that his past will still inspire his children in the future. The reflections of many writers carry us from the present to other moments in time. Arleta Bojarska, in “Home,” conjures the present world with its “silver fog” and “hum of trees,” but wonders, “How many days will you be there?” Necla Tumen’s narrator finds herself in a bakery with “a young lady with dimples,” and asks, “How did this happen? /Well, that’s who I wanted to be.” Each of these writers reminds us that change is a major preoccupation of the human mind.

Change can also be a simple way to approach revising. The essays “Lucas,” by J. Alberto M. Ramirez, and “The Story of Fafa D,” by Fatoumata Diakite, surprise the reader with a familiar story told from an original point of view. In “Bedtime Stories,” by Larisa Jdanova, it is the seed who remembers, and each time the seed remembers something, a new element is added to the story. This essay is a great example of what can happen when the writer asks, “Now what?” or “What next?” and as teachers, we can encourage our students to ask these questions to see if they too can make their stories grow.

Now, like Larisa Jdanova, we must turn on our imaginations and create our own tales.

HILLARY GARDNER
Professional Development Coordinator
CUNY Adult Literacy Program
My travels started from home, my birthplace, a little town in Mexico, where I would play hopscotch with my friends in the neighborhood until midnight. In my quiet and friendly town, I could walk to the candy store by myself to buy my favorite spicy and sweet lollipop. I could walk to school chatting with my friends. I did not need a car. In my town, having a car was a luxury. But I could easily walk anywhere I wanted to go. Only one thing was missing: my mother.

Next came an upside-down place in my life: a sleepy-paced city where I never imagined I would be. Houston was such a boring place that I could not walk to the store by myself. Nobody walked on the street, and the heat was suffocating. Without a car, you could not go anywhere. There were no tiny peaceful streets for walking, only big highways for driving. Sometimes I felt like I was living in an isolated place, where I did not have any friends. But my mother’s and my reunion changed that boring city to a sparkling place. I was lucky because my mother had a car, so I could go to the store and the laundromat with her. When I had to stay in my mother’s house, I used to look out the window for someone or something interesting, but I did not see anything. I missed my life of walking and playing and lollipops in my hometown.

Finally, I travelled to a great place, my last stop: New York. I had never before seen a fast-paced city. Walking in New York is crazy and a big challenge. In the beginning, from the multicolored bright lights on 42nd Street, I could see a sea of people walking fast through the street, people pushing me, others just saying a curt, “Excuse me.” In the beginning, I felt stupid walking in New York. It took me time to become a fast-paced person, too.

I discovered that walking in New York City is like playing soccer because I have to run around and dodge everybody, only with my purse instead of with a soccer ball. I especially like walking in Central Park, with green spaces and people everywhere. I feel like I am part of one of the biggest cities in the world, which I never imagined would feel most like home.
I hope that one day my mother can travel here and walk with me on the streets of New York. Meanwhile, I no longer feel alone. The “Three Lorenas” have traveled from a peaceful hometown in Mexico to an isolated Houston to find a sense of wholeness as one “Lorena” in a vibrant and true home in New York City.

Lorena Deloya, 32 years old, came to New York nine years ago from Mexico. A wife and a mother of three sons, she hopes to become an assistant teacher to preschool children because she believes that education is the key to a successful life. She studies with Tamara Kirson, ESOL lead instructor, at the City College Adult Literacy Program.
Reflections on the L Train
MARTA FERNANDES

When I arrived in New York City, I would take the train from Graham Station to Sixth Avenue and 14th Street. These trips were indescribably hilarious and at times provided reflective moments about life, culture and insensitivity towards people who supposedly are isolated by society. I could travel around the world in a short time, hearing Chinese, Russian, Polish, Italian, Spanish, English, Korean, Hebrew, etc., seeing different styles of clothing, shoes, ornaments, hairstyles and piercings. People were listening to their iPods at such high levels that everybody else could hear. People were reading newspapers and books. Everybody was in the same car but only in body; her or his soul was in a different place because being in this train, in rush hours, is like being in a sardine can.

I remember two different situations. The first situation was in the beginning when I arrived here. The devil took the car I was in! This guy was slim, with implanted horns in his forehead and a terrible goatee. My question, at this moment, was, Why would someone change her or his face to look like the devil?

The second situation happened on a cold autumn day and featured a young woman as the protagonist. I was waiting for my train at the end of the platform. Usually, I liked to observe the different style dresses, people reading books, drinking coffee, etc. On this day, I saw a woman who seemed to be wearing beige clothes, and I remember that I thought, This woman actually isn’t wearing anything. I continued looking at this young woman until I recognized that she was totally naked, except for a little jewelry and a rosary wrapped around her hands. I knew she had a psychiatric problem, but I was totally in shock because everybody ignored this situation. My first idea was to help this person who had lost her mind. But at the same time, I thought, Why doesn’t anybody do anything? I wanted to ask for help, but everybody continued to drink coffee, read books or newspapers, and it gave me a sensation that it was usual to see this in New York City. I was catatonic; I could do nothing, but I had another thought: This is another culture; it isn’t Brazil. However, I was also thinking: My God, what’s happened to this person? Why did she remove her clothes?
... Why? ... Why? Then she arrived very close to where I was standing, and I couldn’t say anything. Finally, my train arrived and I didn’t know what happened afterward with this miss.

Who was suffering from madness: she or we?

Marta Fernandes was born in Brazil. She is 49 years old and has lived in New York for four years. A social worker in Brazil, she has “strong feelings about people, different environments and cultures.” She is thankful to her teacher Anita Mondello at the Brooklyn Public Library ESOL Program, who encouraged her and told her, “Marta, you can do this!”
Almost 12 years ago, I arrived in New York City at my uncle’s house. After a couple of days, I went outside to look for work and make some money. Within a week, I found work in Burger King. My job was only to wipe tables and sweep up if anyone threw anything on the floor. My working time was five o’clock in the afternoon to one o’clock in the morning. Every day I walked home after finishing my work and passed a home where the owners had a beautiful flower garden. So many different kinds of colored flowers were in the garden, and I didn’t even know their names. Every day, when I walked home after work, I appreciated the owner for making a garden so beautiful.

One day, there was heavy rain, and a couple of streets were flooded with water. After I finished my work, I came to the house and I saw the garden sunken under the water. I felt very sad.

The next night, when I passed the house, I observed that the garden was not sunken under the water. I saw the same flowers standing in the same places, none of them destroyed. I was surprised. What had happened? Had all the flowers grown up again within one night? I asked myself, Is it possible? So I went to the garden, touched one leaf and then touched a flower. I saw and felt all of them. They were made of plastic.

Born in Bangladesh, Shaikhul Alam has lived in New York City for 15 years. He studies in the College of Staten Island’s CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP), where Caryn Davis is his teacher. He tells us he feels proud of himself now that people are reading his writing.
This morning I was at home in my dining room reading a newspaper. Suddenly I smelled something fresh and sweet from the window. It smelled like a rose, so I looked over. I had planted jasmine on the fire escape about two years ago, but the flowers had never bloomed. Now, at the end of August, the weather was still warm. I stood in the window and watched the flowers open. In just a few minutes I saw five flowers bloom. Each one opened slowly, slowly and finally popped open.

I was so happy. When I bought the jasmine it was just a baby. Now it was a grownup. It was the first flower I ever planted and it had flowers. The flower’s color was white and very beautiful. Then I looked across the way. In another apartment, like mine, someone had also planted a few pots of flowers on the fire escape.
The Mystery Shop

NADIA MENCO HENRIQUEZ

During one beautiful sunset in my neighborhood in New York City, my sister and I were walking on the street with nothing to do. We were a little bit bored. Suddenly my sister told me, “I have a good idea. I know a store called the Mystery Shop, which is one block from our home.”

I told her, “I was in that store and personally I think they have a lot of garbage.” Nonetheless, I thought that my sister had an odd idea, so I said to her, “Okay, let’s go.”

She led me to the store, and we looked at all the second-hand stuff. I was a little bit afraid because there were a lot of amazing things, like big sculptures of animals, African masks, antiques, and poetry books, things that I never thought I would find in my boring neighborhood.

My sister insisted on introducing me to the owner. I imagined the owner of that store would be a strange old man, but it was the opposite. Surprisingly, the owner was a young and very good-looking guy.

I noticed that the mystery guy was close to us, and my sister introduced me to him. He was stuck, and he began to speak in bad Spanish. So I asked him in my English about a Chinese painting that was on the wall of the store. He began to tell me that that painting had a wonderful legend about a man who was very greedy. He wanted all the gold and the money for himself because he was very rich and selfish. The town where he lived was very poor, and people were sad and angry because that man stole from them. One inhabitant of the town, who was a wizard, was tired of all these barbarities. He wanted them to stop, so one day he decided to put a magic spell on the greedy man. The wizard turned the man into a dragon, and the people in the town locked him up in a cave. Then the people of the town were so happy that they threw a party. After that and over the centuries, that party became a dragon festival celebrated in China every year.

I told the owner, “That is an interesting story. How much does the painting cost?” He told me that the painting was not for sale.

I said to him, “I understand why. You attract all the customers with your fascinating
stories about your treasures.”

He told me, in a sweet voice, “This is my first time telling this story. You are the only customer in all this time who asked me about this painting, and it is a coincidence because it is my favorite in the store.”

I was petrified, and suddenly my sister interrupted us. She was very happy. She told us that she had found an extraordinary thing.

The mystery guy said to my sister, “It is cute.”

My sister asked, “She or my extraordinary thing?”

He smiled. I got red, almost dying of shame.

Thereafter, I have gone every week to speak with my mystery friend about his treasures, and every week he tells me the most interesting stories that I have ever heard here in New York.

Nadia Menco Henriquez, from Cartagena, Colombia, is a 28-year-old actress, poet and sculptor who helped organize Chile Poesia, a poetry festival in Chile. In New York less than 18 months, she studies with Bonny Hart in the City College of New York Adult Literacy Program. She has also performed in galleries, had her first play produced, and now sells her own paintings at the “mystery shop.”
A Super Job
VINCE GLASGOW

My current job as a building super is one of the best experiences I’ve ever had. It took me many years to find this job. I must be a skilled worker in building maintenance: I have to know about plumbing, electrical and general repairs. My job has helped me gain tremendous confidence in everything I do. It has taught me how to communicate better with people, and I have learned to respect the opinions of others.

On my job, I work with many people who need a place to live. I interview them for the apartments that I maintain, and I ask them many important questions to determine their chances of getting an apartment based on their credit history. I have to ask whether their credit is good or bad, and if they were ever convicted of any crime. I also have to inquire if they went to housing court, or if they have outstanding bills that were sent to collection agencies.

Being a super is very challenging. Sometimes people call me names when their apartment needs repairing. They use bad language and slam their doors out of frustration when I leave their apartment. Sometimes they show their appreciation by saying, “Thank you,” and they commend me on a job well done. Some tenants say it is good to have a super that they can depend on, respect, and who respects them.

In my job, two others work with me. They make my job much easier. When I have appointments, my workers are willing to complete the job I have started. Sometimes, we work together, so that we can complete the job on time. I am delighted to work with people who are eager to work hard because they make the job less stressful and more gratifying. I am pleased with the opportunity to be a super.

Born in New York City, Vince Glasgow now studies in the Adult Learning Program of the College of Staten Island, where Donna Grant is the literacy coordinator. He is “grateful to be a part of such a fine program,” through which he “has been able to develop and grow.” He thanks his teacher, Arlene Collins Day, for inspiring him to continue reaching for his goals.
Street Fair Journey
MANTING YIP

The street fair is a New York City weekend activity. Several blocks are closed off for the event. Each vendor rents a 10-by-10-square-foot space and they sell a variety of things—jewelry, scarves, clothes, food and drinks. Some set up shooting games. Some even set up chairs for a massage. It starts at nine in the morning and finishes at six in the evening. Residents walk along the street, enjoying their non-working day by eating, buying, talking and playing in this festival.

On August 23, 2009, three of us, my sisters Wendy and Eunice and I, headed to our first vendor experience in Manhattan. We were going to sell Eunice’s best Chinese dumplings, but first we needed to prepare. We had bought all the ingredients—meat, vegetables and seasonings—the day before. We kept them in small bottles in the refrigerator. We used a lot of containers to make sure the foods were fresh.

On that day, we all got up very early. We washed and speedily cut 13 pounds of cucumbers before packing. We loaded the van and a car with four big bottles of water, three long tables, three ovens, three big frying pans, four big pots, cooking oil, dumpling sauce, napkins, forks, paper plates, a canopy and four big coolers with the small bottles of refrigerated ground meat and vegetables inside. We got to the place before nine o’clock and unloaded everything. We started to set up our space. First of all, we opened the canopy. Wendy and Eunice arranged the tables—one long table for cooking, three ovens on top with the pot and frying pans on them. Our brother helped to connect the propane and to hang up our business sign: Little Bow.

Wendy is good at counting money, Eunice is an expert at cooking and I am the fastest dumpling maker. So Wendy took care of selling, Eunice cooked and pan fried the dumplings, and I made sure that there were enough dumplings for Eunice to cook. Things were all set up and it was time for me to start. I took out only one small bottle of meat at a time, to make sure that the ingredients kept fresh in the hot summer sun. Business started. I had to work as fast as I could.
“The water is boiling. Where are the dumplings? Do you have any?” Eunice yelled.

“Yes. They are in the blue cooler,” I replied.

Eunice started cooking the dumplings. When she put half of the prepared dumplings into the pan, they crackled in the hot oil and they smelled so good! That attracted people and they started heading to our booth. People walked over to look at us and were curious about what we were selling. Some just asked about the price but most couldn’t resist the smell. They bought some, but by ten o’clock, only a couple of orders were gone. At 10:30, there were still not many people buying. We had 10 pounds of seasoned ground meat, 13 pounds of cut cucumbers and a lot of dumpling skins. We started to worry. What could we do? I thought if I yelled out loud, it might be helpful. So I started to yell, “Dumplings, dumplings, homemade dumplings! Juicy, homemade dumplings!”

“Hey, it’s working, ManTing!” Eunice said.

More and more people paid attention to us. They started to come over and try the food. In those moments, I had to work faster. I was rushing to mix the ingredients and make the dumplings. I didn’t even have time to lift my head.

Eunice was cooking like she was running a race. You would even think she was a fast runner the way she was cooking. Sometimes she would say, “The water is boiling,” or “The dumplings are ready to pan fry” or “Watch out! The dumplings are going to overcook.” Even Wendy was very busy taking money and reminding the customers to watch out: The dumplings were very juicy and hot because they were right off of the grill.

We were very busy. The customers were so nice. They were patient as they waited for their food. Eunice was happy to tell us that a customer had come back for a second order. They loved our food. They said these were the best dumplings they had ever eaten. And they were delicious—juicy and fresh. Many more customers came back for seconds. Some told us that their friend suggested they try them.

After a while, a group of people left. The sales started to slow down. No customers. What could we do? This time Eunice said, “ManTing, start yelling again!”

“Homemade dumplings! Juicy, homemade dumplings!”
People started to turn to us again. The day continued like that, with ebbs and flows. By six o’clock, we had sold most of the dumplings. There was only one out of nine of the original containers left when the time was up. We packed up and left. We were very tired but still excited.

Being a vendor in a street fair was not easy, but we learned a lot. It was a pleasure to see people enjoying our food. We did not make any profit; we didn’t even get back what we spent on the food. But we still are very happy about what we did. We think this very first time was a success. The second time will be even better.
A Rain Puddle on the Subway
LAMAR SIMS

Getting on the train can be risky, and going to Brooklyn can be an adventure, to say the least. You can find a lot on the train. There are a lot of people with many different looks. Some of them are gorgeous and stylish. I especially like to see all the different jeans that people wear. Sometimes, I think the train can be too noisy. I hear people talking loudly. Some riders talk so loudly that I think they are talking to me. Mothers often yell at their young children. I prefer a train where I can sit quietly and read my book.

One late night when I was on the train to Brooklyn, I had to step over a drunken man on the floor, as if he were a rain puddle that I did not want to step in. The drunken man had dark hair and olive skin. He was sprawled out on the floor of the train as if it were his bed. The train was not full, so I grabbed a seat right across from him and watched as people came onto the train. They had the same reaction I did. They stayed clear of him.

I was on the train for at least 40 minutes when an older man in a janitor’s uniform came onto the train and went right over to the sleeping, drunken man. He bent down and said, “Hey you! Get up, man!” He slapped the drunken man in the face again and again.

I began to worry that this situation would not end well. I wanted to yell, “Leave the man alone!”

The drunken man fanned away the older man at first. But finally, he said, “All right.” He sat up on one of the seats. The older man sat down next to him and said, “You do not want to lie on the floor.” I could not hear the answer that the drunken man gave, but it was something about the president. Then the two of them began a conversation about politics.

