THE LITERACY REVIEW
VOLUME 14

An annual journal of writing by adult students in English for Speakers of Other Languages, Basic Education, and High School Equivalency programs in New York City.
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THE HUMAN RIGHT TO LITERACY: REFLECTIONS FROM THE WRITERS OF VOLUME 14

Carly A. Krakow, Editor in Chief

“Literacy is a fundamental human right and the foundation for lifelong learning. It is fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives. For individuals, families, and societies alike, it is an instrument of empowerment to improve . . . one’s relationship with the world.”

–United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

The writing contained in The Literacy Review challenges us to question, critique, and expand our own understandings of literacy. Literacy is, of course, the ability to read and write. However, it is also the right—too often denied—for one to narrate one’s life in one’s own voice. I was first drawn to The Literacy Review because of its clear and deep commitment to showcasing the diverse voices of New York City residents. Though I always saw a fundamental connection between the publication and my academic focus on human rights, I have learned that The Literacy Review is both a vehicle through which important stories about elements of the human condition—including hardship, love, family, loss, and origin—are told, and an active expression of human rights. It is a platform for writers to display how they have exercised, and often have had to struggle for, their right to literacy.

The novelist Shimon Ballas has stated that, for a writer, “the transition to another language is crucial, the use of language as a means. Yet language is not only a tool, language is also a part of the personality. That’s what makes this transition so difficult: you have to literally reconstruct yourself.” What inspires a writer to tackle this challenging “transition” and “reconstruction,” to write about a difficult subject matter or engage in a demanding dialogue? How does an author reflect on the experience of telling a story in a new language, while residing in a foreign place? For a speaker of multiple languages, what is it like to think and write in their newest language, to read their own words on the page and see something both familiar and strange? In spite of hardship, what motivates someone to commit to achieving an education that will enable them to express their views to the fullest?

Many Volume 14 writers wished to reflect on the experience of becoming trilingual or quadrilingual, and the differences between writing in English and their first language. Elia Cheng, who wrote “No Spanish—No Food,” and speaks
Spanish, Chinese, and English, explained how English literacy has changed the way she interprets her own memories and has given her the opportunity to reverse roles with her children, with whom she speaks Spanish and English. “My memory all the time is Spanish,” she said. “But when I started to write, my son told me, ‘Mommy, no thinking in Spanish! Think in your mind, all the vocabulary, only in English.’”

Oleksandr Ostapchuk, author of “The Same Customer” and another trilingual writer (Ukrainian, Russian, and English), said, “I never tried to write stories before. Just some essays in Ukrainian at school. I told my parents that I was never published before in Ukraine. And now in the United States my first year, I will be published!” Improving his English has influenced his outlook on education. “I want to study business. I used to study computer programming in Ukraine. I really like science and mathematics. I like something logical connected with something creative. I try to improve myself in both kinds of thinking . . . to create a good balance.” He is motivated to serve as a role model for his younger sister in Ukraine, and added, “I hope to give her inspiration to do something more.”

On the topic of writing in one’s native language, Antonio Ortega, who penned “The Moon, the Stars, and My Grandfather,” remarked, “It’s a little bit complicated to write in English, because in Spanish I’m free to give more details.” “The Olive Grove” author Karima Makhlouf said, “I speak Berber. I speak Arabic. I speak French. In my country, I didn’t write. Just when I came to the United States.” As Manuel Teppepa, author of “Seasons of My Life” improves his English, he has taken on another challenge, as well. “I started to learn Portuguese. . . . It’s similar to Spanish. My English is not enough. I want to try, if I can, to do both—improve my English and learn a new language.”

Makheni Jean-Pierre, author of “Thinking Meat,” also discussed the new experience of writing in English, and the entirely new experience of writing creatively. “In my country, Haiti, I speak French and Creole. But I didn’t want to write that much. But since I started learning English, I have fallen in love with the language. It’s a new connection . . . to express yourself and say exactly what you want to say. It’s magnifique!” He added, “I feel excited every time I write because I want to use the perfect word, the most appropriate word, in the context that I’m writing. . . . Every time I hear a new word, I write it down and learn the definition. I want to use all of them. Even if that seems impossible. . . . I’m a perpetual learner. I can’t stop!”

Some of the writers in this year’s volume also reflected on how to choose the right format to deliver a particular message. Jing Hua Piao and Chen Xi, co-authors of “Before the War” and “During the War,” explained how their poems derived from an in-class presentation on the Bosnian war. They said, “We think a poem is a very special expression of our emotions.”

Basil Baker, author of “I Am My Hero,” shared his challenging journey to understand the meaning of education. He said, “As a kid, I didn’t know that you weren’t born educated. I thought that something was wrong with me because
I couldn’t read or write. My siblings used to tease me.” As for what inspired him to write his essay, he explained, “My teacher told me to write about heroes. I have a lot of people who I admire for their courage and their determination. But I said—I’ll write about them another time. I want to write about an experience that I had.” A dancer, he said that his limitations with reading and writing were “like a big demon eating my inside out.” He said, “I was scared to ask questions.” It was once he realized “If you ask questions, that’s how you learn” that he became hopeful.

While Basil Baker reflected on finding his own heroic voice, Mariam Cessouma, writer of the poems “Survivor” and “Orphans,” reflected on children who are unable to make their voices heard. She said, “Everywhere you look on TV: Iran, Israel, Libya, Uganda . . . there are people who don’t have any defense—kids. They didn’t ask for that. They are born. They want a future. One day I said, ‘let me put myself in the shoes of those kinds of kids.’ Then I started writing . . . not to publish. I said, “This is for my kids.” Yijie Zhu, author of “Reborn,” also spoke about writing with a mission in mind. A survivor of domestic violence, she said she “had a voice in my heart” that told her what she needed to write about. Given only one day’s notice about The Literacy Review deadline, she explained that the sentences of the poem “were all, a long time, in my heart.”

We are fortunate that the writers published here have so been so candid and generous not only in sharing their essays, poems, and stories, but in sharing the deeply personal journeys and processes that are behind the striking works you are about to read.
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SCORCHING HEAT
Shawnia Harry

Scorching heat, sweaty stinky men
With no shirts, racing up and down
The court, little girls playing Double Dutch
Skipping, singing nursery rhymes
Ice cream trucks replaying their theme song
Sipping on ice cold beer, lying on the ghetto grounds, looking up at the sky
Dreaming of being a bird finally learning how to fly
Parties going on till three o’clock the next day
Preacher on Sunday says it’s going to be okay
Monday repeats itself with unbelievable stress and no wealth
How can ghetto days be sweet, when you’re living on the streets?

Shawnia Harry was born and raised in Queens, New York. Her mother was a social worker. Emulating her mother’s compassion and caring for others, Shawnia Harry became a caregiver, serving her community for over five years. She takes pride in caring for the sick and elderly, along with being a devoted spouse, and mother of her five-year-old daughter. Shawnia Harry studies at the Adult Learning Center of the Queens Peninsula Library. Todd Capp is her teacher, Ebru Yenal is the library literacy specialist, and Barbara Martinez is the site supervisor.
YOU’RE COMING BACK AGAIN
Falonne Beljuby Billy Dembi

The first time I met you, I was very confused. You were far from what I was expecting. When I saw you on TV, I admired you so deeply. I wanted to meet you one day, at least once in my life. But boy, when I met you, I was so disappointed. You looked beautiful in your rare, stunning white coat, made with melting materials, but you had a fiercely rude attitude. You were so mean and affected people around you negatively. Why did you make New Yorkers seem so mean like that? They didn’t want to talk to people when you were there. When I needed help to find my way, nobody wanted to stop even for a second. I thought they were always that way.

Then, once you were gone, I realized that you were the reason they were acting strange; after you went, everybody was smiling, helpful, and happy. You went for a while and came back again, taking the smile from New Yorkers’ faces, closing their public parks and other public attractions. No one even wanted to deal with you. When you were out, we all needed to be in. You made our cities look sad and uninhabited, regardless of the efforts we New Yorkers made to resist you. You left no joy in life for most of us, especially our flowers, plants, and animals. We all wished you’d go back where you belonged, even if sometimes we missed you when you were gone.

Now life is beautiful and cool without you. New York and New Yorkers are so excited right now, and . . . soon you will be coming again. Please don’t be rude; please be less mean than the two times I met you, I beg. Oh my God, he is coming again; yes, he is coming. Winter is coming: Be ready!

Falonne Beljuby Billy Dembi emigrated from the Republic of the Congo. She has been in the United States for two years. An accountant in her native country, she now studies writing at the Andrew Romay New Immigrant Center at the English-Speaking Union. Angela Wilkins is her ESOL teacher, and Tanzilya Oren is the site manager.
It was Wednesday morning, a regular day, but it looked particularly beautiful to me. It was raining, and it was a little bit chilly. I took the bus to my work. The bus ran on Fifth Avenue next to Central Park. There was a lot of traffic, and the bus moved very slowly. I thought it was a bad idea to take the bus because I don’t like to arrive late for my work, but when I looked through the window, it was beautiful as I saw the rain, and the leaves from the trees turning different colors. It was amazing that for one moment I could forget I was going to work and that I was late for work.

I hadn’t felt something like that for a long time. I remembered the days growing up in Mexico when I played with my friends in the rain. Nobody cared about being wet or getting sick. After we finished playing, everybody went home, and my mother was very mad. She told me, “If you get sick, don’t tell me. I don’t want to hear that you are sick, and you don’t want to go to school.”

I told my mama, “Don’t worry. I am not going to tell you anything.” After my mama finished talking to me, I took a very hot shower. Then my mama made me hot chocolate and called me to the kitchen, where I drank my hot chocolate. I went to the living room and lay down on the sofa for hours. I felt great.

Finally, the bus started moving faster, and I could see a few people walking down the street. Everybody had an umbrella. But I saw one old lady with a little kid who started playing in the water. He opened his arms and started jumping. I said to myself: This is what I’m talking about. Sometimes you need to enjoy the day, and it doesn’t matter if it is raining, sunny, or snowing. You can enjoy every moment. This was my beautiful day. That was when I felt happy. When I remembered the day in Mexico, it was a good memory that motivated me to write this essay.
MY SUBWAY SHOCK
Min Yu Zhang

Once I took my children to get the N train. On the subway, I saw a strange woman. She seemed very nervous. She had a bit of a problem. She was not wearing clothes. She had a towel wrapped around her body. Also, she was dragging a trash can. It was very smelly. A lot of people moved far away from her.
A TRIP BENEATH THE EARTH
CM Ziaul Kabir

I came from Bangladesh five years ago. Many things impressed me. (Remember, I was coming from a third-world country to the most famous and powerful place on earth.)

After I was here a few days, I went with my small brother on the subway. We couldn’t believe what we saw. We were thinking that it was impossible that a human made this. Maybe there were aliens from outer space in New York City who were building these things.

We stood in the front car near the window and watched the train wind around the tracks, stop where a voice said it would, then continue.

My little brother, Gias, kept saying that only a non-human could conceive of this. Nobody could think to build this. It was under the earth, under the city where people live and work and walk! I myself could not believe we were actually under New York City!

We looked at the people on the train. Nobody else was impressed. They were reading, listening to music, playing games on their phones, or eating.

Now, after five years, I am one of those people.
One morning, I woke up late for work. I was upset that I woke up late, and I was tired and exhausted. I told myself that I would call in to work and state that I was ill, and I could not make it today, but something was telling me to just get dressed and go forward to work. I jumped in the shower quickly and got dressed in no time.

