The Literacy Review

An annual journal of writing by adult students in English for Speakers of Other Languages, Basic Education and General Development Programs in New York City

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EVEN MORE YUMMY THAN KENTUCKY FRIED?
Writing about Food
In a sense, taste cannot be replicated, for it isn’t only taste. It’s a special memory, a signal of a particular era, and yet it’s beyond time.

My childhood coincides with the Cultural Revolution of China. The whole system was in disarray and paralysis. All was out of order during those days. It was one nightmare after another. Billions of families were struggling with starvation and poverty. My family was no exception. Rice, sugar, meat, edible oil, clothes, women’s period paper, firewood and coal—anything needed for survival was rationed. Even so, many people still could not get enough or even sometimes any of it.

One rainy night, my mother came home later than usual. She was excited when she came home and showed my brother and me some fresh wild amaranths that she dug up in the suburbs. My little brother handed my mother a towel; droplets dripped along her cheeks from her hair; her patched clothes were wet. Mother opened her umbrella and put it in the corner carefully. Its two ribs were already broken and had become polygons; however, it was our only umbrella. Mother was happy. She hummed a song as she made a big pot of amaranth soup with sweet potatoes. My brother and I turned to Mother eagerly.

“Hang on. Hungry, right? Why don’t you bring your friends home for dinner? Go, hurry up!”

I didn’t wait for mother to finish, just ran away swiftly and brought my two best friends.

“Wow! What’s that smell?” my friends and I said in unison when we walked in the door. That sweet smell seemed to come from paradise. It suffused all around the old building, and also in my mind, for a long time... until now.

“Wow! What’s that taste?” We ate like hungry wolf pups, Mother said many times, even after we were all grown up. That night, three little girls squeezed in my wooden bed. We slept soundly.

Through the years, I have been repeating the ways of our elder generation: Go through marriage, build a family, and raise children. But life has been earthshaking between the two generations in China. Those tickets of groceries have been collected...
and their prices have soared. That taste was always attached to my memory, no matter how much time passed. When I recall that rainy night, I still feel warm and cozy. That's why, seized by a whim, I imitated my mother: I dug some wild amaranths when I took my five-year-old son on an outing in the countryside.

“We are going to make a yummy dinner today,” I told my boy when we got home.

“Really? Even more yummy than Kentucky Fried?” He stared at the wild amaranths in my hand.

“Of course,” I answered without thinking and began to cook in my fully equipped kitchen.

When the wild amaranth with sweet potato soup was done, that smell was coming up. It filled the whole kitchen. A twinkling, rainy night, a polygonal umbrella, a series of images flashed in front of my eyes, and Mother's song lingered in my ears. Just at that moment, maternal love was concentrated in one bowl.

“What's that smell, Mom?” my little boy shouted loudly, waking me up from the daydream. The same marveling tone, but different emotion in it! At the same time, I felt a little bit uneasy—because the soup had changed. There was something familiar but also strange.

“Hang on, hang on,” I said to my son and myself, and filled a bowl with wild amaranth and sweet potato soup for him.

“Ayah, Mama! It's herbal medicine, isn't it?” He frowned. Then, he refused to eat a single spoonful.

I sipped the soup. A child speaking without reservation, the boy was right. Its taste seemed like herbal medicine. It was disappointing. I couldn't get the same feeling that I got from mother's soup at all. I didn't know what the problem was. Was it the soup's taste or mine? Eventually, I stopped eating. I took my boy to Kentucky Fried to feast.
Where Coffee Comes From
ELVIA SOTO

When I was growing up in Mexico and just 15 years old, my grandparents took me to Veracruz, which was eight hours by bus, to pick coffee beans for the first time. Picking coffee beans is very hard because the trees are very tall. There are two types of ripe beans, red and yellow, but when the coffee beans are not ripe, they are green. The trees with the yellow beans are shorter than the trees with the red beans. Sometimes, we used a ladder to reach the ripe beans. There was only one ladder, and we had to share it. One day, I couldn’t get ahold of the ladder, so I decided to climb the tree on my own. When I was on top of a branch, I started to rip off beans. After a few minutes, I felt that the branch was loose. I said, “God, please help me.” But the branch broke, and I fell!

We would stay in Veracruz for four months, and I had to quit school during that time. The day after we arrived, we had to start picking coffee beans. We had to work five days a week. At the end of the day, they had to weigh the sacks of beans to know how many kilos we picked. The sacks were very heavy. I had to carry them in the rain, mud, and hot sun. I would like to ask my grandparents why they treated me unfairly. They made me work like an employee, but without payment, not like their granddaughter.

Even after all the injustice, I think it was a good experience that I will never forget. I never imagined that coffee would be a favorite drink in the United States and New York. In this city, everywhere you look and smell, there’s coffee.

Born in Puebla, Mexico, 42-year-old Elvia Soto came to New York City 15 years ago. She studies at the New York Public Library’s Tompkins Square Adult Learning Center, where Terry Sheehan is the site advisor, and Hilary Schenker is the literacy assistant. Elvia Soto writes: “I enjoy writing stories. And I like to read so much that sometimes I miss my stop on the train.”
Recipe for a Near Disaster
ANA MARIA ARMENTA

Two foods that make me think of my country are mueganos and rosca de reyes. Traditionally in Mexico we eat mueganos during Holy Week. They are square cookies covered with brown sugar, and they taste delicious. Rosca de reyes is a bread in the shape of a crown that people eat on the day of the Epiphany when we commemorate the coming of the Magi to Jesus in Bethlehem.

One chilly April day, I was feeling homesick, and I decided to bake some mueganos. Since I had never made them before, I called my father, and he quickly explained how to make them. When the cookies were almost done, I looked inside the oven and realized they did not have the brownish color they were supposed to have. They looked as pale as raw dough. I thought it would be better if I moved them to the bottom oven rack, and I changed the oven mode from bake to broil.

The cookies burst into flames. On the top of the stove, there was fire too because the cookies were very close to the flames from the broil mode. I turned off the oven, but the flames did not go out. One of my children told me that there was smoke coming out from behind the stove, and the wall was turning black. I think that at this precise moment my face was looking as pale as my raw cookies.

Immediately, I soaked a big towel with water, and I don't know how I found the courage, but I opened the oven door and took out the tray that was on fire. I dropped it to the floor, and in seconds my daughter threw the wet towel on top of the flaming tray. The blaring sound of the fire alarm was deafening. I quickly grabbed a ladder, climbed up and took out the batteries.
At that moment, I had calmed down, and I thanked God that we were safe and I didn't have to call the firefighters.

There have been other days that I felt homesick and wanted to make a *rosca de reyes*. But first I asked my father to explain the recipe to me in detail, step by step. Now I like to bake my *rosca de reyes* every January 6th and share it with my friends. This way I don't miss the traditions I used to celebrate in my country. But I will never try to make *mueganos* again.
A Food That Makes Me Think of Someone
RENATA SEKULA

If I see spaghetti, I always smile. It reminds me of my son Karol. When my son was a little boy, he did not want to eat anything. I tried to cook many foods but nothing was good for him. I was sad, and I worried about him. One day I prepared spaghetti with long pasta and tomato sauce. Karol viewed his plate with a serious look. He took a fork, but could not get any pasta, so he tried to use his fingers. He started to suck the long pasta very loudly. He loved playing with it. I looked at him and started to laugh. When he ate everything, he asked me for much more.

His face was very dirty, but it made me happy. I knew my son was not hungry anymore. From then on, when he wanted spaghetti, he asked me, “Mom, when are you going to make me the worms?” It was very funny.

Still today, when I see spaghetti, I remember my son with his dirty face and the “worms.” Today, he eats spaghetti with a spoon and fork, and his face is clean, but he still likes to call it “worms.”

Born in Poland, Renata Sekula came to New York City 12 years ago, speaking no English at all. She began classes in CUNY’s Hunter College SPELL Program in 2005, and is now at the highest level. Her ESOL Instructor is Ruby Taylor MacBride. Renata Sekula believes that speaking good English has made her independent in the United States.
Every time I put water in tomato paste, I laugh. People want to know why. Before I immigrated to the United States, I was a student in France. During the Christmas holiday of 2003, I was lonely, so I decided to go visit my older sister, who lived in Murcia, Spain. I took the Spanish airline, Air Europa, where my entire story of tomato juice happened. On board, I was sitting in the center seat of three. A Spanish passenger sat on each side. None of the passengers, not even the flight attendants, spoke French or English. They spoke only Spanish. I didn’t speak Spanish or English, only French.

As soon as the flight took off, the flight attendants started to serve drinks to the passengers. I didn’t have any idea what kind of drinks they were offering because I didn’t know what they were saying. Some passengers chose what they wanted by speaking; others, only by pointing to what they wanted. I didn’t try to read or look at the picture on the bottle; I just pointed. The flight attendant was so happy to serve me, and I was curious to taste the drink. I couldn’t wait for her to put the ice in it.

When the flight attendant gave me the cup full of a nice, red-colored juice, I sat back comfortably, ready to enjoy my juice like everyone else on board. It was a little strange to see people who chose the same drink as I put salt and black pepper in their drink, but I did it too, without knowing why. I took a big sip of the juice. My mouth was full of I didn’t know what! I couldn’t throw up on the plane because I didn’t want others passengers to lose their appetite. I couldn’t get up and go to the bathroom because the other passenger blocked my way. I didn’t know what to do with what I had in my mouth, and there was no way for me to swallow it.

Finally, I had an idea of how to free my mouth from that liquid. I opened my purse and let the juice flow out of my mouth into the purse. For five minutes, people
were laughing at me, and I laughed with them. The flight attendant showed me the bottle with a nice photo of tomatoes. I had never known that a juice could be made from tomatoes. But now I realized that I had just had my first sip of tomato juice.
Who in the world can eat food from a fairy tale? I think it could be somebody who believes in it. I am without parents in the town where my grandma lives. It is approximately a four-hour flight from my home. I am here for the whole summer. I am four years old, and my grandma is a stranger to me. I miss my parents, but I am with them in my dreams.

My grandma is baking something in the kitchen. It is nice to see how she cooks. Her nimble hands are moving quickly and kindly. The kitchen is fragrant, and full of sunlight and warmth. My grandma puts a cup of milk in front of me and a plate with a hot round bun. What I see is an unknown food, so I ask her, “What is it?”

She answers, “This bun is kolobock.” I am amazed! I know this bun! It is from a fairy tale that my mom told me! My grandma made the bun from the fairy tale I like! My own grandma can do this fabulous thing! Unbelievable!”

“Can I really eat this bun like the fox in the fairy tale?” I ask.

“This bun is for you, my sweetheart,” she answers. Her voice is soft and warm like the round bun. I look at my grandma. I feel adoration and delight growing inside of me.

“Why don’t you eat the bun?” my grandma asks me.

“I can’t believe this is happening right now,” I say.

“Eat, please, I made this bun with my love, so it has to have a good taste.”

I absorb this love with fragrance, warmth, and light, and then the happiness comes. The bun is very tasty, but I am concerned a little. I think the happiness will go away if I finish eating. My grandma looks at me with a friendly smile. I smile too. The bun is gone. I wait anxiously to see if the feeling of enjoyment goes away.

“Did you like this bun?” Grandma asks.

“I love you!” I tell her.

We embrace and this marvelous feeling is with me for my whole life.
My Coffee Shop

VICTORIA C. TORRES

I have made coffee for several years for my class. It was very difficult to find a place to buy coffee in my school area. So we asked for permission to make our own coffee. The answer was, “Yes, of course you can! It would be a pleasure for all of us!” The only condition that we had to keep was cleaning the area where I make the coffee. I said, “Yes, I will.” So I have my small coffee shop in class. Here is my coffee song:

My name is Vicky.
I am eighty-three.
I come to school every day,
Just like a good kid.
In class I speak and read.
At the corner of my classroom
I also make fresh coffee.
I say to my classmates:
“My coffee is delicious and free.
Not much sugar! Milk is fat-free!”
I want my classmates to be healthy.
They all love my coffee!

Victoria C. Torres is a student of Wendy Wen at the Department of Education’s Bronx Adult Learning Center at Phipps. She writes: “I came here from Guatemala, in Central America. I have lived in the United States for a long time. I love the United States because it gives people different opportunities. At 83 years old, I still want to learn more English. It’s the international language.”
DADDY, I’LL MISS YOU
Writing about Family

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The Children I Left Behind
ROAN C. JONES

November 3, 2001 was the day I left my country, Jamaica, to come the United States. It was a sad and happy day for me. The sad part was leaving my three children behind. The happy part was the experience of coming to a new country.

My children’s names are Latannia, Krasanta, and Chrisann. At the time, Latannia was only six years old. I kissed and hugged her, and I told her to take care of Mommy and to be a good girl.

She said, “Daddy, I will, and Daddy, I will miss you. I love you.” I cried and held her tight. I told her, “I love you too, baby girl. I will come back for you as soon as I can. I love you. Bye.”

On my way to the airport, I stopped to catch my breath.

Roan C. Jones writes: “I was born in Jamaica and have lived in New York City for 11 years. I am a student at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Bedford Learning Center, where Haniff Toussaint is the educational advisor. My life has changed because I now understand more about math, writing, and spelling. I want to achieve my goal of getting my G.E.D. I thank all the instructors, tutors, and staff, especially Shannon Leahey, James Bell, and Patricia Hazelwood.”
Two
RUTH E. GARCIA

I’ve often heard that twins know what the other is thinking
Or can feel what the other is feeling.
This can be true
If you’re not the twin
Whose life is sinking
But your eyes are watching powerlessly
Your other half who you wish had begun healing,
’Cause she is more than just “another human being.”

We are Two
Two born in the same belly
Two raised in the same home
Two born with creative minds
Two separate, but equally kind
Two looking for success
Two just wanting a good life
Two wanting and needing love.

So two dresses have been bought
Shall two be the same?
Yes, ‘cause two are needed
And these two fit like a glove!

Two support each other
Till one finds another.
Two divided decisions
When disharmony enters the picture.
One decides not to listen
So the other walks away
Then stops, turns around, and shouts
“Oh my God, you have changed!”
No, no, no—we are two but very different
See me, hear me, and listen to me.
I appreciate your opinion.

Yes, twins can know what the other is thinking
But we are unique
Yes, twins can know what the other is feeling
We are two, and different, like God wanted us to be.
I love you, sister
But sister, three is a crowd!

Born and raised in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Ruth E. Garcia writes: “I am 43 years old, the second oldest of six kids. I have had rheumatoid arthritis and Crohn’s Disease since the age of 11. I’ve been through tough times, and I am learning to be my own cheerleader. For me, it all goes back to three words, “Believing in oneself.” Ruth E. Garcia attends the New Americans Welcome Center at the Prospect Park YMCA, where Nabila Khan is coordinator.
It was July 18, 1997 when the phone woke me up. It was my mom. “Your father is very sick, and we need to take him to the emergency room,” she told me.

My sister and I lived eight hours away from their house. Very nervous and in a hurry, we ran to the airport and took the first flight to Guayaquil. In the air, time passed slowly. My mind was full of memories and my heart was regretting the day I left him behind. With tears in his eyes, he asked me not to leave him, but I didn’t listen. I just wanted to go to the capital.

In the hospital he had been transferred to the Intensive Care Unit and only the family could see him. It was so sad to see my father struggling with his life. The days passed, and my father didn’t get better. He had been diagnosed with cancer. We didn’t understand it because he was healthy and strong, like a lion. He used to call himself “el rey” (the king), and his favorite song was “... y sigo siendo el rey” (... and I am still the king). My father was loved because he was always looking to help his fellow men.

The day that my father was longing for arrived, and el rey left the hospital dressed in a fancy black suit, but he was asleep forever in a casket. Friends and family were waiting for him in our town. There were a lot of people, and the block was closed and filled with flowers. From a distance we could hear the mariachis singing over and over “... y sigo siendo el rey.” All of this was just to give my father his last goodbye.

I was his niña bonita (pretty girl), and I never got a no from him; he spoiled me and protected me from everything. He knew he was facing the end, and he didn’t want to leave. I could see it in his stare, and I could feel it in my heart. Time beat me, and I couldn’t tell my papito (daddy) how much I love him. I hate the day when I got the call, I hate the hospital where my father died, and I hate the moment that I never got to tell my father how much I would miss him.

Marcia Bergmann was born in Ecuador in 1969 and has lived in New York since 2000. She is the mother of three girls, age 11, nine and seven. Writing is one of her dreams and thanks to Ellen Quish, her instructor at the Adult Learning Center of CUNY’s LaGuardia Community College, she is making it come true.
The Moon Is Still the Same
SUSANNA YANG

I like the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, even though I don't know many legends about the moon.