“I would like to be a writer one day; I know I have a long road ahead,” says 29-year-old Lamar Sims. Born in New York City, he studies at the New York Public Library’s Aguilar Language Learning Center, where the site advisor is Elaine Sohn. He explains the genesis of his essay: “When my tutor, John Lichtenstein, asked us to think about a conversation we overheard, I remembered the train ride and decided to give it life.”
One day, my friends and I went to a concert in Brooklyn and when it was finished, we took the subway to Long Island Beach. Once we got there, at 10 p.m., we decided to go swimming. All of my friends said, “You’re not allowed to swim at night!” but nobody cared, and about 10 minutes later, we saw a police light and everybody ran out of the water. When the police arrived, we were already out and luckily, nobody said anything. When the police left, everybody began to laugh. “We’re so lucky!” we said.

An hour later, we left the beach and went to the train station. When it was time to pay, my cousin and I decided to pass together as one person to pay only once, and my other friend went below the turnstile. When we crossed the railing, we said happily, “Give me five!” with our hands in the air. Then we saw a nice person with shorts and a yellow t-shirt, who said, “Hi, come here…” but we didn’t pay attention. Suddenly, he appeared right in front of us and said slowly again, “Come here…” with a police badge in his hand.

We each got a $100 ticket.

The point is, we were lucky, but not twice... It is better to pay $2.25 for a subway ride than a $100 ticket.

Hailing from Mexico, Enrique Lezama Castillo, 21, has lived in New York City for two years. He studies English at Make the Road New York, where his teacher is Gabriela O’Leary. He enjoys rock music, hanging out with friends and meeting new people.
Funny or Scary
ADNAN BHATTI

don’t know if this story is funny or scary. It was 10 p.m. and I was thinking about writing my essay for my CLIP class, when my dad knocked on my door and asked me to go to the deli to buy a gallon of milk. The store was two blocks from my house. It was a cold night and very dark outside. The street light bulb was disabled. There was only the moon’s light, which was very dim, so it was hard to see clearly.

The street was quiet when I started to walk. While I was walking, I saw something black on the sidewalk. I wasn’t sure what it was, so I stepped on it and kept walking. I thought maybe it was a leaf, but when I took two steps forward I felt something heavy under my shoe. I tried to rub my shoe on the edge of the sidewalk, to take off whatever was under my shoe. Then I took my shoe off just to see what it was, but the moonlight was very dim, so I couldn’t see anything clearly.

I decided to smell what was sticking under my shoe. When I brought my shoe near my nose, I almost fainted because I never had smelled dog poop before. It was the worst smell I ever smelled. Disgusted, I threw my shoe. It hit a car’s windshield.

A seven-foot-tall man came out of the car and started cursing me out. He also ripped my shirt off to clean his windshield. I was standing quietly, laughing on the inside. After he cleaned the windshield, he also checked my ripped shirt’s pocket. He found the money that my dad had given me to buy the milk. Then the man took my money and the ripped shirt.

I came back home laughing and laughing. When I rang my doorbell, my dad opened the door. He asked me for the milk, but when he saw I was topless with one shoe on he started to laugh. I told my story to the rest of the family. Everybody started to laugh because that seven-foot-tall man was sitting inside on the couch. My dad had sent me to
buy the milk because his seven-foot-tall friend liked to drink tea with milk. The man gave me back my five dollars, but he threw away my shirt.

Adnan Bhatti came to New York City six years ago from Pakistan. He recently graduated from high school in Brooklyn, “a big honor for me.” Adnan Bhatti studies in the College of Staten Island CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP). He thanks his teacher, Caryn Davis, for teaching him “how to build bridges with other people.”
Stand Clear of the Closing Doors, Please

DONIZETTI DA SILVA

It’s 3:25 a.m. on a Friday, and I’m on the N train coming back home after a 12-hour shift at the downtown restaurant where I work. Unlike my co-workers, I’m a waiter, not an actor. This intrigues me. I have been doing this kind of job for over eight years, and most of my co-workers started doing it pretty much the same time. So why am I still a waiter, but they have been promoted to actors?

I start to relax, and for some strange reason, remember different things I’ve experienced in New York City’s subway. I’m from Brazil and I have been living in New York City for over 11 years. During all this time, I rode the subway daily.

I remember a day on the subway when I was surrounded by Tibetan monks in their traditional costumes. I remember some of the performers—singing, dancing and doing all kinds of things. I remember another time when the subway got stuck, and people inside started to complain about not going home. Then a homeless person riding in the same car started to yell: “Do you all want to go home? Guess what? I’m home. I live here!” Also, I will never forget being trapped inside the train for about an hour on September 11th, 2001. It is also hard not to mention the people who beg for money. I have to admit some of them are quite creative. The one I will never forget is a female midget who walked on the subway using the catch word: “CHANGE!!!” This was the only word she said.

While the subway was still running, I began to think about another story that occurred on a night much like this one. The train was not crowded. There was a man in front of me who was probably Eastern European, and some Spanish guys were two seats from me. At one end of the car, an old lady was talking to herself, and at the other end, an African-American man was sleeping. I noticed that the old lady was having a substantial conversation with an imaginary friend or perhaps with only her conscience. It was hard to know, but from what I could see and hear over 15 minutes, she expressed anger, love,
doubt, sadness, and she also laughed. After the Union Square stop, more people arrived, and she got a little shy, but it was only for a few minutes. Then she started the conversation again. I noticed that when the train stopped at the 28th Street station, the African-American man was still sleeping. Maybe he was also a waiter or an actor. Who knows? Maybe he had already missed his stop? Maybe not. At this moment, two cops decided to join us on our journey. They entered the car from the left side and stayed close to the old lady. They also seemed tired, but they didn’t sit down. I guess New York City police are not allowed to.

When the train reached Times Square, suddenly the faces of the two cops changed. The cops started to walk in my direction, and my heart almost leaped out of my mouth. They walked faster, and as they passed by me, I was relieved. But what did they see? They went straight in Mr. Sleeping Beauty’s direction, and as they reached him, one of them went to the outside and signaled the train’s conductor to stop the train. One minute later, he was back with his partner, and at this moment I was extremely curious. Maybe the man was sick, and they were waiting for the paramedics. As they started to examine the man, carefully moving him, I could see a red spot, nothing big, but enough to catch my attention. Apparently the cops saw it too; I could see concern on their faces. Three minutes later, the train was still stuck. Now it was 3:55 a.m., and I was halfway home. After another five minutes passed, some paramedics arrived. They seemed very worried. For the next 10 minutes, the paramedics and the cops worked hard trying to resuscitate the man, but with no success.

Yes, he was dead! For more than half an hour I had been traveling with a cadaver. It was not the first time I saw somebody dead, but I never had this kind of experience in motion. I guess the most amazing thing is that nobody even noticed his lack of life. After a while, all the passengers were asked some basic questions: Did we notice any movement of the body? Did anybody see another person with the deceased? The Spanish guys could not answer all the questions, so I had to translate with my broken Spanish. “La policia queren saber se ay visto algo suspecho.” At a certain point I saw a question mark over the head of my fellow Latinos. I guess my translation was causing more confusion than clarification, but after few attempts we could understand each other.

As expected, nobody had seen any irregularity, but we were still trapped until they
allowed the train to continue. I thought of changing trains, but this early in the morning it would take a long time. A cab perhaps? No, it’s too expensive, plus sometimes it takes a while to get one, and cab drivers do not always want to go outside Manhattan. So the best choice was to wait for the clearance. I finally got home around 5:30 a.m. I was tired and a little stressed out, but I was sure that tomorrow I’d see or be part of another unique story on the New York City subway.

Donizetti da Silva, 39 years old, emigrated from Brazil 11 years ago. He is an office manager and graphic designer. He tells us, “I love history, computers and also like to observe people’s behavior.” A student at the Adult and Continuing Education Center of the Borough of Manhattan Community College, he thanks his teacher, Charlie Brover, for his support. Denise Deagan is the program director.
GROWING UP

GROUP 2
BYOUNG
CARLOS
JAUKARA
BIN
NENDY

GROUP 4
ROSA
AMPADO
JOSE
JACQUELINE
LILIAM
GROWING UP

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One sunny afternoon in December when the elementary school students were walking back home, my mother was waiting for us in front of our house. My block had many teenagers and children who happily spoke, ran, laughed and played together. My friend James was excited as he came round to my mama with his hands close together. He had something white in his hands, showed it to my mother and said, “Mrs. Luisa! I found it in the park on my way home. Would you care for it, please?” All the kids on my block came to see what James had brought. Inside his hands, a little pigeon with his wings cut was cooing and moving up and down, side to side. My mama took it.

The pigeon was passed from eager hands to eager hands. We quickly found a cage and food and water, even a blanket and toys. We felt sorry for our new friend and wondered who had clipped its wings. The pigeon was a mascot for all my friends; we named him Cotton. He lived in my house. My mama often opened the cage door, and he walked all around my house. When the wings grew back, Cotton could fly around my house and sometimes joined us at the table or sat down on one of our shoulders. He watched TV with us and played with my friends. He even bathed in a bowl of water we would give him.

Eventually, Cotton could fly outside. He stayed out all day long but returned home to eat with us and to sleep. My mama sang and Cotton cooed back at her. For one year, Cotton lived with us. Then one day, he flew out and did not return until three days later. When he came back, he introduced us to a gray pigeon, his new friend, who shared his cage and food for a week.

My mama joked that Cotton had a girlfriend and told him to give her grandchildren. Soon after, the couple flew away together and we never saw them again. We always fondly remember the time we had with Cotton.

Colombia-born Maria Palma is “working hard in order to achieve my dreams.” She studies at the Queens Library’s Steinway Adult Learning Center, whose literacy center manager is Tsansiu Chow. She gives special thanks to Jessica Loor, the assistant literacy center manager, “who has been teaching me with patience and clear explanations. She shows me how I can use these English words.”
VETERANS DAY:
HUNTINGTON, NY, 1960

PATRICIA LANDRY-LOUGHRAN

He took me to the top of the hill to view the parade’s approach. (This was queer, as my dad seldom even spoke of his war). They marched solemnly; we waved little flags like tear-dried handkerchiefs, preternatural salutations—uncomprehended jerks of my six-year-old self.

The crowd lined in respectful silence on each side of the vast avenue, to greet the soldiers’ echo-trodden forward march, many to their final formation of public display. How they came in such splendor of uniforms, each segment separately, like segments of an earthworm, brilliant like a corn snake! From the top of the hill, I saw patterns—a pool of helmets, weapons sheathed, boots and costumes made historic.

My heart leaped at the oldest, the slowest, and the bent and limbless in push-chairs aided by their peers. My father leaned down to me and whispered, “There is your family.”

I know that my father was caught with a baby koala bear aboard ship and punished. (But he was not so nefarious; after all, he was Down Under. . . .) Now it’s 2009, and Veterans Day signifies retail sales and a day of legal hooky.

In Union uniforms, we fought in a New York, Brooklyn brigade—blues worn to a final sleep in Greenlawn Cemetery. Irish bogs and American soil bloodrusted are a nimbus memory; and yet, I still wave my child’s heart handkerchief.

To Michael Glover, blown up in war, 2007. I wiped your little runny nose, dried your tears, fed your little stomach. Thank you, Michael, for your sacrifice.

Born in New York City, Patricia Landry-Loughran, 55, studies at the Goodwill Begin Work Study/GED Program. Her teachers are Jane Adamo and Harry Reyes, and the education coordinator is Cynthia Carrasquillo. Now working toward her G.E.D., Patricia Landry-Loughran hopes to enroll in college in the future.
The Day My Baby Brother Came Home
MARIA JUAREZ

On a rainy and foggy day, my family and friends are outside of the house waiting for my mother.
She arrives from the hospital in my uncle’s car, my aunt covering her and the baby with a raincoat.

My grandmother is in the kitchen preparing hot chocolate for everybody and a delicious hen’s soup for my mom.

Relatives from faraway places bring gifts for the baby boy.

All day the relatives stayed, happy for the newborn.

I can’t remember their faces although I remember the event.
I was three years old.

Maria Juarez, age 49, emigrated from Colombia nine years ago. The mother of two, she is taking a G.E.D. class at the Elmhurst Adult Learning Center of the Queens Library. Her writing teacher is Meaghan Wagner, and Bona Soanes is the site advisor. Maria Suarez writes, “I would like to go on to college and study nutrition. I have great confidence that my success in this class will pave the way for a better future for me and my loved ones.”
Las Panchitas!

FELIX CINTRON

In my home country of Puerto Rico, there was a family named Las Panchitas. All of their ancestors were called Panchitas—the grandmother, mother, daughter, aunts. It was a very large family. All their ancestors had died, but the elderly from the village would tell stories about them, scary stories. My brothers and I were afraid that the scary Panchitas would come out from the bushes when we played outside. People were very superstitious in those days. Many people believed in ghosts and in dead people who would come out from the cemetery to catch people.

I remember one Friday after school. My brother and my friends had started to play when the bushes started to move. My brother Catalino is three years older than I. We always played cowboys and Indians at that time. He was the Lone Ranger, and I was Tonto. We were a group of 20 friends, divided into two groups on the mountain. We were having so much fun, but it became very dark.

Suddenly I looked up in the sky. I saw bright lights on the mountain. I was afraid, and slowly I started walking back. I whispered to my brother Catalino, “Las Panchitas!” I was the first to see the light and remember the story.

Then, all my friends started to hear chains moving and to recall that Las Panchitas would come out from the grave to get us. The name alone made everyone start to run. My friends started to run very fast. They stepped all over me. I was the last one to get home. I went to bed trembling. I thought Las Panchitas would come to get me.

The next morning one of the sons of the Panchitas family told us that he was the one who lit a candle and moved the chains around the bushes, trees and rocks. When he heard our story, he laughed at us with all his heart.

It wasn’t funny to me.

Forty years ago, Felix Cintron came here from Puerto Rico in order to work. Now 70 and a pastor, he thanks Wendy Wen, his teacher at the New York City Department of Education’s School 2 of OACE at Phipps, for encouraging him “to do the best to help the most in my community.” He plans to keep writing: “I have many interesting stories.”
A Life Lesson
MARIAELENA BALLESTEROS

have the most wonderful job on earth. I work at the WIC Program Breastfeeding Center at New York-Presbyterian Hospital, where I am a Certified Lactation Counselor. I have been working with new mothers for almost 20 years.

My grandmother is my inspiration. She was a unique woman. By trying to emulate her simple ways of caring and giving, I am following in my grandmother’s footsteps. In my daily work, I try to provide love and support for families to get a healthy start in life.

In Barranquilla, my hometown in Colombia, my grandmother was the queen of knowledge to my 12-year-old mind. She took care of my uncle’s wife in her quarantine (the 40-day period after a baby’s birth).

To take care of my aunt, my grandmother had a helper who followed her instructions to cook my aunt’s special dishes and to prepare my aunt’s morning bath water with herbs that were previously boiled and had been cooled off. My grandmother combed my aunt’s wet hair out in the sun so that her hair dried naturally, and she would not get a cold. My grandmother ensured that my aunt’s bedroom was sanitized and had proper ventilation, that she wore appropriate garments to support her body after childbirth, and that she had good meals. Most of the time, soup was prepared from baby doves, chickens or vegetables.

The baby stayed in my aunt’s bed, to be breastfed on demand. My sister and I couldn’t make any noise because my aunt needed to rest, and the baby would get scared if we went wild. My uncle slept in the guest room for those 40 days. They lived in our house then, and they returned four more times. Yes, they have five kids, and my aunts, my cousins and my uncles came back to our house for those special occasions.

My grandmother never went to college and had no credentials, but she had great love and compassion for women. With her care, her patience, the way she listened, and her
beautiful smile, there was no need for words to communicate.

I know I will see her again, and I will tell her, “You have never left me. Your love has always been a part of my life, and you are a part of my soul. You are the greatest and most important teacher in my life. Thank you, Mami.”

MaríaElena Ballesteros, 52 years old, moved from her native Colombia to the United States 28 years ago. She studies at the College of Mount Saint Vincent’s Institute for Immigrant Concerns. Her teacher is Lillian Porta, the education director is Mark Brik and the director is Donna Kelsh. MaríaElena Ballesteros’ dream is to become a psychologist.
Dinner at My House

YVONNE BRISTOW

My sister and I have always loved to cook and bake for our family. Everybody loves to eat, but when it was time to wash the dishes, no one wanted to help. If I asked my mother, she would say, “If you don’t want to do the dishes, just leave them.” Sometimes I did, but how long could I leave dirty dishes in the sink?