While I was walking to the train station to jump on the 2 train I saw some friends fighting. I wanted to find out what was going on, but I was quite late already. I walked very fast to the train station. Before I could swipe my card, the 2 train had already passed. I was quite upset because I would have to wait a bit for the next 2 train to come. A 5 train arrived, and I had to think twice about whether to hop on, but I did because I was running even later, and I wanted to reach my destination before a certain time.

I was about four stops before my destination when a crazy man decided to act out because the train was stuck in traffic. I was very upset. The man was talking a whole lot of stupidity and started kicking on the train door. I was already vexed because of how late I was, and then the train was stuck in traffic. What could happen next?

The man kept kicking and banging on the train door like he was claustrophobic. An old lady told him he didn’t have to act like that, and he turned to her and started talking in an aggressive way, like he wanted to hit her. A man who was sitting next to the old lady told him to chill out, but he started to act crazier and knocked the old lady off her seat.

I couldn’t take it anymore, and I started to fight with the crazy man for hitting the old lady. I let him have it. I was a third degree brown belt in self-defense class, so I knew what I was doing. Although I was a bit frightened, I pinned him down to the floor while other people pressed the emergency button for help. The police officers
came through from another car in a split minute. I told them what took place, and they took the crazy man away.

I was even more upset when I realized I was now even later for work. That was one of the worst experiences for me on the New York City subway.
FROZEN MILK AND PIZZA
Felicienne Zoungrana

I came from Burkina Faso. I was very excited to be in New York City. I came in the winter, and it was so cold my eyes were crying, and I could not stop them. Suddenly I noticed something unusual happening. Frozen milk was falling from the sky. A lot of frozen milk!

When I got into the house, I stayed there for a week. I never wanted to be so cold again. I got a coat and other things to keep me warm. Then I went to the pizza shop with my husband. What a wonderful smell! My husband told me I had to eat it while it was hot, so right away I took a big bite.

Now I know snow is not frozen milk, I wear sunglasses to help my eyes, and I never, ever take a big bite of steaming hot pizza. I love America!
My son and I like to shop some weekends at Brighton Beach. This is an area where many Russian-speaking people live, and it has a lot of Russian stores and restaurants. When you walk to these places, people mostly speak Russian.

On one of those weekends, when my son, Ivan, was four years old, and we were taking the train to Brighton Beach, we saw someone who lived in our building. She was curious about us, and she started a conversation. At that time, I did not speak English very well, and Ivan tried to help me. I told her I was from Kazakhstan, a former Republic of the U.S.S.R., and I speak Russian. Then I said I had not been in my country for seven years. She asked my son if he knew where Russia was on the map. Surprisingly, my son looked at me and told her, “My mom does not speak and understand English very well.” Then he got up and walked to the subway map, pointed at the sign “Brighton Beach,” and proudly said, “This is Russia, and my mom and I shop there every weekend.” I started to clear up his confusion, but he argued with me. He commented, “So how come nobody there speaks English? And everywhere there are just Russian foods?” He said even his favorite McDonald’s was not there.

My son is now 13 years old. Even now, he always makes a joke about going to Russia on weekends.

Fifteen years ago, Gulzina Griffin immigrated to New York from Kazakhstan with her six-year-old daughter. Then she had a son. She was not able to take classes to learn English because she had to work and care for her two children. Recently, she began studying at the Hunter College SPELL Program. She discovered that she enjoys writing essays and thanks her ESOL teacher, Ruby Taylor MacBride, for motivating her and helping her improve her writing in English.
I have lived through more learning experiences over the last 10 months in New York City than in the previous 19 years of my life in Mexico. My mom and I moved back to her family town before I turned one year old. Then I decided to come back to the United States for summer vacations with my dad.

On a cold June 9th, my mom and I drove to the airport in Puebla so I could catch a flight to Newark Airport. This trip was my first time traveling in an aircraft without my mom. Before boarding the plane, I waved a see-you-later to her. I was going to be away for only two months, but she would not let her only big baby go without a big breathtaking hug. I did not want to get emotional, so I walked away from my mom to the metal detector.

After four-and-a-half hours, I arrived at my destination. From my reunion with my father, I did not know what to expect. The fit young man with thick dark hair that was in my photo album was not the person who picked me up at the airport. After an awkward hug, we walked to the car. On our way to Staten Island, the only thing I wanted to do was to cry. I wanted to cry because I already missed my mom, I did not know the man behind the steering wheel, and I was afraid of change.

The following days went better: we went shopping and ate at restaurants. My first time in Manhattan was on a cloudy day. I wanted to fit in with the city and look glamorous, so I wore high heels, which with so much walking made my feet swollen. When I saw huge billboards in Times Square, I was amazed by the beauty of women: blond hair, blue eyes, perfect smile, fashionable, skinny. I wanted to look as beautiful as they did, and the only way that I could look like them would be by losing weight. That is when there was a click in my mind, and something inside me changed . . . and not exactly for the best.

I went to the Big Apple every day to take English classes. The way I saw my classmates was different from before because now I was comparing them to the gorgeous people in the posters. I started losing weight with exercise and dieting. Eventually, I got to a point where I was only exercising and not eating. People started noticing the difference in my weight and giving me compliments on how good I looked. However, I did not feel pretty enough yet. I started avoiding meals with my dad, lying to him that I had eaten before, and spending more hours at the gym than at my house. I did not
notice how it became a bad habit that brought me health issues, such as heart problems and losing my period.

My tiredness and skinny appearance started worrying my parents, putting them in touch after 11 years of not speaking to each other. They sent me to a pediatrician, a sweet Asian American woman who, without knowing me, made me feel like she was my friend. Because of my undernourishment, she had to check me every week, telling me that if I lost more weight she was going to hospitalize me. Of course, I did not believe her and continued depriving myself of food. On a sunny November afternoon, I left home to go to my check-up with the doctor without knowing that I would not be back home until the following month. As my pediatrician had warned me, she hospitalized me in an eating disorder clinic. When we arrived at the facility, two women pushed me in the stretcher inside the registration room. It took two hours to get registered before going to the ward. Electronic gadgets, sharp things, and shoelaces were not permitted in the eating disorder area. By the time they showed me my room, I was exhausted, and for the first time in months, I slept like a baby. The following day, I was introduced to the doctors and the patients. I felt better about the idea of no longer starving myself. The image of my mom suffering strengthened my new intention to recover.

Doctors let me call my mom every day from the hallway so they could monitor me. They measured the improvement in my health with the weight I was gaining. After four long weeks, I got discharged from the hospital. But leaving the hospital did not mean that I was cured. There was still a long path to recovery. My mom came to walk the path with me. She came like a superhero to rescue me in December. She gave me all her support and all the love a mother can give to her child. After being in New York for a month, she had to go back to her job in Mexico.

People may dream about a life of luxury in the big city. However, the advertisements showing extraordinary people looking ordinary are just a way to sell products to insecure customers. They promise happiness from superficial things. Fighting against beauty stereotypes imposed by society is not easy. Nevertheless, with the assistance of our loved ones, it is achievable, because everything is possible in New York City.

Born in Huajaupan de Léon, Mexico, Susana T. Cruz Garcia had lived in New York City for 10 months when she wrote this essay. She studied in the CUNY Language Immersion Program at the College of Staten Island, with instructor Polina Belimova. Donna Grant is the program director. Susana T. Cruz Garcia is now attending college.
MY GENTLEMAN
Daria Fedorova-Moskvina

Last night, one young, red-headed gentleman visited me. He was approximately two to three millimeters long, so all of his eight legs were almost invisible. Still, he was a breath of life, and I didn’t want to wash him away with the daily dirt from my face or pieces of food from my teeth.

I looked at how he tried to climb the walls of the sink, over and over again, dropping to the edge of the drain. Finally, he stopped, confused. I remembered another gentleman with quite a similar appearance, who I met in the same circumstances more than a month earlier. That time, I thought he would climb his way to freedom. Unfortunately, he did not. Instead, when I tried to help him, my gentlest touch was too rough for the few microns of his chitin shell. That story ended sadly.

So this time, I placed my finger half a centimeter below the spider and tapped a few times. He immediately ran away, trying to save his life from the giant monster. He ran up the sleek, slippery sink, desperately fighting gravity. Many times the spider dropped down—more than a few times straight onto my forefinger—but he always continued the hopeless climb because of the “finger danger” from below. I believe that small creature never knew before how brutal and mean life can be.

When we both passed the edge of the sink, my gentleman left me alone, almost immediately disappearing over the horizon.

I looked at the empty sink for a moment, and all of a sudden I had a thought: Maybe, in the worst moments of our misfortune, life is also afraid to crush us; instead, it gives us a way to go, and a chance to fight for ourselves.

Daria Fedorova-Moskvina, age 33, was born in the very small village of Kamchatka, in Russia, when it was still the U.S.S.R. She has lived in the United States for eight months. Her first language is Russian, and she also speaks a little Chinese and Japanese. A teacher of traditional Chinese martial arts and tai chi, she studies English at the New York Public Library’s Harlem Adult Learning Center. Her ESOL instructor is Christina Nieder, and Yolanda Rodriguez is the site advisor.
THE BEST CAMERA IN THE WORLD
Alexis Hernandez

Sometimes I walk along the street in the rain and start thinking that now everybody has a good camera to take pictures, or catch good moments or beautiful views forever. But I think we forget that we all have our own camera, and it is our eyes. The eyes make the best cameras in the world because they can catch every moment, every feeling, and every second in our lives.

Sometimes you see something with the eyes so beautiful or so perfect that when you take a picture with the camera it doesn’t look the same. It happened to me the first year I got here, and I went to Coney Island with one of my uncles and his family. That year, I was with only my father, and I missed my mom and my brother and sister a lot because they were in Mexico. When I went to Coney Island, the sun started going down, and I started thinking about my family in Mexico. With this beautiful sunset, I started having a lot of flashbacks of my family and friends.

But the image that I never forget is of the moon that night because it was so big, and it was reflected in the sea. It was so beautiful that in my mind I was asking, When will my family be able to see this?

I knew that even the best picture from the best camera would not be the same as my family being there to see it with their own eyes.

Alexis Hernandez was born in Mexico City in 1991 and has lived in New York City since 2008. He has attended the Adult Learning Center at CUNY’s New York City College of Technology since 2012. His instructor, Douglas Montgomery, characterizes him as a friendly person who is always making jokes, and who is very happy to be published in The Literacy Review.
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THE STREETS THAT RAISED ME

Rafael Matta

Dedicated to Juan Vasquez

What did I do with my unsuccessful life?
I felt lost in the system where darkness covers the light.
Truth is, I’m sick and tired of crime.
Courts and these judges constantly giving me time.
They lay upon me the burdens of their own affairs,
Just another cash out, and the truth is, no one cares.
From courts to jail, back out on bail.
It felt like I’m in between heaven and hell.
Doesn’t anyone understand?
My life has been a tragedy, from child to man.
Nothing you could do or say can ever change me.
Seen it all in these streets that raised me.