On that day, we spent a whole afternoon scrubbing clean the courtyard for lying down underneath the moon later that night. It was the best weather in the year. The hot summer was gone, and winter had not come yet. We enjoyed a lot of mooncakes, fruit, and taro cakes. My grandma once told me to suck out the meat of seven snails while looking at the moon without blinking, so that my eyes would be as bright and charming as the moonlight. I wanted to try it again and again.

Children preferred hanging out with neighbors with the lighted lantern. Its shine showed our way in the dark. Grandparents talked about their pasts in different versions. No matter what they talked about, we knew what they were going to say.

Once when I was a child, Father stayed in his old chair, and mother shouted out, “Come, kids, the courtyard is so cool. Let’s sleep in it.” I lay down on the courtyard ground to listen to the insect band and its members: crickets, frogs, and cicadas. The breeze flew to me and kissed me, then went away. I felt in love in that moment with everything, everything that was covered by the moonlight: my pigs sleeping in the hogpen, my hens and cocks standing in the same pen, my naughty brothers, my hard-working parents, my wrinkled grandparents, my friends. We were united.

Time flew. Electricity changed the way we lived. Lights and air-conditioners became regularly used in my life. Then I saw the roundest and biggest moon last night at the Mid-Autumn Festival, and it refreshed my memory. No matter where they are, my grandparents are in heaven, my naughty brothers are not naughty anymore, and I can’t believe my parents have lived up to the age of my grandparents when I was a child. I am the mother of two young kids. I believe I am more loquacious than my grandma was as I have become older and older.

Susanna Yang, born in China, has lived in New York City for 13 years. She is a student and an assistant teacher in the advanced writing class of University Settlement, where Michael Hunter is the director of the Adult Literacy Program. She writes, “On my first day working in Chinatown, I couldn’t understand English at all. I promised myself to study English harder and harder, hard enough to have a good life here. I think I am on the way.”
My daughter likes October very much because there are three people’s birthdays in our family: hers, my son’s and my husband’s. Almost all of our family members’ birthdays are in October, except mine. So my daughter always waits for this month and feels very excited when the birthdays are close.

She particularly likes to blow out candles and always watches them. It seems that the candle light gives her more space to imagine. She likes the feeling she gets when the candle light twinkles. For this reason we don’t celebrate all of our birthdays together, even though we think it would be simpler, so that we may let her blow the candles out and eat birthday cake every week this month.

At the end of this October, Hurricane Sandy attacked New York. There was no power in my neighborhood for four days. We used candles for lighting. Everyone was very upset, but my daughter did not feel bad, because she could blow the candles out every day. She thought it was somebody’s birthday. She asked me: “Mami, whose birthday? Why no power? If I blow out the candle, the power will come!”

We laughed. I asked her, “What is a candle?”
She said to me, “Candle is birthday! Candle is eyes. Candle is mouth.”
“Why eyes and mouth?”
She said, “Candles light the dark. I can see anything clearly, and I can use the breath from my mouth to blow out the candle before I go to sleep, so I will feel very happy. ’Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are,’” she sang.

I thought about how amazing it is that a girl can describe her feelings and her thinking about the candle light. Everything in the world of a little girl is beautiful and peaceful. I think we adults, too, should have more optimism.
The Man Who Touched My Soul
LINDA PARADA

Traveling on the New York City subway is an adventure for everyone. Everyone has their minds on their own thoughts. Many times we identify with someone, and that happened to me.

One day on the 6 train, I empathized with a man sitting in front of me who had two kids. He looked like he had come from work and picked up his children from daycare or maybe school. He looked tired and the children were asking too many questions. They wanted everything silly, such as doughnuts, cookies, juice, music, and TV. It was so funny because when we are on the train, my three-year-old son asks me for every single silly thing like those kids.

I saw that the man looked tired, but with all of his love, he answered all of their questions. After that, he took one ipod with headphones out of his bag and gave it to his children. They calmed down and started to sing the song they were listening to.

That man touched my soul that day. I never realized that raising children in this country could be so hard. Since that day, I try to give more quality time to my son, and I understand that kids also get stressed when we are stressed. It’s not their fault; it’s the way they express how they feel.

Linda Parada was born in El Salvador and has lived in New York City for four years. Speaking English is one of her priorities. She is very sure that it will open doors to better opportunities in this country. She studies in CUNY’s Hunter College SPELL Program, where Ruby Taylor MacBride is her ESOL instructor.
Take a list of questions. (Christmas)

1. Did you exchange gifts?
2. What did you eat for Christmas?
3. What did you buy for New Year?
4. How do you celebrate in your house?
THE MOON WAS ENDEAVORING TO LIGHT OUR WAY

Writing about Nature

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THE MOON WAS ENDEAVORING TO LIGHT OUR WAY
The Sadness of the Swan
DILEK USTUN OZALP

It was a warm and lovely September night on Staten Island. We couldn't stay home, so we threw ourselves outside. My life partner and I were together at the seashore at dusk. Of course, we took our camera. The moon was endeavoring to light our way. It was a full-moon night. We set up our camera and took photos of the moon gliding in the sea in the company of ships.

Just then, I saw something right behind me. They were swain swans, a couple. They were swimming together charmingly. Their shadows were reflected in the sea. We looked at each other, my husband and I. We didn't say anything, but we were thinking the same thing: They were just like us.

I don't remember how long time hung heavy on my hands. It was a day after Hurricane Sandy. We were in the same place, we were together at the same sandy beach, except for one thing. The cob—the male swan—was alone in the reed field; his female partner—the pen swan—wasn't there. We couldn't look at each other this time, my husband and I.

Everybody was looking for disaster all around the beach, except us. We were looking for an inanimate white body in the reed field. We tried to find it but we couldn't. There was no choice open to us but to walk slowly. We walked and walked at Long Beach. The cob was joining us, as if not wanting to be alone.

Time passed, when all of a sudden I saw an exhausted, sluggish, weak, dirty, white beauty right in front of me. I will never forget this feeling throughout all my life. And somebody was even happier than I—the female swan. You should have seen them, how they had their lovely reunion. The cob raised his wings as much as possible, and they turned around each other, dancing. I was humming for them. We took their happy-times photo, much more beautiful even than on that September night.

Dilek Ustun Ozalp is a native of Turkey, where she was a high school biology teacher and also published science writing for children. She has lived on Staten Island for two years, and is married with two daughters and one son. She studies in the advanced writing class of University Settlement Society's Adult Literacy Program, where Michael Hunter is the director. She was also published in LR10.
The house I left behind was buzzing with life. 
Fruit trees were loaded with coconuts, mangoes, ackees
And papayas in season. 
The cock crowed at the break of dawn. 
The hens were busy laying eggs, hunting worms, and incubating chicks. 
While my dogs Betsy and Bruno were engaged in 
Barking at every early passerby. 
Mom's kettle whistled as she stirred in the kitchen 
Making breakfast of fried dumplings with codfish 
And hot chocolate tea.

The house I left behind was enveloped 
By neighbors who played a role in my upbringing. 
Their watchful eyes and reports to my kinfolks 
Kept my behavior in line.

The house I left behind was filled with rocky days 
When my daddy was enraged at his eldest son 
Who wanted to have his own way under my father's roof 
And hell would break loose between them.

The house I left behind, for want of a better life 
Was filled with bittersweet memories 
I will forever hold.

Joan Allen is the fifth of seven children, and the oldest daughter, born in Kingston, Jamaica. She moved to the United States in 2002 and has lived in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn for five years. At the Department of Education's Brooklyn Adult Learning Center, her teacher is Jay Rasin-Waters. She writes, “Through reading the work of Langston Hughes in class, I developed my passion for writing poetry.” It is now her favorite pastime.
The Sun

JAMES DURR

The sun outside touches my soul.
   Yes, it touches my soul.
   And I begin to see
   my troubled life.
The trouble is wanting
   too much.
   Wanting too much.
The sun outside touches my soul,
   and I begin to see
   The trouble changing in me—
   like the sea.
Like the sea changes,
   so do I.
   Sometimes high and
   sometimes low.
Can I accept the changes in me
   As I accept the changes in the sea?
The sun outside touches me.
   I reflect on the changes that it brings in me
   And it makes my heart sing—
Now I am in spring.

James Durr attends the New York Public Library’s St. Agnes Adult Learning Center, where the site advisor is Sid Araujo. James Durr writes, “I also attend an art studio in Brooklyn. The library has the resources that have helped me learn more. I can now do research, so my reading and art fit together like a glove. I thank all the teachers who have helped me move forward. Most of all, I thank my mother and father. I think that is where I got my inspiration as a child.”
A few weeks ago my older son, Olek, asked me, “Mom what is a hurricane?” I said, “Do you remember last year there was a hurricane, and its name was Irene? It will be windy outside, it will rain just like the other storm. This year the hurricane will be named Sandy. Remember last year, when we walked before the storm, the streets were empty and the wind was very strong and...”

“Yes, yes!” my son yelled. “I remember we laughed because we were going to tie Max to a string and Dad would hold the string and Max would be flying like the balloon.”

“Exactly. Tomorrow will be almost the same hurricane as we had last year,” I told him. “You can look out the window that night. You will see how the tree can dance in the wind.”

“Cool!” Both my sons were excited.

Before Sandy, I had this conversation with my sons, Olek, who is six and Max, who is four years old. At the time, I didn’t know how wrong I was. I never even thought that it might be that bad. My sons enjoyed the night, because we lost electricity very quickly, and candles were everywhere in our apartment. They enjoyed it when on the roof of our house the transformer antenna exploded and they saw sparks.

I didn’t know that the other side of Staten Island was a tragedy. I did not expect what I finally saw. Many others were thinking the same as I, that it would not be bad. But people died that night. And a lot of people, including my friends, lost everything they had, including their cars and their homes.

One night changed many people’s lives. The day after the hurricane, we went with our friend and the kids to South Beach, to see if there were a lot of shells on the beach after the storm. On the way, we were horrified by what we saw because we had no electricity so we did not know what had happened. Mother Nature gave us our garbage back from the ocean. She destroyed stores, homes, cars, broke trees, and even...
pushed a massive tanker ship onto the street. Every day we learned something terrible.

My friend and I decided to go to South Beach with food and hot coffee. We bought bagels, doughnuts. We brought and finished three large coffee thermoses. I know that is not much, but we wanted to somehow help those people.

November 8th was a very cold day after the storm. But we had no right to complain because we knew we would return to our homes. I met with some of my friends who had lost everything they had in the house. I saw the house where we had lived a few years ago—destroyed. Everything looked like a scene from a war movie.

After a few hours, I pulled out my phone and saw eleven missed calls from my husband. I called him back.

“Hello, darling! Happy birthday,” he said.

“What?”

“Did you forget that today is your birthday?” he asked me. “I did not want to wake you in the morning, and later I could not get through. You didn’t answer the phone.”

Yes, I forgot. The days after the storm I did not think of myself. I still can’t believe the tragedy that touched the lives of so many on October 29th, 2012.

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Joanna Zygmanska, age 37, was born in Gdansk, Poland. She has lived in New York City since 2002, and studies English at the New York Public Library’s Adult Learning Center at the St. George Library. Geniene Monterrosa is the literacy assistant. Joanna Zygmanska writes: “I am married with two sons. I love art, reading books, and traveling. I would like to improve my English to get a good job utilizing my degree.”
Water
LOIS GENG

Water is the source of life. Water is the treasure of life.
In our lives, we cannot be separated from water. Water will always accompany us. During my childhood, I lived in my grandmother’s hometown, which is in China’s Southern countryside. In front of the house, there was a big stream flowing down from the mountains. It was crystal clear and there were a lot of small fish hiding under the stones. We often went to catch the fish and play in the water. The water brought me the joy of childhood. But when I returned to my grandmother’s home a few years ago, I couldn’t recognize the stream I once knew. The stream was now a victim of pollution. It gave me a feeling of sadness.

Water is the best gift nature gives us. We should cherish it, protect it. If people do not cherish water resources, then the world’s last drop will be tears.

Born in China, Lois Geng has lived in New York City for more than 10 years. She studies at University Settlement Society’s Adult Literacy Program, where her teacher is Lynne Hayden-Findlay and the director is Michael Hunter. “I love New York because of its fantastic lifestyle and opportunities,” she writes. “I like to challenge myself. I want to continue to work hard improving my language skills in order to better integrate into American life.”
A Little Bird
CAMVAN NGUYEN

A little, little bird
Standing on the windowpane
Why don't you sing a little, little bird?
Why do you stay on the windowpane?

A little, little bird
Just standing there this autumn morning!
Why don't you sing a little, little bird?
The world awaits your happy song, this gloomy morning

Dear little, little bird
My teacher holds you in his hands
Don't you want to sing a little, little bird?
The window opens for you, have strength to stand!

Dear little, little bird
You could fly! Just try!
Don't you want to see a little, little bird?
The trees welcome you, the sun waits for your chirp, “Hi!”

Oh little, little bird
We wave you goodbye
You will see, little, little bird
You know how to fly

Oh little, little bird
Fly to the sky like a kite!
You will sing little, little bird
Light up the gloomy morning, with your feathers so bright!

Born in Vietnam, Camvan Nguyen now studies English at the Adult Learning Center of CUNY’s New York City College of Technology. She thanks teacher Jay Klokker for his help and support. She wrote this poem after another student came to class carrying a small, yellow bird that he found after he got off the subway. The bird seemed to be injured, but when the classroom window was opened, it flew away!
The Blue Butterfly
TANIA ESPINOZA

In a yellowed grassland, where no flowers or trees grow and water is scarce, there lives a little butterfly. She is happy and healthy, even though every day she has to travel to a faraway garden to find some water and her favorite blossom nectar.

In the afternoons, when she returns to the parched land, the butterfly meets the young lady who lives in the only house for miles around. They rest on the hill near the house. The young lady has lived there for a very long time and still enjoys the sun, even after all the damage it has caused. She carries a book and snacks, but as soon as her friend arrives, she neither reads nor eats. The young lady turns all her attention to looking at the butterfly’s hypnotic beauty and her dance-like movements.

The little butterfly can never forget their first meeting: The weather was, as always, hot, the heat forever recorded in her emergent wings. She remembers the only thing that moved the air that day was her wings, as they beat for the very first time. The sky above was scattered with some clouds; even so, the air was hotter than hot.

That day was cause for celebration.

The young lady was painting her house blue, which has since turned grey and dry, like everything else. The little butterfly helped the young lady to refresh and relax by fluttering her new wings. She flew around her forehead and then closer to her sad eyes. When the young lady finished painting, she followed the little butterfly, who was pirouetting for joy because, at last, she could fly. That day was cause for celebration.

The little butterfly thinks how interesting it is that the young lady has such grace and beauty. Even with no trees or flowers around her, somehow she makes the land seem bright and alive with her smile. The little butterfly hovers near her friend and touches her hand. She flies around the young lady’s black and silky hair, which never ages or dries out. And she never even wears a bonnet.
There is also a cricket that lives on the hill. He, too, knows and loves this yellow land. He is continually singing and jumping about. He will say, “Good morning! Good afternoon!” Or he will ask, “Where are you going?” When are you coming back?” The cricket repeats his chatter over and over in raspy tones. Just before dark, when the sky and land become pink-orange, they go to sleep and dream of rain. In their green and multicolored dreams, the trees and flowers have returned, and the sun appears at all the right times.
Who Am I?
PATRICIA BELLANTONI

I am like the four seasons
My spirit is like the wind that blows in the air
My soul is like the warm summer days
My knowledge grows like the winter storms
Nevertheless, my heart is like the leaves that fall from the trees
As the seasons have changed, I have changed in life
Who am I, the person who has so many seasons?

Patricia Bellantoni is a Staten Islander. Despite her extensive work experience, she has found many doors closed to her because she has no high school diploma. Believing that "education is a key to any door," she enrolled in the G.E.D. program at the College of Staten Island’s Adult Learning Center to earn that all-important certificate. Karen D. Johnsen is the teacher coordinator at the site.
It happened last spring. My husband and I live in an apartment building that has a fire escape, as all buildings do in New York City.

One early morning, on the first warm spring day, we opened all our windows to enjoy the spring air filled with mild sun rays. Spring was coming, with sun, warmth, the smell of flowers and birds’ singing.

I looked out the window and saw that a few pigeons were cooing on the fire escape. They were enjoying the weather like we were.

The next day, I opened the window again, and I met my pigeon-friends there in front of my window cooing under the sun. They were so cute; I could not avoid feeding them. After that day, the pigeons visited me constantly, until one day I saw two small bird’s eggs on the fire escape. That was an unusual surprise for me. The eggs were very small, just a bit bigger than a quarter, ivory-colored and even translucent, in a word—defenseless.

Then, day by day, I watched as the pigeon family built their nest. They brought branches and leaves by turns, to make a comfortable birds’ house. I caught myself thinking about how birds are like people, or vice-versa how people are like birds. We all flew here from different countries; we have different looks, different cultures, religions, traditions. But we all came here to build our nests, to create a family, to raise our children, to get an education and to reach our dreams. Maybe birds have their dreams too.