My brothers never washed dishes because my mother never told them to. They were not willing to help; no way. I became the one who always had to clean up after everybody finished eating.

When my sister cooked, I loved her for that. After dinner was served, everyone would say, “Thank you” to her.

“Thank you again, sister,” I would say.

“As long as your belly is full, I am okay,” she would answer.

My mother would smile. But still she never would say to my brothers, “I think you should do the dishes.”

Yvonne Bristow, a native of Guyana, moved to New York 26 years ago. Now 57 years old, she enjoys crafting, cooking, sports and riding horses. She is a student at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Flatbush Learning Center. She tells us the literacy advisor, Luz Diaz, continues to encourage her to improve her writing skills. Gladys Ortiz is the site supervisor.
Grandfather and Me
BLONDIE

This is about my life in Jamaica. I went to Dalvey Prep School when I was two years old. My grandfather carried me to school every day on his donkey. When I was six years old, I left the prep school and went to big school. My grandfather still took me to school the same way, on the donkey. People used to shout, “Your granddaughter can walk. You have been bringing her from the time she was small until now. She is now attending big school. She is not a baby; let her walk. She is spoiled.”

My grandfather stopped taking me to school. One day, my friends were going to the river, and I went with them. That day I almost drowned. My friends got scared and ran off and left me. A man passing by saw me and came to help. He carried me to my grandfather’s house. My grandfather told me that I would never walk to school alone again. So I was back, safe and sound, on my grandfather’s donkey.

Blondie, born in Jamaica, has lived in New York City for almost two years. She studies at the New York Public Library Center for Reading and Writing at Wakefield, where the literacy assistant is Charmain Hayes. Blondie tells us, “I was happy to come to school at the library to improve myself.”
Superman Saved Me

GELI CHEN

It occurred when I was five years old. I almost killed myself. Perhaps I would not be here if he had come several minutes later. Who was he? He was Superman, a famous cartoon character. He was a good samaritan who always helped people in hard times. I thought he saved me at a dangerous moment.

That day, my parents went out to work. I stayed home, alone and feeling dreary. So I invited several neighbors’ children to my home to play Hide and Seek. I was one of the hiders in the first round. While the seeker was closing his eyes and counting from one to 10, every hider went to find a hiding place. Two of the children were hiding in the clothes chest, and one of the children was hiding behind the door.

I hurried to my bedroom right away and hid myself under the bed. Actually, that was my favorite hiding place. I heard the seeker’s steps from the kitchen to my bedroom. In a second, he had found two of the children. I breathed very carefully and heard the steps coming closer. I was holding my hands tightly in front of my heart and praying that he would not find me. I did not want to lose the game. Unfortunately, I heard him yelling my name, and coming closer, laughing. “Aha, I know where you are hiding. I can find you finally because you’re always hiding under the bed!” Then he bent down and looked at me with a big smile.

I decided I had to win the game in the second round. However, first, I had to find a new hiding place, and it must be a secret one. I looked around my home. I got a good idea. I hurried to the kitchen and opened the door of the refrigerator. Yes, that’s right. That was where I wanted to hide. I could sit inside with ease because I was a skinny little girl at that time. I closed the door, and suddenly everything was dark. I was a little bit scared, actually. However, I thought I could certainly win the game as long as I was hiding in there.

In fact, the smell was very bad in the refrigerator, and I felt extremely cold. A few minutes later, I felt it was even hard to breathe and to move. I was confused. Should I go out or still stay here? After a few minutes went by, I finally decided to go out. I tried to push the door lightly, but it did not open. I was so frightened. I knocked on the door heavily and yelled my friends’ names to come to help me. Nevertheless, nobody answered me. I cried.
and yelled until I had no strength. Gradually, I was shivering with cold, and I began to feel sleepy. I lay down and closed my eyes in the dark.

Finally, I heard somebody yelling my name, and the door opened. I felt warm, strong arms pick me up. The bright light was shining at me, and I just partly opened my eyes. I could not see his face clearly, but I thought it was Superman. At last, when I opened my eyes, I was in my bed and my mother was by my side. I was afraid my mother would reprove me. However, she did not. She was tenderhearted, teaching me how dangerous it was, and why I could not do it again. I cried and nodded my head. I would keep it a secret that Superman had saved me.

Ten years later, when I grew up, I knew Superman was totally fictitious. However, I wondered who had saved me at the time. Then I met one of the neighbors’ children in high school. I thought she would know the answer. Guess what? Superman was my father. I was astonished, and then I was touched. In a hurry, I went back home and hugged my dad.

Geli Chen is 26 years old. Originally from China, she has lived in New York for a year and a half. She tells us she loves her parents for continuing to teach and forgive her, and for their “free and infinite love.” She is a student of Joe Beard at the New York City College of Technology’s CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP).
Xiaoping Deng is a hero in my heart; he saved us and China from danger.

Xiaoping Deng was one of the top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party; he dealt with matters relating to work. However, under Chairman Mao’s revolution theory, Deng’s ability was limited, and he was persecuted during that time.

As an educated teenager, I had to leave my family and go to an out-of-the-way part of the country to work on a farm because Chairman Mao thought that knowledge would bring rebellion, and farmers who lacked knowledge would follow what he said.

During that time, classical music was prohibited in China. If someone sang or played music, they would be accused of “worshipping foreign things” and “fawning on foreign powers.” However, I loved to play classical music on the harmonica. So I chose to hide by practicing harmonica at night with the windows closed. In summer, I was always bathed in sweat.

After the end of Chairman Mao’s period, Deng started to control China. First, he released the educated youth back to the city or gave us appropriate jobs. Second, he put a new policy in effect. He is a hero in my heart.

After Deng released the Chinese people from the culture war, we started to go back to normal life, and I got the opportunity to show off my musical skills. I won second place in the first World Harmonica Competition, which was held in Britain. I really appreciate what Deng did for our country and for me.

Born in China, Shen Ji is 56 years old and has lived in New York City for 17 years. An internationally recognized musician, he plays the classical harmonica and works as a music teacher. He studies English at the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center, where his teacher is Fontaine Dunn and the instructional facilitator is Diana Raissis.
A Painful Memory

MOHAMED JALLOH

It was the month of April, in Conakry, Guinea, in a competition among many schools in the borough of Matoto. This competition was both academic and religious. I was a member of the jury. My role was to correct the answers to the questions about Islam, particularly the sayings of the prophet of Islam. On that day, the competition was taking place in the Bill Clinton School.

After taking our place and checking to make sure all the teams were on the site, we began the competition. The competition was in the semi-finals. Four schools were competing for the final phase. Two schools would win, and two would have to return home. There were many people at the site, and each person was supporting his school team. When the competition got a little bit hard, everyone at the site was quiet. In front of me sat a young lady. I glanced at her and saw she was looking at me, too. I tried to fix my eyes on other things, but now I was thinking about this young lady who was looking at me.

When the competition was finished, the Hassan 2 School team and the Lambandji School team had won and were moving on to the finals, while Bill Clinton and Yimbaya had lost. While everybody was trying to go home, I was trying to see this young lady. I asked one of my friends, who went to her school, what her name was, and he said “Yero Diallo.” Immediately, I walked up to her and introduced myself. After we talked for a long time, I asked her if it would be possible to go and visit her family. She agreed, and we made an appointment. This was how our relationship began.

When I was with her family, they were very happy about my visit, and I learned many things about them. They told me about the day, one year earlier, when Yero Diallo’s father died in a car accident. Her young brother died, too. That information saddened me and concerned me because her mom was already married to another man. This meant that even though Yero Diallo was living in her father’s house, her father’s brother was responsible for the family. Now, it was my turn to tell them my reason for visiting them. Really, I couldn’t wait to tell them that I had fallen in love with their daughter and was looking for her to be my wife. Her uncle’s wife was very well-disposed toward me because I came directly to see the family, according to tradition. She told me that she would pass my request to Yero Diallo’s uncle because he was the only one who could decide about her future, so I went back home.
It was difficult for me to go and see her in her family home, but I kept our relationship going by buying her a cell phone. Now we could talk and exchange ideas. I went to see her four times a week at her school, and always I brought a gift for her. One day, I was surprised that Yero Diallo came to my house with her young sister and told my mom, “I love Mohamed.” My heart leaped when I heard that. After an hour and a half, she left to go back home. My mom said, “Now I see why you have been talking so much on the phone at night.”

Now my family had to go and meet Yero Diallo’s uncle. My father was not in Guinea at that time, so he told one of my uncles to go to meet Yero Diallo’s uncle. In my tradition, when a man wants to be married to a girl, the man’s parents have to see the girl’s parents because sometimes the parents have already promised their daughter to someone else. But in Yero Diallo’s case, it turned out that her uncle didn’t want to give her to someone who did not come from the same village. That was a big problem because I’m from a different village.

I was astonished at her uncle’s objection because our religion says when someone comes to you and asks to be married with your daughter, look to see if he has two qualities: He should have a good character, and he should practice his religion. I was very shocked by her uncle’s attitude. I know that a person will never get something or someone if the Creator doesn’t want it to happen. But in this situation, it was her uncle who disrupted our marriage plans.

Now I live in New York, and my love is in Guinea. Five months ago, I learned that Yero Diallo was married to another man. The man who married her is a friend of one of my best friends in Guinea, to whom I gave my young sister in marriage. I decided to accept this situation. Maybe Yero Diallo and I wouldn’t have had a good future together. Who knows? Right now I am focusing on my education, and my big dream is to be a medical doctor. I don’t have a new love yet, but she will come one day.

Mohamed Jalloh, born in Sierra Leone and raised in Guinea, is 23 years old. He added Allaren (“God is watching you”), the name of his paternal grandfather, to his own name. Now in New York City over a year, he studies with teacher Joe Beaird at the CUNY Learning Immersion Program (CLIP) of the New York City College of Technology.
Memories of a Little Girl in Haiti

VIOLETTE BASTIEN

When I was nine years old, I had a job on Saturdays. My job was to help my mother in the house. Sometimes I went to the river to wash clothing for everybody in the house. I was always very happy to help my mother. When I finished my job and my mother saw that everything was clean, she always said “Thank you” to me.

She always said to me, “I try to prepare you. I don’t want your husband to send you back to my house. It would be a shame for me.” I was nine years old and my family already was preparing me for marriage.

On Sunday mornings, I had to make sure my homework was done because we always went to church. After we finished eating dinner, we would be free to enjoy other activities. We went to the beach. My friend and I liked to collect seashells and take them to my house. I loved the beach. I liked to play in the waves. I loved the smell of the sea.

I remember that the mango tree branches were a second home for me and my friend Yacinte. We were allowed to stay in the branches for up to four hours at a time. When the mangos were in season, we were so happy to eat them. We would count the mango seeds to see who had eaten the most mangos. The winner got a big smile. That was it!

Best of all, the mango trees are still there for other children to climb and play games in. I miss my country and the food. One day, I will go back to visit.

Born in Haiti, Violette Bastien is 61 years old and has been living in New York City for 25 years. She tells us it is very important to her to be a good mother so that her children can learn from her example. She studies at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Central Learning Center, where her tutor is Rochelle McNeeley, and the site manager is Winsome Pryce-Cortes.
REMEMBERING

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Peculiar Creatures with Extraordinary Memory

MAIMOUNA CISSE

’ve been thinking about language and memory a lot lately, and the words *déjà vu* keep whirling in my head. What if we are not learning new words, but rather remembering them? If we were born with all the knowledge we need and somehow have forgotten it, and now we are trying to remember it? We remember words through other words, songs, faces, jokes, names and places. Somehow we feel the urge to remember, to learn and to know. What if there are hundreds of tiny rooms of knowledge in our head, and words are the keys to those rooms? A door opens, and we start exploring. So every time we remember something or understand something, we just say, “Oh, yes,” or “It seems like *déjà vu*.”

We are able to memorize so much, like places we have been and challenges we have overcome. Things that we don’t want to forget, which have made us who we are. I remember “the marriage proposal” like it was yesterday. It was one day before my 15th birthday. My father wanted to give me in marriage to someone of his generation.

“MAI MOU NA,” he called for me, half asleep in his room. I could barely hear his voice. I never liked the way he said my name when he was upset. I thought, just by the way he said my name, *This can’t be good.*

“MAI MOU NA, someone came today and asked for your hand in marriage. Do you remember? I introduced him to you earlier today.”

I replied, “That old man?” I must say, I was not a shy child. Sometimes I think that’s why my father wanted to give me away.

“He’s not old,” my father responded. “He’s only my age, and he will love and care for you.”

I never knew how old the man really was, but my father was 49 at that time. All I could think was, *Does my father hate me that much?* I thought about how old the man was,
his big fat belly, his gray hair, and how I was going to end his life. And I thought about his poor first wife, who would end up without a husband if my wishes came true.

All those memories are buried inside of me, but one word, one name, a song or a similar story awakens them. Words start whirling and lining up inside of my head. If I could see all the words I have learned since I started the English language program, see all my memories whirling above my head, I would have three lines for each word because I speak three languages. For instance, when I think of love, my favorite word, I think of the words friendship, soul-mate and marriage. The second line would be: *amour, amitié, ame-soeur* and *mariage*. If I find English words similar to French, it’s easy for me to memorize them—for example, words like “individual” in English and *individuel*/individuelle*. My last language, the third line of words, is Mandingo. Love! There are so many beautiful ways to say it in Mandingo. I’m smiling just writing about it.

Unfortunately, Mandingo isn’t a written language, so I can’t always translate one word from one language to the other. Sometimes the meaning changes in the translation and the word loses its value or its truthful meaning. Also, in Mandingo there are many words that don’t have specific names, like key, picture, and camera. Instead, we describe them. Camera and picture have the same name—“shadow taker/taken”—and key is “door iron.” Although it isn’t a written language, Mandingo gains new words over time. French is my country’s first language, so most of the new vocabulary in Mandingo is similar to French or sounds like it.

Even though words instill memories in me, sometimes I can’t find the words in French, Mandingo or English to describe the feelings I have, like when I held my daughter in my arms for the first time. Neither can I express how I felt when my four-year-old lovely baby girl gave me a greeting card she had made herself. She stopped playing and spent time trying to spell “HAPPY MOTHER’S DAY MOM. LOVE ROKYATOU.”

We are peculiar creatures with the tremendous power of language and the extraordinary gift of memory. It is through words that we express our deepest desires and our most cherished memories. Yet words do not mimic reality. The linguistic world is another dimension, a place where we can be or do anything our heart feels. We can create and imagine through words what we can’t always do in reality. Sometimes, though, the
tongue doesn’t have enough power to describe what the heart feels. Perhaps that’s why the tongue is locked up inside the mouth and closed by the lips and teeth. We must think, or at least it’s best to think, before we use the power of words. Words will never die as long as we use them. No one can take away our words and the memories that they awaken in us. My angst. My happiness. All words of my heart.

Maimouna Cisse, a native of Cote D’Ivoire, has lived in New York City for six years. At age 27, she is an aspiring fashion designer, who loves to sew, draw and make clothing because it makes her “feel good, special and important.” Her teacher at City College’s Adult Literacy Program is Tamara Kirson, who “says the right words to keep me motivated.”
You love this home, this family home,
What is found on the summer nights, this silver fog.
The hum of trees makes you sleep.
The quiet soothes your tears.

You love this home, this old hut
That talks about old days.
The threshold at the door says “Welcome.”

You love this home, this wet grass.
The red roses smell gorgeous.
The fence reminds you of your childhood.

You love this home, this friendly room,
Your comfortable bed made full of dreams.
How many days will you be there?

You love this home, this old house.
You will always remember this building.
It will be in your dreams forever.

Arleta Bojarska, age 29, was born in Poland and has lived in New York City for five years. She is a student in the Queens Library ESOL Program in Jackson Heights. Her teacher there is Elke Lerman, and Christopher Jornales is the ESOL program manager. Arleta Bojarska describes herself as “a quiet person with a lot of dreams and hopes.”
Living Between Two Worlds

VANIA SOUFFFRONT

came from Haiti four months ago. My siblings and my mother are still in Haiti, although I have started a new season of life in America. My family misses me and I am finding it difficult to be without them, as well. My mind is always in Haiti; I am so sad I can’t sleep and I can’t eat. My mom is very worried about me. She loves her children, and she is always watching out for us. She is often consumed with the problems of her children. Since I left her she has been sick a lot and often cries at night when she sees my bed empty. She calls me every day and tells me she is depressed because she feels the house is paralyzed without me. Physically I am in another world, but my heart is with my mother.

I have been very discouraged since I left my family. Now I am in the United States to begin another season of life, but it sometimes feels like I am not the same person. For me, everything is new. I live with my husband, and there are only two of us in our home. We have created a new family. Since I married him, from time to time I tell him that I will go back to Haiti because I should have done so many things there before I left. I feel bad not being there for my mother. I don’t have any friends here, so when my husband is working, I pass all my time at home by myself.