Crack houses and prostitution, gang wars, drug institutions.
Life behind bars, riding in stolen cars, near death experiences, close and far.
So what am I to do in this hard-knock life?
Where there are no rules, no direction, feeling or affection.
I live the lifestyle of the poor, society’s rejection.
No reason, purpose, or goals, time keeps on ticking, and I’m getting old.
Constantly searching for the father figure I never had,
When there was nobody and times had gotten really bad.
No food on the table, asthma on my chest.
My brother’s murder, may he sleep and rest.
Tough times created welfare lines and my first felony crime.
Snitches got stitches for dropping dimes.
The solution in institutions was No Child Left Behind.
No contact visit, no photo flicks, officers running up in my cell
beating me with night sticks.
My hands on the wall, cell searched and all, MCI blocking my collect calls.
Prisons are overcrowded, votes being rerouted,  
People are dying from AIDS and nothing is being done about it.  
Pedophiles are stalking our young innocents with desires,  
While the FBI taps your telephone wires.  
The states are being burnt up by five-alarm fires and  
The oil company’s only goal is gas prices getting higher.  
Years at war with no advance,  
Children in Muslim countries are victims of circumstance.  
America Online is a web for fools and  
Columbine sets the trends for murder in high schools.

Evil lurks in the midnight hour,  
Gangsters and thugs are those with the powers.  
Our presidential and governmental minds are sour  
And terrorists target our World Twin Towers.  
And here’s something amazing,  
SONY’s got a new game on PlayStation,  
Teaching kids to do drivebys in gang-war retaliations.  
They’re either incredibly smart or seriously mistaken,  
Sitting back counting all the money they’re making.  
Could you imagine the lives their invention has taken?  
Nothing you do or say can ever change me.  
I seen it all in these streets that raised me.

Born in Brooklyn, New York, on Valentine’s Day, Rafael Matta studies at the Adult Learning Center of the Brooklyn Central Library. Winsome Pryce-Cortes is the site manager. He writes, “I am a peer advocate, and I love to help people.”
Every day, I used to walk home after school, always the same way. But one afternoon something happened that would change my way of seeing life. This day when I was walking to my home, I saw a woman walking in the same direction. The woman carried heavy bags. I thought of my mother, and I offered her help. That woman immediately accepted my help. On the way, we talked about different things. I remember she told me that she went to church every day. She seemed very religious. The church was on the street before my home. To be exact, it was on the corner.

After a while, I felt tired of walking and carrying things that were heavy, and the woman never stopped talking. And as we neared my house, she made a comment that I never imagined hearing. Pointing at my house, she spoke of my mother in a way beyond my belief. She said, “In this yellow house lives a white woman with blue eyes who is married to a black man. To me, she is a dirty woman.” She told me that the woman believed she was the best in the neighborhood because she had a lot of money. At this moment, many negative thoughts came into my mind. My God, how could she be so wrong about appearances? But I decided to be polite and humble; that was my best way to cover her mouth. Maybe someone else would have insulted her, but I would not stoop to the level of that person.

When that woman finished speaking, I looked at her with a sweet look and an angelic smile and told her, “Yes, I know this woman. This woman is my mother.” At that moment, I could see that the woman’s face paled with shame. She no longer had any words to say. She did not know how to look at my face. This woman that I had seen walk to church almost daily, I never saw again.

When I got home, I saw my beautiful mother preparing dinner. At this precise moment, I gave her a strong hug and many kisses. I never told her what happened that day. I took it as a lesson life gave me; I learned that we must be careful how to talk to strangers about someone we don’t know.

Joel Parets writes, “I was born in Cuba in 1979 and came to the United States in 2009. I am very proud of my mother. I am a friendly, honest person who likes to help others.” On his days off, Joel Parets likes going to the gym or relaxing at home or in the park. He studies English at the Adult Learning Center of the New York City College of Technology, where his teacher is Jay Klokker.
WOMANHOOD

Fanta Sangare

My family in Mali practiced the horrible procedure of female genital mutilation. According to the tradition, the girls and women in my family are taken to an old woman in the village who has no medical skills. After the excision, they suffer a lot, and some of them lose their lives. They are forced to undergo this ritual because it is a part of our ethnic culture.

I was a victim of that horrible procedure when I was around five years old. After the ritual, my sister and I went back to the Ivory Coast, where I was born. In 2010 my father’s eldest brother, a very traditional man, took us to Mali again and tried to forcibly marry my sister and me to our cousin, who was his son.

I asked my uncle, “Why don’t you let me be with the person I love? He’s ready to marry me.”

He said, “I don’t care about your choice. Even your parents don’t have an opinion about what I do. So the conversation is over now. Your wedding day is fixed.”

After our conversation, I found someone to help me get an American visa. On the date of the arranged marriage celebration, I left for the United States.

To finish my story, I want to say thank you to the American people, who gave me their hospitality and warm welcome. God bless them, and God bless America.
In 2012, I attended a marriage ceremony in Bangladesh. I was not happy to be there. The bride, Shimu, was 13 years old, and she was my eighth-grade student. The groom was 35.

Shimu was not a great student, but she loved to come to school every morning. She was always helpful to me in the classroom, and she was a good athlete. She was the youngest of five children in a poor family. Her mother cleaned offices and her father, perhaps out of laziness, didn’t work at all. Things at home were very hard.

One day, the older man saw Shimu on the street. He was taken by her beauty—her long, flowing hair and her smooth, brown skin. So he went to Shimu’s mother and asked for the little girl’s hand in marriage. This man was highly educated and had a good job in a local drug company. He could provide financial help to the struggling family. So the mother approved the marriage.

Shimu came to me soon after and begged for my help. She knew she was not ready for marriage at 13. “Please,” said Shimu, “talk to my mother. Tell her not to make me do this.”

I went to the mother and tried to explain why this marriage would be a bad thing, especially for her daughter, who was not ready for the responsibilities of adulthood. All of Shimu’s teachers did the same, trying to make the mother understand the terrible thing she was about to do.

But the mother would not change her mind. “We need the money,” she told me. “This man can take us out of poverty.” In Bangladesh, where many thousands of little girls like Shimu are forced into marriage every year, there was nothing her teachers and friends could do to stop the wedding.

I remember that wedding as if it were yesterday. Shimu was crying throughout the ceremony. Not a bride’s tears of happiness, but tears of sorrow. I cried for her on this sad day.

A year later, I saw Shimu walking along the street. The change in her appearance was astonishing. She had lost a lot of weight, and her once shining face was dull and pale. There was no hint of the beautiful little girl of 13 who loved school and sports. I stopped to talk to her. When I hugged her, her eyes began to fill again...
with tears. She told me she had just given birth to her first child—at 14—and that she carried a heaviness in her heart every day.

That heaviness, I thought after I left Shimu, would never go away. Shimu’s education had ended forever when she was only 13 years old. She would never grow up to be a lawyer, or a doctor, or any of the things she might have become. She would go on to have many more children and much more sorrow.

Back home, I cried more tears of my own for a sad little eighth-grade girl.
My name is Pimana. I am 38 years old. I have been living in America for 15 years. When I close my eyes, I see women in Afghanistan. They live like birds in a cage.

I see blood on the faces of Afghanistan women. Often they are punished with stones and die for no reason! Nobody asks why. It hurts me day and night. I am lucky.

Women from Afghanistan live in America. When I see them, I cannot control my tears. I can’t do anything for them. Just pray, just pray for the women.

In Afghanistan, they live like birds in a cage. They need help for their rights and to live like they want. Nobody cares about them. I pray and pray for birds in a cage.

Pimana Soofi was born in Afghanistan. She has been living in the United States for 15 years with her husband, son, and daughter. She and her family enjoy watching movies about American families. She loves to read books. Before she wrote poems in her CLIP class at York College, she didn’t like poetry. But now she loves to write poetry. The site advisor is Stephanie Mueller. In the future, Pimana Soofi wants to study computer science.
This is not a fight.
There is a girl stuck in this circle . . .
The girl is being sexually assaulted.
Right now there are three or four hands inside her pants,
And three or four hands inside her shirt.
There are 10 men pulling her from every body part . . .
There is a guy taking off his pants to give it to her,
And there is another trying to give her his jacket,
And another trying to cover her up,
While dozens are trying to stop them with weapons.

It was the 25th of January, the second anniversary of the Egyptian revolution. We gathered in one of the corners in Tahrir Square. We formed a group to fight against the sexual harassment of women during the protesting. We divided ourselves into four groups. My group was on the Talaat Harb side of the square. We were 11, eight girls and three guys. The square was full of people, and the assaults started to be more than we could handle. We’d managed to help five women in the last hour. We were trying to get them out of the assault circles.

Then we saw a women being attacked. They formed a circle around her, and another circle around the central circle. We did what we could to get to her. When I arrived, she was topless, and her pants were torn off, and there were hands on every inch of her body. I searched for my friends, but I found only two of them. Someone took off his shirt to cover her, and we managed to get her out.

When we got back to our base point, we were besieged by the attackers, and they managed to take one of our group. I heard her voice. She was my best friend. I couldn’t leave her, so I jumped after her into the circle. I was behind her. I remember shouting in her ears, “It’s me, Fadel. It’s me, Fadel. It’s me, Fadel.” . . . “I won’t let you go.” . . . “I’ll protect you.” . . . “Now I’ll put my hands on your body.” . . . “It’s me; don’t panic.”
I grabbed her from behind and pushed my body on her so they couldn’t get to her. But they were like zombies; they were tearing us apart. They managed to get to both of us. Hands were everywhere on our bodies. Five minutes felt like an eternity. At last, the interference groups managed to form two lines to get us out of the square with the surviving women. We arrived at the safe house. I couldn’t look at my friend without crying. I felt guilty for not being able to protect her more than I did.

After a while, I looked over the square. It was a chaos of concentric circles, where lots of women were being sexually and violently attacked . . . and no one seemed to care . . . everyone turned their eyes away. All the cameras were avoiding what was really happening and only getting the picture of people celebrating, holding the Egyptian flag. Everyone turned their backs on us.

That day, at least 20 women we knew of were attacked.

A native of Egypt, Muhammad Fadel is a human rights lawyer and legal researcher. During the Egyptian revolution, he was part of the Front of Defense for Egyptian Protesters. “This is a true story,” he writes, “but the kind of story you won’t hear because it’s hidden.” He has lived in New York City for two years now and studies English at the New York Public Library’s Seward Park Adult Learning Center, where Terry Sheehan is the lead instructor. He is passionately pursuing the LLM (Master of Laws) in international law and human rights.
ON THE BOSNIAN WAR
Jing Hua Piao and Chen Xi

BEFORE THE WAR

It was a beautiful Sunday
Mom cooked us lovely pancakes
My brother said
“Let’s have some fun today”
In the sunny park we stayed
Ran and laughed and played
We were free like butterflies
In the sunny Bosnia we stayed
Ran and laughed and played
We were happy like angels in heaven

DURING THE WAR

Everything was on fire
So was my dear brother
I saw desperate soldiers
They pulled me out of the cadavers
They said to me “poor girl”
I was put on a truck driving to nowhere
Maybe there would still be hope
Teacher’s note: “This pair of poems was written by Jing Hua Piao and Chen Xi as a reaction to a lecture they attended on the Bosnian War (1992-1995). The first poem describes life before the war; the second poem describes life during the conflict. The poems are from the perspective of the lecturer, who was a young girl at the time.”