I continued to feed my birds breadcrumbs and grain. I got attached to my new neighbors and visited them every day. I spent a lot of time admiring them. They made me happy and I wanted to care for them, to give them more food and water. I wanted to help, and I did all I could.

Days passed, and the eggs were getting ready to hatch.

One day, there was very hard rain and wind, probably a storm. It went on all day, but the pigeon did not leave her nest. My husband and I were very upset
and worried about the pigeon family. We wanted to help and protect them from the rain and cold. We decided to cover the pigeon and eggs with an umbrella and a towel wound around the nest. It was the worst thing we could have done. Our protection scared the pigeon, and she left the nest.

All night, I was looking at the rain and the wet, lonely pigeon’s eggs. I waited for the pigeon. But she never came back.

This reminded me of the legend of the man and the butterfly. The legend tells how a man caught a caterpillar, fed and took care of it. Then it became a cocoon and started to move. The man wanted to help the butterfly get out, so he took the cocoon and notched it with a small knife. He opened it and saw a dead butterfly.

The moral is very simple: Do not intervene in the laws of nature, and do not overprotect. Sometimes it happens in human families when adults overprotect their kids. At the end we see that even love can hurt.

Iness Kaplun, an artist and designer, was born in St. Petersburg, Russia. She has been living in New York City since 2009. She says art has always lived in her house, starting with her grandfather, who was an artist and painter-decorator. She truly loves what she does, and thinks it is a great opportunity to share a part of her soul. She studies with teacher Jay Klokker at the Adult Learning Center of CUNY’s New York City College of Technology.
I COULD FEEL THE PASSION
Writing about the Arts

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On Friday I visited MoMA with my teacher and classmates in the writing class. The guide at MoMA showed us some world-famous paintings. On the fifth floor, we looked at “The Starry Night” and “The Olive Trees” by Vincent van Gogh. Though we knew some very famous pictures online, I was still very excited to see the real paintings.

When we came to the fourth floor and stood in front of a huge painting with scrawls all over, I was wondering why such a messy painting would go here. It was just like a naughty boy pouring some colored ink on the wall. Anyone could do it. But I still felt curious about why it was so special. It might just be something I would never understand. But I became more and more interested in it when I heard the guide tell us something about it. Its name is *No. 31* and the artist is Jackson Pollock, one of America’s greatest painters of the 20th century. He used his body to draw it. He died at 44. I began to look at it carefully. It was amazing. At that moment, I felt something in my heart. I began to be excited. The lines that went all over seemed to be dancing on the canvas. But we couldn’t stay there too long and just moved to another painting.

During lunch I was still thinking about the painting *No. 31*. I couldn’t wait to go back to it. I wanted to see if I still had the same feeling. I got a phone call from a Chinese friend who also came to America not long ago. We often talked about the pressures that we suffered as new immigrants. We encouraged each other to work hard studying English and try our best to get used to this country as soon as possible. I came back to *No. 31* after I cut off the cell phone.

There were only a few people looking at this painting. This time I felt I walked into the painting. It was incredible. I still saw the all-over lines as dancing. The lines had no rules, no direction. The whole picture had no subject, no center, no end, no primary or secondary. It was just named with a number by the painter. It was the harmony of controlled and uncontrolled, order and disorder. It was so natural. It seemed that I saw
Pollock dancing on the canvas, following a music of his own. And it was a modern music that he made in his lifetime. The wonderful thing is that I could also feel peaceful in front of it. The all-over colored lines were in such harmony that no matter which piece you picked from it, it would be an entirely beautiful painting. I could feel the passion that the painter brought to his art.

I could use my imagination to think with the music of the lines. I could release my stress with the music that was made of the lines in the picture. I could also pour out my troubles with the music in the picture. Recently I had felt so upset and struggling about the hurt caused by the impact of different cultures. It was so interesting; at that moment I just felt myself become the lines and I was dancing, following the line tracks. Finally, I felt peaceful.

Now I have a deeper understanding about American culture through this painting. People here can wear anything on the street. They can do anything they want. Everyone wants to be special. Most people hate to be similar to someone else. They try to do things in their own way. But most of them will never break the law.

I arrived here on a Saturday night, and I heard people talking loudly and even screaming at midnight. My husband called them “party animals.” I had worried so much about it that I couldn’t sleep at all. But my husband told me not to worry; everything would go back to normal on Monday. It was true. They indulged on the weekend but worked hard on work days. Out of curiosity, once, I took part in a late-night Saturday party. We were drinking a lot, talking, singing, dancing, and playing games. I felt good through the whole next week.

This is also the kind of harmony that the painting showed, I think. I really love this painting!
The Girl Who Loved to Dance
CAROLYN WILLIAMS

I love to dance. I remember when I was a little girl, living in Brooklyn, on the corner of Vernon Avenue and Nostrand Avenue there was a record shop owned by Eddie. Every day after school, before we did anything fun we had to do our homework. After I did my homework, I would gather up the girls and start our day.

We practiced dancing. I would start doing the James Brown, standing in front of the record shop. The bigger guys would see me and say, “There go little Carol again.” They would gather around me, laughing. I would hear someone say out loud, “Do it one more time.” They would give me quarters and say again, “Do it one more time.” I would laugh and do it again and again. I would be so happy. Just knowing I was making people laugh made my heart so joyful.

I would do it one more time and after the last time, I got 50 cents. I had talent. I wasn’t able to pursue my talent because other situations tend to happen. What I can say is that even though I’ve grown up, I still make people laugh doing the James Brown—especially my friends and my children. I’m still the little girl who loves to dance.

Originally from Alabama, Carolyn Williams came to New York City with her mother in 1961. She loves music, especially r&b, dancing, and making people laugh. The mother of two and grandmother of five, she enjoys answering her grandchildren’s questions on every topic. At the Department of Education’s Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center, she has studied with Corinne O’Shaughnessy and Teresa Bell. Diana Raissis is the educational facilitator.
My Experience at Carnegie Hall
DULCE MEJIA

Big hall
Fancy lighting
Red velvet chairs
Symphony orchestra
Soft classical music
Flutes, guitars, horns, clarinets, violins, and pianos,
Brown, black, and gold décor floating—high, high ceiling
Fancy outfits.
If only I was there.

Dulce Mejia has lived all her 60 years in New York City. She writes, “I started attending the New York Public Library’s Bedford Learning Center in 2011, with the goal of reading my mail. At this time, I have reached that goal. My long-term goal is to write my life story.” She credits Haniff Toussaint, the educational advisor, with “breaking me out of my shell,” and her tutor, Yvonne Pringle, with “pushing me to work harder, with no excuses, always saying, ‘Make it happen!’”
My Violin and Me
AKI SAITO

I met my instrument 15 years ago. It was a present from my parents. Frankly, when it came into my hands, at first I was embarrassed because it was all new for me. The instrument lives and each has its own character, like people. My instrument is an unmanageable girl. When I want to play but she doesn't want to play, she doesn't make a sound. Sometimes when I am practicing I feel like crying because she doesn't make a sound. But step by step, I come to believe she will do it because at a concert she always makes a beautiful sound. Even if I am nervous and I quiver, she doesn't care about my condition.

My instrument is always with me. Of course, when I go to work I take her. When I travel, I take her too. Even when I go to a restroom, I take her. I have to take care of her. Every day I wipe her body as a mother takes care of a baby. Sometimes I change her strings as a mother changes a baby’s diaper. If her condition is not good, I take control as a mother takes her children to the hospital. She is like a baby or child; she gives me many problems, but she’s my treasure. I thank my parents a lot. I will always be with my violin.
We Are the World
QIAO ZHUANG (GRACE) ZHANG

Many people say good things about my children, so I assume I am a pretty good mother. But many times, I feel guilty. I would rather spend more time on myself than on my children. I find all kinds of excuses to let them do things independently, so I can be a soul searcher. It has turned out to be a lose-lose situation.

Growing up, I didn’t have many parent-child interactions. I hardly recall any family quality time from my childhood. My parents were too busy, and I was too emotional and didn’t know when to share. It caused me to be independent and not know how to share love and be loved.

I understand my daughter because she is the same as me: a sensitive and delicate little girl. I comforted her when she was in a situation that seemed similar to one that also bothered me a long time ago. She was so thankful and wrote a thank you-card filled with passion. That’s a parent-child interaction I’m never going to forget.

It’s not enough now. About two week ago, we planned together for more quality time before bed. I drafted a list: TV, reading, arts, music, park. Immediately, my daughter added Monday to Friday to each item. She also made a little book describing everyday with beautiful illustrations. My little boy showed he was also excited by chirping around.

It’s more important spending time with your kids than spending time alone. Today is Thursday, October 11, 2012. It’s a night for music. Actually, it’s us sharing our favorite songs. There was recently a very popular show called Voice of China. It gave us the idea to construct a small stage. I performed as an emcee. I announced my daughter’s name and the title of her song. She went on the stage and took an elegant bow to the audience, which was just me and my son. She sang a song that was familiar to me, but a little bit off-key. I wondered how she learned this song. It’s a famous song called “You and Me,” which was performed at the opening

WE WERE ALL INTOXICATED WITH THE MUSIC.
of the Beijing Olympics in 2008. My daughter told me she learned it from *Voice of China*. She also rewrote the lyrics to be about a friend she remembered meeting in summer school this past summer.

My son is a bit shy, so he always asks me to sing with him. I was amused by his serious face and his Michael Jackson dancing. I am greatly impressed by what my kids have done.

We finished with a song called “We Are the World.” We were all intoxicated with the music.

“...We are the world, we are the children,
We are the ones who make a brighter day
So let’s start giving
There’s a choice we’re making
We’re saving our own lives
It’s true we’ll make a better day
Just you and me…”

Qiao Zhuang (Grace) Zhang, age 32, was born in Fuzhou, China, and has lived in New York City for 14 years. She writes, “I’m temporarily a full-time housewife. I have two adorable kids in elementary school, and study English and writing at University Settlement. Now an assistant teacher in the writing class, I enjoy that I’m studying as hard as my kids. They won’t think I’m ‘out of it!’” Michael Hunter is the director of the Adult Literacy Program at University Settlement Society.
A Beautiful Way to Waste Time
MARINA GARCIA

I had an art teacher in the fourth grade at my elementary school in Lima, Peru, who taught me to draw. I liked it so much that drawing became my favorite subject.

When I was in the fourth year in secondary school, my art teacher, Señor Davila, started teaching us to paint in watercolors. Now painting became my favorite subject. That’s how I liked to spend my free time. My classmates painted on canvas, but I painted only on cardboard. My parents could not afford to pay for canvas.

I liked cool colors like blue and violet. I used them to paint landscapes of the beautiful countryside around Tinco, the place where I lived with my family when I was a very little girl. Señor Davila didn’t like me to use only those colors. He thought it was important for me to learn to work with all the colors. He was right because he was there to teach us everything he knew about painting. But even though I tried to paint his way, I knew what I liked, and I knew even then that in art there are no rules.

After a while Señor Davila began to compliment my work. He was never happy with my choice of colors, but we learned to co-exist. I have fond memories of my classmates. We were five girls who spent a year together in that class. I have a photograph of all of us that shows their canvases and my cardboard paintings. We look very happy.

When I finished secondary school, I went to the Universidad Federico Villarreal in Lima to study to become a teacher. The only art classes available were how to teach drawing to children. I missed my hobby, so when I got my first job I started to take free drawing classes every Sunday at a local center. When I told my father what I was doing, he was not supportive at all. He said, “You’re wasting your time. You can’t make a living from drawing.” But I didn’t lose heart. I went every Sunday and kept drawing.
Two years later, I fell into a depression and had to stop working. The doctor sent me to an outpatient psychiatric clinic once a week for an hour of painting therapy. It helped me to heal. One of the paintings I made was of a strong, robust Jesus. The teacher took it to display at a psychiatric congress in Paris.

Eventually I got married and started to raise a family. I didn't lose my love of drawing and painting, but I had very little time to do it. My greatest wish was to study art full-time to learn more about mixing colors and other techniques. Three times I applied to art institutes—in Peru; in Puerto Rico, where I lived for a while; and in New York, after I moved here—but I didn't pass the tests. I was sad. Like my father, my husband wasn't sympathetic or supportive. He said, “You are no Picasso. You're wasting your time.”

I kept on drawing and painting whenever I could. Then one day my son sent me a brochure about an art instruction school in Minnesota that taught students long distance through the mail. I had been painting and drawing for 25 years, but there was still much I wanted to learn. So I signed up and took courses for four years through the mail until I received a diploma. I am still painting and drawing, and my art has been shown in many collective exhibitions in New York. I have never regretted the time I “wasted” on my artwork.

Marina Garcia, age 69, was born in Peru, where she was an elementary school teacher. She has loved painting all her life, and continues to practice it. She is also a volunteer at her church. At the New York Public Library’s Aguilar Adult Learning Center, her tutor is Trevor Eckles, and Elaine Sohn is the site advisor.
One day Ms. Edna Konoff, a tutor at the Aguilar Center for Reading and Writing, spoke Chinese to me. Okay, it wasn’t really Chinese she was speaking, but what she said was just as foreign to me. She suggested that someday I could go to see a movie. She thought it would be a good way to escape from the noisy place where I live, and to relax.

I was 65 years old, and I had never once been inside a movie theater. I grew up in poverty, without electricity, on a farm in Colombia. Movies were for privileged city people. Then, when I came to America, I was busy working as a housekeeper and learning the language. Going to see a movie never even crossed my mind, until Ms. Edna brought up the subject. Movies are a part of her life. They weren’t even part of my daydreams.

But she’d planted the seed of an idea in my mind, and it grew so big that after a while it was all I could think about. But I didn’t have a clue where to start. I had passed movie theaters, but I’d never paid attention. And I didn’t know the names of any movies or which ones were good. I didn’t know how much they cost. When I asked two of my roommates if they knew where to see a good movie, they said, “What? You never have any money and now you ask about a movie?”

Ms. Edna asked me if I’d thought some more about going to see a movie. It was my luck that “Titanic” was playing for a week at the Pavilion Theater in Park Slope. “You should go this Sunday,” Ms. Edna said. I asked how much it would cost. I had a little money that someone gave me for a birthday present. The movie cost $8.50. “And you have to have popcorn, too,” Ms. Edna said. I had $20, so I decided it was now or never.

On Sunday morning, I left the shelter and walked to the Pavilion. It was before 11 a.m., but there was a long line already. That line reminded me of all the long, long lines I had to stand on in the shelter all the time. I wondered if it would be the same when I finally arrived at the movie ticket window. Would they tell me, “Sorry, no tickets left”?

But I kept standing on the movie line, and when I got closer to the window, I eavesdropped on the woman standing in front of me, who was saying to the ticket seller, “Hello. ‘Titanic,’ 11 o’clock, please.” I kept repeating her words in my mind, “Titanic, 11 o’clock, please,” trying to imitate her American way of talking.
Finally, she said, “Bye. See you,” and started walking into the lobby. I had to keep one eye on her to see where she was going, while I repeated her words to the young woman. I said my sentence, and I was very pleased with myself for getting it right.

“I'm sorry, I don't speak Spanish,” said the ticket seller. I said, “But I'm not talking Spanish now. I asked in English, like that lady in front of me.” The ticket seller understood that, and said, “She bought a ticket for ‘Titanic.’ What movie do you want to see?” “Titanic!” I repeated. Finally, she got it and gave me a ticket, but inside I was a little annoyed. I couldn't find the woman who'd been in front of me. I wanted to say to the ticket seller, “Because you didn't understand my English, I lost my guide.”

I rushed into the lobby and looked everywhere for the woman. At first I didn't see her, and I panicked. Then I saw her standing near the door with the sign for “Titanic” over it. I followed her sneakily into a huge room with dim lights. There was a big white wall in front of me, and rows and rows of seats facing the wall. There were only a few people in the seats. For a crazy second, I wondered, Where are all the people? Did I miss the movie? Then I realized it was still early, and the movie had not started yet.

I can be on my own now, I thought. I was finished with my epic trip. I took a soda from my bag and sipped some. I also had a bag of popcorn in there that I bought from the grocery. (Someone had told me I'd have to pay through the nose in the theater.) More people came in, and the seats filled up.

Suddenly, I saw a big ship with the word “Titanic” on the side. I was as thrilled and happy as a little kid with a Christmas gift. I have mixed feelings about the movie—sad and happy emotions. Happy because I saw a movie for a first time in my life, and sad for the wonderful people who lost their lives. I was crying; I really felt like this tragedy had just happened.

I think I will write a long thank-you letter to my secret guide, even if I never get to give it to her. Both Ms. Edna and my guide helped me see a movie for the first time in my long life!