Although I am very lonely here, each week I have three nice days. Monday and Thursday are the days of my classes, and I am very happy to be one of the students. When I learn a new thing, I feel more comfortable being here. That is why I faithfully go to class even when I feel sad. I don’t want to miss my class. Sunday is also a big day for me because this is the day for God. I can’t live without Jesus. Without Jesus, I would never feel good. I like to pray every day because it makes me feel better, and it gives me peace in my heart.

Sometimes when I feel my mind travelling, I am so confused about where I am. My mind is still in Haiti, but my body is in America. I have been trying to forget the past and move on with my new life here in America, but life is never easy. It is impossible for me to forget my mother and my family in Haiti, but I can live without her in America for a while. During this time, I will work hard to accomplish all my goals and one day, in the next four years, I hope to be able to bring my mother here to live with me.

I think when you are separated from someone you love, you always miss them.
When my fiancé left Haiti to come to America, I missed him all the time. Now that we are married and together in America, I miss my mother all the time. Since I am here it’s important for me to encourage my mom to take care of herself. I hope I will be able to reconcile these two worlds I am living in, so I can be happier soon. I would like my mind to be with my body in America. Haiti is my native country and America is my new country. I don’t want to live between these two worlds. I must be able to live in my new home with fond memories of my native home.

A native of Haiti, Vania Souffront, 29, moved to New York less than a year ago. She studies at the Downtown Learning Center, where Larissa Clark is her tutor, and Lavinia Acosta is the ESOL Coordinator. “Reading is very important,” Vania Souffont believes. “When I read a book I feel my mind traveling to another world because I learn something new.”
A Mi Lindo Ecuador
CARLOS TIXI

My spirit and my heart are witness
to your beautiful mountains at dawn
and rivers that complement the sky.

My spirit and my heart remain in place
to care for you, my pretty homeland Ecuador.

My spirit and heart stay there
caring for your crystalline waters
cressing the cloak of beautiful fields as
the children out of you remember with melancholy and fondness
only one goal in returning some day and
saying I only want you, “mi lindo Ecuador.”

Carlos Tixi emigrated from Ecuador. He studies at the College of Staten Island’s Adult Learning Center Program, where his ESOL teacher is Eileen Cameron. “New York, the capital city of the world, opened its door to me 10 years ago,” he writes. “Thank you, New York, for being a beautiful city and opening your door to receive all foreigners. I love New York!”
Public Transportation in the Dominican Republic

AMBIORIX E. BARET

In New York City, we have the subway, buses, ferries and taxis. In Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic, we also have public transportation. We have carros de concho (gypsy cabs), buses, motoconchos (taxi motorcycles) and the metro (subway).

Carros de concho are like gypsy cabs because people use their own cars but they take the same route as a bus, except they don’t have specific stops. There is supposed to be one person in front, next to the driver, and three in the back; but they put two people next to the driver, and four in the back. If a person is fat, that person has to pay double.

A Dominican bus has a bus driver and a guy who leans out the open door and screams the direction of the bus because the regular bus doesn’t have a signboard on the front. The guy says, “Squeeze together like last night.” When the bus is overcrowded, the collector says, “Pass the money down.” When a passenger says, “Getting out,” the driver can’t hear because the music—merengue and bachata—is too loud. You can imagine that in 97-degree heat around noon.

The motoconcho is like a motorcycle taxi that parks on a corner. When somebody hails the driver, he starts the motorcycle. “Vroom, brr, brr, brr, phut, phut…” The motoconchos make a lot of noise. They are very old, but the owners don’t have money to buy new ones. When the passenger gets on the motorcycle and tells the driver where to go, the driver says, “You want air or no air?” If he says “air,” the driver goes faster, and they don’t use the crash helmet.

The metro is like the subway, but it has only three cars on the train. Each one has the capacity for 30 people, but around 55 people go in, and you can’t feel the air conditioner because of too many people. Sometimes the electricity goes off, and the metro stops for 20 minutes or more. It depends on how long it takes to put the emergency unit on. When the electricity comes back, the metro starts running again to the next station.
It sounds funny, but for years there has been no change. Every country and continent has problems. I don’t need to decry the problems with public transportation in New York because you already know them. People laugh with arms crossed and eyes closed. But we need to take this seriously: It’s time to change. Public transportation is only one of multiple problems we have to solve. I’m trying to advise the people of my country and other countries to do something to help, to get solutions. We need to prepare and educate ourselves in order to help our own countries.

Ambiorix E. Baret, born in the Dominican Republic, is 27 years old. This is his second publication in the Literacy Review. A New York Yankees fan, he thanks God that the Yankees are champions again. He is also very grateful to his writing teacher Bonny Hart and his computer teacher Jim Kleinhenz at the Adult Literacy Program of the City College of New York.
A Special Holiday in Ethiopia
AMANUEL GUDETA

When I was a child, I used to live in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. When I think about my childhood, the only things that come to mind are the things I used to do on holidays.

My favorite holiday was Buhé. It is a religious holiday that is celebrated by Ethiopians on August 22nd, 23rd or 24th; the date may vary from one year to another. On this holiday, kids would make a musical instrument from a stick. Mostly we used the stick of a broom, and on the top of the broom we would attach flat pieces of metal that were pierced in the middle, which allowed a wire to pass through them and hold them together. These metals were tied loosely so they could move up and down to make a sound.

After we made these instruments, we would go from home to home to sing the Buhé traditional song. In return, the head of the household would give us money or mulmul, bread that is baked in a special way. Then we would thank the head of the household and move on to the next house. We would keep all the money and mulmul until we tired of singing. After that, we would divide the mulmul and spend the money. Most of the time, we would buy fireworks. My friends and I would entertain ourselves by lighting the fireworks and enjoying the spectacular view.

Amanuel Gudeta, born and raised in Ethiopia, moved to New York just four months ago. Only 18, Amanuel is determined to do everything in his power to be successful and to make his family proud. He thanks Bill Zimmerman and all the talented and helpful teachers at the College of Mount Saint Vincent’s Institute for Immigrant Concerns. Mark Brik is the education director, and Donna Kelsh the director.
Climbing My Mango Tree
VELMA NOEL

When I was a little girl in Grenada, I had a big mango tree in my backyard. I used to climb to the top of it. It was an old tree. It had been around for a long, long time—maybe forever. I thought as a little girl that it was my best friend. I spent most of my time on top of that tree.

Every time I touched that mango tree, I felt its movement when the wind blew. When I got to the top of this tree, I could smell the freshness from the ocean. I could see the birds flying by. I could see for miles in every direction.

As I looked around, I could see the town of Grenville. I could see Marquis and all the little islands that surround it. I could see the beautiful ocean. I could see the fields filled with cocoa, nutmeg, banana, orange and grapefruit.

When I was on top of the mango tree, I could feel the spirit of the tree. I could taste the saltiness in the air that the wind blew in from the ocean. When I looked at all the beautiful things that surrounded me, I felt happy. I felt like traveling and exploring the world. I used to sing a song: “If I had wings of a dove, I would fly, fly away.”

When I was lonely or sad, I would climb to the top of my tree. I would pick the yellow leaves from its branches. Doing that made me happy.

I miss climbing on top of my mango tree and the happy feeling it used to bring me. Most of all, I miss my friend.

Velma Noel, age 53, moved from Grenada to New York City 16 years ago. She tells us it is very important to her that she is a strong person, and she has a lot of courage and faith in God. She is especially appreciative of her tutor, Rochelle McNeeley, at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Central Learning Center. Winsome Pryce-Cortes is the site manager.
Shh!! Wait and Listen
MARIA LOPEZ

I am from the gully.
I am from the other side of the sky. I am from the mountain house.
I am from the farm area, so I am a farm woman.
I am from the same continent as the United States.
I was born and raised with beautiful birds, cows and chickens.
I am from calm rivers.
I am from the real simple life.
I am from the furthest town. (One day, I went walking with my little sister to the store, which was all the way on the other side of the mountain. It took us half a day to get there, and half a day to come back. My sister cried most of the way because she was tired of walking. I tried carrying her, but she was larger than I. Because I couldn’t carry her, she cried even more.)
I come from the precipitous parts of my country.
I am from the mountain roots.
I am from the fresh air and the green tea.
I am from where there are a lot of eucalyptus trees.
I am from a Spanish-speaking country.
I am from the same country as the rare bird named the Yariguies Brush-Finch.
I am from the strong smell of coffee.
I was and still am the coffee woman.
I am from the same country as Ugly Betty. (Ugly Betty is a TV show, and Betty is the main character. In my country, she is very popular.)
I am from the people who welcome you to their bamboo house.
I am from where the strongest, maximum, highest military discipline is given.
I am from a beautiful place that is sky high, has enormous rocks, giant trees, lovely wildflowers, and colorful butterflies.
I am from where there is poor taste in clothes.  
I don’t fit into the world of beauty, luxury and glamour. But I win people over with my wits and my good behavior.  
I am from the family that was never able to have birthday celebrations.  
I am from the family that was never able to give me Christmas gifts as a child, or keep pictures from my childhood. I am from the family that never had a graduation party.  
Now I am from reading as much as I can.  
Now I am from writing pages and pages and more pages.  
Now I am from books and books and more books—reading part-time, full-time, and all the time.  
Now I am from two beautiful cultures.  
But I never forget my roots and my small, cozy bamboo house with dirt floors.

Maria Lopez, 60, emigrated from Colombia 10 years ago. She describes herself as “starved for knowledge” and recognizes that learning is the key to overcoming all her limitations. She thanks everyone at the New York Public Library’s Aguilar Language Learning Center, especially Elaine Sohn, the site advisor; Eliza Hornig, the creative writing tutor; and Betty Gerstein, the literacy tutor, who is “a blessing.”
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Cow or Chicken?
LAERCIO GRANZOTTO

I’m a person who laughs when I see a piece of chicken or beef at the dinner table. I love to tell my daughter the story just to hear her laugh at it.

It all happened when I was on the flight to New York. As a young man, I could not wait for the evening of August 6, 1985 to end, because the next day would be the day I would take Pan Am Flight 958 to America.

After all the excitement of the day, I was sitting next to my friend Wilson who, like me, didn’t speak a word in English. That didn’t stop us from figuring out which one of those cans in the narrow wagon was the beer. But when dinner time came, the story took a left turn for us when the flight attendant asked us what we would like to eat for dinner.

I looked at my friend, and he looked at me, as if we did something wrong. The flight attendant saw that we couldn’t understand the question. She pointed to the tray and started shaking her arms up and down and making a song like a chicken, then putting her hands together over her mouth and mooing like a cow.

After her theatrical explanation, she looked at us and waited for our answer. By then half the plane was laughing.

Even today, I’m not sure at whom they were laughing because I answered her the same way she asked me: KoKo Ro KoKo Ro!

Laercio Granzotto studies at LaGuardia Community College’s Adult Learning Center. Born in Brazil, he has lived in New York City for 20 years. He thanks his teacher, Ida Heyman, for being “very helpful” in regard to improving his English skills.
A Tiny Room in the Big U.S.A.

OTILIA SOLIS

When I came to New York, I thought all the houses were very big and beautiful, with huge yards and many trees. I thought that I would live in a spacious house, like in my country, where I had a big bedroom for myself.

When my husband showed me his apartment, I was shocked to see a tiny room where my husband lived with his brothers—three tall young men. In this very limited space, they had to do everything: cook, eat, read, watch TV, sleep and dress.

I asked my husband, “Is this the new life for us?”

He said, “No.” He told me that we would live with his sister in her apartment.

I said, “Okay,” and began to imagine how beautiful and spacious that apartment would be. *This is America! America is a huge country. I like its big space,* I said to myself. I saw many times on TV that the houses in the U.S.A. were like palaces.

In the evening, my husband said we would move into his sister’s place. The family welcomed us with delicious food. I was happy, but when I saw our room, my happiness was gone. “Is this our room?” I asked my husband in a low voice.

“Yes,” he said.

It was a very small room, probably smaller than my husband’s previous one. I thought it must be their kid’s room. Toys were in the corner, boxes were under “our” bed. Then, what else? Just a table. It was so small that I couldn’t use it as my desk.

Now I knew I wouldn’t have my own bedroom with a sofa and dressers. I had many illusions, but some ended in seconds, when I set foot in this new land. I said to myself, *Otilia, now this is your new home: a tiny room in this big America.*

Otilia Solis was a teacher in Mexico before coming to the United States, where she has lived for seven years. A student at the New York City Department of Education’s School 2 of OACE at Phipps, her goal is to return to teaching. She thanks her instructor Wendy Wen “for her help in my education.”
Letting Go
MARTHA ORDOÑEZ

We were in our magical place—the ducks in the water, the leaves of the trees moving in the air. She stared at people walking and running while she was sitting in her stroller. She was anxious to get out of it and kicked her little feet with excitement. I lifted her up, and she put her small hands on the stroller. She held on and pushed the stroller to move around the park. Her face was illuminated, like a brilliant star. Her tiny legs could not stop.

Suddenly, she let go of the stroller, and she was walking by herself! She fell down, but she started over and she kept walking. There were many people near her, going places. While they were walking with their big steps, my daughter was testing her first, tiny steps by herself. While people were accelerating their steps, my daughter was trying to improve hers, little by little. She was smiling, and her dazzling smile complemented the colorful Central Park world in which she let herself go.

Martha Ordoñez is a 40-year-old mother from Honduras who came to New York 13 years ago. She studies at City College’s Adult Literacy Program, where Tamara Kirson, the ESOL lead instructor, is her inspiration. Martha Ordoñez aspires to be a counselor, so she can help young people find direction, “in the same way I helped my daughter take her first step.”
My Wife’s Dream

PABLO MARCA

When I met my wife, I told her what I used to do in my country for a living. “I am a mechanic,” I said. She told me that her father, two brothers and brother-in-law shared the same profession as I. Then I said to her that before studying auto mechanics, I used to help my mother work the land of our farm. We used to plant corn, beans, potatoes and all types of vegetables.

Some time after we got married, my wife said to me, “My dream is to eat something planted by you.” Two years ago, we moved to a house, and the landlord told me I could use the land in the backyard to plant. Last spring, I showed my wife how to clean the ground and how to plant. I planted tomatoes, beans, corn, squash, cucumbers and other vegetables. With the tomatoes and cucumbers, my wife made a tasty salad; and with the beans and squash, she made a soup. She felt happy and said to me, “My dream has come true.”

Originally from Ecuador, 32-year-old Pablo Marca has lived in New York City for 11 years. He works as an auto mechanic. At the New York City Department of Education’s Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center, Corinne O’Shaughnessey is his teacher, and Diana Raissis is the instructional facilitator. He is also taking a computer class.
My Ambition
MARY BARRETT

My ambition was to be a writer. I have always admired people who were able to express themselves well through the written word. I believe this to be a special gift.

Throughout my early years, I turned to writing as a means of expressing myself. While outgoing as a child, I was still very shy when I learned the craft of writing at school. I found my inhibitions could be addressed through this medium. All of the things I could not say verbally could now be said in a different way. Growing up was both frustrating and challenging for me. My teachers taught me to channel these feelings in a constructive way. As a result, I began writing essays whenever possible. Book reports given as homework were always met with enthusiasm. Whatever upheaval was occurring in my home life diminished when I was given the chance to write.

All of these efforts came to fruition when I was asked to write a Dutch diary in grammar school. We were told to pretend we were Dutch pioneers and write a daily account of our lives for one week. Times were difficult at home, so I relished the idea of throwing myself into a faraway world. I could be someone else for a little while.

My diary was judged the best in the class. I was happy and yet confused. Should I pursue this as a professional goal, or just use this skill as a means of expressing myself when the spirit moved me? Even as a child, I considered such things. Life would soon tell me the answer.

I went on to work as a secretary and gave up the idea of writing professionally. The need to be practical took precedence. Despite this, I still use writing as a way of coping with life’s daily challenges. Both at work and at home, being able to write has sustained me as a person.

Mary Barrett is a student of Pat Marrin at the New York City Department of Education’s Bronx Adult Learning Center. Born in the Bronx, Mary Barrett has been working in hospitals for over 25 years. “Being able to write has helped me through the most difficult journeys of my life,” she tells us. She would like to get her G.E.D. and work as a hospital administrator.
Discrimination?
DANNY LIU

Discrimination happens a lot, everywhere, all the time. It is bad. The worst is, in my opinion, that in different cultures, sometimes it is quite hard to determine whether something is truly discrimination.

After graduation from college, I worked in a big state-owned company in a big city in China. I worked very hard, in order to learn more, earn more and lay a solid foundation for my career and my future.