Both Jing Hua Piao (r) and Chen Xi (l) emigrated from China. Jing Hua Piao writes, “I am very interested in writing poems, and I am very interested in studying American culture.” Chen Xi writes, “I admire the beauty of the English language. My poem is about the impact war had on a girl, and I wish for a peaceful world.” The authors study in the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP) at Queensborough Community College. Their instructor is Zach Kelly, and Dr. Diana Berkowitz is the site director.
STOP THE WAR
Suhair Tamair

What has happened to the world? Is there a contest for power, money, oil, or to experiment with new weapons? Whatever the reasons are, what is the result? Green land changed to black. Clear skies turned to smoke. Bombs are everywhere, irrigating the land with blood. Mothers are looking for their sons after explosions. Kids’ laughter has turned to crying. Streets are empty after five p.m. Everyone who comes home safe thanks God. When will the world wake up and rescue what’s left?

Suhair Tamair came to New York from Syria 10 years ago for a better life for her children. She lives in Brooklyn, where she is responsible for her three sons. In order to communicate better with doctors, teachers, and her community, she studies English at the Adult Learning Center of CUNY’s New York City College of Technology. She thanks her teacher, Douglas Montgomery.
I
would like to introduce my grandparents.

My grandmother was born in the United States because my great-grandfather’s
work brought her to America. Many Japanese families moved to America because
they chased their dreams. My grandmother’s family is one of them. She lived and
stayed in the United States for 16 years. Unfortunately, the war broke out so they were
forced to return to Japan.

My grandmother was so surprised with the sudden change of environment,
culture, and society. In America, they lived comfortably with cars, refrigerators,
television, etc. At the very young age of 16, my grandmother had difficulties adjusting
at first. Her family started living in Hiroshima prefecture, and a few years later, she got
married and began a happy married life, but it didn’t last for long.

In 1945, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, since Hiroshima had
a lot of military factories. At that time, my grandfather was at work. He was less than
three miles from the center of the explosion, and my grandmother was in their home,
which was less than two-and-a-half miles from it. Fortunately, she decided not to go
to work (which was just over a mile from the center of the explosion) due to morning
sickness. Most of her colleagues died in the bombing, and all buildings within 1.2
miles from ground zero were fully destroyed. It was a miracle to be alive.

My grandfather was a doctor, so he needed to see more than two thousand
patients who were injured by the atomic bomb in a day, even though there was a shortage
of medical equipment and medicines. One of his patients was my grandmother’s
sister. Unfortunately, due to the extent of the injury, she passed away a few days later.
Grandfather told me that some patients were carrying dead babies and were begging
for help for their babies. My grandfather promised that their babies would get well
soon, and after feeling relief from the promise, the mothers died soon after.

After that, he went to the area where there were many injured soldiers. He
tried to help them, but the soldiers begged off and instead asked him to look after the
other citizens first. He was impressed with their warm hearts. He said that he had never
seen such a terrible scene before, but at the same time he saw the Japanese true spirit
and compassion.
After the war, my mother and her younger brother were born, and they lived peacefully after Japan admitted its loss in World War II. I am very proud of my grandparents because they survived the pains and hardships brought about by World War II. I hope my story will inspire others to promote peace, love, and happiness.
SURVIVOR AND ORPHANS

Mariam Cessouma

SURVIVOR

Refugee, they call me,
I am born, and proud,
I feel the bladed edge,
I grow, and flower,
I found out men of war,
I am so withering and small,
I saw the streams of blood running down my legs,
I have no choice but to leave,
I know that I will be safe in new place,
I only want a life at peace, surrounded by friends,
But always, I hold up my head, imagining the day,
Not now. It’s not over yet. I must sit out my time,
They call me Refugee, no I am not a Refugee,
My name is Survivor, Survivor is my name not Refugee.
I just turned six years old. Me too, I want to attend school.
ORPHANS

We are drinking cholera water,
We are highly infectious,
We are so hungry, but no one will give us even the little waste of their dinner,
We are eating starvation,
We are growing in starvation,
We are the sons and daughters of deadly diseases,
We have no birthday,
We are waiting our earliest death day,
Tell us now, who’s having a lot of memories?
Can you save us from this hell-life?
We too want a real life like you . . .
This is the saddest story of all ORPHANS.
A WAR IN MY COUNTRY
Feryal Tello

I'm from Syria. I was living there with my family—I have four children—and we had a happy life together. We lived a peaceful life, but suddenly we had a war in my country. My home was damaged by the army and by the people fighting against the government. I lived in my mother's house for two years.

I have a brother who was living in New York. He told me, “You have to work on your visa application.” After I did all the papers and the interviews, finally they gave visas only to me and my daughter. After three years of war, I left my family and my country, and I came to New York with my daughter.

I can’t forget this moment. It was very hard for me to leave my family.

I started a new life in New York. Later on, all my family was separated. I have one son living in Lebanon. The second lives in Denmark. He took a car from Syria to Lebanon, an airplane from Lebanon to Algeria, a car from Algeria to Morocco, and a boat from Morocco to Italy. The boat was very dangerous. The trip took two days. No eating; no water. Just the ocean and the sky. Then he took a car from Italy to Denmark. The road was not safe. He had to pay ten thousand dollars for the trip from Syria to Denmark. Now he feels safe. He has a house and a job, and he is studying Danish. My oldest son lives with his wife and son in Syria. My husband wants to go to China.

As for me and for my daughter, we are starting a new life in New York. We are starting to go to school.

Life in New York is very different from life in my country. People are helpful and nice, especially my brother; he helps me a lot. Without him, I can do nothing.

I’m waiting for the day when I see my family, and we all live together again.

Feryal Tello writes, “I’m from Syria. I have lived in Brooklyn for two years. I’m studying ESOL at the Adult Learning Center of the New York City College of Technology. I wish to thank my great teacher, Jay Klokker. My goal is to continue studying and to find a good job.”
I was born in Turkey, in a central Anatolian city called Sivas, educated in the capital, Ankara, and worked for a while in Izmir, a city on the Aegean Sea. But my hometown, the place I’ve lived the longest and love the most, is Istanbul. I still have a house with a small garden there that my wife Ayla and I visit every summer. We came to New York five years ago to be near our daughter, son-in-law, and two granddaughters who live here now. We have a good life, but our happiest times are when our daughter and her family come to stay with us in Istanbul. The girls, Leyla, 13, and Talya, 10, love our garden and help us plant and tend the vegetables and fruits. We grow tomatoes, cucumbers, green beans, zucchini, apricots, plums, apples, and cherries. Most of our friends live in Istanbul, so when the family is all there, it feels like I’m where I belong.

Last year, we went to Istanbul in late April. The weather was good, but something was different in the city’s center. At almost every street corner, we saw people begging for money or food. There were some men, but most of them were women with small children. Of course, I’ve seen beggars on the streets before, but never like this, never so many. I gave what money I could, but the sight of those poor ragged people upset me. At first, I didn’t understand this sudden invasion of beggars; then I realized they were part of the flood of refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria. I had thought most of those who fled to Turkey were living in camps in the southern cities, under the auspices of the government. But I was wrong. Millions of destitute Syrian people wound up in Istanbul and other Turkish cities and live in very bad conditions. Altogether, Turkey is hosting three million refugees. Most of them are hoping to get to Europe, mainly Germany, but too many have lost their lives at sea in flimsy boats.

My hometown, Istanbul, is a beautiful city, historic, yet cosmopolitan. It is situated on two continents, Asia and Europe, separated by the Bosphorus, the strait that connects the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. It used to be called Constantinople and for almost 16 centuries it was the capital of the Roman, Byzantine, and finally the Ottoman Empires. Now it is the cultural and economic center of Turkey, and a bridge between East and West.
The 15 million inhabitants of Istanbul are not homogeneous—many have come from Afghanistan, Iraq, and several African countries. But the largest number in the shortest period of time have come from Syria. It is a humanitarian crisis that many other cities and countries are dealing with now. Some want nothing to do with the refugees, but when a crisis is on your doorstep, how can you just ignore it? Somehow we all need to figure out how to absorb and care for millions of people, most without any resources, without throwing our own society and institutions into chaos. That is the challenge we face.

This spring, I will go back to Istanbul and will see how my hometown is meeting the challenge.

Husamettin Unsal, age 75, considers Istanbul his hometown. In addition to Turkish, he speaks French and is learning English. A former journalist and university professor, he now studies at the New York Public Library’s Pasculano Foundation at St. Agnes Library. The lead instructor is Yolanda Rodriguez, the volunteer tutor is Lynda Myles, and Elke Stappert is the hub manager.
FALL
Lingping Chen

I.
I see golden leaves
fall and drop from a tree like a child leaves
his mother’s arms. Does the tree select leaves
to stay on the branches or fall from them,
like a mother who wants to hold her child
and yet someday thinks she must say goodbye?
When leaves leave the protection
of a massive tree, does the tree face ruin or regeneration?
When a child leaves his mother’s arms, does that mean death or flourishing?

II.
I see a bronze monument. It commemorates
brave soldiers who died in World War I.
We know they left their mothers’ arms
and joined the war.
Although the war brought death and bitterness,
we can still remember the souls that remain in this city.

III.
I touch the rugged monument’s surface.
I will never forget any war that makes soldiers’ faces
become bitter. When we drive our cars on the
asphalt streets in Brooklyn near this monument,
we need to admire all the heroes in our city.
IV.
I hear a crunchy sound when I tread on these golden fallen leaves.
I feel sorrow because I deprive them of a longer life. Yet leaves fall on soil and will become soil which gives a tree nourishment.
Next year, we will see new leaves appear in the drizzling rain.
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My mother’s name is Li Ru Xin. She was born in Taishan, China. My mom and my dad came to the United States in 1994. My dad passed away in 2006.

My mom is short and heavy. She has very short hair, and she still has black hair (she doesn’t dye it). My hair is not like my mom’s. I have a lot of white hair. But my nose is like my mom’s. We have ugly noses.

My mom likes to watch TV, but she can’t read the newspaper because she has poor vision. She likes to cook. When I go to her home, she keeps calling me to eat. She is very hardworking, and she doesn’t waste money.

Every morning she goes to the park to exercise. But she fell down and fractured her lower backbone. The doctor told her to have surgery, but she says no because she doesn’t believe in surgery. She just stretches her joints, and now she can walk slowly.

My mom is not fun. In my memory, she did not laugh or smile. I’ve never seen her teeth. She has many wrinkles on her face. She worries too much, always feels sad, always thinks bad things. I always remind her, “Think good things, you’ll feel good.” But it’s very difficult to change her thinking.

She tells me until she was 12 years old, she was a very happy girl. She had a sister and a brother and two parents who loved her so much. In her hometown, her parents had a good business. Her family was rich.

But in the Second World War, the Japanese army entered their town. Her parents and her sister all died. There was only her and her brother. She was 12 years old and her brother was 14 years old. No food, no job, no money. Someone sold my mother to a family in another town to work for them in their home.

She lost a lot of hair, and she became thin. Every day she worked a lot: cooking, washing clothes, cleaning the house. At night she cried and cried and cried in her bed. She missed her brother. She wanted to go back to her hometown and bring her brother to her new town. But she was too young and didn’t know how to go back. Later, she heard her brother had starved to death.

Forty years ago, one day we were at home, and we heard a man in the street speaking loudly. I saw my mom run out the door, and she followed the man to look at
Xiu Lin immigrated to the United States in 1989 from Guangzhou, China. She speaks Cantonese, Mandarin, and English and is currently taking ESOL classes at University Settlement on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Her teacher is Jon Eckblad, and Michael Hunter is the director of the Adult Literacy Program. Xiu Lin lives in Manhattan and has one daughter, Sylvia.
I think that one of the biggest events of the end of 20th century is the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which occurred because of many inner problems. For most citizens of the Soviet Union, it was a tragedy because every one of them lost something during and after the dissolution: family, quietude, friends, home, work, their past, their future, health, and savings. On the one hand, in the Soviet Union usually people lived with illusions about the Communist system, party, and leaders. On the other hand, many people just lived, not thinking about the Cold War or other geopolitical nuances. Someone can say that during revolutions or changing political systems, obviously some people are damaged. But usually such people are ordinary people and not the government. The government just changes orientation from one system to another and continues to do well.