A native of Colombia, 65-year-old Maria Lopez moved to New York City in the early 2000s. She loves yoga and meditation, reading and solving puzzles, but writing is her passion! She now studies with tutors Lynda Myles, Lena Hayes, and Betty Gerstein at the Aguilar Adult Learning Center, where Elaine Sohn is the site advisor. This is her third publication in LR.
INSTEAD OF CRYING, I WAS SINGING
Writing about Education

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When I was a child, I didn't like school very much. I saw other kids play outside, but I had to go school, so I was very jealous. I began to play hooky too. But I only did it sometimes because I was afraid that my father checked on me in my school.

One day, somebody saw me outside of the school. Then someone told my father. He was very angry. But I didn't know. I came back home.

I had a brother who loved me very much. When I went to my house, he stopped me and told me, “You know, Papa is going to whip you, because our uncle let him know you were playing hooky.” I was very scared. My brother said to me, “Don’t worry.” He got a carton, tore it open, flattened it, and tied it on my back under my dress. When my father whipped me with a belt, I didn’t feel it at all. Instead of crying, I was singing. My father was surprised and got very, very angry. He was running after me, whipping me again and again until he was tired.

I was saved by my brother. From that day, I dared not play hooky any more.

Now I am 74 years old. I’m studying in an ESOL class. Of course, I don’t play hooky. I love school! On the wall of my bedroom are my two beautiful certificates saying “Excellent Attendance: Carmen Garcia.”
When I was in school, I would just sit there without moving. I didn't know why. But my teacher came to me to ask, ”Why are you not picking up? What do I have to give you?” I didn't know the answers, so I just sat down and didn't move at all. So they called my mother to come to the school. “Your son is not participating in the class.” I could see my mom just looking at the teacher, and she didn't know what to do. So the teacher got my mom a letter to take me out of the classroom because I wouldn’t participate. She had to take me down to the principal's office to put me in a class that would fit my needs.

I know my mom had to be thinking about what would help her son. She must have been sitting down at home and thinking about what she had to do with me. If she knew what she had done to me, I think she would not have told me about what was on her mind. So she just kept it to herself. But I had it in my mind too as I got older and knew why all those things had happened to me.

I remember one day when I was sitting near my mom, and I had my books on my mom's bed. She was showing me how to do my homework I wrote my letters backwards, and she hit me until I got it right. I could not open my mouth. It was like a bee sting on my mouth. Then I didn’t move at all.

So I was put in a specialized class. I didn't like being in the class I had been put into. I didn't feel safe in that class. Just sitting there was like being put in an icebox and learning nothing. I continued to go school, but I didn't learn anything at all.

It was like being without a mind in that classroom, and 12 years of school left me with an empty brain.
When I was getting out of school, a teacher helped me to get a job where he knew the boss. I got the job and have been there just about 27 years. But, you know, all along I still kept thinking about why I was put in a special ed class.

Then I figured out what would help me. I had to pick up a book and start to work it out, to read on my own. I started to read everything that I could put my eyes on. Being one with my mind in a safe place brought more inspiration knowing I could pick up a book in my hand, just for my sake and hold it, letting that little book become a part of me. It got in me, just sitting down, reading: My mind started to open. Going through all those things, I worked my way out of my old mind, and I am not the same anymore.

Roosevelt Pugh was born in Manhattan’s Harlem Hospital and later moved to the Bronx, where he was hired by the state of New York as a housekeeper. Currently, he is studying at the New York Public Library’s Harlem Adult Learning Center, where Sid Araujo is the site advisor. He thanks his tutors, Laurie Hockman and Anne Conroy. He writes, “I would like to say that reading within the Centers is a good thing. So come one, come all!”
Behind My Face
EVELISSE ROJAS

All my life, I have lived behind my face. People looked at me and always thought I was a smart person. I always pulled it off behind my face. Whoever hired me for a job looked at my face, not at how smart I am. My face has taken me a long way.

I see what everybody sees, but I don’t feel that way. How can you have a face without a mind? My mind means a lot to me. Sometimes I sit down and think, I’m getting old and don’t know nothing. I say that, but my face pops up again. I forget about my mind again. I start again behind my face to try to pull it off. Again and again it works.

Nobody knows what I have behind my face. I have a learning disability. Nobody knows. People look at my face and don’t know nothing about me. I am a happy person, an outgoing person, and I get along with everybody. I love my face, but I want something to go with my mind. When I walk out my door, I feel beautiful. But when somebody tells me to read and write, I feel ugly about myself. It makes me upset for the whole day. I start crying and thinking about it all day. When I hear somebody reading, it upsets me.

What about me? What happened to me? I talk to myself and say, “Please, God, help me. I don’t want to be behind my face. I want to be in front of my face!”

Born in New York City 42 years ago, Evelisse Rojas has lived here her entire life. She is a proud mother of a boy and a girl. She would like to improve her reading level at least three grades and is making a serious effort to improve her writing skills. She attends the Brooklyn Public Library’s New Lots Learning Center, where her tutor is Jean Buonacore, the site supervisor.
An African Woman’s American Dream
Racky Ly

I grew up in a society where girls’ education is neither encouraged nor practiced. I was not an exception to this.

Since I was a child, I wanted to go to school and learn how to read and write. I used to take a book and pretend I could read. Most people didn’t know I couldn’t read at the time. My sister and I used to beg my father to let us go to school. But he refused; he said that when a woman is educated, she behaves differently. They think they can do whatever they want to do because they are educated. When he finally agreed to let us to attend the school near our house, we were so happy. Less than two months into school we were married, and I was off to the neighboring country of Mali. My sister stayed in Senegal because her husband was there. It was frustrating for me that I was the only uneducated woman in the house. When the phone rang, I was scared to answer it because most of the callers spoke French and I had to call someone to translate for me. It was so shameful that when my husband’s friends came to visit him, I couldn’t communicate with them. I couldn’t even write my own name.

Upon my arrival in the United States, I heard that adults can learn for free. I was excited, and I told my husband, thinking that he would encourage me, but he didn’t. He said my father should have taken me to school when I was young, and now that I was not, he would not let me go. I thought because he was younger than my father he would be more understanding, and I thought every man would be happy to have an educated wife. But some of the African men are afraid to send their wives to school; they wish women’s eyes to be closed forever, so they can treat you unfairly forever.

Since he was my husband, I agreed to drop the issue of going to school.
Years went by, and I couldn't take it anymore. When I made visits to the doctor, I couldn't fill out the forms or talk with the doctor about what was wrong with me. It made me look like a fool, and I knew I was not a fool. So I said to myself: *Enough is enough!*

I knew that I could do better for myself and even help my children in the future. I began to dream of what I could and would be if I could read and write. This was my motivation, and I started going to school.

I ended up getting divorced from my husband because he thought I was adapting to the American dream. What is the American dream? Did he object because I wanted to go to school, or because I would like to have a nice place to live? Or because I wanted to go to work, and have my own money? If so, then who wouldn't have those dreams for their life?

Racky Ly was born in Senegal, West Africa. At age 17, she was sent to Mali to marry. Her first child was born when she was 18. After coming to the United States, having three more daughters and starting her own business, she is only now realizing her lifelong dream of getting an education. She attends the Adult Learning Center of CUNY's New York City College of Technology. She wishes to thank her great teacher, Douglas Montgomery.
In 2004, I worked in the Dominican Republic for Helvetas, the Swiss Association for International Cooperation. There was an important event in Fribourg, Switzerland, for people enrolled in Agricultural Education. I won a scholarship to go there for my job.

My boss told me that we would go there with another co-worker. He told me too that the event included translation to Spanish, and that he would be a translator. I was worried because at that time I did not understand any English, but I was so glad to have won a very important scholarship.

About three weeks before the trip, I asked my boss about the confirmation for the event to fill out the visa request. He was informed by the Internet that they had sent it to me by e-mail one month earlier. Something had happened: I had deleted this strange message thinking it was a virus. To me, at that time, all messages not in Spanish were viruses.

To find the information, my boss went to my computer and asked for permission to go to my deleted messages. There was all the information. He printed it and gave it to me. This day my face almost came down. I felt very bad about not understanding English.

The truth is that after this experience, I promised myself to start to study English, but I never had time. Then I met my soul mate in my cousin’s house in the Bronx. And by the art of magic, I could understand almost everything he told me that first day even though he spoke only a little Spanish.

His first words to greet me were: “Hola, my nombre es Arnold, mucho gusto,” as he extended his hand. I swear I just responded with my hand, but I never had the words to tell him my name.

Perhaps what impressed me was seeing an “American” speak Spanish so sweetly. Then he informed me that he knew the Dominican Republic very well, because he frequently traveled with some co-workers who were Dominican.
Later, we decided to marry. During the marriage ceremony the magic understanding deserted me. I did not understand the judge when she asked me if I agreed to the marriage vow. I was too excited. She repeated it over again and again. I remember that she looked friendly and smiled.

Then my cousin Jacqueline, who was in the ceremony, moved behind the judge and whispered to me, “Josefina, say yes!”

Promptly, I woke up and said three times, “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Immediately, the judge smiled. My answer was incomplete. Now I understand that the correct answer should have been, “Yes, I do.” But she understood me because she continued the ceremony.

Now I’m learning English and my husband is learning Spanish. The most important thing is that I’m turning my embarrassments into learning.

Three years ago, Josefina Signer immigrated from the Dominican Republic, where she was a teacher. Now she is an ESOL student in the Adult Learning Center of CUNY’s New York City College of Technology, with teacher Jay Klokker. She writes: “My family is the best thing in my life. To a person who has trouble learning, my advice is: Speak as much as you like; don’t be afraid or embarrassed. Making mistakes is an opportunity to learn.”
The first day I started class, I was afraid that people in my life would know that I have trouble reading. The only person who knew was my mother. That was my big secret. I lived in secret. I kept myself from the truth. I felt ashamed of myself. I hid from the secret; I hid from the world. That was slowly eating me alive. There were tears I shed inside. The truth would stare me in my face. Day after day, I lied. When I went to my job, I hoped my co-workers were in the dark.

I know many words. I love and hate the same words. I run to the words in my mind. I see so clearly the words that give me life, that give me new ways to talk to people—but not on paper. The words in my mind are lost on paper. I think like an adult, but I write like a little child. The words I know are lost in an ocean of small words that I can spell. The power in words is losing its punch and strength. My little land is surrounded by an ocean of letters. The ocean is so deep, and the words are so hard to write. There’s a wave of small words I know, but the right word is what I want.

Writing is so hard to do. I use the little words to weave the written words into a useful web.

Each day, I start a new battle. The voice inside me tells me: You’re too stupid. I’m going to make you bend and break, give up the fight. Birds don’t fly backwards, so go to sleep. Who do you think you are? No one good.

But time is on my side. I’ve been looking forward to the future. My heart beats to taste the truth of discovery, to get there, to stand at the new beginning.

Kenny Pauljajoute, age 30, was born in New York City. He attends the Adult Learning Center at CUNY’s LaGuardia Community College, where Miriam Fisher is his instructor. He writes, “I like lots of different kinds of music. I am interested in science, history, technology, and human behavior.” This is his second publication in the Literacy Review.
Getting My G.E.D.
RUTH BOIRIE

I want to write about the G.E.D. I always wanted. Growing up in the 50s, I didn’t talk much until six or seven years old. Like all mothers that care about their children, my mother was worried about me not speaking, and she thought that I was going to be handicapped. My mother started to take me to doctors to find out why I didn’t speak and if something was going to be wrong with me. They told my mother that as I got older, I would come out of it.

When I started school in first grade, it seemed weird to me being in class with so many children who spoke English. In our home we only spoke Spanish. I didn’t know how to respond when the teacher would speak, so I would just look at her. I guess she thought something was wrong with me. She continuously came up to me and said things over and over again to see if I would understand what she was saying, but deep down in my heart I felt I did understand her when she spoke to the class as a whole.

As I moved on in my class, I really tried to learn English. The only problem was that I didn’t speak it out. I would observe how she would pronounce the words when she spoke to the class, but it was hard. I encountered many kids who picked on me and called me names because of the way I was. That really hurt my feelings, so I would cry a lot. Eventually, the teacher took me out of that class and put me in a slower class that would help me improve. In my new class, I did start to speak more and understand things more clearly. I was getting older, but I was still in this same class, and all the other children were moving up grades. I asked myself why I was still in this same class year after year. I felt I was improving and wanted to learn more in school like the other children.

My mother and father came to school to talk to the principal about why I wasn’t moving up in my classes every year. They told my mother and father that I
had a learning disability. My mother and father asked the principal to have me retested and they did so. They never told my parents if I passed. My parents really didn't know how to fight the education system. I was left in that class during elementary school, junior high school, and high school.

I went up to the 11th grade feeling like I didn't learn what I needed to learn in all the years that I was in school.

One day in the 11th grade, looking at my life, I decided to leave school. I asked my mother to come to school and sign me out. She said, “Are you sure?” I said, “Yes, because I’m not learning the things I’m supposed to learn here.” My mother signed me out of school.

At the age of 17, I left home to see if I could make a new life for myself. I never stopped trying to get my G.E.D. in the years I was out there taking care of myself. I have taken the G.E.D. five times and failed each one, and now I’m here again, still trying to get my G.E.D. I’m now 65 years old, and I haven’t given up. Now I’m here going to the Brooklyn Public Library at the Central Learning Center to be trained, so that one day I will pass and finally get the G.E.D. I feel proud of myself that I’m still trying to get my G.E.D.
“Put your case down!” she read in her student book on English grammar, and the strap snapped. Her mind took that absolutely plain sentence literally, as if referring to herself, because she had had a long history with trunks.

She lived in her trunks, full of dresses and words, for a long time. “Put your case down!” for her meant “Write! Open the trunk and arrange the words!”

Ever since she could remember, words spoke to her. But in school she was captured by numbers and forms. She learned civil engineering, but in her whole life she has built constructions only with words.

She realized with a vague idea that between these important points in her life, studying numbers and working with words, there exists a natural link, even as others perceived those choices as discordant. Still, she needed to receive a logical proof that she made the right decisions. She was looking for the reason that inspired her choices.

When she figured out that “recount” and “tell” are synonyms in English, she fell in love with this language. English helped her to move on confidently and gave her a special gift: the link between words and numbers. In order to write in English as a foreigner, she had to be an engineer first. She had to learn to make constructions with nouns and verbs, and then to create stories. The numbers led her to the words. The answer emerged simple and clean. She opened the trunk. On the first scrap of paper was written, “A clock tells the time . . .”
Learning is very hard for me. At my age, I find it difficult and challenging. I have started learning somewhat. Learning to find the keys on the computer, I find it very difficult to “save.” I am fed up with it by the time I am finished, and I forget everything I learned.

My life has not been a bed of roses. It has had its ups and downs. For instance, I brought up five children by myself. In America, it’s not like Trinidad, my home. You can’t say you’re leaving your kids at the next door neighbor’s unless you’ve checked out the person and have some good money in hand.

I started working in factories, then in hospitals as a dietary aide, working in the food service department. I found out a long time ago, in high school, that I could not retain information like other kids. It makes me feel terrible about myself. But I still keep trying.
I Am a Spiritual Being
CHRISTOPHER MATOS

I am a spiritual being
I am a soul
With blood that pumps
A mind that flows
My body is armor to my mind and my heart
I am as eager to finish
As I am to start
I have a thirst for change
And it’s insatiable
Knowledge is power
So
What
Is
Left
To
Do?

Christopher Matos writes, “I am an 18-year-old Boricua born in New York City. I like poetry because it’s a popular way of expressing yourself that catches people’s attention and makes them see things from a certain perspective. I would like to say to readers that believing is seeing.” Currently fervently in pursuit of his High School Equivalency Diploma at the Fortune Society, he also studied in the Young Adult Literacy Class with teacher Lee Weinstein.
CAPTAIN YAMAMOTO SAID, “IT IS JUST THE FIRST DAY”

77 Oswaldo Rodriguez  Yoko
80 Gala Marrazzo  A Happy Ending
82 Jafar Rasouly  A Little Shepherd
84 Jenny Foong  Yes
85 Milagros Gonzalez  New York Cowgirl
87 Luiz Carlos N. Queiroz  Personal Trainer
88 Arpine Avagyan  Non Morbum, Sed Aegrum Curare
When I first met Yoko, I was astonished. My eyes opened wide, seeing this huge marvelous ship. I had never seen anything like that before.

I was waiting to see the captain to ask for a job. I expected to meet a tall man with a muscular body, but instead I saw a skinny little man with no hair. He asked me a few questions, and finally he said, “Okay, you can work here.”

I didn’t know anything about fishing on a Japanese ship. When the ship started to move, I saw the workers running and yelling at each other. There were other Ecuadorian workers on the ship. A little man ran into me and said, “Hey, my friend, watching, watching and learning fast, fast.” I had never seen people so well-organized and powerful. Around me was only water, as everything else disappeared.