Hard work rewards, in most cases. In the second year at my work, my colleague Mr. Zeng and I were borrowed by the mayor of the city to work on a project. We bent over backwards every day, to get the job done and demonstrate our excellence. The mayor kept us longer than the project needed. It was a good sign! That meant the mayor liked both of us, and there was a good possibility that he might keep one of us to be his assistant. I thought I was the better candidate, as not only was I good at what I did, I was also a readaholic; I read almost every book I could get my hands on. Extensive reading enabled me to start a conversation very easily and get along well with all kinds of people. The mayor sent me to talk to people on his behalf whenever he was busy. Zeng was jealous, big time!

But then one thing changed it all. One evening, the mayor took both Zeng and me to have dinner with a mayor from another city. In China, some people take drinking as a kind of contest, and an important way to socialize with others, or “bond” as some Americans call it, especially with new acquaintances. The more you drink, the better the chances that you and the people who drink together will become good friends and partners. I couldn’t drink much; two bottles of beer could slide me under the table easily. But Zeng could drink, and he proved it. That evening at the dinner, Zeng drank a lot of liquor for our mayor and defeated everybody from the other team. Shortly after that dinner, Zeng became one of our mayor’s assistants, and I was sent back to the company I had worked for earlier.

I don’t how people would react under the same situation here in the States. Sue the mayor, I guess. But in China, even now, I think probably the best thing to do is to practice more, to enhance your drinking ability.
Although I was mad that Zeng had gotten the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, we became best friends afterwards. Whenever I am in China and having dinner with somebody who can drink, I give him a call.

Born in China 44 years ago, Danny Liu reports that he traveled to “a lot of places in the world” before he “eventually settled down in New York City.” He studies at the Queens Library’s Adult Learning Center in Woodhaven, where his teacher is Anita Mondello. He tells us he “goes to the library a lot” and New York has “the best library system in the world.”
Dear Emil,

I know that you will never receive this letter because you have been dead for nine years. You can’t imagine how sorry I feel about what happened. We were friends for so many years. The feeling of sorrow will never leave me. Yes, I was guilty, all of us were guilty of being friends who didn’t take your problems and fears seriously.

When we graduated from school, I went to college, but you enlisted in the army. You could have easily gone to college but you didn’t, because of the conflict you had with your father. You had to avoid all his complaints about your not being man enough: What’s wrong with you? I don’t feel like I have a son. You’re 14—why don’t you have a girlfriend? Shame on you, boys don’t cry. Be a man.

He wanted you to be just like him, strict and strong; he didn’t understand that people are different, each with strong and weak parts. But how could you become a man without feelings? You had four older sisters. You loved your father so much that you felt you were not good enough for him. You wanted to prove to him that you deserved his love and respect.

When you came back from the army, everything had changed. You had changed. You were so different from who you had been. You became just like your father always wanted you to be. You were cold, so cold—almost emotionally dead. You became one of those “guys from the block,” selfish and proud of being bad. But it wasn’t the real you. Now I know that it wasn’t entirely your fault that you became a drug addict. You just needed a little help to get over it, or at least somebody who would understand what you had been through.

It’s a fact that many soldiers come back from war as drug addicts. You weren’t an exception. You were sick. You needed help, urgently.

Today, I understand that many of the unpleasant things that you did were not done
by the real you, but by the addicted person you became, dishonest and indifferent. Emil, you were hurting people so easily, without even noticing it. And your job as a barman at a nightclub so fit who you became. Many girlfriends, countless parties and your being high—it was terrible. To be honest, I was afraid of you. Maybe people who know how drug addicts behave can understand me. Of course, my fear is not an excuse. I just want you to understand and forgive me. You will be always in my heart. Rest in peace.

Your friend forever,

Kamilla

Kamilla Aghababayea, born in Azerbaijan, is 28 years old and has lived in New York for five years. She lives with her husband and two daughters, enjoys reading books and going to the movies. She studies English at the Adult Learning Center of the New York City College of Technology and is thankful for her teacher Jay Klokker’s help and support.
First Letter to My Father
HUNG (MAY) SELTZER

Dear Father,

Do you know I miss you very much? You left me 23 years ago. But your look and your smile are still in my mind very clearly, just like yesterday. So many nights I cried and woke up because I missed you.

You gave me a healthy family. You let me have a good education. You taught me to study hard, never give up and be the best I can be. You also taught me that there are no short cuts to success. I must work hard. You’re a good father. I’m proud of you.

I want to tell you what’s going on with me. You might have many questions. How’s my life? Why am I writing an English letter to you? It is time to tell you what’s happened.

First, I married an American. He is not Chinese. But he’s a nice guy and we love each other. I hope you accept him as your son-in-law. Second, I’m taking an English writing class. The teachers and students are very nice. I’m so happy in this class and I want to share that with you.

You’re the first person that I am writing an English letter to. I hope you can understand. But don’t worry; I will bury this letter with a Chinese-English dictionary for you. You have to try to read it. Don’t give up. If you still don’t understand, you can come in my dreams and I’ll help you.

I will keep writing English letters to you so that you know your daughter’s writing is improving every day. I want to make you proud of me.

I love you.

Your daughter,
Hung Seltzer
P.S.: Don’t be scared, you’re not getting the wrong letter. “Hung Seltzer” is my married name. I hope you like my new name.

Born in Wuhai, China, and a successful businesswoman in Hong Kong, Hung (May) Seltzer tells us, “I came to New York City as a visitor and decided to spend the rest of my life here.” She studies English at the University Settlement Society, where Michael Hunter directs the Family Literacy Program. She writes, “My goal is to speak fluent English.” She thanks her husband, Joshua.
My granddaughter is six years old. Her name is Dora, but we call her Dee Dee. She is her own person, who pretty much does what she wants to do. One day she insisted on tying her own shoes. She thought tying her shoes meant stuffing the laces inside her shoes. When I tried to teach her how to tie her shoes, she would not let me. She cried. I was wrong. She was right. Like I said, she has a mind of her own.

Joanne Bradford, age 42, was born in South Carolina but has spent most of her life in New York. She attends the Brooklyn Public Library’s Bedford Learning Center, where Haniff Toussaint is the literacy advisor, and Edith Lewis is the site supervisor. Joanne Bradford appreciates her tutor, Eugenie Birdsong, for helping her to love reading and writing.
Good evening, Mom. How are you?” my son Wyman greeted me by phone last Thursday.

“Good evening, Baby. I’m fine, thank you,” I said to him.

“Mom, I admire how hard you study, but the most important thing is that you’re healthy. Dad told me that you never listen to him. Even when you’re sick, you still go to school regularly. Is that true? Are you getting better now? Has your temperature gone down? I will take you to see a doctor tomorrow, okay?” He went on relentlessly with his questions.

“No, no, no, honey. I know myself. School time is my blissful time. Please don’t worry about me. I am an adult, your mom. I am getting better now. I really thank you for your greeting and offer. You have a lot of things to do every day. Your father takes good care of me. It is getting late. Please go to bed early.”

I was afraid that my husband and son would not allow me to go to my writing class the next day, so I urged my son to go to bed early.

“Mom, one more thing: many con artists have been on the computer and telephone, and in the newspaper and street. It is very serious. You have to be careful about that. You must not have dust thrown into your eyes. They are very cunning. Remember: Never tell a stranger your personal information. There are a lot of people who have already been fooled.”

“Well, I know, I know. I wanted to tell you that too,” I interrupted his speech.

“Mom, please don’t mind me. I am just giving you a suggestion. According to our Chinese habituation, children have to listen to the counsel of their parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts. But I know you are an enlightened and approachable mom. So I do not have a frightened feeling when I talk to you. Well, it’s getting late. Goodnight and take care! Oh, please remember to take your medicine on time. Do you know your health is the happiness of our whole family? If you want to talk to me or need help, please let me know. Feel free to call me anytime. Goodnight and take care. Goodbye.”
“Goodnight and thank you. Goodbye.”

“Peter, our son has grown up. No matter what, we are getting older,” I told my husband, smiling heartily.

“Yes. Yes. It’s time to take your medicine. You are the baby in our family now,” he said in a witty jest.

His jest made me happy. I grinned in approval.

Ming Xian (Cindy) Lin was born in China and now studies at the University Settlement Society, where Michael Hunter is director of the Family Literacy Program. Two years ago, her essay “I Want to Be Literate!” was published in the Literacy Review. She has progressed so much that, as well as a student, she is now an assistant teacher in the advanced writing class.
Pig Ear Dinner
BERTHA SANCHEZ

One day, I didn’t have money to buy food to cook dinner.
I had a bottle that I put my pennies in, so I counted all the pennies, and all I had was five dollars.

I went down to the supermarket, and I bought me some pig ears. When I got home, I started to cook the pig ears for my kids. At that time I had only Jessica, who was five years old, and Alejandro, who was three years old.

I set the table, and when I was done I called the kids to come in because the food was ready. Jessica and Alejandro ate the food that I made for them. After they were done, they told me they were happy and the food was very delicious. So I told them that what they ate was pig ears.

My kids looked at each other, and Alejandro ran to the bathroom because he wanted to throw up. So you see, at dinner at my house you never know what you are going to eat next.

Bertha Sanchez, a 43-year-old native of Guatemala, has lived in New York for 24 years. Her dream is to become a nurse. She studies with teacher Kristin Winkler at the Bronx Community College CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP). Her husband and two younger children accompanied her to the Literacy Review photo shoot, and the two boys said they have not acquired a taste for pig ears.
Lost in Translation
BRAULIO MORA

Many years ago, when I arrived in the United States from my country, Ecuador, I had a big problem with English. I couldn’t write, and I could hardly understand or say even a couple of words in English.

One day, I needed to buy bulbs for my house. I went to a store, and I saw a guy who was helping customers. I didn’t know the word “bulb,” so I decided to approach him and ask for help.

I came up to him and asked, half in Spanish, half in English: “Mi amigo, give me two focos, por favor.” You had to see his reaction: First he was surprised, and then he started yelling at me, saying words that I didn’t understand.

One thing I understood: I had insulted that person. Two employees came up to me and asked me to leave the store immediately. One of them told me that the person who got very angry with me was the manager of that store.

Later I was told that the word “bulb” in Spanish sounds similar to an inappropriate word in English.

Even now, when I buy or change bulbs, I remember that embarrassing incident that happened to me many years ago.

Today I am a student in a program where my teachers help me improve my English. I understand and speak English fluently.

Braulio Mora, 50 years old and a native of Ecuador, has been in New York for 18 years. In Ecuador, he worked as a music teacher for young children and played violin in a symphonic orchestra. Here in New York, he plays violin in his free time for his friends. He is a student at BEGIN Managed Programs, Brooklyn, and is very thankful to his teacher, Alvard Berberyan.
IMAGINING
Here I am again. Another monotonous day in my ruined life. Within these three walls. Yes, three walls. This is no more than a nasty box in the form of a square. The bed is a cement bed, the food is disgusting, you can’t brush your teeth three times a day and you have to exercise every single day.

In this place, you have to learn how to be a hyena, as I have done. You cannot act like a child. You have to be a hard woman. Sometimes you need to demonstrate that you are wilder than you look if you want to survive in this jungle. That’s what I call it: a jungle.

Please, do me a favor. Don’t think that I am here because I did what a lot of people call a crime and others call a sin. I don’t care ‘cause I don’t believe anybody except me.

One thing is sure: I am not the person I used to be before I got here. This situation changes people’s lives. It does. I didn’t just change because of this lifestyle, but because people took advantage of me when they saw that I was a good person, kind and all that stuff. So I decided it was time to be different. I got tired of being too nice and humble and hopeful. That’s why I am here. I defended my best friend when she did what she did, and they gave more years to me than to her.

The crime was committed in front of my box, when one of my partners started to argue with me about something that I really hate. She called me “retard” and also mentioned my mother. This drove me crazy to the point that I almost killed her. So now I have to live more than 30 years here. Can you believe it?! I needed just 20 years to get out of this disgusting box, and now I need more than 30.

Sometimes I think that male hormones have begun to develop inside my body. The hatred for good people has overpowered me. I have even started to hate my mom a little bit, even though she is the only person I have, because she is always telling me what to do although I’m an adult. But at least she supports me. She is the only one who thinks that I did not commit any legal mistake before I got here. Dad, who always looked at me like the princess of the house, who even helped me with my homework when I was a child, is
the one who doesn’t want to hear about me anymore. My two brothers have never called or visited me; I imagine that they have their own lives, but I don’t ask Mom about them because I don’t want to look like a person who is interested in others. Things have fallen deep down. I don’t care about anybody, and nobody cares about me, so we are equal now.

I have thought many times that this is a totally ironic world, because when you try to be better is when worse things happen to you. That’s the lesson I have learned.

I want to stop seeing the world through these gray bars. I am sick of it. I don’t know if it is day or night, or how many hours have passed. Sometimes I don’t know if I am awake or if I am living in a dream. I have concluded that even God makes a lot of mistakes.

The only things I really hope for are to see this nightmare over and to have wings to get out of here.

Actress, artist and poet Milagros Almonte, from the Dominican Republic, is 18 years old. She has lived in New York City for over a year, has participated in the All Stars Project of New York, and has written a collection of poems in her native Spanish. She studies with Amanda Johnson in the Developmental Skills Department of the Borough of Manhattan Community College.
Here
NECLA TUMEN

Here I am in the bakery shop
With a young lady with dimples
And beautiful cookies, in all
Shapes and sizes.

How did this happen?
Well, that’s who I wanted to be.

At last, a lady
In the new style. She is
Buying a chocolate cake with
Strawberry frosting, and two little
Kids are eating big cupcakes
With cream on top in the
Bakery shop.

That’s my little Bobby
In front of the bakery shop.
He’s looking at the baker,
How he makes homemade breads
And sweets,
and
I am suddenly wanting to eat
A big pie with strawberries
And cream,
Sitting on a couch.

It’s a perfect place to stop.

Sneak a peek in the bakery shop.

Necla Tumen, age 43, came to New York City from Turkey 10 years ago. She studies English at the Brooklyn College Adult Literacy Program with teachers Cheryl Georges, Louise Mancuso and Phyllis Rada. She wants to learn English to communicate better and to help her children in the future. She also plans to work in the library.
When my daughter was a baby, she liked to listen to fables before she went to sleep. Sometimes, she would ask me to tell her something new, so I turned on my imagination and created my own fairy tales. My stories were about people, animals and plants; they all were good and wise, to help my daughter develop a correct perception of the world. I believe my fables awoke in my child all the best feelings and brought her light and joy, hope and faith, mystery and inspiration. One of her favorite fables was the story about a small grain. The story started with these words…

Once upon on time, a small grain lay on the ground, basking in the sun.

What a good sun, thought the seed. Its warmth is so pleasant, radiating on me. But why am I lying here?

Then the seed started to remember. The first thing he remembered was that he was not always rounded.

Exactly, exactly, because I once was a twig on the side of a branch on which I hung.

He started to look at his side, where he had a twig, and suddenly from this place a stem grew up. It got longer and longer until it grew into the ground.

And where are the leaves? After all, there were still leaves. . .

Suddenly, on the other side of the seed, a couple of little seed leaves opened up, and they rushed up and spread.

Oh, but I am not a grain, I am a stem, said the stem, as it began to stretch toward the sun.

Along the way, he remembered that he had not only one twig, but in the places where they had been before, new germs grew.

And leaves, leaves! I had a lot of leaves!

He was covered with a huge number of leaves.
“Well! I am a tree!” the tree cried, and because it was so happy, flowers bloomed on it. “I want to share this discovery with other grains, but how will I do it?”

Suddenly, the seeds began to form in place of flowers.

“Wow!”

The tree swung its branches, and thousands of small grains scattered in all directions around the field…

This story could be prolonged, but let me leave it like it was finished. One day, I think, my daughter will create the perfect end to this fable for her children.

Larisa Jdanova moved to New York City from Uzbekistan three years ago. She loves to write. “My imagination opens the way to my creativity and my stories come alive.” She studies at the College of Staten Island’s CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP). Her teachers are Caryn Davis and Azadeh Leonard.
In the Beginning
EDWARD SEABRON

You can find me on riverbanks and ponds.
I come in many different colors.
You can find me in tracks near riverbanks.
Sometimes you find me in your backyard.
I can travel home with you, but I’m not allowed inside.
I show up when it rains.
Kids like to play with me.
I am a recipe of water and dirt.
My name is mud.