I want to write what happened to my family during the dissolution. It is not easy because the story will be about our mother. On the other hand, it is very important to communicate such information to other people because this information makes history more alive and less statistical.

My family was from Ukraine. At the moment of the dissolution, our mother stayed alone with three children and was out of work. (She had been fired, like other people.) All the savings in the bank were impaired. She was only 27 years old. I was eight years old, my sister was six years old, and our brother was just born. We had relatives in another city, but it was a very difficult time for all, therefore they were not able to help us. She could only find a job delivering newspapers. Because our brother was a baby, she took him to work. I remember how she went out with two heavy handbags with newspapers on her shoulders, pushing a baby carriage in the rainy or snowy weather. I was a child. I did not know what our mother was feeling then.

She was destroying her health for us. Every day she worked very hard without any hope of improvement. Once my sister and I came back from school and did not find our mother at home. We did not have keys, and all evening we were waiting for her near our door. At night, our neighbor took us to her apartment to sleep; and in the morning, we went to school. When we came back from school again, we found our relatives near our home. (The neighbor had called them.) I do not remember exactly
Evgeny Nimerovsky writes, “I am 33 years old. I was born in Donetsk, Ukraine. When I was 15, I immigrated to Israel and lived there for 17 years. My wife, our two children, and I have been living in the United States for nine months.” At the New York Public Library’s Jefferson Market Library, Evgeny Nimerovsky’s ESOL teacher is Michele Persaud.
very morning, I walked an hour to get to Kouroula, the nearest city to where I lived in Guinea. I was 12 years old and in sixth grade. I was preparing for an exam for a higher level class. After a few months, my father was ill and was getting close to death. On Friday, May 20, 2004, I woke up at seven in the morning, like I always did. I saw my father's condition as he was lying in his bed. I realized that if I went to school, I would not see my lovely dad again. Like all mothers, my mom was pushing me to go to school. Knowing she did not have time to check on me, I lied and told her I did not have class that day. This was the best decision I have ever made.

After my father's death, I was depressed for several years. I felt lonely and abandoned. I couldn't stop thinking about the times we spent together on the weekends. He took me to many places, just the two of us. I started skipping school. At that time, my sister, Oumou, lived in Conakry, the capital of Guinea. She came and took me there for my studies. It is very hard for people to adjust to a new city. I had to change not only my life, but what I had messed up in my childhood. My sister is like my mom. She helped me by making me go to school. It is the best thing she has ever done for me.

She struggled for my success because she was so concerned about me after my father's death. Every day after school, she made me go over everything we did in class. She insisted I finish my studies, so I could become a better person. One year later, brave woman that she is, she came to the United States. Then two-and-a-half years later, her children (who I consider my sisters) and I received a call from the United States Ambassador for an interview. In October 2013, we came to the United States to join her. Now I live with my sister and her kids—my family. I talk to my mom, who still lives in Guinea, all the time.

Many people have lost someone close, so we can imagine how awful it is to lose a parent. But until it happens to you, you won't fully understand the gravity of its awfulness. And it's okay not to understand and not to feel the pain. We should be entitled to go as far as we can without this experience. The pain of waking up every morning includes first forgetting for a split second that part of your heart and soul is not here anymore. Then the remembering is awful, and the pain is part of who you are.
Fadima Bah writes, “I am 23 years old. I was born in Guinea, and I have lived in the United States for two years. I am going to school to become a home health aide and am also studying to get my High School Equivalency Diploma. My goal is to become a nurse.” At Phipps Neighborhoods Opportunity Center, Fadima Bah studies with Pre-HSE Instructor Gale Shangold.

and where you came from. It is never easy to lose your parent, and it doesn’t matter when they died. Dad, you have always been at my side. I will always keep you in my heart. Rest in peace.
STRONG WOMAN
Kee Kui Heng

My grandmother was a traditional person. She was very dominating. We all had to listen to what she said. Even my grandfather did.

As a child, I was very scared of her. But when I was sick, she brought me to see the doctor. She bought me candy to cheer me up when I tasted the bad medicine.

She faithfully believed in Buddha. She helped her neighbors and poor people, and she always sent money and clothes to her relatives in China.

She had a healthy body, and just before she went to heaven, she did not look sick. She just said, “I feel tired. I need a nap.” And she never woke up.
MY GRANDMOTHER’S COCONUT BAKE
Angela Goodman

Growing up in Trinidad, I had a unique childhood. Though we didn’t have many material things, our household was full of love. Much of this love came from my grandmother. She was an awesome cook who made the best “coconut bake.” In Trinidad, “bake” is similar to bread and is commonly eaten with cheese and butter.

My favorite memory is playing in the yard with my brothers and sisters, and my grandmother calling us in for dinner. As we walked into the house, the aroma from the bake was so strong that we couldn’t wait to eat it.

To cook it, my grandmother used four stones and wood to start the fire and a big pot to make the bake in. The coconut bake was cooked to perfection with fire on top and fire below. It amazed me that the bake was even on both sides. Usually before the fire started, we gathered coal and sticks and fanned the fire. This helped to get it started and to keep it burning. This process is similar to getting a barbecue grill started. In my opinion, food cooked this way is tastier than food cooked in an oven. Though the smoke burned our eyes, the thought of the coconut bake that my grandmother was going to make made it all worth it.

When the food was ready, we got cleaned up to eat. We would excitedly sit in front of the television and eat our hot coconut bake with cheese and hot cocoa. While eating, we joked with each other and shared details about our day. Though we didn't have much, we were content. In that moment, we had no other care in the world and were just happy to have each other.
A few years ago, a time-travel TV series was very popular in China, and I started to think about what time period I would like to go back to.

When I was nine, I had wanted to go back to ancient China and be a princess. It would be interesting to have the power to do everything I wanted. But I’ve changed my mind. If I could travel to another time period, I would go back to 1955 since my mother was born in 1956.

I would want to be my grandmother, my mother’s mom. Because my mother felt unhappy when she was a child and had many regrets later, I would do three things to change my mother’s life.

First, I would go to work to earn more money. Because my grandmother was blind, she could not do any work. Only my grandpa had a job, so my grandparents’ family was very poor. If I could be my grandma, I would like to run a convenience store at that time. I could buy some things and sell them at higher prices to other people. It could help me make more money.

Second, I would send my mother to school when she was six years old because my mother never went to school. She had three brothers and one sister. In China, boys were more important than girls, and because my mother’s parents did not have enough money for five children to go to school, she could not study. Instead, she did work in the house to help her family. She told me that she felt depressed when she was six years old because she really wanted to go to school and study like the other children. She wanted to read books and newspapers, she wanted to write a diary and letters, but she could do nothing without schooling. For her entire life, she has felt inferior to those who had an education. If I went back in time and was my grandma, I would help my mom with homework and check the school worksheets every day. I would support her study until she went to university.

Finally, I would forbid my mother to go to the river at the age of 15. My mother told me that once she fell into the river when she was playing with her friends. Fortunately, the neighbors saved her life, but she was in a coma for a while. Ever since...
that accident, she has constantly had a headache. If I could protect her from falling into the river, she would have a happier, healthier life.

Realistically, I cannot go back. I cannot change anything in my mother’s life. However, I have a daughter and a son, and I can help them grow up in a healthy and positive way. I will try my best to help them enjoy their lives, and I hope they will not have any regrets about their past.

Lie Liu writes, “I was born in the north of China, in Anshan. I was born in a rural area and grew up in urban areas. In Dalian, a city in Liaoning Province, I was a TV host. Now I am a student in the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP) at the College of Staten Island, and I also attend Chinese school part time.” Lie Liu’s teacher is Polina Belimova.
To grow wings or take root? I always ask myself that question, and even when I definitely decided to take root, my life changed and brought me to New York. I’m very glad that my wings and a fair wind showed me the right way. You never know how to answer that question, but I truly believe that we do so through our lives and our thoughts.

My grandmother never had thoughts about growing wings and traveling. She had very strong and deep roots, which allowed her to move only between her apartment and her summer house. Everything changed when she became ill. She had stomach cancer, and she had only six months to live. She decided not to have surgery because of her age and her heart problems. At first, she was in despair, and when I visited her in the hospital, she told me about her dream to fly on a plane. She had never been abroad. I promised her that if she became stronger and started to believe in her recovery, we would travel together. She smiled, but it was difficult for me to be with her because she was so weak.

I saw my granny in the hospital again, and after some time I was able to convince her to have the surgery. I said, “We will celebrate your recovery by having a glass of Champagne and going on a trip.” I was the first person who saw her after surgery. I came with a pink flower in a pot. She smiled; the surgery was successful. She told me that she would be as bright as the pink flower. We had new passports and tickets for our travel. I presented them to Granny with the words, “So now we have to go to Jerusalem to say ‘thank you’ to God.”

Born in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, Kateryna Moriasheha had lived in New York City for three months when she wrote “Growing Wings.” In her native country, she worked as a travel agent for seven years. She speaks Russian and Ukrainian and now studies English at the Institute for Immigrant Concerns. Her instructor is Mark Brik, the site’s education director, and Donna Kelsh is the executive director.
THE OLIVE GROVE
Karima Makhlouf

When I go to the grocery store and see bottles of olive oil, I remember something special in my childhood. I used to go with my grandfather to the forest to collect olives. After he died, my grandmother took over the same job. Mostly on the weekends, my mother woke me up early to eat my breakfast and go with my grandmother to the olive grove, which was far away from our house.

We usually took some fruit, water, bread, and two bags, one for me and one for my grandmother, where we could put the olives. On our way, she held my hand and told me stories, sometimes about the war. Sometimes she sang. While we walked, we met people going to the grove to do the same job. When we arrived at the place, my grandmother climbed the trees and shook them with a stick. When she finished, she came down. I bent down next to her to pick up the olives.

We always had a competition, but every day she picked up more than me. The sun was always shining, and it was a beautiful day, so we stayed on the grass to have lunch. I relaxed. I was enjoying that time. In the evening, we came back home with our bags. My grandmother’s bag was always more full of olives than mine.

After a couple of days, we had a lot of olives. When it was time to turn those olives into oil, she did it at home. She put the olives in a barrel and she pressed the oil by walking on them. There was a secret to getting a lot of oil: she could not talk to anyone until she saw oil between her feet. I was excited to learn how to make olive oil.

From that olive oil, she could make a lot of things, like soap. It was good for the skin. You could wash cloth with that soap, and the cloth would be very clean.

I learned a lot of things from my grandmother. That is why when I came to the United States, I brought some bottles of olive oil with me.

Always, I use olive oil in salads and traditional meals. When I see olive oil, I remember my grandmother when she shook the trees, and the olives came down. That was so beautiful.