Everyone else had a roommate, but I had nobody. I was lying down on my bed, looking at the big moon through my little window, when suddenly somebody knocked at the door. It was the little man who said that I had to go eat.

In the kitchen there was a big table and all the people were sitting around talking and laughing. The food was raw fish, mayonnaise and soy sauce. I was watching how they ate with those small sticks, even the Ecuadorians. I said, “I’m not going to eat that food.”

I went back to my room. At two o’clock in the morning a thunderous sound woke me up. I thought something bad had happened on the ship. I saw everybody running and they said, “It is time to work.” I had to work with two Ecuadorians, Vincente and Leon. They took me to the back of the ship, and we had to start throwing bait into the sea. I liked to work with them because they taught me everything about fishing. At first, we threw more than 500 pieces of bait in four hours.

When I went to the kitchen, I saw the same food as before and Leon said, “You have to eat something because more hard days are ahead.”
Later on, everybody had to be in the front of the ship to pull in the fishing hooks. It was very dangerous because we had to catch the fishing lines before they passed through the engine.

The first day the fishing was very poor. Captain Yamamoto said, “It is just the first day.” The next day the same terrible sound woke me up again, and the food was still one of my problems. Yamamoto came to my cabin, and he was very angry. Yelling at me, he said, “You have to eat something!” So the following day I tried the raw fish, and it was not bad with mayonnaise.

We did the same fishing routine every day. Soon we became successful and Yamamoto and the other Japanese were very happy. The ship had a very huge freezer to keep the fish from spoiling. After work, I liked to walk around the ship. I enjoyed it when a huge black veil covered the sea. No less fantastic was the jumping of the fish, playing with the moonlight, like sprinkles in the air.

Finally, the food was changed. The chef made rice, chicken and sometimes clam soup. I was comfortable with that, and I learned how to use the small sticks.

One day we circled the Galapagos Islands. It was incredible, and I felt really blessed to be on Yoko. Everything was perfect, an adventure, until the most terrible thing happened.

Blood was everywhere on Yoko. It was sharks’ blood, and I couldn’t believe the way they killed the sea life. For a minute I thought it was a bad dream, but when the blood covered me, I realized that I was awake.

I could see their eyes pleading not to be killed, However, they didn’t listen to them, They didn’t see their tears, They didn’t feel their pain. I saw the sea like an enormous grave, I saw the sea covered in red, My heart was in pain.

I could see how they enjoyed killing the sharks. I saw that for them, everything that happened on Yoko was normal, but not for me.

I didn’t realize that I had been three months on the ship, but one day Captain Yamamoto came to my cabin and told me that we would be back home in two days. I
was very happy to hear that, but at the same time, nostalgic. Very soon I would have to say goodbye to Yoko, and let go of all the secrets that I know.

Nowadays, when I watch the ocean,
I still remember the blood,
I still remember the tears,
I still hear the crying of the sharks.

Oswaldo Rodriguez studied literature at the Universidad Tecnica de Machala in Ecuador. He now studies English at the Consortium for Worker Education in the Workers United Education Program, where Sherry Kane is the program director. “I want to say thanks to CWE for giving me the opportunity to improve my English, and to my teacher, Jackie Bain, for believing in me.” He says, “When I write, everything around me stops.” He was also published in LR10.
When I arrived in Barcelona five years ago, I had just graduated from university so I started to look for my first job. The beginnings in a new city are always difficult, and this period was no exception. Everyone was saying it wasn't the best moment to find a job as the crisis had just started in Europe. For that reason, I began working as a promoter of alcoholic drinks in bars and restaurants.

The salary wasn't bad; furthermore, many people kept telling me I should be happy to have a job. However, I wasn't. There was no challenge in the position, my responsibilities were very easy, I had to work every weekend and, on top of all this, I felt very frustrated as it wasn't the type of job I thought I would do while I was studying at university.

One day I visited a new marketing agency to participate in a casting for a promotion. The interview with the Marketing Manager was a complete disaster. When I left, I explained my experience to the receptionist in a very funny way and she laughed a lot. I explained that I felt very disappointed with my professional development. There was a great rapport between us. We kissed each other goodbye and agreed to keep in touch for future promotions.

One week after the terrible interview, I received a phone call from Joana, the receptionist, asking me if I was interested in attending an interview with a friend of the owner of the agency. It seems that the owner's friend had asked Joana if she knew someone who was looking for a job. I went to the interview and got the job. To my surprise, the company was a communications agency and the position was for a Marketing and Communications Assistant.

This experience taught me many things. First of all, you never have to stop smiling, no matter how bad things are. Moreover, the more honest you are with people, the more positive energy you
receive from them. People are always trying to hide their feelings because they believe showing your emotions makes you weaker. I don’t agree. If we shared our fears more often, life would be easier as we all have similar experiences.
I was born into a poor farm village family in Afghanistan in 1965. I started to work when I was around six years old. I was a shepherd tending a few sheep and goats that belonged to my family. My father owned a small plot of land and a man leased my father’s land, but it was not enough to support the growing family. He was heavily in debt. One year, he had to agree to work for another landowner, Haj Ahmadbeg, as a peasant. Landlords and peasants usually made an agreement that landlords would provide land, seeds, fertilizers, and equipment. Taxes were also paid by landowners. Peasants had to work on the land and grow crops, mostly wheat, maize (corn), and barley. The harvest was divided between them, with usually one fourth for the peasant, but all the straw would go to the landowner. However, the landlords sometimes would demand more. The peasant had to pay a sum of money in advance and agree that one of his children work for the landowner for free.

Haj Ahmadbeg asked my father to pay him 1100 Afghanis in advance and have me work for him for free, as well. Both demands were difficult, but my father had no alternative. I had to pasture nine baby goats on hillsides. Happily, they were agile and funny.

There were other chores I had to do for my family. I had to collect edible wild greens and solid fuel, like small sticks and twigs. Once, after I had brought home a basket of greens at about 1 p.m. as usual, my mom told me that the villagers would butcher a cow for a feast that afternoon, so she wanted me to go to the hillside for more fuel and greens but not go too far. She promised me some cooked meat when I returned. It was her way to encourage me to do extra work.
I left home with my tools, a small basket on my back, and an axe in my hand. I went farther and farther and reached the next village. I saw a woman who was taking care of her sheep a short distance from her house. She recognized me and treated me kindly, by telling me that she would not let children in her village harass me. That’s because no one was not allowed to collect greens from another village’s territory.

I had emptied my basket and hidden the greens on my way to her village because I was scared that other children might take my bounty by force. Her promise encouraged me. My basket was full when I returned to where I hid the first batch, and I loaded everything on my basket. It was getting dark, and I struggled greatly to carry the entire load. The basket fell off my back three times. I was exhausted and started to cry. Then, I suddenly remembered that mom had said there were ghosts and goblins there after dark. It scared me so much that I left everything behind and ran away.

Reaching a hillside, I heard my father’s voice from a distance. He was calling out my name. “I am here!” I shouted, “I cannot carry my basket.” He reached me, and I showed him where my basket was. Then, I heard other voices, my mother’s and other adult family members. They deafened me with questions all at once: “Are you all right?” “Did you fall asleep?” “Did you see ghosts?” They believed in superstitions; goblins and ghosts would have frightened them too.

These are my childhood memories. My youngest son, William, who was born earlier this year in New York City, will have such different childhood memories than mine. I hope to do my best to make that so.

A proud father of six, Jafar Rasouly grew up in Afghanistan. To escape the 1980 Soviet invasion, his family resettled in Iran for 20 years. In 1997, he opened a school for Afghani children banned from Iranian public schools. A committee member in the adoption of a new constitution after the Taliban’s ousting in 2001, he was also a campaign manager for President Karzai’s 2009 election. Currently, he is the First Secretary in the Consulate General of Afghanistan in New York.
Yes
JENNY FOONG

My boss lady told me she wants me to wash the bed sheet, iron it, and put it back on the same day.
I said, “Yes, ma’am.”
My boss lady asked me if I could please clean another apartment she has on First Ave and 50th Street in Manhattan, for the same pay as the one apartment I already clean for her.
I said, “Yes, ma’am.”
Last week my boss lady asked me to take the dog for a walk right before I was supposed to leave for the day. Plus, it was raining.
I said, “Yes, ma’am.”
Rain or snow, when the boss lady asks, it’s, “Yes, ma’am.”
Many people who hire housekeepers demand a lot. They want to get everything done right away. How does the housekeeper feel? She feels she has no choice.

Born and raised in Malaysia, Jenny Foong is 64 years old. She studies at the New York Public Library’s Adult Learning Center at Seward Park. Terry Sheehan is the site advisor. Jenny Fong writes: “I grew up on a rubber plantation. I started working there when I was six years old. I never had a chance to go to school until three years ago, when I came to the library. My hobby is learning to read and write.”
On October 4th, I went to work, and when I saw my boss that morning he asked me if I wanted to take a vacation. I told him, “Yes, in February.” He said, “No, I mean MV has a company in Texas, and they need help, and I have to send my best drivers to help out.” I told him that I didn't have any money to go out there, but he said, “Don’t worry. The company will pay for everything.” “Okay,” I said. He said, “Go home and pack.” I said, “Wow!”

I was a mess—I didn’t know what to wear or take. I called my boss and asked him, “How long am I staying there?” He said, “Three weeks.” I cleaned my apartment. I just packed my uniform and clothes for Sunday, in case I went to church or got a day off, because my boss said, “You are going to be working a lot.” So I went with the attitude that I was going to work; there would be no fun. “Okay, I can do that.” Will, my boss, said, “Be at the office at 8 a.m. tomorrow, and a driver will take you to the airport.” When I got to the office, there were three more good drivers that were leaving for Texas with me.

I was so excited to be going somewhere different. Then, when I got on the plane, I wanted to chicken out. A feeling like that was inside me because I was still sitting in my seat. I was sitting in the middle. I think that’s why I couldn’t move. Inside, I was panicking. I started to think: I don’t know Texas. I don’t have a GPS. I’m just going to mess up.

But I closed my eyes and started to pray: God, I turn to you for help because I don’t know what I’m getting myself into. Three hours and 45 minutes later, we got to Texas.

They picked us up, and took us to the office, where the boss introduced himself to us and the rest of the managers. He told us, “Now, go to the hotel and get dressed. We need you to start right away.” Wow! Now I wanted to know what happened to this company that they needed our help from New York.

We started to work; everyone got a route and vehicle. Some of the drivers started chickening out and said, “No, I can’t drive a big truck.” Some of them said, “I
don't know where I'm going.” I said, “I'm here to help. What do you want me to do?” Dispatch gave me a route and a big bus, which looked like a truck. I went for it, but when I was on the route I was scared, so I used the GPS on my phone. The highway was long, seven to 10 miles to the next exit. I felt like I didn't know where I was going, but I listened to the GPS and just drove. I picked up a passenger and asked for help: “Where do I drop you off? I'm from New York.” The passengers and I talked, and every day was good.

The passengers made my day. I was supposed to stay for three weeks, but I stayed for six, and it was fun. On my only day off, Saturday, I would ride the bus. (The fare in Texas is four dollars to ride for the whole day.) That was good because I went to the State Park, where Big Tex was. There was a lot of food, such as ribs, corndogs, and turkey legs. On Saturdays, I dressed up in my cowboy boots and a cowboy hat. My co-workers said, “There goes the New York cowgirl.” It was fun, but it was sad that I had to leave to go back to New York.

Milagros Gonzalez was born in New York City and is of Puerto Rican descent. She is currently working toward getting her G.E.D. and having her commercial driver's license reissued. She attends evening classes at the New York Public Library’s Harlem Adult Learning Center. Her tutors are Laurie Hockman and Anne Conroy, and the site advisor is Sid Araujo.
I was 19 years old, a skinny little boy, living in Brazil. I used to watch people work out in the gym. One of my best friends, Mocoto, helped me train. He was one of my biggest inspirations. He showed me how to be a personal trainer. By the age of 25, I was bigger and was able to get my license as a personal trainer.

I decided to move to Miami, Florida in 2000 because of friends who used to visit Brazil from the United States. They made a lot of money in Miami as personal trainers. I was not making a lot of money as a personal trainer in Brazil. So I moved to Miami and took three jobs: personal trainer, caterer, and furniture mover. But Miami was a beach city, a place to take a vacation. I wanted to live in a place that had more energy, was more dramatic. So I moved to New York in 2009.

As a personal trainer in New York, one of my greatest joys has been working to help people get healthier. One example was a 60-year-old man who had been boozing for 40 years. He had diabetes and a big beer-belly. I started him out with a lot of cardio exercises and changed his diet. In the morning he could eat scrambled egg whites or oatmeal, instead of bagels with butter. For lunch he could have chicken breast—not fried chicken. He could have mashed potatoes. Basically, I gave him a low-fat diet. But once in a while he could have a cupcake or slice of pizza—just not every day.

Now he is a happy man. He is no longer diabetic. He is better looking and leaner. More importantly, he not only looks healthier, he is healthier. While he used to pass out in bars, now he no longer goes to bars. I feel blessed helping him and living in the United States. America is my home.
I will never forget my first patient.
She was admitted paralyzed, unable to move her legs and arms, and was in a depression because of a miscarriage. Her situation was made worse by the fact that she had nobody to take care of her.

She already had children and her husband was staying with them. So she was very lonely with her grief. I was feeling responsible not only for her physical well-being, but also for her emotional stability. Moreover, she was asking repeatedly whether she could have a baby again. This was a question for which I did not have an answer at that moment. My friends were joking with me that I was spending all my time next to the bathroom doors, when she was inside, to check if she had regained her functions.

Day by day, I realized that observing the dramatic improvement of her physical and emotional functions was the best reward of my work. I learned that medicine is more than a challenge of diagnosis; it requires great patience. It requires understanding your patient on a human level. And as a Latin proverb goes: *Non morbum, sed aegrum curare*, which means, not the disease, but the patient should be cured.

She went home walking on her feet but remained to me a model case that inspired my whole future career.
IF YOU MESS WITH ONE, YOU MESS WITH ALL
Writing about New York City

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Where I’m From
JESSIE TORRES

I’m from a brood of eight children,
A strong mother with strong genes.
From a family with a lot of love.
If you mess with one, you mess with all.
From where I RISE and then I FALL, into the arms of my family.
Don’t I love them ALL.

From where cops dress undercover, not wanting to be seen.
From seeing my brother get shot.
Watching him bleed,
And not being able to help ’cause they shot ME.

I’m from late night shootings and early birds tweeting.
Where you go to school all week and drink all weekend.
Where cops stop and frisk and judge you on how you dress.
From where we shop online and dress to impress.

I’m from being spoiled not knowing how it feels to get hit.
From seeing crackheads get star-struck off that hit.
From where you can’t be nice ’cause they take your kindness for weakness.
Where we wake up early just to clean on weekends.

Where your friends turn to enemies, can’t be trusted,
When you go to jail you don’t hear nothing.
Where they catch cases and don’t say nothing
And when you get money everybody want something.
I’m from if I get hurt, then my whole family’s hurt.
Where they keep secrets and take them with them to the dirt.
From a family that loves me regardless if I go to school or work.
I am from the blood that flows through my family’s body.
Where my brothers lay on the couch all day, but to me they still somebody.
One year ago, I was living in a quiet place between mountains and forest. My noisiest neighbors were birds in the trees near my apartment. Then my husband found a job at Columbia University, in genetic research. We knew that it was an amazing chance. We knew also that it could be difficult to change our life. We took time to think, and we decided to accept the position. My husband started his job in September 2011. I stayed in France to finish my work.

In October 2011, I came to New York for the first time in my life. From the plane, when I arrived over New York at night, I saw the ocean of light outlined by the city. I could not believe my eyes. I thought: It never ends.

In the street, cars and trucks honked their horns. A bus squeaked its brakes. An ambulance and a police car sounded their sirens. The subway roared under the sidewalk. A plane droned in the sky. After my eyes, my ears were shocked, and I thought: It never ends.

On the same sidewalk, I smelled a frying odor from a fast food restaurant, laundry detergent from a laundromat, nuts roasted by a vender, pizza from an Italian restaurant, a nauseating odor from ginkgo fruit, bread from a bakery, grilled meat from the hot dog venders. After my eyes and my ears, my nose was shocked. I thought: It never ends.

When I arrived in our apartment, I collapsed in the armchair. I felt really strange, tired and lost. My brain could not understand all the sensations observed by my eyes, my ears, and my nose. It was too much.

Now, I understand that my senses caught all of what it is possible to do in New York. It never ends.
Heloise Bonnefon, 30 years old, was born in France. She arrived in New York City in October 2011. She is a social worker and horseback riding instructor. Elaine Sohn is her ESOL teacher at the New York Public Library’s Aguilar Adult Learning Center. Heloise Bonnefon says that she discovers this amazing city more every day.