Edward L. Seabron, 57, born in North Carolina and raised on a farm, moved to New York in 1970. Married, with two children, he is a skilled cabinetmaker and machinist. He studies at the New York Public Library’s Bronx Library Center, where Barbara Martinez is the site advisor. This is his second publication in the Literacy Review.
I Reached the Moon

PING LI

It was the year I was seven years old. My relatives and I got together in my grandma’s house to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival—a Chinese traditional festival. The main activity took place after dark. The whole family sat in the yard around a big stone table on which was laid a feast, including moon cakes, grapes from our vine, dates from our tree and dishes with pork, which were my favorite. Some red lanterns hung on a wire across the yard. They made the place bright like daytime. The weather was warm, the sky was clear. There was a big bright full moon hanging in the dark sky.

We kids ate food and ran around among the flower bushes. We were very happy. My grandma was amiable. I could see a smile always on her face. She loved kids. I remember that after the dinner, my grandma sat on a chair while several children sat on stools around her, listening to the story about the moon.

My grandma told us that the moon was a cold palace. There were some people living on it. A young man lived there, whose name was Wugang, and he had the skill to make wine with the flower of the huge laurel tree. His wife, named Chang Er, danced well. She wore a beautiful pink silk skirt that flowed with her dancing. She also held a cute red-eyed white rabbit while she danced. They lived a happy life there. However, they felt lonely. They welcomed us to go to the moon to play with them.

Late that night, my body suddenly became lighter. Like a balloon, I flew up in the sky. I felt a little bit dizzy. But then I closed my eyes, flying with the wind. I knew it was the moon when I landed and opened my eyes. It looked flat and clean like a mirror, the same as I had seen it from Grandma’s yard. There was no Wugang, no Chang Er and no red-eyed rabbit. I looked around; nothing was there. However, I heard somebody speaking. Listening carefully I figured out—oh!—it was my grandma’s voice. I wondered if she had followed me there. Who was she talking with? Had my sister come with her? I kept looking around and felt a little bit cold. No wonder, the moon was a cold palace, as Grandma said.
Suddenly, someone sneezed nearby, and I couldn’t help sneezing again and again.

I woke up and found myself still sitting in the yard. Everybody was there. I thought over the dream. I wanted to go back to it again. It would have been even better if I could have met the moon residents or held the red-eyed rabbit.

Ping Li describes herself as “a domestic diva” and names reading and writing as her hobbies. She emigrated from Beijing to New York City four years ago. She thanks the many teachers who have helped her to learn English. Ping Li studies at the New York Public Library’s Center for Reading and Writing at Tompkins Square, where the site advisor is Terry Sheehan.
Haiku I & II
RASHEL MINEVICH

HAIKU I

I’m trying to sleep.
Looking down tomorrow,
I see just yesterday.

HAIKU II

November. The orange leaves
outside my window circle.
Soon, winter.

Rashel Minevich came to New York City from her native Russia nine years ago. Collections of her Russian-language poetry for children have been published in Moscow. She currently studies English at the New York Public Library ESOL Program at Riverside. Her teacher is Maria Neuda.
Listening to St. Croix’s Vision I
MOHAMMED SHOHAG

One day, my teacher played a DVD in our classroom. I had never heard music like that. It was my first time. When she played this music, everything seemed sleepy and scary. After that, I thought about it. What type of music is this?

I think it’s very old-fashioned-sounding music. I think this sound is like a jungle where many different types of animals lived. Some of the animals had enemies. Sometimes the enemies hunted. The poor animals could not live very comfortably. The poor animals’ lives were sorrowful, painful and sad. They lived like that day after day, year after year.

Then one day, all the poor animals of the jungle called a meeting to get together to think about what they had to do. Finally, they decided they should fight for their lives, happiness and freedom from their enemies. All the animals joined together. It was midnight in winter. They told one another, “It is not time for sleeping; it is time to wake up, run, fight for our lives and freedom. So let’s go attack our enemies.”

They fought with their enemies. The animals were killing each other. Eventually, the poor animals got back their happiness, lives and freedom.

Born in Bangladesh, Mohammed Shohog, 25, has lived in New York for five years. He studies English at the Adult Learning Center of the New York City College of Technology. Sally Freeman is his teacher. He enjoys funny movies, drawing and dreaming.
A bird is singing outside my window
Its song is long and soft
It is an autumn morning
My house feels cold, the heat is off
But everything outside my window seems warm
The colors of the ivy wrapping the few trees in my backyard
The tall brick wall, the sun…
I can’t see the singing bird yet
But perhaps tomorrow when all the leaves have fallen off
I will see the bird outside my window

Tania Espinoza is an ornament designer and sculptor, a yoga instructor, and an independent TV producer. Ten years ago, she left Guayaquil, Ecuador to live in New York City. She studies English at the New York Public Library’s Center for Reading and Writing at Seward Park. Her tutor is Ruth Meehan; the literacy assistant, Hilary Shencker; and the site advisor, Terry Sheehan.
A Letter to Santa
IRYNA MATSVEYENKA

have never before written a letter to you, but I’ve always wanted to. I would like to share my feeling about the magic and wonderful time of Christmas when you have always been with us. I also want to say I’m sorry about something and ask you to do something for me.

I remember Christmastime from my childhood very well. My parents would always buy Christmas trees, and the pine scent filled the room with freshness, giving a feeling of the holiday. My mother and I would buy a few new ornaments every year, and they have remained with me until now. I like to open that box and look at the things inside it because for me that box is a time capsule. There are old colored lights, glass balls and tinsel, which I used to decorate the Christmas tree and the room. All those decorations made the room so special and beautiful. In the morning, when I found the bag with candy, nuts and tangerines under the Christmas tree, I felt unforgettable happiness and magic. I believed you had brought me that bag. That’s why I would always leave the window open.

But I want to say I’m sorry about something. One Christmas night, I took your place. When my daughter was three years old, I disguised myself as you. I wore an old red coat, which I made look like yours. Also, I knitted red mittens for my hands and found a red hat. I wore red makeup and a fake white beard. To carry the presents, I had a bag made from a pillow case and decorated with silver stars. It was funny for me to disguise myself as you because I had to change my voice. My daughter didn’t figure out the fakery, so I was a good copy of you. I remember my daughter’s surprised eyes and her tiny voice because she was amazed to see the magic in that night.

Santa, now I have a wish. I wish everybody would experience some magic at Christmas. If people experienced good and unforgettable things, it would make them kinder
and better to everybody around them. The memories of the magic would help people get through the bad times. Santa, I ask you to make my wish come true.

Iryna Matsveyenka, 37, emigrated from Belarus to New York City with her family six years ago. She works full time and studies English at the Adult Learning Center of the New York City College of Technology. Jay Klokker is her teacher.
was born on the night of a full moon, and I’ve always been fascinated by the moon. Every time the weather would allow us to see it, I would be at the window or outside, waiting for the moon to appear. It was a kind of precious moment.

Another kind of precious moment came when my father would unite all of the children in the family to talk about the events of the day: our day in school, our behavior, our obedience and, specifically for the younger ones, how we acted with Mom at home. These moments came before bedtime, when we would also hear stories read or narrated. So, one full moon night, my father told the story Petit Jean (Little John).

Petit Jean was a boy who was very disobedient. He was disrespectful and did not want to help his widowed mother with the farm chores. Petit Jean disliked school and would kick his classmates for no reason. He was a lazy boy and would spend all day playing or going fishing, not going to school.

All the barnyard animals on his farm were beaten by him on a daily basis. The cows were hungry and thirsty; when they could not provide milk, they were beaten as well. They would moo all day, making the farm the noisiest place in the area. The hens were so stressed, they would not lay any eggs, or they would do it in the field, where no one could find them. Petit Jean’s mother, a brave, hard-working widow, could not make money anymore from selling milk, eggs, or other farm products. She often begged him to change, to be a good boy. He would shout at her; he would not listen to her. He would treat her disrespectfully. Petit Jean thought no one saw him when he did his mischief. But the moon and the sun witnessed all of Petit Jean’s behavior.

Early one night, his mother told him to bring a bundle of firewood home, so she could cook dinner. Outside, full of rage, Petit Jean started to kick rocks, destroying his only shoes (which his mom could not replace for him). He met some nocturnal animals and started to throw things at them, wanting to hurt even the night creatures. He captured some bats in a bag, and was in the process of killing them. Finally, the moon got very mad, came down and picked him up. Petit Jean never came back to Earth. He was stuck on the moon forever.
Ever since my childhood, I have kept looking at the moon, knowing that Petit Jean is there, never growing up, the bundle of firewood still in his hand. This was such a persuasive story that I still think it is true. My father did not tell us how Petit Jean’s mother cooked dinner that night, or how she handled her son’s disappearance. That story kept my siblings and me quiet and well-behaved for a while. We brought happiness to our parents.

Now I work with children, and I have shared this story with all of them. But for the best impact, it has to be narrated outside when the moon is shining.

Originally from France, Viviane Kando, 45, moved to New York five years ago. She enjoys studying English with ESOL Coordinator Lavinia Acosta at the Downtown Learning Center. Viviane Kando “would love to speak English without any difficulties and maybe one day write a book.”
When my mom had been pregnant with me for only five months, she was told she was having a miscarriage, but God had other plans. I was the first-born child of Astrid Martinez. When I arrived in Brooklyn on July 2, 1971, I fit in the palm of my mother’s hand. My grandmother dressed me in hand-knit clothes that could have fit a doll. They never gave up on me.

When I was eight months old, the doctors discovered I had cerebral palsy on the right side of my body. It could have been avoided if the doctor who delivered me had not administered too much oxygen during my birth. My mom was very distraught. She was told I would never walk.

While growing up, I was confined to a wheelchair. Basic activities were very hard for me. I used to watch other children play, and I felt alone and sad, wishing I could walk and play with the other kids. In 1986, at the age of 15, I was introduced to a doctor at the Blythedale Children’s Hospital in upstate New York. He told my mom, “Your son can walk if you allow certain operations to reconstruct his hip and implant artificial limbs.” The process was going to take up to two and a half years. My mom agreed to the operations.

In June 1987, I was admitted to the hospital to begin a rough road of 10 surgeries and physical therapy that would cause a lot of pain. Remember, I had never walked. I had never used my legs. I barely saw my mom during this time, as she was working to pay the hospital bills and it was hard for her to travel to see me. I used to see my mom once every four months. It was a very sad point in my life, but I understood. She would tell me to be strong; she was not going to give up on me.

On April 2, 1989, my mother came to the hospital to visit me. When she noticed I wasn’t in my room, she looked for me in the bathroom. I wasn’t there, either. Where was I, she wondered. Where could I be? As she approached the nurse’s station, there was a young man standing there with a bouquet of roses covering his face. “I love you, Mom,” I said, as
I walked for the first time at the age of 18. I was so scared I was going to fall. As she turned and saw me, she fell to her knees and passed out. As my mom came to, she said, “I am so proud of you. My prayers were answered.”

I’m 38 years old now. I’m in school learning web design. I am the proud father of four beautiful children and a big brother to my younger siblings. They all draw on my life experience to guide their own life lessons, but that’s another story. This is my story.

Jose Vasquez, 38 years old, was born and raised in Brooklyn. He studies writing with Corinne O’Shaughnessey at the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center, where the instructional facilitator is Diana Raissis. The father of four, he is also taking a course in web design with the hope of opening a computer center for children.
My Early Life
JAMES HARRIS

I was born on a farm in North Carolina. My mother and father moved to Baltimore at the end of the Great Migration, but when World War II started my father was drafted into the army. I was around seven or eight years old at the time. There was no room for me with my mother, and I was the oldest, so back to my father’s family on the farm I went.

It was a big farm, 25 acres or more. We had to share it with my grandfather’s brother and his family. The main house was big and three stories high. From the main house, you had to walk outside across a short porch to get to the kitchen and dining room. There was a big oak tree, which had roots running everywhere; I stubbed my toe on it many times. Just behind the kitchen were the smokehouse, chicken coop, and the grapevine where the guineas roosted at night. On the other side of the house were the corral and the outhouse. There were four peach trees on each side of the path leading to the outhouse.

At the beginning of July, we harvested the tobacco, which had to be strung and hung to dry by dry heat. In August, we started picking the cotton. Nobody told me how to do it. All they said was, “This is your row. Do it.” At the end of the day the yard boss would weigh the cotton that each person had picked and log it in the book. Then, at the end of the week, we would get paid. I had to pick at least 50 pounds a day. No matter how hard I tried, I could not do it. And I suffered for it all through the harsh summer.

By the front door was a three-foot switch. At first, I didn’t know what it was for, but I soon learned. At the end of the day, my grandmother would ask, “How much did you pick today, boy?”

“Fifteen pounds.”

“Go git me a switch, boy.”

And then I made a big mistake. My Uncle George told me to strip the bark off the switch when I handed it to her, so I followed his advice.

When she saw it, she said, “Oh, you are trying to be funny, huh? I’ll be right back.” She came back with what looked like a small tree and wore it out on me.
I was about 10 years old. This was when I knew I had to get out of there. My back could not take much more.

But I caught a big break. In September, Aunt Vick came to visit, so for two weeks there were no more beatings. I had time to play and get to the grapevine. The grapes were ripe and juicy and sweet, and I could eat all I wanted. I also hid under the porch and listened to folks talk about things that happened to Aunt Vick at work. I learned a lot, hiding under the porch, but the most important thing was how to travel from town to town.

So the next Saturday when my family went one way, I went the other. Not knowing it was the wrong way, I made it to Raleigh, the capital. There, I was caught. They put me on a bus going back. But when it was time for me to get off, I didn’t. I stayed on to the last stop, where I was caught again and put on another bus. This time I made it to Virginia, where I learned to hustle. I worked the ferry from Norfolk, Virginia to Richmond until a worker blew my game. I was working a lady when he said to me, “Get out of the way, boy.”

She said, “Don’t talk to him like that. He’s deaf and dumb!”

The worker said, “What are you talking about? I’ve been talking to him all day.”

I got off all right, but I was on the wrong side of the river. The police were after me. I was caught again.

They kept trying to send me back to my father’s place, but I didn’t want to go there. Finally, they asked me where I wanted to go. I said, “To my mother, in Baltimore.” By the time I got home, I had learned a lot. But then I got in a lot of trouble. I was the youngest hustler they ever saw, so they sent me to reform school in Maryland, about an hour and a half outside Baltimore.

At the school, I was somewhat of a loner. I would wander off by myself. One day while walking alone down a dirt road, I thought someone was following me. I ran into the woods, thinking no one would follow me there. When I stopped running, the only sounds I could hear were my heartbeat, my footsteps and the squirrels.

I could no longer see the road, so I was scared. There were tall trees, four to five stories tall, thousands of them. It was a pine forest. The ground was covered with dry pine needles. And when the wind blew, you could hear a strange sound. So I ran back to the road. I could see no one, so I crossed the road and went to the corn field to catch my breath.
While listening to the wind blowing the corn, I decided to go back in there again. The sound was beautiful, like nothing I’d ever heard. Sometimes it was a steady sound. A gentle breeze would make a sound like a hum from a church choir. The harder the wind blew, the louder it got. In my special place, I used to lay there listening for hours, just looking at the top of the trees and the blue sky and clouds and listening to the wind. Even though I didn’t know what a cathedral was at the time, today I call it nature’s cathedral.

This wonder of nature gave me peace in my hard early years.

In 1980 I decided to take my family to see this. It was a one-hour drive to the country. When we got there, it was a total disappointment. The land had been cleared. I had to describe it to them the best I could.

What I have written here is true.
Rising to the Challenge

NANCY POLO

grew up in Colombia in a small city called Cienaga. I am the oldest in my family, with two brothers and three sisters. I remember my childhood as happy. Even though my parents didn’t have enough money for everything, my siblings and I enjoyed every single day we were together. When I think of those beautiful days, my heart beats faster because they bring to mind wonderful moments in my life.

We were educated at a Catholic school. When I got my high school diploma, I was 17 and the best student in the school. At that time, when someone was in the last year of high school, she had to take final tests in every subject. These tests had to be scored by a different teacher than she currently had, and the student’s identification was just a number, not a name. In my case, I got the highest grade in Spanish. The scoring teacher was a woman, and she was pregnant. When she checked my test, she wanted to know who took it because she planned to choose this student as her substitute when she went on maternity leave. She asked at the school and finally got my name. Surprisingly, she was my neighbor. She talked to my mom, who agreed that I could work as a substitute teacher. I was planning on staying home after high school because we did not have enough money to pay the tuition at a university.

My mother told me, “Tomorrow you are going to work as a teacher, replacing Ms. Torres while she is on maternity leave.” I was in shock because I didn’t have any experience as a teacher. However, I needed this job. Early the next morning, I was at the school. Although I was 17, I looked like I was 15; I was short, thin and shy. When the principal, a mature woman, met me, she shouted, “Are you the substitute teacher?!” I answered in a whisper, “Yes.” And she said “Ms. Torres is crazy. I would never allow you to work here as a teacher. The students are older than you. I know we will have many problems because they will not respect you. You are a baby!” I was shaking like a leaf, but I held up my head and said, “I can be a good substitute. I will not have problems with students. It will be a challenge for me, but I know I can do it.” Finally, she allowed me to work at the school.