Karima Makhlouf emigrated from Algeria to the United States in 2014. She says, “I had a lot of difficulties: I could not connect with people because I could not speak English.” Now she is studying English with Jay Klokker at CUNY’s New York City College of Technology. Her dream is to go to college and become a nurse.
MY FEATHERED FRIEND,
PEPITO
Alicia Ochoa de Dam

When I was five years old, I lived in Chacao, a town near Caracas, Venezuela’s capital. We were seven siblings from 13 to two years old, plus Mom and Dad. My house was modest and surrounded by different kinds of trees: mango, guava, orange, lemon, and others. We lived near a train, and our parents had forbidden us to go near the train tracks.

One day, my dad returned home with a bag that had many small holes and put it on the dining room table with care. We children looked at the bag because we believed that inside was a lot of candy. After my dad removed his shoes, he opened the bag and took out a little yellow duck.

The duck had a broken leg. It was hanging like a paddle beside a boat. So Dad collected some herbs. He mashed them and used two small sticks to fix the broken leg.

We named the duck Pepito. That little duck was a joy for everybody. He took turns sleeping with the siblings, one day a week for each. He greeted us when we came home from school, running and crossing between our legs, quacking with happiness.

One afternoon, while my mom ironed, Pepito, my sister Haydee, and I were playing with a ball. It accidentally fell on the train tracks. We ran, crossing the tracks. Suddenly we heard the whistle of the train. When we turned our heads, we could see Pepito trapped between the rails.

We didn’t know what to do. The train passed, and we thought Pepito had gotten free. But when we came closer, we saw only a lot of bloody feathers!

That deep pain! It was the first time I met death.

Today, I remember Pepito with sadness and joy. I give thanks to God for that little gift that filled our lives with pleasure.

Alicia Ochoa de Dam was born in Caracas, Venezuela. She was a Spanish language and literacy teacher in her country. Now retired, she spends her time taking care of her grandchildren. She has lived in New York City for two years and wrote “My Feathered Friend, Pepito” as a final project for her English class at the New York Public Library’s Harlem Adult Learning Center. Her ESOL instructor is Myrna Holguin.
Today is Mother’s Day.

I look out my living room window and see a sunny blue sky, but my heart is a dull gray. This is the first time since my daughter was born that I have been alone on Mother’s Day.

My husband, Peter, is in China visiting his parents, and my daughter, Tiffany, is in England on a business trip. I look over at the beautiful bouquet of orchids that Tiff sent me yesterday, and then my eyes slide over to the living room wall to a photo of the three of us. I miss my family so much I could cry.

Later that afternoon, the front doorbell rings. I open it, look down, and there is Jasmine, the charming little six-year-old girl who lives with her mother in a basement apartment across the street. As a single mother trying to support Jasmine and her own parents in China, Helen puts in long hours at her job, and I’ve been babysitting Jasmine on the frequent nights when she works overtime.

“Happy Mother’s Day!” says Jasmine, after I’ve invited her into the house. She hands me a card on which she has a left an imprint of her tiny right hand and written a few lovely words. Attached to the card is a small pack of M&M candies.

“Oh, my!” I exclaim. “What a darling little girl you are to think of me today!” I give Jasmine a big hug and kiss, and she smiles and asks if I’d like to play with her. I don’t hesitate for a moment. “Let’s go,” I say.

So we begin with a furious game of hide-and-seek, the two of us running all around the house and laughing. Then, exhausted, we take a break for some vanilla ice cream with rainbow sprinkles.

After that, I sit in my rocking chair, and Jasmine plops herself on my lap. I read her “Little Red Riding Hood” from beginning to end. It is a story I have read to her a number of times, but she never seems to tire of it. When the story is done, Jasmine falls asleep, sucking her thumb.

I let her nap for a little while, and then I reluctantly wake her up. “It’s time to go home to your mommy,” I tell her. Jasmine, who is an extremely well-behaved child, gives me one more kiss before dashing across the street, back to her loving mother.
I sit in my rocking chair and remember my Tiffany when she was six years old. She was a lot like Jasmine, I think. By now, the gloom that had invaded my heart this morning is gone. To be sure, I would love to have had my husband and daughter with me on this special day, but even without them, there was love in my house today.

And in the end, isn’t that what Mother’s Day is all about? So, Jasmine, wherever are you now, thank you, dear little girl.
THE FIRST THREE MONTHS WITH THE BABY

Jennifer Glasgow

The first three months with the baby caused many sleepless nights. My daughter brought my grandson home from the hospital. She was uncomfortable trying to adjust to the changes with a new baby. She got out of bed and looked at him. He was a beautiful baby boy. At birth his weight was eight pounds, five ounces. She didn't want to leave him alone for fear that something might happen to him. Babies are more fragile than adults. Their immune systems are not strong enough to fight off sickness and diseases. You have to be very careful with newborn babies.

My grandson is two years old now. He is in preschool. I bought some books and sent them to him. One day my phone rang, and it was my daughter on the other end of the line. She said to me, “Your grandson would like to say something to you.” He said to me, “Granny, thank you for my books, I am going to preschool now. I write an ‘A’, and A is for apple.” I said to him, “Congratulations and keep up the good work.” He said, “Thank you,” and “I love you.”

Jennifer Glasgow writes, “I was born in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and moved to Tortola, where most of my seven kids were born. I love children and work as a nanny. I also love to travel and have visited other Caribbean islands. I am involved in the choir and the women’s ministry at my church.” Jennifer Glasgow studies at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Eastern Parkway Learning Center. The site supervisor is Donna Alleyne, and Gladys Scott is the literacy advisor.
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Francis Calderon

73 THE SAME PEOPLE ON
THE WATER
Aya Kishinobu Hirahara

74 MORE THAN A BEAUTY
SALON
Serafoula Ververis

76 THE WOMAN WHO SINGS
Berlinda A. Louisy

77 I AM MY HERO
Basil Baker

78 I STOP WRITING THE POEM
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79 DRAWING LESSONS FOR
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80 I DESERVE THE WORLD
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Nicolas the Librarian Man
who love everything.
If you write something
he love it,
anything you write
he is in love with it,
come to the library
he love it,
the door is open all day long
he love it,
you sit and read a book
he love it,
you take a test
he love it,
what is it he don’t love?
the man just love his job,
being a librarian man.
I moved to New York City from Japan almost a year ago. Although I was excited to go to a new world, I had an anxiety. My only concern was whether I could surf. Yes, I'm addicted to surfing.

Soon after I started to live in the city, I came across a lot of culture shocks. A difference in language: When I was in a coffee shop, I could not understand what the staff was saying. “Do you want it to stay, or to go?” (Though I had studied English, I still wasn’t good at understanding native speakers’ conversation.)

A difference in toilet quality: The toilet in my apartment went wrong just a week after I started to live in New York City. It didn’t flush. That would never happen in Japan, even in my grandmother’s old house.

A difference in the subway: How many rats are living there?

I braced myself for shocks about surfing in New York City. Is the water clean enough to surf? Is the beach safe? Are there any restrooms? Are there any weird creatures or people?

Concerns about differences were running through my mind.

On my first day on the beach, I found a familiar sight, like déjà vu. I found the beach, waves, and people on the water who were into it as much as I am. The ocean is there, and waves keep coming. We share exuberance in glassy waves, awed silence in the waves when it is raining without wind, a little tension in the crowded water, disappointment when missing good waves, and fear in rough water.

We are all the same, though we have differences in everything from language to feelings to temperature. (It’s totally different from Japan to see a man clad in surf trunks in the water in November.) We are all the same kind of people, those who are addicted to this great nature.

A native of Osaka, Japan, Aya Kishinobu Hirahara has been living in New York City since January 2015. She studies at the Tompkins Square Adult Learning Center of the New York Public Library, with Lead Instructor Kathryn Bonn. Sherin Hamad is the hub manager. Aya Kishinobu Hirahara says that surfing has always been the most important part of her life. Wherever she lives, she “would like to be with the vibes of the ocean.”

Aya Kishinobu Hirahara
For over 40 years, I worked as a hairdresser. The experiences I had all those years are unforgettable. Some of my clients, when they visited the salon, thought they were visiting a psychiatrist. They would bring all their problems with them and tell them to me. Every week, it was like a soap opera; we would continue where we left off the week before. Some of them would come to talk to me just because I was a good listener. Because of that, they thought I was the most wonderful person in the world.

It made my clients feel better to talk to me, but they never asked me if I wanted to listen to their problems! Often I was interested, but not always. And they never asked about my life, which didn’t bother me because I don’t like to talk about myself except with close friends. But it wasn’t always easy, coloring, cutting, and styling my clients’ hair while being their psychiatrist. One stone was killing two birds, and I was the stone.

Through the years, I got to know so many of their secrets, secrets about their husbands, about their kids, and about themselves. One of my regular ladies was in business with her husband. She came in for her appointment and told me she had caught her husband cheating with another woman. I waited for her to say she’d kicked him out; but no, instead she told him that if he had a girlfriend, she wanted a boyfriend. The husband agreed. She didn’t leave him, and for many years they both cheated. They never got a divorce and continued to live together until he died. She married two more times, outlived both men and died in her sleep at the age of 105.

Another time, a young man, a boy really, walked in off the street and asked me to trim his very long hair. While I combed and snipped, he told me that he wanted very much to be a girl, but he didn’t have enough money for the operation. He came back now and then and always told me he was still hoping it would work out somehow. Finally, one day he came in for his trim, and he was smiling. One of the surgeons he’d gone to had just told him he would do the operation for free if the young man agreed to let the procedure be televised. The surgeon thought that would be a good way to advertise his skills. I told him I’d give him a free haircut when he was a girl.

I don’t work full time anymore. Some of the people I listened to aren’t alive now, but their stories are still alive in me. From time to time I get a phone call from an
ex-customer who wants to talk. They still feel the need to tell me their problems. I’m their security blanket. They always tell me how good it is to have someone they can lean on.

Originally from Levadia, Greece, Serafoula Ververis writes, “I attend ESOL classes. They are a big help to me.” She is a student at the New York Public Library’s Pasculano Foundation at St. Agnes Adult Learning Center. Yolanda Rodriguez is the lead instructor, and Linda Myles is the volunteer tutor.
THE WOMAN WHO SINGS

Berlinda A. Louisy

While walking in the Central Library in Brooklyn, I observed many images on the wall in the lower lobby. There were photographs of different people from different places doing things that they enjoyed. I was drawn to a special image of a black young lady singing her heart out.

This young lady has natural, long, and frizzy hair. It’s large and unsettled like a lion’s mane. Her long black curly strands drop to each side of her face like a weeping tree. Her hair looks soft like cotton. Her jeans are as dark as the midnight sky. The jeans tightly hug her hips and butt, shaping around every curve, while she does something that she loves. The jeans of denim texture look like they’re unable to stretch, thus allowing no one bigger than her to fit inside. Oh, and her shoes have pointed toes. Their pencil heels provide a formal appearance. Her all-black shoes support the weight of the energetic woman inside of them.

This beautiful young lady captured my attention while she joyously sang. She reminds me of who I am. She is a free spirit; she brings happiness to others, just like me. Her facial expressions brought an amazing feeling to me. She attracted me by doing something that she loves, something that I also love and enjoy.

Berlinda A. Louisy, age 18, writes, “I’m from St. Lucia, a small island in the Caribbean. I speak fluent English and basic Creole. I am a young, enthusiastic female who is currently in pursuit of a modeling career.” In the United States for approximately four months, she studies at the Pre-High School Equivalency Program at the Brooklyn Library’s Central Adult Learning Center. Her teacher is Ann McNamara, Moana Fogg is the student advisor, and Avril De Jesus is the coordinator of the program.
One morning, a friend came to my home with a newspaper. He opened it and showed me an ad that said Alvin Ailey Dance School was holding auditions. They were giving out 25 scholarships for male dancers. He said, “If you don’t go and try out for this, do not speak to me again.” I took the paper and got ready to go to work.