York. In this city, you have a choice about what you want: what you want to do, where you want to go, when you want to do it. The mix of all the nationalities and cultures adds up to a good will that brings human wealth to the city.

Before my brain understood, my senses felt the energy and the life “that never ends” in New York City.
I remember when I first came to New York City on May 13, 2008, I felt extremely emotional and also embarrassed. The reason I felt so emotional was because I could not stop thinking about the friends and family I had left in Haiti, especially my son who was four days old.

My first week in New York was terrible because every day I stayed home by myself; I was afraid to go out. I thought some people might ask me questions on the street. But I was also afraid to stay home.

In Haiti, we don’t have a heating system because we never have cold weather like New York does.

One Saturday night in late November, I heard a noise close to the radiator. It sounded like somebody hit the pipe. But I did not panic because I was the only one in the house. I heard that noise several times. Then I started to question myself: Where is that noise coming from? Who the hell is it? Is it a person? What is he looking for? At that moment, I was getting scared.

My first guess was that the house was haunted. That night, I could not sleep. I stayed awake to see where the noise was coming from, but I couldn’t find it.

The next day, things became more complicated. I began to hear the kick in every corner of the house. I was alone in the house and was very panicked. I did not know what to do, so I called my brother-in-law to let him know what was going on in my apartment. I told him “Yo, it seems like my apartment is haunted.” He asked me, “What makes you say that?” When I began to explain what was going on, he started to laugh at me. He told me, “Don’t worry. There’s nothing wrong in your house. The noise that you hear is coming from the radiator. It means your house is going to be warm in a few minutes.”

Then I realized the house was not haunted.

Jonel Obas was born in a small town in Haiti and has been living in New York City for four years. He is studying English with teacher Jay Klokker at CUNY’s New York City College of Technology. His dream is to become an engineer in auto mechanics.
The Subway Is Another City
PROSPER G. ILBOUDO

One, two, three . . .
I step into the hole
In the corner deeply
Sleep two poor souls
It's a new day
On the subway
With its mosaic crowd
It's a real salad bowl

We don't know each other
We don't talk to one another

The subway is another city
The subway never sleeps
Gigs and screaming here
Beggars and cursing there
Alcohol and cigarette smells
Too bad for police officers

The subway I hate it
The subway I live it

Here's my train coming
The monster opens its mouth
Throws up and swallows clients
Some are nice and smile
Others watch with scorn
Anyway it’s the subway
Sometimes with delays
Time Square 42nd Street
What a relief
I’m still on time
Holy Subway
I love it sometimes

Prosper G. Ilboudo was born in Burkina Faso, West Africa, and immigrated to New York City in February 2012. He began writing (in French) in Burkina Faso, and he also became interested in philosophy, especially Plato and Sartre. He says he writes stories and poems, sometimes autobiographical, when he’s extremely unhappy and also when he’s extremely happy. He studies with Elke Stappert in an ESOL class of the New York Public Library’s Mid-Manhattan Learning Center.
I walked onto the 4 train with my clothes soaked from the rain. I wanted to take a seat, but I was wet from head to toe, which would only leave pools of water on the train seat.

I stood up during the entire ride, hoping to dry off, and watched the little kids do flips and tricks on the pole. All I could say was, “Oh my!” It was entertaining to watch as it made time seem to pass faster. By the time I knew it, it was my stop. I did not want to get off because the kids captured my eyes. I looked down, saw the wet floor, and thought, *The MTA needs a mop!*
Lady in the Subway
VENESSA LENOIR

A homeless lady came to me and asked me for something to eat. I gave her a cheeseburger and french fries out of my bag. I had bought the food for my children. The lady took my food and said, “Thank you.”
I said, “You are welcome.”
The lady turned away from me and threw the food on the train track. I screamed at her. She laughed at me and left the platform.
I was so upset that I said I would never give a homeless person anything again…but I probably will.

Born in Brooklyn, 35-year-old Venessa Lenoir really met the “Lady in the Subway.” She studies at the Central Learning Center of the Brooklyn Public Library, where Winsome Pryce-Cortes is the site manager. Venessa Lenoir writes, “I am a proud mother. I love being with my children.”
Free at Last
WESLEY SALLEY

I felt free when I came to New York. I was working in the South from the age of seven. I worked very hard for a little money six days a week. My mother needed help at home. All of the girls went to school and the boys stayed home and worked on the farm.

I picked beans, peas, corn, watermelon and cucumbers. I also picked cantaloupes, grapes, plums, pears, blackberries and peaches.

Sometimes I thrashed peanuts. First I pulled the small bushes up and wrapped them around a pole until the nuts dried. They took a month or more to dry. Then I stripped the nuts off the bush and loaded them in crates. I also drove a tractor to plow the soil and plant cotton, soy beans, rice, oats, corn and other crops.

I was twelve when a white man tried to beat me. He said that I had broken a tractor. I went home and got a gun. My mother asked me, “Boy, what is wrong?”

I responded to my mother, “This man is talking about beating me.”

My mother said: “Boy, let’s go to New York!”

When I got to New York, I found a job with an old man working with plaster. He was repairing ceilings and walls of an old building. I have looked back on that day and realized that I have worked from that day until now.

I felt free to work in New York because I didn’t feel afraid anymore.

Wesley Salley, who is 62 years old, was born in Denmark, South Carolina. Raised by a single mother, he had 13 siblings. He started working in the fields at age seven. When he was 13, he came to New York and has worked in the building trade ever since. He studies with his tutor, Peggy Spangler, at the New York Public Library’s Aguilar Adult Learning Center, where Elaine Sohn is the site advisor.
In my home country, Togo, there is so much talk and information about New York City: In New York City, each citizen has his own house or building; he has his proper cars and much money from the government. In New York City, there is freedom for everyone. In New York City, you can feel paradise. Who wouldn’t want to visit this wonderful place?

Yes, but here is New York: No one has time for you; here everything is about speed. Your bills alone won’t allow you to sleep. Here, every day someone gets killed by a gun. Here there are people without houses—the homeless. In New York City, people ask you for quarters for help. After 12 years in this place, I understand.

Far from here, people are thinking, just imagining how it could be.

Adjana Molomandi, age 46, was born in Togo, West Africa and has lived in the United States for 12 years. He studies at the Department of Education’s Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center. Jessica Jordan is his teacher, and Dianna Raissis is the instructional facilitator. Adjana Molomandi loves New York City and his job as a baker.
SHE RAN LIKE A TIGER
PURSUING ITS PREY
Writing about Surprises

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Running Against a Granny
OVIDIO GERALDINO ZAYAS

Just one month after I arrived in the United States, I was standing on a corner of Morris Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change so I could cross the street. There was a bus stop across the street. Suddenly, a little elderly lady stood beside me. Shakily but with authority she told me, “You can’t run faster than me. You couldn’t catch the bus before me.” At least that was what I understood with my limited English. I was surprised to hear a senior citizen say that! Was she challenging me?

I answered her with a little fake smile, “I am sorry, Madam. I cannot do things like that.”

Then she gave me a hard look and ran like a tiger pursuing its prey. She didn’t wait for the signal change to cross the street. I thought, Seriously? I had heard that in New York City you could see many weird things, but I didn’t expect that an old lady with a folding walker would challenge me to race.

When the “walk” sign showed, I crossed the road and arrived at the bus stop. The old lady was there, waiting for the next bus. She seemed a little mad at me. In that moment I rewound my mind, and then I understood everything. A few minutes before, she had really said, “You can run faster than me. Could you catch the bus for me?” So now I really wanted to run. I was too ashamed to stand beside her.

I was thinking about that matter all day. Now I knew that I had to sharpen my ears and pay attention to the English pronunciation in order to avoid a situation where another old lady missed the bus through my fault.
It was a nice day in August when I decided to be nosy and dig into folders in my mother’s closet, containing lots of important paperwork. I was unfolding and trying to put ripped-up pieces together to see what they were, and I went through a lot of papers.

I found documents dating back to 1950. I was completely astonished when I found my old, faded birth certificate. It had my birthday and the hospital I was born in. It had my name as Eugene Ruiz before it was legally changed to Angel Joel Santos. When I saw this, my eyes opened up as big and wide as if I had seen a million dollars. This left me in a state of mind where I didn’t know what was happening.

I looked at my old birth certificate. I saw the address but couldn’t really tell the apartment number because it was faded. Without hesitation, I quickly got dressed and raced to the door. My mother asked me, “Where are you going in such a rush?” I didn’t want her to know that I was on the verge of finding my blood family. So I told her, “I’m going to a friend’s house because he just got a new game. I love you, and I’ll see you later.” Then I gave her a kiss on the forehead and rushed out of my house faster than a bolt of lightning. I ran to the 22 bus and waited impatiently for it to come. I took the bus to the 6 train, and I was on my way to meet my family.

While I was on the train, I kept thinking: What am I going to say? How am I going to react? How are they going to react? I was happier than a kid with candy. I finally got to the building but didn’t know what to do because I couldn’t see the apartment number on the birth certificate. I saw a group of people talking on the stoop. I went up to a lady and asked if she knew a lady named Diana. She replied, “Yes, but who’s asking?” I told her, “This might sound crazy, but I’m her long-lost son Eugene.” The expression on her face showed me that she had a lot to say but couldn’t come out with it. She then gave my aunt in Virginia a call, but after the third try she left a voice mail message.

“I’M HER LONG-LOST SON.”
Two days later I got a call from my aunt. She was excited to be the first person in the family to speak to me. I then spoke to my older brothers Angel and Gege. My brother then called the one person I’d been dying to meet for 20 years, my mother. The next day I went to visit my mother, and when we saw each other we hugged for a while. She was constantly crying and apologizing for her absence. I told her, “It’s fine, and I’m back in your life now.” We then began walking to her house, where I met more of my aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. After three weeks of hanging out and getting to know my family a little, I went to Virginia to visit my brothers. I couldn't believe I look just like my mother and my brother.

I discovered that I have an older sister who is 22, also adopted, and now living in Florida. So we are waiting to meet her and welcome her to the family. I thank God every day for making my wish come true. It took me almost 21 years to find my blood family. My adoptive mom, who is a very special person, is happy about it too. God works in mysterious ways.

Angel Santos is 21 years old and lives in the Bronx. He is working and studying at Phipps Community Development Corporation, where his teacher is Gale Shangold. He plans to get his G.E.D. and continue his education in college, majoring in business.
One night a woman was waiting at an airport several hours before her flight. She bought a book and a packet of biscuits to pass the time. She found a seat and sat down to wait. She was concentrating on reading her book. Suddenly she noticed that a young man who sat beside her had stretched his hand casually to the packet of biscuits that was between them. He began to eat them one by one. Not wanting to make a fuss, she tried to ignore it. A little annoyed, the woman began to eat the biscuits and watch the clock, while the young thief of biscuits continued shamelessly eating biscuits. They were almost out of biscuits. The woman was irritated. She thought, *If I was not so good and educated, I would hit the thief.*

Every time she ate a biscuit, he also ate one. The dialogue continued silently through their eyes. When there was one biscuit left, the woman wondered who would take it. Softly and with a nervous smile, the young man reached out, took the last biscuit, broke it in two, and offered half to the lady while he ate the other half. She took the half a biscuit abruptly from his hand and thought: *What kind of man! So rude! He did not even thank me! I’ve never met anyone so rude.*

When the flight was announced, the woman took her bags and headed for the gate. Having boarded the plane and sat down comfortably, the woman reached for her book, which was nearly finished. When looking for the book in her bag, she was totally surprised. She found her packet of biscuits nearly untouched. *If my biscuits are here,* she thought and felt sorry, *the other packet must be his. He tried to share with me.* It was too late to apologize to the young man, and she saw with much regret that she had been the rude, poorly educated, thief of biscuits.
Three things we cannot recover:
A stone . . . after it has been thrown.
A word . . . after it has been said.
An occasion . . . after it has happened.

Maria Avelino, age 42, studies English with Wendy Wen at the Department of Education’s Bronx Adult Learning Center at Phipps. She writes: “I was born in Santo Domingo, the Dominican Republic. I have been living in the United States for 11 months. Persistence has helped me achieve many accomplishments in my life. I love studying, and every day I try to learn something new.”
Right Then and There
LILLY MARTINEZ

What really changed my life was becoming pregnant and giving birth to my lovely daughter. Throughout my entire 20s and early 30s, I dreamed of being a mom. I just love kids.

When I became pregnant at 30 years old, it only lasted for about four and a half months. I rushed myself to the hospital because I felt a strong pain in my abdominal area. I was at the hospital for hours. When the nurse finally did a sonogram on me, he announced that the baby had died. I was devastated. After that, I tried so many times to become pregnant, but to no avail. I thought I would never become pregnant.

The years went by, four years to be exact, when one day my husband was making my favorite meal. It was ribs, white rice, and black beans, and fried yellow plantains.

I said to him, “When are you going to throw that shit away?”
He said, “What in the hell has gotten into you?”
I said, “Don’t you smell that? It’s spoiled!”
He said, “Lee, are you pregnant?”
I said, “By whom?”
He started to laugh. I didn’t want to believe it, but it was true. Now I was three months pregnant, and afraid.

It turned out I had a wonderful pregnancy. When the birth time arrived—Wow! What an experience—and it was worth it! When I saw my lovely baby girl, Nareyni, I couldn’t believe my eyes. I started to cry. Right then and there, I knew my life had changed.

Lilly Martinez, age 35, was born in Brooklyn. She has been studying with Writing Lab instructor David Tarica at the New York City Department of Education’s Brooklyn Adult Learning Center. She wants to get her diploma so she can study to become a licensed practical nurse. After that, she plans to go to college, to become a registered nurse. Of writing, she says, “I never knew how much you can do by picking up a pen. You can be so creative, and there’s no age limit.”
The Adventure of Cuba’s Parrot
NIKOLAY MALEVANAY

I heard this story on the train when I was traveling from Vladivostok to Moscow. By January of 1961, the United States had broken diplomatic ties with Cuba, and an embargo was declared. Castro, the leader of Cuba, quickly found a new political ally in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union bought Cuba’s sugar and extra manufactured goods. Hundreds of Soviet specialists were sent to help Cuba build a new lifestyle, socialism. When the contract was finished, all the Soviets who worked in Cuba took home a parrot as a present.

In Cuba, the parrots were as numerous as sparrows in Russia, but the laws of the Soviet Union prohibited imports to Russia. The quick-witted Soviet specialists resorted to different tricks to evade the prohibitions. The day before the trip to Russia, they poured two tablespoons of rubbing alcohol into the beaks of the parrots. The parrots fell asleep and stayed asleep during the entire trip.

This is what happened in one of the Soviet Union custom houses in Moscow. Maybe in this case, the owner of the parrot didn’t have rubbing alcohol, and instead poured in vodka. So the parrot didn’t sleep enough. When the owner went across the border, the parrot woke up. The cries “I’m Russian, I’m Russian!” broke through the normal custom house noises. The sound came from one of the suitcases. The officer asked the owner to open his suitcase, and when the suitcase was opened, the officer saw a swaddled parrot. The parrot turned his head back and forth and cried, “I’m Russian, I’m Russian!”

An officer asked, “What is this?”

The owner of the parrot lost his head, and in fright he could not speak to the officer.
“Are you Russian?” asked the officer.
“I’m Russian, I’m Russian!” the parrot repeated.
A burst of laughter resounded in the custom house.
The officer laughed, said, “Welcome to Russia, sir,” and slammed the suitcase.
The owner crossed the border with confidence.
It was 1992. I was 15 years old and living with my family in Bangladesh, when I experienced the funniest event of my life.

One day, my mother, my eight brothers and sisters, and I were visited by three cousins and their mom. All day and night we laughed, sang, ate, and talked about our lives. Finally, at 4 a.m., we fell into bed, exhausted, the girls in their room and the boys in theirs.

About half an hour later, our housekeeper, Bowa, arrived to begin her morning duties. It was still very dark outside, with thick clouds and a heavy mist. As she filled a large pot with water from our well, Bowa saw in the distance a lone figure running beside the four-foot wall that surrounded our house. It was a friend of one of my brothers, who had decided to take an early-morning jog in the neighborhood.

“How are you?” our friend called out to the housekeeper. “What are you doing outside at this early hour?”

The housekeeper, unfortunately, could not make out the figure in the misty darkness. To her, he appeared as a ghostly presence. Bowa dropped the pot of water on the ground and ran, screaming, into the house. She cried, “Bhoot, bhoot!”—a Bengali word for ghost.

The housekeeper ran into the girls’ bedroom, still screaming. All the lights were off, and her screams jolted us out of bed. Meanwhile, two of my brothers, one on his way to the bathroom and one who had just finished his prayers, saw the housekeeper dash into our rooms, and thought she was saying that our house was being robbed. When my brothers entered our room, Bowa assumed they were ghosts, too, and she started screaming even louder. We girls started screaming along with her.