The principal introduced me to the top grade’s students, almost all of whom were older than I. I realized they wanted to intimidate me by interrogating me with questions like, “Where did you work before?” I was really nervous, but I made a great effort and answered
all the questions with apparent tranquility. The next day was the worst because one student asked me what I knew about the *Mio Cid* poem. This question was indeed difficult to answer because I had never heard about this poem before. I told her, “Sure, I know about it, but I cannot explain in this class because I do not have time today. Tomorrow I will give you an explanation.” That night, I could not sleep because I was studying the poem. In the next class, I stepped up to the plate.

As the days went on, I felt more confident in myself, and the students began realizing that despite my lack of experience, I was a good teacher. So much so, that at the end of Ms. Torres’s maternity leave, the principal wanted me, instead of Ms. Torres, to teach Spanish. However, I did not want to because I felt I would be betraying Ms. Torres, and my ultimate goal was to study at a college. I had such mixed feelings when I left my first job; students even cried about my decision. Today, many of those students are still my good friends. In the end, I was so happy to have risen to the challenges of my first job.

Nancy Polo was born in Colombia and has lived in the United States for three years. A civil engineer, her positions in Colombia included Mayor of Cienaga and Secretary of Education. She is now studying at the Adult Learning Center of La Guardia Community College. Nancy Polo thanks her teacher, Ellen Quish, for being “most helpful to me.”
Surround Me
CORY WILLIAMS

My guardian angel, protect me.
I heard Red got killed.
Who’s next?

I hug mother but don’t hug pops.
My little brother said he’s immune to them gunshots.

Guardian angel, stay close to me,
Especially when I’m in front of that store that says grocery.

When police approach me, stay close to me.
I’m sweating, gripping my grandmother’s rosaries.

Don’t ever leave . . . There’s no I’ll see you later.
I want you to be there when I’m getting on the elevator.

I know life’s all wrong, but it’s all right.
Be with me till I’m surrounded by all white.

Twenty-year-old Cory Williams was born and raised in New York City. He studies in the Education Program of Fortune Society, and thanks his tutors John Maney and Rita Hickey. John Kefalas is the teacher coordinator. Cory Williams tells us, “I enjoy writing poetry and rhymes. One day I would like to write a book about my life.”
Desperate Days
PILAR ANDALUZ

The days my son was in Iraq were the most anxious and desperate of my life. Every time I turned on the TV to watch the news, my eyes would begin to search the screen in hopes of seeing the list of dead soldiers, but then I would turn away and pray to God that my son’s name was not on the list. The anxiety and the feeling of being helpless felt like a knife shoved into my heart. I waited days and nights for the end of my son’s service.

Twice, my son almost died. The first time, my son was in a ditch. He was in danger because a grenade had just landed in the ditch. Luckily it was a dud, a grenade that had not been activated because the enemy forgot to pull the pin. My son saw the grenade and his heart skipped a beat. The second time, he almost died because of a roadside bomb. He would have been killed if not for the protective bulletproof shield on the side of his car door.

The day my son’s service ended was the greatest day of my life, and it was the happiest day for my son and all my family.

Pilar Andaluz, age 46, has lived in New York City for 26 years. Born in Ecuador, she started studying English at her son’s school once she arrived in the United States, and she earned her G.E.D. A student at the New York Public Library’s ESOL Program at Fort Washington, she thanks Fran Schnall for being “a very good teacher and very patient.”
My Time at the Refugee Camp
TEZEE DOE

In 2000, there was a war going on in my country, Liberia. I was 12 years old. When my mother got permission to come to the United States, I did not. I was supposed to stay with my father and grandmother. When my father left me alone with my grandmother, my mother decided it was time for her, my siblings and me to leave. So we ran through the bush, all through the Ivory Coast, and were able to get to Ghana.

There was a refugee camp there, where my mother met her old friend. Later that year, my mother and siblings left for the United States. That’s when things got very hard for me because I had to go out and get things on my own, like food and water.

I stayed at that camp for seven long years. It was only during the last two years that I started going to school and working. In 2007, my mother sent for me to join her in America.

Here, we found out that the New York Public Library had Centers for Reading and Writing, where I am learning how to improve my English.

When someone says I have been through a lot, I tell them it’s not just me. There are so many other people that are still at the camps, waiting for help.

A native of Liberia, Africa, Tezee Doe moved to New York City over two years ago. He studies English at the St. George Center for Reading and Writing of the New York Public Library. His tutor is June Heinberg, and his teacher is Geniene Monterrosa. Tezee Doe hopes to earn his G.E.D. and work in a hospital.
am in need of someone to love me. Can I find someone to hold me and care for me? I am in need of affection.

When I was growing up, I felt like no one loved me. I had to learn how to open my eyes to understand that I can do all things if I believe in myself. But life comes with ups and downs. If you learn how to make the right decisions, you can find your way out of the 'hood, but if you make the wrong decisions, as I did, like not going to school, you can't. I had to survive in the 'hood, seeing things like people getting shot and dying. I had to learn to sell drugs to survive in the streets to get money to eat.

Then my friend got shot. I was in jail for four months for selling drugs. So I decided to stop selling drugs and go back to school to try and get my G.E.D. because I did not want to die on the street.

I started to look for a job. Two months later, I got a job at Kmart, selling appliances. I did not like it, but I needed money. I didn’t want to sell drugs anymore, so I learned to like it. But my boys, my friends in the 'hood, did not like that I got a job. They stopped talking to me. I said I did not care, but deep down in me, I cared. The first thing I said was, “Damn it!” But I had to provide for my son and be a man and take care of my responsibilities.

Born in Kentucky, Tony McArthur has lived in New York City for 27 of his 29 years. He is a father, an entrepreneur, and “a person who enjoys life.” Currently, he studies at La Guardia Community College's Adult Learning Center, where his teacher is Miriam Fisher.
Down in Mississippi
OLLIE MAE FLOYD

When I was a child, I couldn’t go to the school that was almost in my backyard because I was colored. I could see white children in the schoolyard playing. Some mornings, I would get up just to see the yellow bus drop the children off at school. How I wished I could go to that school!

Back in the 1950s, the Southern states were all segregated. Colored people, as we were called then, went to the colored schools, and white people went to white schools. I had to drink water from where it said “Colored Only.” There were also signs that said “Whites Only.” The same rule applied to bathrooms.

One day, some of the boys from the plantation went to town and tried to drink from the white fountain. They were beaten. About two weeks passed, and the same boys planned to go to the white school. However, the people on the plantation stopped them. They said that the boys would be killed. Three years passed, and the same boys tried to go to the white school. They entered from my backyard, all 10 of them, and they were beaten with sticks and bats. One of the boys died. Nothing was done about the death. The white storekeeper said that colored people should stay in their place.

The next week, the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) came on the plantation with their fire sticks and started burning down colored people’s homes. Some colored people were so afraid that they stayed in their houses. Yet some sat ready to shoot their guns if necessary. There was one man, Mr. Williams, who was willing to die. Mr. Williams was unafraid of the KKK. He sat in his yard waiting with his gun; the KKK didn’t touch him.

Mr. Williams worked as a sharecropper on the plantation. The sharecropper made all the money for his boss; therefore, the boss wouldn’t let anything happen to him. However, on March 12, 1956, Mr. Williams was found hanging from a tree in the backwoods of Mississippi. No one knew what had happened to Mr. Williams. People on the plantation said that Mr. Williams was lynched by the KKK. The colored people on the plantation
were too afraid to ask questions. After Mr. Williams’s death, some of the people moved off the plantation because they were afraid of the KKK. You see, they did not know who the KKK members were because they covered their faces. KKK members could be the police, a mailman or the boss.

The next year, Mrs. Williams moved off the plantation with her four children.

Ollie Mae Floyd was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, but has lived in New York City since 1969. She works as a certified nursing assistant, providing hospice care for critically, chronically and terminally ill patients. She writes, “Nursing is not a job; it is my vocation.” A student of Ann Goodwin at the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center, this is the third time Ollie Mae Floyd has been published in the Literacy Review.
The Story of Fafa D.
FATOUMATA DIAKITE

Fafa was born in 1983 on the Ivory Coast of Africa. She lived with her mom, two sisters and seven brothers; Fafa was the first daughter. She was very pretty. Her father wasn’t living with them, but he came once a year to see them. Fafa had never been to school. She stayed home to cook, clean the house and watch her little sister and brother. When she was six years old, she knew how to do everything, like a housekeeper or a mom. When she turned seven, her mom sent her to Koranic School. She wasn’t happy but pretended to be happy about going to school.

She was going to school two times a day, morning and afternoon. When she came home from school at noon, she had to start preparing things to cook for dinner at five. She came back home to cook and then gave all of her sisters and brothers a bath. Her mom loved her sisters more than she loved her. Her mom beat her up or screamed at her every day. One day, Fafa cooked her father’s favorite soup and she took it to her father in the living room, but she slipped with the soup in hand. Her daddy told her to take it back and clean it up. He called her mother and asked her to get some food to eat. Her mom got upset and called Fafa into the bedroom to come help her do something, then she beat her and beat her because of the food that she had dropped.

Fafa was sad in her childhood, until one day a rich woman came and asked her mother if she could take Fafa to work for her. Her mother was sad the first time, but when the woman came again, Fafa’s mom was still thinking. Her mother didn’t ask Fafa if she wanted to go. She decided all by herself. She gave her to that woman as a nanny. Fafa’s mother needed the money to survive because the family was very poor.

At the beginning, Fafa cried all night and slept on the floor. Every month until Fafa was 18 years old, the lady paid Fafa’s mom $50. Then the lady’s family moved to New York City, and Fafa came with them. The kids went to school, but not Fafa. She stayed home all day and all night.

One day she asked the woman if she could go to school now. “The kids are big, so when they go to school I can go to school, too, and come back at the same time,” said Fafa. The woman screamed at her, “No, you stay home. There is nothing good for you!” But Fafa
kept asking, until one day the husband and the wife called her. The husband said to her, "We really appreciate your help. The only thing we could do for you was to bring you here. So now you are free to go anywhere you want to go." But Fafa didn’t know anybody, so it took her a month to leave.

Then Fafa found her way. She now is working for herself. Nobody tells her what to do. Her sisters and brothers don’t know her much. She is far away from them. Sometimes she sends them money since she loves them. Now Fafa lives in New York City, happy with her new life.

Fatoumata Diakite was born on the Ivory Coast of Africa and has been living in New York City for about eight years. She studies at the New York Public Library’s Harlem Center for Reading and Writing. She gives special thanks to Steven Mahoney, the site advisor, and tutor Sarah Key. "In the future, I would love to study more, go to college and be a big businesswoman."
An Unforgettable Sunset

KEE FONG LIU

Everyone enjoys a beautiful sunset, but I had a different experience of it. Until recently, when I saw a sunset, I looked away. It reminded me of the hard time I had in China. I lived in the countryside as a farmer for a few years starting when I was 18, and I could not forget the difficult time.

Most of the farm work was growing rice in the countryside of Guangdong, China. The rice was harvested two times a year, in July and October. July was the busiest season because farmers had to harvest, then pull the rice shoots from the seedbeds and transplant the rice seedlings. Everything had to be done in about three weeks. This period was called “Double Summer” (in Chinese, Shuang-Xie) because it was twice as much work as usual. There was no machine; all farm work had to be done by hand. During this period, farmers had to work 12 hours or more every day, with no rest time and only a short time for lunch. The lunch was served in the field. No one was allowed to go home for lunch.

In the summer, the temperature was always 90 degrees; the sun was like a fire plate hanging on the sky above my head. I stood in the rice paddy, which was just mud and water. The water in the field was very hot because of the sun. I bent down to cut the rice relentlessly from morning to dusk. Harvesting was an arduous task, but transplanting rice seedlings was even worse. I stood in the field, holding a bundle of rice seedlings in my left hand, with my right hand taking a few pieces at a time to push into the mud evenly and rapidly. Sometimes my fingers were swollen, but even so, I couldn’t stop working. No one could take a sick day before the season passed.

Another terrible thing was leeches. Leeches lived in the water, and they attacked humans and cows. Once you were bitten, the wound wouldn’t stop bleeding, and the blood would attract more leeches. The only thing I could do about the leeches was work harder so I might forget the fear. I prayed for the clock to run faster and faster. I was happiest when I saw the sunset. I liked to see the sunset not because of how beautiful it was, but because it sent me a message that daytime was almost over, the farm work was almost over, and I could finally extricate myself from the field. Those are unforgettable sunsets to me.

Many years later, I live and work in the United States. The sunset has no more
meaning to my job, but I still have nightmares about the sunset and farm work, about standing barefoot in the mud. The bare feet are always in my dreams. I’ll be dressed up for a party with my bare feet. I’ll be late to work because I forgot to put my shoes on. In my dreams, everyone wears shoes except me with my bare feet. Now I’m glad that I live in the United States. No one can force me to do a job that I don’t want. My schedule is according to the timeline of the clock, not the sun. Finally, I can smile at the sunset.

“Life,” Kee Fong Liu writes, “is a continuous learning process.” A former seamstress who went on to become a magazine typesetter, she returned to school after a 20-year hiatus to study English. “The more English I learn, the more confidence I have,” she says. At the New York Public Library’s Tompkins Square Center for Reading and Writing, her tutor is Jackie Clark, and Terry Sheehan is the site advisor.
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Sunset of My Life

BIN CHEN

It is a Monet painting, dated 1883. A sunset painting shows that the sun’s light changes slowly. The sky is colorful. It is the rocky coast of Étretat. There is a light, soft wind on the peaceful surface of the sea. A red sun is going down with its final warmth. You can imagine when you sit in front of a sunset; a great many thoughts come into your mind. Life is like those rocky coasts that are difficult to change. Past is already past. You cannot change these facts. My life might be at a kind of sunset. A sunset is beautiful.

Experiences in my life have made me happy and healthy. I have become an honorable person who has enough money. I am going to plan the rest of my life—my retirement. My retirement should be planned physically and financially.

I am going to take the citizenship test to become an American citizen. This is one of the plans for my sunset life. Then, in a few years, I am going to go to China.

The most important part of my sunset life is helping my daughter in China. My daughter is my only child on this planet. She got married last year and would like to have a baby, but she does not know when. Maybe it will be in 2011. It means I will quit my job and retire before 66, because I would like to help her and my son-in-law take care of their baby. I hope they will have two children, a girl and a boy.

My other plan of my sunset life is that I will return to New York after they can take care of their children by themselves. Maybe it will take three to five years. When I return to America, I will still not yet be 66. Maybe I will get another job or become a volunteer, and I will travel all over the world once or twice a year with my husband. Maybe we will go to the rocky coast of Étretat, where Monet painted.

These are my plans for my retirement. It is an American dream of my life. My sunset life will be wonderful.

Bin Chen was born in Shanghai, China, and has lived in New York City for 10 years. When she first arrived in the United States, she “could not speak a whole sentence.” Now, however, she can write essays in English. Bin Chen studies at the Hunter College SPELL program with teacher Ruby Taylor MacBride.
Ballerina
ROSE COVINGTON

My lovely Tainá.
She dances ballet. She hugs me and my soul smiles.

Rose Covington emigrated from her native Brazil four years ago. She studies English at the New York Public Library’s ESOL Program at Riverside. Her teacher is Maria Neuda. “I love books,” Rose Covington writes. “I think there’s something sacred about a great library.”
Son of Immigrants

EULEMA L. FUENTES

When I heard that the son of Mexican immigrants was selected by NASA to go on a space mission, I was excited, proud and curious. Like Jose Hernandez’s parents, I am a Mexican immigrant.

While I was watching and listening to Jose’s interview from space, many things came to mind. I asked myself how Jose Hernandez could have such aspirations, even though he hadn’t had the same opportunities as children who were born and raised in the United States. As a child, he had a dream of being an NASA astronaut. Of course it wasn’t easy for him; he had to face many challenges as the son in an undocumented family. His father had to work as a migrant worker, always moving from one town to another, harvesting crops for a low salary. He couldn’t afford to pay for Jose’s education. The most amazing thing was that Jose didn’t learn English until he was 12 years old. But he didn’t give up on his dream.

For me, it is very important to talk about Jose Hernandez. It makes me proud that he made history with his success as a NASA astronaut. I think he is an inspiration not only for Latino immigrant children in the United States, but also for many adults who, for various reasons, couldn’t realize their own dreams.