The Ailey School was two stops on the train from my work stop. When the train got to my work stop, I didn’t get off. I went two stops more. When I got to the school, the staff was giving out numbers. The number I got was 488. I looked around and got very scared and nervous. There were a lot of trained dancers promenading and showing off. I was intimidated and was ready to leave. I went in a corner of the room and tried to hide. I felt like I didn’t stand a chance with so many good dancers. I picked up my bag, went to the dressing room, got dressed, and started walking out. The friend who gave me the newspaper was standing at the door. He said to me, “You got it!” I said, “No, I am leaving, I don’t stand a chance with all these good dancers.” He said, “So you are going to give up? Look around, each person out there is one person representing themselves. So you got to represent yourself. Go out there and show them what you can do.” I decided to go back and do it. They kept me there all day.

We did ballet, modern, Horton ethnic, and jazz. They sent a lot of people home. That day I worked really hard, and strong. I tried my best at everything they gave me to do. They kept sending people home. At the end of the day, a staff member named D. Brown called me to her office. She told me, “We don’t normally do this, but we are giving you a full scholarship. When we added up all the judges’ scores, you had the highest score of all these people.” I was number one. I could not believe it, after putting myself through all that. I found out that someone believed in me more than I did. So, I had to believe in myself. It came to me that I am my hero. I didn’t believe I could do it, and I did it.

Born 46 years ago in Jamaica, Basil Baker has written a true story in “I Am My Hero.” He was a dancer with the world-famous Alvin Ailey Company for 14 years. He writes, “I love to dance. Dancing is my heart.” Basil Baker attends the Adult Learning Center at Brooklyn’s Central Library. The site manager is Winsome Pryce-Cortes.
I STOP WRITING THE POEM

Maryam Sani

I stop writing the poem because right now the words are blocked in my mind. I try so hard to write one word but something is always stopping me. I stop writing the poem because today I start school for my education that I have been awaiting for so long. I stop writing the poem for the love of my children, who want me to go to school because life is wonderful with education. Without education, life in this world right now is upside down. I stop writing the poem for my job because I have been a very hardworking woman all my life. I stop writing the poem for the love of money. I stop writing the poem for today but tomorrow is another day. I might go back to writing the poem again. Maybe.

Maryam Sani writes, “I am from Africa, but I have lived in the Bronx almost all my life. This is my country now. I have five children I love so much. My life is wonderful right now, and I am happy and grateful for who I have become: a mother and a very hardworking woman. I’m going to school to learn how to read and write. I’m very proud of myself.” Maryam Sani studies with Mindy Levokove at the Adult Learning Center of Lehman College, where Dr. Jaye Jones is the site advisor.
DRAWING LESSONS FOR LIFE
Asami Takekida

“Reading calligraphy is the closest you can get to hearing music with your eyes.” —Anonymous

Copying a great ancient master’s work is considered the best, most important way to practice calligraphy. This is the way you learn his drawing techniques and presentation styles, and it helps you to polish your own style. At first, you might think that duplicating another artist’s work, even a master, will not help you develop your own special talent, but you’d be mistaken. There will always be a part of your work that expresses your individual artistry.

It is often said by people who do calligraphy that your work reveals your personality and can reflect your mental state at the moment of drawing. Even a hesitation in your stroke shows up on the page! To attain a satisfactory level of accomplishment, you must not only practice daily, you must force your mind to pay attention to every stroke you make. The strokes cannot be corrected, so you have to think of each one as your one chance.

When I start drawing, facing a white paper with a brush, I am always excited, wondering how my work is going to turn out. Sometimes it is disappointing, and I am frustrated, but I feel so good when it is going well. I love those moments, and that’s why I can’t stop studying calligraphy.

Successful drawings can inspire strong emotions, as can any work of art. People respond to an artwork’s warmth, elegance, sense of calm, and discipline—or its fierceness. But before that can happen, the artist needs to master drawing techniques and develop a sense of the best placement of characters. That takes time and practice, but it’s the only way to perfect your own unique talent. I find that this dedication to a worthwhile goal can also teach you much about life.

I am making an effort every day to live my life with the same purposeful attitude that I bring to the study of my beloved calligraphy. I believe it will help me to become a better person as well as a better artist.

Asami Takekida, age 34, was born in Miyazaka, Japan. She has lived in the United States for one year and five months. She writes, “I am lucky to live in New York City, where I can even study Japanese culture. This shows New York City’s cultural diversity. The whole world is here!” Asami Takekida studies at the New York Public Library’s Pasculano Foundation at St. Agnes Library. Yolanda Rodriguez is the ESOL instructor, and Lynda Myles is the volunteer tutor.
I DESERVE THE WORLD AND NOTHING LESS

Raquel Mendoza

Many people commit injustices, but they simply ignore them and pretend they are doing the right thing just because they are more powerful than the others. Injustice can take place at work, school, or even at home. People who do such shameful acts would probably never imagine how their actions could affect another person’s life.

When I arrived in the United States, I got a job as a bank teller. I had been an experienced worker in the Dominican Republic before I was hired by my employer here in the United States. After working at the bank for many years, I was asked by my supervisor to train many other tellers, and I sadly saw everybody I trained receive a promotion and be sent to other branches to work in better positions. I instead had to continue working in the same position just because I did not speak English very well.

The saddest part of the story is that when the bank needed a substitute for employees who were sick or on vacation, I was the only one who had to be on call. I kept receiving unfair treatment. I was never brave enough to speak up because my English was not good. I kept it to myself for years just because, as the sole supporter of my family, I could not afford to lose the job. But I felt tired of being looked down on.

I made the decision to enroll in a CLIP class at Hostos Community College. I told my boss the next day that I had registered for an evening class, which meant I had to leave work before five o’clock every day. Again, another problem came up because they did not allow me to leave work before five o’clock. I fought so hard. I went back and forth to the Human Resources Department, spoke to many different people, wrote many emails to several different departments. I was exhausted. I was about to give up the job I had been doing for 10 years.

Then, I suddenly remembered my little daughter, who has always been my motivation and energy. One day, I finally spoke with my big boss with my limited English and told him that I would rather work at a restaurant even though I might be paid less than work at a bank that never gave me the opportunity to grow and improve myself. I told him my feelings, my stressful situation, and the concerns that I had been
Raquel Mendoza has been living in New York City for 10 years. Originally from the Dominican Republic, she describes herself as someone who has overcome many obstacles in life while fighting for herself and her daughter. Marshalla Lie, instructor in the CUNY Language Immersion Program at Hostos Community College, says Raquel Mendoza has made “an immense improvement in her English skills,” and “she has now become one of the best students in the class.”

hiding for years. As someone who had been working for many years without receiving any opportunities to move forward, I could not tolerate this act of injustice.

My big boss looked at me like I was a slave. I left the room, hopeless, thinking that it might be my last day of work. But I actually felt relieved because I had stood up for myself and was able to address the issue. The next day, I woke up in the morning and went to work. I kept thinking about all the possibilities that might happen until someone from the Human Resources Department came to me and said that I was finally given permission to leave early to go to the class I had registered for. As author Vincent Gallagher said, “It takes great courage to open one’s heart and mind to the tremendous injustice and suffering in our world.” I felt it was an accomplishment to deal with injustice humanely and to break the chains of negative thoughts and energies.
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Those moments that you wish never passed, that you want
to keep alive forever
Those moments you appreciate now more than before for only one reason
And the reason is that time passes and never comes back
I wish that time stopped when I was a child
Those moments spent playing in the forest with neighbors,
friends, and family
Those moments when time went slowly, touching all feelings
Those moments when you went to the garden and could smell
the pure air, the perfume of the flowers, and the fragrance
of the eucalyptus trees
Those moments you could hear the singing of the birds, the water flowing
free on the land
Those moments you could see the plants grow, the animals run around
Those moments when you met with the family, when a simple meal was a feast
Those moments when the most important thing was spending time together
Those moments will never come back, but will be alive in our hearts forever
THE TASTE OF CHILDHOOD
Galyna Nyzhnyk

We all come from Childhood. It’s a wonderful country and an interesting time when we are there. Through our children’s curiosity, spontaneity, and sincerity, we questioned the world around us. And Childhood answered us. For some, what we saw and heard was quiet and calm, for others interesting and intense. But my childhood smells . . .

It smells like summer. Every year on summer vacation, I went to the village to stay with my grandmother. Three months of freedom, space, scenery, and air!

It smells like . . .
cool, crisp mornings and dew on the grass, when with my cousin I went to herd the cows;

hot ground and dust on my feet, which playfully ran several miles per day;

a sandwich—brown bread with lard, onion, and salt—hastily prepared and put in my pocket, then somewhere among the grasses consumed with pleasure;

my bike, which I loved, repaired, and killed, chasing around on it all day;

just-torn grass for our little rabbits, who huddled, afraid, with their mother;

milk, freshly obtained from the cow. It was warm and smelled a special way. Every evening, a cup of fresh milk with bread and honey. It was delicious. We didn’t need anything else.

summer rain, which refreshed the air and our heads, which washed dust from us and the road, which gave life to flowers and greenery and gave us breathing space;
the books that I “devoured” and read out to the holes, when I was sitting on the window sill, which was wet from the rain;

donuts, especially with cherries in the middle and sprinkled with powdered sugar, golden on the outside and sweet and plump on the inside—we could not stop eating them;

my grandmother, who had boundless love for us and forgave us all. She taught and took care of us and asked God for a good fate for us.

my mom and dad, who came for me and took me back to the city to study.

I remember everything. I remember all the smells of my childhood. I even feel them. They will not change. They are in me.
And let me tell you, I had a delicious childhood.

Galyna Nyzhnnyk was born and raised in Ukraine. She is an auditor, with her own company. She came to New York City only months ago, with her husband and daughter, then five years old. Their 20-year-old daughter remained in Ukraine to complete medical school. Galyna Nyzhnnyk studies writing at University Settlement Society, where Michael Hunter directs the Adult Literacy Program.
Afaf means honor, lover of beauty, and happy
It is the number four
It is like a shining star in a dark night
It is when me, my brother, my sister, and my best friend
went to Chuck E. Cheese’s
It is the memory of my grandfather
Who taught me forgiveness and happiness
When he would forgive people no matter what they did and be happy
as if nothing ever happened
My name is Afaf
It means to stay faithful to my religion and live my life with a clean heart
THE MOON, THE STARS, AND
MY GRANDFATHER

Antonio Ortega

We think to travel to a new country is the end of the world, but it is not. It is a start of a new life and the discovery of new things. It is important to remember where your original country is. Yet life in a new city, in a new country, does not mean you have to change who you are.

My country, Mexico, is big. I don’t like to live in a city. There are too many problems; people die every day, there are accidents, and drugs. My town is very small and beautiful, and people there respect each other. My grandfather had a farm with horses and goats. Some nights we took them to the pastures, and we slept in fields. I loved sleeping in the field, looking at the beautiful moon walking lonely across the sky among the beautiful stars. My grandfather used to tell me that the moon is the mother of the stars, and the sun is the father. The moon and the sun never see each other because they are working at different times. He also told me some personal stories about how he grew up without a father, how life was hard, and he asked me to always look forward and not back. He said, “When I leave this world, and you live in it without me, don’t remember the moments when I was mad at you. Only remember the good moments that we shared and the stories I told you.” He was crying when he told me this.