Finally, someone threw the light switch on, and we could see each other. All the mothers, brothers, sisters, and cousins were now in the room. After a few minutes, we calmed down. The housekeeper explained about the
ghost, my brothers explained about the robbers, and we all went outside to see for ourselves what had actually happened.

My brother’s friend was standing by the front door with a puzzled look on his face. He told Bowa that he was the ghost she had seen, and she seemed relieved.

While all this commotion was going on inside, the landlord, hearing all the noise, had phoned the police. Outside the house, we told the landlord the story, and he immediately called back the police and told them not to come.

When it was all over, and we were safe from the imaginary robbers and ghosts, we began laughing again, as though our night of fun had never ended.

Even now, all these years later, when I think of what happened on that dark and misty night, I can hardly keep from laughing out loud.

Umda Moriom is a 35-year-old native of Bangladesh who immigrated to America in December 2011. Since May 2012, she has been studying English at the Queens Central Library Adult Learning Center, where Mark Mehler is her writing instructor. She holds a Master’s degree from a Bangladesh university and hopes to become an American citizen.
My Metamorphosis
CECILIA CAI

One morning, I woke from a bad dream and realized that I had turned into a dog. I wanted to speak, but I found that all I could say was “Bow wow.” Oh, my God! What was happening? I smelled many different odors that I had never smelled before; my nose had become so sensitive. I went to the mirror, looking at myself. I had transformed into a dog! A small, white dog. I was so surprised and didn’t know what I should do. I thought of my parents, my job, and my boyfriend. My whole life would change completely! I felt so depressed. I loved my home. I didn’t want to leave my boyfriend, so I chose to stay in my room.

At this moment, my boyfriend came in. “Honey, wake up. I have cooked delicious food for you.” Then he found nobody in the room but a lovely, small, white dog. He was wondering where I went. He took me in his arms. “Hey, how did you come into my home, lovely dog? Do you want to be my pet?” I said in my heart, I am your honey, but you cannot recognize me.

Days and days elapsed. My boyfriend treated my dog-self well, and he kept trying to look for my human-self but kept failing. He thought I left him and felt very sad. I thought: How can I tell you that I still love you? I am right beside you. I felt such pain in my heart but could say nothing. I just followed him.

One year later, he stopped looking for me, and finally he got a new girlfriend. I felt so sad. I escaped from that house, my home in the past. Now I just wander outside.

Cecilia Cai, age 30, came from China to New York City only two months before writing this story. She modeled it on Franz Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” while studying with Adam Bubrow at the Queens Library ESOL Program in Jamaica. While writing, she was expecting a baby. She continued studying so she’d be able to communicate with her child in two languages. She gave birth in mid-December, after attending class the night before.
SHE DECIDED TO SEE ALL THOSE LIGHTS FOR THE LAST TIME

Writing about Extreme Experiences

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Cowboy Boots
GEORGIA NOMI

She was certain that her life no longer mattered. She realized that she had nothing more to see: She had felt the summer heat throughout her body, been charmed by the Statue of Liberty, walked the back-lit Brooklyn Bridge, sensed on the fragile skin of her face the first snowflakes of an autumn cold, been afraid of the power of hurricanes, feared the force of a tornado, felt the spilling of heavy water of Niagara Falls, sensed the good taste of the cannolis in Little Italy, experienced the weird bubble teas in Chinatown, engaged in the dusty, perfumed Indian markets of the Lower East Side, admired the beauty and complexity of her favorite artists at the Metropolitan Museum, realized the passion for research at the American Museum of Natural History, discovered the greatness of her love for her parents, felt moved when she watched her favorite band, found and misplaced love.

On this day, she decided she no longer wanted to live. She chose the place, what to wear, and a message to leave. She left Flushing’s Chinatown and headed toward Manhattan, watching through the window her last view of the Hudson River, rooftops and graffiti printed on the faces of the buildings of New York, the last sunset.

On Canal Street, she decided to spend time in the food store De Palos and appreciate once again the two things she loved most, a piece of Italian bread and Parmesan cheese of the best quality, like a last wish. From there, she took the 6 train, and could not fail to be charmed by the wonderful street artists from New York, while waiting for a train listening to her favorite tune from Dave Brubeck’s Take 5. Inside the subway, a little girl told her that her cowboy boots were beautiful, as the embroidered stars seemed to glitter and make the little girl smile.

She thanked her and told the child that those boots were special to her. After that, she arrived at Grand Central, and in the Great Hall a family asked her to take a picture. Visiting America, they were all dressed in Indian saris and adorned richly. After she took the picture, the family thanked her by giving her an image of the Goddess Lakshmi, a beautiful woman sitting on a lotus flower, which represents
good luck and prosperity. She thanked them and remained motionless for several minutes, looking at that little piece of paper, then followed the north side of the hall and entered the 7 train. Holding on to the pole, she watched a mother teaching her daughter to read the first words of a book. She realized how much the mother's eyes sparkled when each word was properly pronounced by the small and beloved daughter.

Standing in Times Square, she decided to see all those lights for the last time, walking down 42nd Street. She saw on display at Madame Tussaud's the wax statue of John Lennon, and thought how things would have been if his life had not been taken prematurely. She realized how this man was passionate about life, so surely he'd seen everything, but he would have seen and felt much more than his 40 years gave him.

She was dogged in her goal, walking in her cowboy boots, a black dress and long stockings adorned with a generous loop on the side, her dark red hat trying to cover her ears from the cold winds of autumn. She entered the subway station and boarded the red line, her destination 96th Street. Inside the train she heard a male voice telling his story—a veteran, homeless and jobless, asking for help; any help was welcome. The man was dirty with a big beard, wearing shabby clothes, his cap and eyeglasses protected inside the shirt, and he walked toward her.

Getting close, he complimented her cowboy boots and her beauty. He said that in life what really mattered were the love and the good things that one carried within oneself to offer the world, as a gift to each individual. He said that even in the toughest times he never stopped believing that.

She smiled and gave him some coins she carried in her pocket. With her head resting on the safety bars of the subway, she fell asleep for a while, and woke up at the 79th Street station. Getting out, she decided to walk to 96th Street, bought red gerberas, her favorite flowers, and left the bouquet at the brown wood door of her good friend.

A few more blocks, and she finally arrived at her destination. Descending the stairs to access the 96th Street station, she helped a lady who was balancing a huge suitcase down the endless stairs. Next to the turnstile, the old lady thanked her, put her hand on her hat, pulled out a pin adorned with feathers and colored stones,
and asked her to put it on her hat. She smiled and was thankful for the gift given by the gentle lady.

She decided this was the best location to end her journey through life. She looked down to feel the height, accompanied by lights and indicator lights authorizing the coming of the train. To see the green light, she stood on tiptoe, very close to the edge of the platform. The train's wind blew Lakshmi's image that was in her pocket and in a moment of distraction, watching the train go over the colored paper, she thought that could be her, and scared, moved away from the edge.

She breathed and made a little smile, relieved. She reflected on the day, thinking that possibly she had already seen everything, experienced pain, love and loneliness, but that she could continue her journey enjoying the magical and mysterious blessing of life. And confident of that decision, she headed towards the subway exit, walking in her cowboy boots.

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Georgia Nomi is a 32-year-old native of São Paulo, Brazil. She has been living in New York City for about five months and studies English with teacher Robin Poley at the New York Public Library’s ESOL Program at Seward Park. She is passionate about colors, stories, music, books, shoes, food, people, animals, art, and sometimes she writes about her impressions of life, feelings, and love.
Ukraine was in ruins after the Second World War. The Soviet Troops burned our beautiful house, which my father had built in 1937. My older sister and I were orphans. My sister Halyna was 17, but I was only five. We lived together in the village of Yordanivka, where Halyna worked all day in the collective farm fields, leaving me without care. One day, I was walking through a meadow with children of different ages. They surrounded a horse. A teenager gave me a twig. He smiled and said, “You must hit the horse from behind.” I pitied the horse, so I gave him only a light touch. The horse kicked, and his hoof hit my head, near my left eye.

My sister was in a field off in the distance. A girl ran for dear life to her, and cried, “The horse killed your brother!”

Halyna came running. She saw I was immobile, and my head was covered in blood. She picked me up and carried me seven and a half miles to the district hospital in Dykanka. My sister, the skillful doctors, and our God saved my life. I thank them very much.

I listened to the voice from above: Your father and mother perished too early, but you must live.

Vasyl Barabash writes: “I was born in Ukraine 74 years ago and have lived in the United States for 16 years. I study English at the New York Public Library’s Seward Park Adult Learning Center. In 2004, I founded the Art Studio for Children in New York City, where children develop their artistic talents.” This is Vasyl Barabash’s third publication in LR. His site advisor is Terry Sheehan, and the literacy assistant is Hilary Schenker.
Red: A Different Meaning
ABIR FALLOUH

Christmas is the next holiday, so everyone is preparing themselves for celebrating. We see the colors red and green everywhere. Everything is sparkly around us. The buildings stand up happily with their lights, and the Christmas trees proudly wear their shining jewelry.

The color red is everywhere.

My heart is divided into two parts. One of them is happy for this enjoyable season, but the other is terribly sad about a problem in my country. The people in Syria have seen the color red for around a year and a half, but I can't make a comparison between the two reds.

We used to celebrate and enjoy Christmas with joy and peace, and we too used to decorate our trees with the color red. But not this time. Now red means blood, killing and death.

I can't believe how the same color can have two completely opposite meanings. In the end, I hope my country will go back to normal, to a peaceful life, so that we can like the color red again.
This is the kind of story we have heard about too many times, and even when it makes us shiver, we usually refuse to believe it because we could seem insane, and that is what Alesi tried to avoid.

Because of a severe trauma that happened in the past, it was a very difficult story to leave behind. She could not have imagined her life in the future. In her mind there was nothing else to live for, so she decided to finish suffering. It was around 11 in the morning and the emptiness on the subway station was perfect for her purpose. She was crying, thinking about all she had lost because of her mistakes. There was nothing else to do to recover her life. She was lost in her thoughts.

The tears in her eyes did not let her see more than those lights coming from the tunnel. It was confusion all over the place. All she remembered was somebody pulling her from behind. Meanwhile, a hysterical noise came from, maybe, across the platform, and then Alesi was held by a lady maybe in her 60s, hugging her as if there were some blood relationship between them, telling her that everything was going to be okay.

Next, that lady took Alesi to her house and fed her, gave her clean towels to take a shower and talked to her for hours, telling Alesi a similar story of her own. Alesi felt as if the lady was telling her own story. She gave Alesi 20 dollars and a piece of advice that she never forgot: Never give up; go and look for what you need to start again.

After some time, Alesi went back to that house to tell the lady that life had gone well, and to thank her for what she had done before. Alesi was knocking on the door until somebody from the next door came out and asked her if the lady was related to her. That lady had died alone a year ago, and nobody had gone to clean her apartment.
Alesi just left the place because she did not want to tell anybody what had happened. She could not believe what she heard because she had been there less than six months before.

Now she remembers that story to remind herself that something, or someone, showed her that life is a gift and she has to appreciate it like it comes. Even when everything is difficult, there is always something to live for.

We can believe or not what she said, but in the end, everybody likes to hear stories with happy endings, and this is one of them. Even though Alesi was involved in a near-death experience, she is still holding on to hope!

Isela Herrera-Favela came to this country seven years ago, holding a promise to herself to give her kids a better life. She said she never imagined how complicated this would be. She says she is still wrestling life and surmounting great obstacles in order to achieve her goals. She believes she is on the way to be the best example of “Yes, we can.” She studies in the Hunter College SPPELL Program, where her teacher is Ruby Taylor MacBride.
My Near-Death Experience
HERMA PALMER

My near-death experience happened when I was taking my daughter to school early one morning. In Jamaica, not too far from my home, I experienced near-death, and I will never forget it. It was a frightful experience.

My daughter and I were walking on the road. We reached a narrow bridge, where two vehicles cannot pass at the same time, so one should stop to allow the other vehicle to go by. My daughter was on the inside of the sidewalk. I was on the outside, beside her.

While we were waiting on the narrow bridge, there were two cars coming behind us. They didn't stop and allow the other one to go by.

They were speeding. I heard a loud sound rush over my side of the bridge. I didn't realize it was I who got hit and knocked down by that car coming behind me.

I was unconscious for five minutes. When I woke up, I couldn't believe I was lying on the sidewalk, with blood running from my ear and my nose. My daughter was screaming and crying for her mother.

I was crying, “Please, someone take me to the doctor.” Two men in a red car stopped. They were so good to me. They put me into a car and took me to the doctor on Half Tree Road. My daughter, at the doctor’s office, was still crying.

While the nurse cleaned up the blood on me, I asked the doctor if he could take an X-ray of my head, to make sure I didn’t have brain damage. When the driver hit me, he didn't stop and find out if I was dead or alive.

I thank God for saving my life! I could have died, leaving my young daughter. Although it was a terrible near-death experience, I am glad it happened to me and not my daughter.
In the Mango Tree
AFO OUSMANE ORPHEE SALIFOU

As a young boy, I loved mangoes. Despite my parents’ prohibition, I used to climb mango trees to pick these fruits.

When I was almost 13 years old, I climbed a tree where I saw a juicy-looking mango. I was about to pick the fruit when I saw two tiny black eyes staring at me coldly. It was a green mamba.

The next moment, I was standing on the ground. How I got there, I don’t know. Had I fainted? Or, from an unconscious need to survive, had I let myself drop from the tree?

Fortunately, I was not hurt. When I felt the ground under my feet, I ran, ran, ran, as fast as I could, until I lost my breath.

I had escaped the fatal bite of the mamba.

After that day, I always thought twice before disobeying my parents.
Circumcision is part of African culture. Many women suffer this pain in their bodies and in their minds. When I was eight years old, my grandmother came to my father and said, “I want my granddaughter to come with me to the village.” When my mother heard that, she knew what my grandmother was going to do, but she couldn’t say “no.” She did say, “Remember, she is the only daughter I have.” Thinking I was about to play in the village, I was happy to go with my grandma. I thought I’d have more time to know my grandma, but I didn’t know what she was planning.

We got to the village, and I wanted to play. But Grandma didn’t give me a chance. She took me to a place I didn’t know. She said, “Wait for me here.” When she came back, she was with a lot of old ladies. They were holding a bucket of water and said, “Come, take a bath!” I said, “Why, what’s going on?” Grandma did not answer me. Nobody answered me. She just pushed me into a small room and said, “I love you, close your eyes!”

But I didn’t. I saw she was holding a knife and put it into a fire; then she came to me. I was scared. I tried to run out. But there wasn’t a way. She put the burning knife on my vagina and circumcised me. I cried “Mom, Mom! Help me!” But my mom was not there. No one helped me. I screamed, “I hate you! I will never forget that!” Three weeks later, my grandmother and those old women celebrated the circumcision. At the moment, I was happy because she gave me lots of toys.

Nine years later, I was getting married. My grandma came to my wedding. I asked her, “Why are you here again? I didn’t want you!” and I cried. She said, “I’m sorry for whatever I did to you.” I said, “If I have daughters, you’ll never see or touch them!”
Two years after my wedding, I had my daughter. My grandmother called and asked me, “Can you name your daughter after me?” I said, “That will never happen.” I said, “My daughter is named Mariama after my mother. She will never be circumcised!”
This is a story about the largest trip I made in my life. It is a story of many stories; it is a relative of many relatives.

When I decided to come to this country, I thought that everything would be easy and fast, but it wasn't. Over the course of my trip, I passed through different countries, such as Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. I saw different styles of life, tasted different kinds of foods, and used different coins. It was like getting in and getting out of different worlds, uncertain if I would get to the place that I wanted to arrive at.

When I arrived at the frontier between Mexico and the United States, we started the last challenge. We had been walking many days in the desert, where I saw many used things in the land: shoes, empty food cans, packages, old pants. Wow! What I will never forget is that I felt summer and winter within 24 hours. It was an adventure that I will never have again: an indelible adventure, a scar that will be with me forever.
My oldest daughter was born in a taxi. You may want to know how it happened. If you read this piece you’ll notice how foolish my husband was.

On the last day of 1966, I visited the obstetrician. That day, the doctor told me that the baby was due within two weeks. I was not surprised. My stomach was so big, and I was walking heavily as I worked at the laundry business my husband and I owned. I worked 12 hours a day with my two-year-old running around, plus I did all the cooking and cleaning. I hoped the baby would come as soon as possible. Going to the hospital for a few days would feel like a vacation.

That day was New Year’s Eve. We ate dinner, everything as usual, and watched the New Year’s Eve celebration on TV. Suddenly, I felt I had to go to the bathroom more often, but nothing came out. I had severe stomach pain all over. I told my husband that maybe the baby was coming. He replied, “When you had the firstborn, he took a day of labor to come out. Wait until dawn, then I’ll take you to the hospital.”