After Jose Hernandez came back from space, I saw him on TV, visiting Michoacan, Mexico, where his family returned every six months when their temporary work in California ended. He was welcomed by the Mexican president, and they had a discussion about children’s education. In his speech, he gave the message to all that the most important thing in life is to get an education and not waste our minds.

When I remember Jose Hernandez, wearing his NASA astronaut uniform, talking with confidence about his experience in space, it fills me with inexplicable emotions and encourages me to continue learning English and pursue my own dreams.

Born in Mexico, Eulema L. Fuentes has lived in New York City for 16 years. While living in Mexico City, she worked in the police department as a secretary. She currently studies at the Adult Learning Center of La Guardia Community College, where her teacher is Ellen Quish.
My Maple Trees
WILLIAM R. CHEN

There are many maple trees around my house.

When they spit out new shoots,
They tell us the spring came back to the earth.
Many little birds are jumping and singing the whole day between their branches.
Every morning the wonderful songs wake me up from my sweet dreams.

When hot summer comes,
These maple trees spread their thick leaves that cover my house.
They use their shadows to let me feel comfortable and cool.

In the autumn they put on colored clothes.
Green, yellow and red are mixed with each other; they draw many pictures.
It makes my house look charming and beautiful.

Later, leaves begin to fall from trees
Because they know I need more and more sunshine in the cold winter.
When the sun arises,
The sunbeams go through their bare branches into my house.
The solar energy lets me feel warmer and warmer.
Maple trees are my true friends.
They are so wonderful, so kind and so useful.

My maple trees, I’ll love you forever.

A native of Beijing, China, 66-year-old William R. Chen has lived in the United States for 14 years and in New York City for eight years. He studies at the College of Staten Island’s Adult Learning Center, where his teacher is Anita Dyne-Eshun and the ESOL coordinator is Ellen Navarro. “The ESOL program makes me progress in English every day,” he tells us. “I give thanks from my heart.”
A Trip to the Village
AGATHA ROCKSON

After my intermediate education in fashion, I was assigned to a remote village to do national service. The 12-hour bus ride was my first time going on a long journey alone.

I lived in the city, so I was a little scared. I thought there were no electric lights or plumbing in the villages. I also thought I could not have fun there. I was used to city life, doing things like playing music, watching TV and going to parties. I had never met anyone from that village before.

To my surprise, I quickly grew to love the environment. I loved the breeze, the atmosphere, the smell of fresh leaves, the vegetables, fruit, pure air, birds singing, and animals. The first time I heard about the pure air and atmosphere, I asked myself, What does that mean or feel like? But going to that village gave me a different view altogether. To know and to feel the peace and cool calm that came from nature was refreshing. So recently, when our class visited the Botanic Garden in Brooklyn, I was happy because it brought me same feeling I felt on my first visits to the village.

Agatha Rockson, a native of Ghana, moved to New York three years ago. At 42 years old, she enjoys cooking, sewing, traveling and reading. A student at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Coney Island Learning Center, she appreciates the encouragement of tutors Nick Titakis and Emily Young, computer aide Elizabeth Lopez, and Stephanie Bouffard, the health literacy advisor. Michael McDuffie is the site supervisor.
Travis Thomas, age 27, was born and raised in Guyana. He has been in New York for seven years. He is thankful for his wonderful wife and son, whom he loves dearly. A student at the Eastern Parkway Learning Center of the Brooklyn Public Library, Travis thanks the literacy advisor, Gladys Scott, and his tutor, Benita Primas, who have helped him improve his writing.
What a Day!

JUNE LAM

In 1963, I was 17 years old and living in Hong Kong. I was a student and I liked to dance and go out with my friends and listen to music. The Beatles were very popular then. The radio played their songs again and again. Sometimes they played the songs so many times in a row, it got on my nerves: “Help! I Need Somebody!”

I remember when the Beatles came to Hong Kong on tour. They stayed in a very fancy hotel and when they left, all their fans came to their room and looked around for something the Beatles had left behind. There was a story in the newspaper that one of the fans had found an apple core. It had teeth marks and was brown and rotten, but the fan was so happy to have it. People were crazy over the Beatles.

I have always loved music and everyone who knows me knows this about me. So when my son told me that the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame was open to the public for free, I was excited. The museum was celebrating John Lennon’s 69th birthday. Usually the entry fee is $24.50, so this was a really good deal—as free as a bird.

I was glad my son wanted to go with me to the museum. We waited in a long line for 30 minutes before they let us in. The first room was full of plaques with the signatures of famous singers like James Brown, Johnny Cash, John Lennon, and Diana Ross. When a song played through the speakers, lights blinked above the plaques so you would know who was singing.

The next room was a big theater. We watched a movie about the history of rock and roll, from its roots to the present. It was quite interesting. So many of the people in the movie yelled and got excited. They were all enjoying themselves.

In the next room, we saw Springsteen’s 1960 Chevrolet Corvette. It was beige and white, a huge car, much bigger than cars nowadays. He had purchased it after the success of “Born to Run.” The car had cost him $2,000, which I think was a mint of money then.

In the next room, we saw Elvis’s white suit decorated with blue patterns and sequins. At first, I couldn’t believe it was his suit, but there was a sign that said: “DONATED BY ELVIS PRESLEY.” I stood looking at the suit for a long time. Elvis is my favorite rock and roll performer. He sang such sweet songs, and I liked the way he moved. He was very handsome. I’ve seen all his movies—some in Hong Kong and some in New York. I remember in 1977, I went home to Hong Kong for a visit. It was my first trip back home in
13 years. I had only been home for two days, so I still had jet lag and was in bed sleeping when my brother woke me up. He said, “Your favorite singer has died!” I was so sad. Elvis could do everything. He could act and sing and dance. He was very talented and he was too young to die. Some musicians are only popular for a little while, like a flash in the pan. But Elvis has stayed popular.

My son and I saw costumes, handwritten lyrics, personal scrapbooks, and musical instruments that had belonged to James Brown, The Rolling Stones, and Bruce Springsteen. There was also a feature on Motown. We read about Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, the Four Tops, the Temptations, the Jackson Five and Diana Ross. I always liked Diana Ross because she had her own sense of style.

Finally, we entered the last exhibit. It spanned four different theaters. There were benches in each room to comfort tired people. You could sit down and rest and watch a film. The rooms were filled with John Lennon’s belongings. I liked looking at his instruments and song lyrics. Near the exit was a showcase with a brown paper bag and inside the bag were the clothes that John Lennon was wearing the day he was murdered. His wife, Yoko Ono, wanted people to be able to see his clothes, so they would realize what had happened to him. My son and I watched all four movies about John Lennon.

Usually my son is very impatient, but he stayed with me through the whole Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. We walked around together for two and a half hours. Afterwards, he said, “That was so interesting. I really enjoyed going to that with you, Mom.” I felt the same way. We got to learn a lot and see our shared history together. I think music is something that brings people together. It makes people feel things. It can bring peace to big crowds of people or between a mother and son out for the day.

June Lam studies at the New York Public Library’s Center for Reading and Writing at Seward Park. Her tutor is Neela Vaswani, the literacy assistant is Hilary Schenker, and the site advisor is Terry Sheehan. June Lam enjoys singing, dancing, drawing and learning English. Every now and then she participates in a karaoke contest. “I am so glad that I am in America,” she writes. “I can enjoy my golden years.”
was born in Osumenyi town in Nigeria, Africa. As a child, I never thought about being thankful, but now I appreciate everything done for me. I started school at age six and had to stop at the age of 12, when my father died. I liked school so much. I got married at the age of 16, not knowing about my body or sex. I started having children, and eventually I had four boys and four girls. I am so thankful to all of them. They are very supportive. At the age of 40, I decided to return to school. It was difficult being out of school for so long and being the oldest person there. I was determined to attend Enugu State Teacher’s Training School. After finishing, I got a position in a primary school and worked there for two years.

Missing some of my children who had moved to the United States, I decided to come here. Now I am thankful I have a grandson, Jeremiah. He is one year old but behaves like a three year old. He brings such joy to me every day. He likes to dance and sing. I wonder if he will be the next Michael Jackson. He can sing “Happy Birthday,” his favorite song. He puts my hands together to clap and sing “Happy Birthday” with him. He says “Dada” and “Mama,” and he calls me “Mama.” He doesn’t like going to the babysitter.

I am so thankful that I came to America. On October 16, 2009, I became a United States citizen, which makes me more thankful and proud.
My Mom Is My Hero
JOY EDORISIAGBON

If you were to ask me who is my everyday hero, it would have to be my mother, Denise Stella Johnson-White. Even though she’s gone, she still lives in my heart.

When my mother was alive, she was truly a strong woman. She had five kids, two boys and three girls. My mother had to raise us on her own because my father had passed away. She didn’t know how she was going to do it without his help. Even though they were not together when he died, she loved him more than anything.

After he died, things started to get hard for us. There were no more big Christmases, and birthdays were limited. But she made sure that her kids at least had a smile on these special occasions. She tried her best to make us happy, and that is what she did.

I can remember back in June 1999, I had just graduated from junior high school. My mother didn’t have any money for me to go and hang out with my friends. So she sold her medicine just so I could have a good time with my friends. That was a very special day for me and her, and she got to see her baby graduate.

Even though my mother was sick and dying from AIDS, she never let that stop her from doing what she did best: loving people and helping others when they needed it. She was always outgoing and always told it like it was. It will be 10 years on January 31, 2010, that she has been gone, and there has not been a day that I have not thought about how loving and caring and strong she was. That is why she is my everyday hero.
A Gift of Hope
ANTONIA HERNANDEZ

It was December 19, 1991, the day I first came to the United States. My friend Sonia picked me at Miami International Airport. It felt like I was daydreaming. The city looked so clean, bright and special.

About a week later, I telephoned my friend Ada in New York City. She invited me to come and I accepted. After staying for a week and doing some shopping, I packed everything and got ready to go back home.

Then she said, “Why don’t you stay?”

I answered, “This was a short vacation for me. I didn’t plan on staying. I have to go back to my two children.”

She said, “Just give it a try.” I thought about it, and with the blessings of my children, I decided to stay.

Time passed, and finally Ada found me a babysitting job for a six-month-old boy named Zachary. Born to an unmarried interracial couple, Zachary was a special, beautiful, sweet little boy who did not mind that I spoke no English. A couple of months later, his parents separated. While his mother struggled to support herself and the child, I got to spend a lot of time with him and, in a way, we helped each other. When Zachary started school, I babysat for other children and then took care of him after school. Then, once again, I became a mother myself, with the birth of my beautiful son, Mohammed. I brought him with me when I watched Zachary after school. I would pick Zachary up after school, help him with his homework, watch videos with him and we did many other things together. I felt as though I was part of the family.

When Zachary was 10, his family moved to New Jersey. We stayed in touch for a few years, but because I moved from place to place, gradually lost touch.

Suddenly, the night before he was leaving for college, Zachary called me.
He said, “I am so glad I found you. I did not want to leave without saying goodbye. I wanted to thank you for taking such good care of me. I’m taking some pictures of you and me because tomorrow I will be on my way to Harvard University. I’ll be back for Thanksgiving and will call you then, okay?”

After that call, I wept for happiness for two days. I felt that I had been accepted at Harvard University, as well.

Antonia Hernandez, age 47, studies at the Prospect Park YMCA, where her ESOL instructor is Anita Mondello. Born in Honduras, Antonia Hernandez has lived in New York City since 1991. She writes: “I feel that the United States is the land of opportunity. No matter where you come from or what your background is, if you work hard and persevere, you can make your dreams come true.”
Messy Review
MARIA S. RAMIREZ

When you write an essay, you first come up with a bunch of ideas, and then, in order to make your writing understandable and interesting to the reader, you have to organize them. You can delete what you think is not necessary; you can add something new; you can move a sentence from one place to another. That is what we call messy review. But what if the mess is in your own life? How would you organize it and make it interesting, not only for others but especially for yourself?

Some memories from our past make us feel sad or unworthy, and it would be wonderful if we could just remove them from our lives. Unfortunately, it is impossible to change what we have lived, but instead we can use it as an experience to improve our lives. Suffering makes us very sensitive, but it also makes us stronger and able to defeat the challenges we face, so let us turn the negative into positive. Let us travel to the past just to see that what once was a weakness is now our greatest strength, and let us not be afraid to pursue bigger and bigger goals each and every day.

Living new experiences allows us to know ourselves better and to move forward. Once we start participating in a different activity, we discover that we have some skills that might have been hidden inside of us. We tend to be stuck in the negative attributes that others have set in us, but as we give ourselves the opportunity for our qualities to unfold, we begin to believe in ourselves. We start developing our true identity. We receive compliments from others, and that helps us to build our self-esteem, although I believe that the best compliment is the one that comes from ourselves. Let us stop every day to see how well we have performed, and let us not forget to reward ourselves for our minor and major accomplishments. As we get into that habit, we will become more confident, and we will be able to present ourselves with the best attitude. If we believe in ourselves, the world will believe in us.

It might not be as easy to organize your life as it is to organize your writing, but
as soon as you get the desire to reinvent yourself, you will discover the wonderful human being that lies within you. You are the main character in a story where you came across a lot of obstacles, but none of them could stop you from growing. Re-create yourself. Believe in yourself, and be proud of who you are!

Ten years ago, Maria S. Ramirez came to New York City from Guatemala with her three-year-old son. She started learning English and later began to participate in Hunter College’s SPELL program, where she discovered that she enjoyed writing essays. Maria S. Ramirez thanks her teacher, Ruby Taylor MacBride, for motivating her to continue writing.
You were born one year ago exactly. Three days later, at home, I met you: small, closed eyes; closed hands; defenseless; not so ugly, finally.

Since then, we are learning more about each other, and I can say that you are a good guy to live with. First of all, it seems to me that you know a crybaby is not at all positive and can irritate adults. You are so smart; I know, believe me, because I am your bedroom neighbor. You have been disciplined: keeping your schedules very well; taking time on your duties—sleeping, playing, learning, playing, eating, sleeping and learning some more. You are good at all of them, especially eating. Right now your mom is experimenting with your food. You enjoy everything and your mouth is always ready, even for green beans.

I think your development as a baby has been terrific. You are healthy and you are growing fast in very nice conditions, improving every day. Now that you are a walker, you are suffering some setbacks that life usually gives us. But don’t worry; stand up and go ahead.

You have been my best Playstation 15, the ultimate version, exceeding all my expectations. And maybe I am your tallest robot. You have me, along with your big dad machine, so it is a good deal for all of us.

Keep being patient, calm and friendly, among other qualities. And remember that we have a goal together: to learn English. You will be my conversation partner.
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Queen Library aDULT LEARNING CENTERS
The Gallatin School of Individualized Study, a small innovative school within New York University, began in 1970 and grew out of the educational reform movements of the late 1960s. As a small college within a highly regarded research institution, Gallatin provides the best of both worlds for its 1,350 undergraduates and 200 graduate students. In close consultation with faculty academic advisors, students create their own curriculum and unique plan for learning, combining Gallatin’s own interdisciplinary courses with more traditional courses in various schools of NYU; self-directed education through independent studies; and experiential learning through internships at New York City’s numerous institutions, businesses and arts organizations.

The Writing Program includes a curriculum of more than 30 courses each semester; a Writing Center staffed by undergraduate Peer Writing Assistants; the electronic Writing Program News; a Guest Lecture Series; Writers in Progress and Gallatin Teachers Reading events, at which members of the Gallatin community read from their own works; the Gallatin Review, an annual student literacy and visual arts magazine; and two Community Outreach Projects: the Literacy Project and Great World Texts.

The Literacy Project is comprised of a Literacy in Action course (co-sponsored by the Community Learning Initiative) that combines the study of the adult literacy/ESOL field with volunteer work at four partner organizations (University Settlement Society, Fortune Society, International Rescue Committee, and Turning Point Educational Center); a weekly writing class at University Settlement Society; publications of writing by adults, including the Literacy Review, Refugee Writing, Writing What We Want, and Where I’m From, and the annual, free, all-day Literacy Review Workshops in Teaching Writing to Adults in Basic Education, G.E.D. and ESOL Programs.

Great World Texts, which began in fall 2008, consists of a collaboration between Gallatin Writing Program faculty and undergraduate mentors with teachers and students at New York City public high schools—for 2009, four teachers and 160 students at Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, in the Bronx, New Design High School and the High School for Dual Language and Asian Studies, in downtown Manhattan. Together, faculty and students study a canonical or “contemporary classic” work and create and present projects—including essays, stories, poems, posters, drawings and photos—related to it.

For further information, and/or a free copy of the Literacy Review, email the Writing Program Director, June Foley: jaf3@nyu.edu

Look for the Literacy Review, Volume 8 online at the Gallatin website this summer!