But I could not bear the pain. I felt the baby fighting to come out any minute. I was alert to every movement I had. When I sat on the toilet, the blood smeared all over the seat. I told my husband to come and look, then I said to him in Chinese, “Go and telephone the doctor first; see what he tells us to do. And second, call your sister, because she lives two flights above us and will help.”

When the doctor returned my husband’s call, he said, “Go straight to the hospital.” My sister-in-law heard the news and came right away. My husband ran down Mott Street looking for a taxi and saw a cab parked in front of a restaurant. He went into the restaurant and asked, “Who drives that cab parked in front?” The taxi driver was Chinese. He was off-duty but came to Chinatown to get something to eat. He was so good; he reached out a helping hand to drive us to the hospital.

In the cab, the driver asked me, “Do you know what time the baby will be born?” I replied that I didn’t know. He said that instead of driving on the highway to
my doctor’s hospital, it would be better to take the local streets. There were a few hospitals right there; it was safer for me and my baby. He didn’t care about the traffic lights. Even though it was a red light, he ran right through it. A cop followed our car with the siren on. “What happened? Are you drunk?” the cop said. The taxi driver told the cop it was an emergency: The baby was coming any minute. “Okay, go ahead. Good luck.”

When the taxi was on the way, at 30th Street, the baby came out into the world with a smile. My husband held the baby and saw her smile at him. He was so surprised. I asked him, “Girl or boy?” He said it was a girl. The driver said he would stop at the nearest hospital, and he pulled up in front of the emergency entrance. He ran in to call the doctor. The doctor came running out. I was in the back seat, and my husband was still holding the baby with his bare hands. The doctor cut the umbilical cord and then my baby and I were separated. The doctor carried the baby inside the hospital. I came in later on. We sent the cab driver home and said, “Thank you very much.” He was a real hero. The cab driver beamed and said, “Congratulations to you both!” In Chinese culture, if you help someone, you will have a long life.

An hour later the doctor came and explained my condition. If I stayed in that hospital, he only could come to visit one time. He suggested I be moved to the original hospital, so he could take care of me any time. He was so kind! He drove the three of us to the hospital where he was based. My girl stayed in a private room because she was born outside in a non-sterile environment. They thought maybe she could bring disease to another baby.

That was my unforgettable night of the new year. I still remember everything so well. It felt like a nightmare. If my husband hadn’t been so foolish, none of it would have happened. I would have gone to the hospital earlier. But I do feel humbled that so many people reached out a helping hand. For so long I have thought to write it all down.
I COULDN’T CHANGE
WHO I AM OR
WHO I LOVE

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Every adolescent has his own problems, changes, and moments that we thought would decide our entire lives. Almost every time we are wrong. Things change. Nothing lasts forever. Well, almost nothing.

When I was 18 years old, I knew that I was gay, and I knew that I couldn't fight it anymore. I spent the last years of my adolescence trying to be normal, seeking a cure, praying and making promises. When one answer to my prayers didn't work, I jumped to the next one. After several years and several tries, I realized that I couldn't change who I am or who I love. But how could I live this life without my parents knowing? How could I avoid hurting them for having a gay son? I tried, without success.

My mother found out when she read my emails. (Advice: Never leave your notebook open!) And it was not easy for either of us at that time. She started the path that I had already finished: seeking a cure, praying to God. Then she pressed me to tell my father. “He has a right to know,” she said.

My father is a big man. He was my hero. When I was a kid I thought that he was Rambo, a military type man. My father was always smart, strong, and sometimes a little rude, with very strong ideas. He always expressed how much he loved me and my brother. I didn't know how he would react when I told him, but I waited for the worst. I even considered that maybe he would try to punch me.

One day, I was in my bedroom, and my mother came in to try to talk about it. I saw how desperate she was. She didn't know what to do or how to face the situation, at least not alone. Then she said that my father needed to know.

I tried to change the subject, but then she called my father to come to my bedroom. I froze: I couldn't breathe; I couldn't move. When my father entered the room, my mother said, “Your son has something to tell you.” My father looked at me and said, “What?”
I couldn’t think; I had no plan for how to tell him this, so I just spit the words out of my mouth: “I’m gay.”

My daddy looked me in the eyes and said: “Okay, so what?” I still don’t know who was more shocked, my mother or me. Then my father said, “I just hope that you don’t get hurt out there; I’m afraid that someone will try to do something to you.”

I couldn’t believe that, so I said: “Are you okay? You are not mad?” My father’s face showed surprise. “Why should I be? This doesn’t change anything between us; it is your life; you decide whom to love. So you already have some boy in sight?” And then he smiled.

That moment, that particular moment, decided my entire life because at that moment, I understood that some kinds of loves are beyond everything.

André Pimenta, age 24, was born in Brasilia. He writes, “My grandmother, who helped my parents take care of me and my brother, died in 2011. She was the only one who didn’t know about me. Today, my brother, mother, and father share all the moments of our lives. They support me completely, and the love of my family is no longer at a distance.” André Pimenta studies in an ESOL class at the New York Public Library’s Aguilar Adult Learning Center, with site advisor Elaine Sohn.
The Red String of Fate
HAISHAN (NIKKI) CHEN

“Fate brings people together no matter how far apart they may be, otherwise they can't know each other, even face to face.” This is my favorite sentence from the novel *Water Margin* by Shi Nai’An. I love this sentence deeply, and the red string of fate also happened in my life once.

One old story, featuring the red string of fate, involves a young girl. The first year that I came to New York, I went to a telephone company to open a cell phone account. A red thread led me to a boy who had a big smile. He was nice and polite. He was the person who took care of my account. At that time, I knew nothing about the phone's function and didn’t know which one was better for me to use. I asked him about every function, and I seemed to be making mischief for him. He didn't act impatient and was still willing to explain. I looked at him. I saw his face was wearing a trace of a charming smile. I was captivated. Time went very fast, and I finished opening my cell phone account. “Bye-bye. Nice to see you today, and thank you for your help,” I said, with a smile. Before I left, he gently touched my head, as if I were a cat. In that moment, my heart beat quickly, and I blushed like a ripe apple.

The red string made a connection between him and me, as if it were decreed by fate. I was surprised, and I couldn't stop thinking about him. Day after day, I thought the encounter would pass, but I always kept this special memory in my heart.

Is it destiny that brings people together, or is it accident? Two years later, I went back to the telephone company to renew my family plan. I saw a familiar silhouette. It was him. At the time, I thought that he did not remember me, and I casually looked for a salesman to help me. Five minutes later, I felt someone gently touching my head again.

“Hello. Long time no see. How did you know I would be here today?” he said in a funny voice.
“How did I know? What do you mean?” I said, puzzled.

“Today is my first day of work in this store again. Do you remember the last time we met two years ago? It was my last day here, and I was transferred to the other shop for training. Now I’ve come back!” he said excitedly.

“Really? Isn’t that what they call ‘fate’?” I glanced shyly at him and whispered.

He laughed. “I get what you are saying. Here is my email address. Send me an email tonight. I have a job to do now. Bye.” He put his personal business card firmly in my hands and quickly went back to work.

Although he had gone, his faint scent was still hovering by my side. Our love, connected to the red string of fate, had started.

To love a person doesn’t need any reasons, but I can say that I was hypnotized by his big smile. I believe a red thread connects us together between different places and difficult journeys, eventually making us come together. Now we have been together two years, and I hope our love will be forever.
Mr. Pink
JOHN DOUGLAS

This day is a good day. Every day I wake up is a good day. I like colors. I like to wear bold, colorful stuff. And when I go out, people give me compliments about my colors. When people see me, they say, “Sir, I love your colors.” It makes me feel happier. Everybody should wear bright colors because it makes you feel so right. I like to wear pink and red. Real men wear pink. I am a boxer with pink shorts and pink shoes.

I like to be bright
So if you don’t like it, good night
Because I am going home to get a bite.
When you see me, just call me Mr. Pink
Then I will give you a wink.

John Douglas, age 41, immigrated from Guyana to New York City 13 years ago. He is a student of Miriam Fisher at the Adult Learning Center of CUNY’s LaGuardia Community College. He writes: “I am good at motivating people and very positive. I help people I work to change their lives. I am a husband, a father, and a boxer.” John Douglas was also published in LR10.
My First Love
MARIA ROMANOVA

When I was in school, I did not like the novel *Eugene Onegin*. I was not very receptive to the love stories in literature and in life. Literary images of love seemed to me nothing more than fairy tales, and I did not understand the first love experiences of my friends. My parents fought and argued all the time. I had never seen even a tiny part of the love that is written about in books. I thought it was impossible that I could ever fall in love. However, as a wise biblical proverb says: “To everything there is a season.”

My time came in 2002. Only a week remained before my eighteenth birthday. I came to the big city to take an entrance exam for the university. On that day, two important events took place in my life. First, I failed the exam. Second, I met my first love. The second event was a disaster compared to the first because I fell in love with a university professor!

We met in the building for teachers where he lived. I had rented a room for three weeks to take additional courses at the university before my second attempt to pass the exam. It was an accident. He was not my teacher. We just lived in neighboring apartments. I fell in love at first sight. My world turned upside down. From the first conversation, we had similar thoughts, views on life, interests, and hobbies.

I was drowning in his eyes. His voice was so familiar. We talked as if we were reading each other’s thoughts. Then I realized that I had found my soulmate. At the same time, my heart was bursting with pain. We could not show our feelings—a 32-year-old university professor and an 18-year-old student. It was impossible! Fourteen years is a big age difference in my country. In addition, we had a different social status. We could not see a future for our relationship. We were afraid to step over public opinion and prejudice. We were afraid to admit our feelings even to ourselves. We had different plans for life: He planned to move to the capital for his career, and I had to think about my education.

Also, I was afraid to ruin his life because I loved him very much. I reasoned with myself: *I am a young, inexperienced girl. He needs a more mature woman, a formed personality, confident, successful, and interesting. Such a woman would support him in his career and life. What could I give him, and what if for me it is only the first passionate love, which will pass quickly?* For me, the possibility of hurting a loved one would be the most terrible thing. Therefore, we pretended that we were just friends and neighbors, nothing more.
I passed the exam, and he moved to Moscow to make a career. And I, in my turn, began to study at the university. Our ways diverged. The thread that bound us together was torn. In my country people often say that first love usually passes quickly. My heart was broken, but I kept hoping it would pass with time, and I would be able to love someone else. Despite these hopes, my pain and anguish did not leave.

In the ensuing eight years there was not a day in my life without my thinking about him. This man had won my heart forever. The years passed. I graduated from the university and moved to Moscow. It is highly unlikely that I would meet him by chance in a city of millions like Moscow. However, through mutual friends, I got to know that he had moved to New York. In my mind, I wished him good luck and happiness. I sank into a new job, trying not to think about my personal life. I still believed that time was the best healer.

Quite unexpectedly, I found my first love again. Virtual social networks are very popular today; that is where we found each other again. After so many years, each of us was sure that the other had already married or had a loved one. It was a surprise that we both were still alone. It took a lot of time and emails to finally decide to speak honestly and to tell each other everything that had not been said a long time ago. In 2002, we were at arms’ length. After eight years, we were separated by thousands of miles and the Atlantic Ocean, but I heard for the first time “I love you!”

On November 18, 2012, in New York City, we celebrated the second anniversary of our wedding. My husband Michael is my first and only true love. We made a big mistake years ago, but used our chance to fix it. Another country and experience have enabled us to move beyond social prejudices and our own fears. We are happy now! Also, I know you should not consider that first love is transient because it may be the only one in a lifetime. Now, I don’t care about what people will say. This is my life and I have only one!

Maria Romanova, 28 years old, comes from Russia and moved to Staten Island to marry Michael, a programmer. She studies English with instructor Judy Falci at the College of Staten Island, where Elizabeth Schade is the ESOL director. She likes classical music, opera, books, walking in New York City, and hot chocolate. Sports, going to the gym, and cooking healthful foods are also important to her.
I will always remember how I met my wife. It was a Sunday afternoon, at a dance after church. It was a miracle. I was raised not to go to dances or parties on Sundays, but after I left my parents’ house, if I went to a dance, it would have to be after church.

This particular Sunday afternoon, I had an argument with the girl I was seeing, so we decided not to see each other that weekend. Therefore, my pal invited me to this special cocktail sip at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. It was crowded, so my pal and I decided to separate, have a good time, and check on each other later. The band was playing and people were dancing. I spotted this younger woman. I went over and asked her if she would like to dance with me. She said yes, so we danced. I asked her name and what borough she lived in. She told me her name was Inez and that she lived in Brooklyn. I lived in Brooklyn also. I found myself kind of attached to her. Almost every round, I was dancing with her.

Inez had just come here from the South and didn't have a boyfriend. I asked for her telephone number. I didn't have a pen or a pencil, and neither did she. I had to remember it in my head. The next weekend, we went to the movies. The girl that I was seeing and I were having many arguments. I don't like to argue, so the rest is history. After three years of dating, Inez and I decided to get married. Out of this union, there are four children, two boys and two girls.

Love is strange. The dictionary says that love is “a strong personal attachment and affection.” I had to give love, security, and protection to Inez for better or for worse. Inez and I have been married more than 50 years. Although Inez and I had many problems in our marriage, our love for each other was stronger than the problems. That is why our marriage lasted so long.
Four years ago I cut off all my hair. In my community, this practice is called the big chop; I call it freedom-waking-up. I remember the day clearly. I stood in front of the mirror examining my honey-brown complexion, my full cheeks, and the one, deep dimple which complements my almond-shaped eyes; then I glanced at my dyed blonde hair that had been permed down to the skull.

I was introduced to chemically-straightened hair at six years of age. My mother, a hairstylist, had decided it was time to tame my unruly hair. I became the family's first victim to beauty—but not the last; I have two younger sisters who were next in line. Mother took that creamy chemical and vigorously rubbed it all over my head. After about 20 minutes, the substance had burned into my scalp; then she washed that white stuff out.

Magically my hair had become perfectly straight. I did not even recognize myself. As much as I loved my new look, I dreaded those monthly straightening treatments, which seemed like the price I had to pay for beauty—that is to say, beauty of the type that is still on display everywhere in the African-American community. The young and old—those with frizzy hair—all walk into beauty supply stores and buy a hair-relaxer product to become someone they are not.

I took a last look at my straightened, damaged hair; and with an expressionless face, I impulsively shaved my head. I had purchased professional clippers the day before, so I guess it was destined to happen.

The cutting and shaving over, I smiled at my reflection in the mirror. *She's beautiful!* I said to myself. From behind the shadow of self-hatred, there emerged an African Queen whom I had not met before. *Never again will you inflict this pain on yourself,* I said to her. *You're too gorgeous.*

Today more African and African-American women are embracing the natural texture of their hair—but not everyone. Some are either ignoring the harmful
effects of the chemicals, or they are following a fashion trend that will one day make them bald: Alopecia, a medical term for extreme hair loss, is a common ailment in the African-American community. Baldness is becoming the new beautiful.

I wonder what had influenced my mother to put chemicals in her children’s hair. I have heard her remark, “Beauty knows no pain.” Some may see my kinky curls and be turned off—like the African-American pastor who said, “You really should perm that nappy hair of yours.”

On the other hand, a man of European descent told me that I looked very regal. And in Harlem a middle-aged man said, “Thank you, my sista, for wearing your hair so naturally.” Let freedom ring!

Vanity Samuel has lived in Brooklyn, New York, all her 27 years. She studies at the New York Public Library’s Adult Learning Center at Tompkins Square, where Terry Sheehan is the site advisor. Vanity Samuel writes: “My class at the library helps me to open up. We are talking about a book, and we have different points of view. Everyone says something different. I go to the Art Institute, too, and we had to do a presentation. I feel freer to express my ideas openly.”
Manners
Make It, Man
ROWLSTON AMSTERDAM

Travel far and travel near
Travel by sea or air
Find manners if you can.
We are all in such a hurry
For business and work.
No one takes time for play.
It would not take much
But a little love to stop
And say to your fellow men
Good morning or good day.
Manners make it, man.

Rowlston Amsterdam, born 37 years ago in Guyana, has lived in the United States for over four years. He studies at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Central Learning Center, where Winsome Pryce-Cortes is the site manager. He writes, “As a boy, I always dreamed of coming to America. Finally, my dream is a reality, and I am loving every moment of God’s gift of life.”
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The Literacy Project dates from 2001 and 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, Ten, and Where I’m From, and the annual all-day Literacy Review Workshops in Teaching Writing to Adults.

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 several New York City public high schools, which have most recently included Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, Facing History School, and Marta Valle High School. Together, faculty and students study a canonical or “contemporary classic” work and create and present writing projects—including essays, stories and poems—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 11 online this summer at the Gallatin Writing Program website: gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/undergraduate/writing.html