In America, I live on Staten Island, and it is good for me because Staten Island makes me remember my town. At night, I come out of my house and look at the moon and the stars, and I remember my grandpa’s stories.

Twenty-year-old Antonio Ortega writes, “I was born in Guerrero, in Mexico. My grandparents are peasants. They are corn farmers. I want to be a paramedic, to save lives.” At the College of Staten Island, Antonio Ortega studies English in a CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP). His teacher is Polina Belimova, and the program director is Donna Grant.
I
n Senegal, you travel from the village to the city in our public cars. Village by village, the car stops to pick up people. In every village the car stops, and the passengers get off and get on. Whoever gets on greets everybody and asks about their families. The passengers love each other. It looks like they know each other, even if they don’t. It’s crowded all the time; the passengers talk, and the babies cry. When you look out the window you see wonderful, newly-painted houses, and sometimes right next to them old houses built years ago. You see people wave their hands at the passengers with happiness, as if they knew you. In the car it smells very nice, like a cologne called Gonga, which is a mix of lots of perfume that makes the car smell all day. You see the people respect each other. When an old person or a pregnant woman boards, the youngest ones give up their seat. At the end of your traveling, you feel very happy about the people.

Mamadou Coulibaly writes: “I am a very easygoing person. I love everyone; I respect everybody. I work in a coffee shop in Manhattan. I would like to learn more in a High School Equivalency class to get a better job.” Born in Senegal, Mamadou Coulibaly speaks Fulani, French, Wolof, and English. He has been in the United States for five years and studies at the Brooklyn Public Library’s Bedford Adult Learning Center. His tutor is Kayla Morse, Matthew Greene is the literacy advisor, and Susan Knott is the site supervisor.
In a small garden at my grandmother’s house, there were two mango trees, and some rabbits, chickens, and roosters that my grandmother liked to raise.

On a summer morning, while the sun was rising, I went to the garden. I saw a butterfly dancing with a flower. I smelled the grass. I heard a bird sing a song, and I touched a rabbit with a feather. I imagined I was an angel playing in a beautiful garden. I enjoyed playing in the small garden. That was my daily routine when I lived in my grandmother’s house.

My grandmother’s small garden gave me a lot of wonderful memories of my childhood. Every year I went there for the summer, and I have never forgotten it. It has made me feel so happy.
My family lived on a university campus, since my parents worked in an affiliated hospital. I remember only the #15 building, although my parents told me we lived in other buildings, too.

The #15 building was an open, two-story, tube-shaped apartment structure with two hallway stairs on both sides. It was different from buildings nowadays. With this building, the families shared a lot of open space.

There were about 20 families living in this building. Most of them had children around the same age as me. At that time, life was not easy. Parents were busy making ends meet, even though they got a regular salary. They didn’t have much time to play with us, but we didn’t care because we always played together and had a lot of fun. After school, we jumped rope, played hide-and-seek, and all kinds of games that we made up. Of course, we always got involved in all kinds of trouble.

Not far from our building, there was a small hill. We liked to go there to be with nature. We set fires and toasted sweet potatoes. We jumped into piles of fallen leaves. We lay still, just enjoying the afternoon sunshine, in the early winter. Sometimes, we did not dare to go home because of the vegetable gardener’s threatening to tell our parents that we ruined his garden by picking the wild berries growing in his garden fence. Many years later, I told my parents our biggest adventure was that we explored an air-raid shelter that had been built for World War II. At the time, we could barely get out of the shelter because we used up all of our fire sticks. How lucky we were!

That time was full of adventure, creativity, and risk, a time that children living in the city nowadays can’t imagine. That’s the childhood I’ll never forget.

The #15 building was pulled down in 1999. Now, there is a small recreation park in that spot. The small hill was fenced over and locked, and turned into an experimental research site.

Each time I went back to China, I would go to that park, not talking with anybody but just sitting there. Sometimes, my kids felt strange because I’d talked freely with them just seconds before and then stopped talking. After a few seconds,
I explained that this was my old home where I spent my childhood. They just kept asking “Where? Where?” What they saw was a park. But for me, a two-story brick building was still standing there, with a lot of children laughing and playing around.

*Lixia Zhang, age 42, studies at the Adult Learning Center of the Queens Elmhurst Library. Her instructor is James McMenamin, and Michelle Johnson is the interim center manager. Lixia Zhang comes from Jiangxi, China, where she taught statistics at Jiangxi Agricultural University for over 10 years. Married and the mother of two boys, Kangxi, 10, and Michael, five, she now works at Kids Time as a teaching assistant for two- and three-year-olds with autism. Last year, she became a permanent resident of the United States.*
A young man from Aguadilla’s countryside and a young woman from an island named Viequez, both of them from Puerto Rico, met for the first time in New York City and fell in love with each other, love at first sight. I was the second of six children that my parents gave life to in Brooklyn. My four brothers and one sister respected me as if I was the oldest one, I guess because my parents picked me as the sheep dog to gather up the sheep, so to speak. Thanks to my parents, I speak Spanish and English, and I understand both languages very well. Most of us first-generation Latinos who are born in the mainland United States understand Spanish very well, but we speak it with an accent.

My parents once took us all to live in Puerto Rico for one year, and they put us all in school. In the beginning, it was very difficult for my brothers, sister, and me. We did not know how to read or write Spanish, and we couldn’t speak it as well as the other kids, so they would call us “Americuchi” or “Nuyoricans.” Thank God we had all learned how to fight and defend ourselves in New York City. The good news is that our Spanish improved, but I think we still have that New York accent, which is hard to shake off.

As a grown man during a very hard day at work in Brooklyn, I fell down the basement stairs and landed on the floor, face-down. I did not get hurt, but I remember asking myself: Why am I working so hard, so much? For the first time, I realized that life is not about just work, work, work. Later that week, I decided to take a break from work, and for the first time in my adult life I went to Puerto Rico. I wanted to live by the ocean and explore Puerto Rico as much as I could in one month. I also wanted to learn more about my Puerto Rican heritage and who I am, including why we have different color skins in my family and my parents’ families. I decided to learn more about my parents’ families and the history of Puerto Rico. When I arrived in Puerto Rico, I went straight to Isla Verde in Carolina, which was where my condo by the beach was located. I was in a wonderful state of awe. Coming from Brooklyn, this was like paradise to me. I immediately fell in love with the ocean, the palm trees, the people, and a small black bird called a chango. This bird made me laugh because it reminded me of Brooklyn toughness; it was fearless.

WHO AM I?

Jimmy Crespo Suarez
Jimmy Crespo Suarez writes, “I was born in Brooklyn, New York. I became skilled in heating, air conditioning, refrigeration and appliance repair at Manhattan Vocational & Technical High School. I also attended some college in Brooklyn. I have enjoyed tinkering with tools and fixing things since I was a boy. Now I want to master the computer, and thanks to the YMCA, and our instructor, Daniel Tortoledo, I’m on my way to a new career.” At the YMCA’s New Americans Welcome Center, the coordinator is Nabila Khan.
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OLD AND NEW
Mingwei Li

Once in the Gilded Age
Mansions built along the Newport coast
Stood luxurious and proud
They were once so new

But now, stuffed with dusty furniture
Tonight, every night
No lights, no cooking smoke, no human noise
They are lonely and empty
Some even torn down or deserted

Yet look what is built new today
With streamlined materials, cheap and shallow
No craftsmanship nor personality
Will there be visitors when our grandchildren grow

Will they even survive the passing days
Still shining to tell stories of the old days
Built with no quality
Is that what we call new

Born in China, Mingwei Li speaks Mandarin and Cantonese. He worked as an interior decorator and artist in his native country and continues this work in New York City, where he has been living since 2012. He studies English at the Institute for Immigrant Concerns. His ESOL instructor is Carol Gordon, Mark Brik is the education director, and Donna Kelsh is the executive director.
SEASONS OF MY LIFE

Manuel Tepepa

There was once a beautiful shining view of little hills covered with green grass. Some little animals, such as rabbits, squirrels, and deer, among others, were running everywhere. There were trees full of green leaves and plants with colorful flowers on the shore of the lake and on the dirt road’s edge.

Birds were flying and chirping all around. Butterflies flew like they were dancing. People were walking and enjoying their various outdoor activities. Everything we could see was wonderful, of course. It was spring time. I was spring.

Now, everything has changed. The hills, once covered with green grass, are now brown and dry. The little animals do not run anymore. They have gone away, looking for food and shelter.

The trees are no longer green. Their leaves sadly have turned brown, yellow, and orange. They have begun to fall down one by one, dancing slowly to the ground and waving farewell to the big and robust tree that once held them.

The plants on the shore of the lake and on the dirt road’s edge have gone dry. They are not pretty anymore. We can rarely see a bird or a butterfly. Most of them have immigrated to a tropical climate. We can not see them flying around here, or hear the birds chirping. We can only hear the wind blowing and howling.

Further in the distance, we can hear some kids yelling and screaming, but their voices fade away through the gusty wind. The air is getting colder and colder, as is usual in this season.

Autumn is here. I am autumn.

Manuel Tepepa was born and raised in Tlaxcala, Mexico. He came to the United States nine years ago at the age of 33, looking for a better life. He has been a construction worker since that time, and his dream is to go to college. He has been studying English for the last two years. He says that studying at the Harlem Adult Learning Center of the New York Public Library has made him feel confident and proud, with the help of a great instructor, Myrna Holguin.
I HAVE BEEN WAITING ALL MY LIFE
Anna Chan

When I was pregnant with my son,
I waited for a baby to come into this world.

When that baby came,
I waited for him to smile, to eat, to speak, to walk, to love.

When he was three or four,
I waited for him to go to school.

When he was 10 or more,
I waited for him to go to university.

When I wanted a job or money,
I waited for an opportunity.

When I went to work,
I always waited for the subway and the bus.

When I was working every morning,
I always waited for lunchtime.

When the clock struck four in the afternoon,
I waited to go back home quickly.

When I felt work was hard,
I waited to retire.

When I went to the bank,
I always waited in line.
Anna Chan was born in the countryside in China. When she was 15, she left her village to go to Shanghai, where she got married. Anna Chan and her husband left Shanghai to move to Hong Kong. At age 40, she wanted her children to have a good education, so her family immigrated to the United States. After working hard for 30 years, she retired. Now she studies English at CUNY’s BMCC. Her ESOL teacher is Christine Wilson-Green, and the site advisor is Solange Farina. Anna Chan was also published in LR13.

When I went shopping,
I always waited to pay for items.

When I stand in front of the mirror,
I see that I have waited for a long time because I have gray hair.
My face has a lot of wrinkles too.

Now I am done waiting,
But I still have one thing I need to wait for . . .
Its name is “three long two short” (Chinese idiom for coffin).

Everyone in the world must wait for this one thing one time.
Oh! What is my life? My life was all waiting for.
FALL IN LOVE WITH YOURSELF FIRST
Saira Yudith Ventura Morey

There’s nothing more wrong than loving somebody more than yourself, and I had to learn it the hard way. As a teenager, I fell in love with somebody I thought might be my partner for the rest of my life, that pure and caring love like my parents have.

Everything seemed to be just perfect. I couldn’t let one day pass without seeing this person, and for him it was the same way. No time for friends, no time for family. It was just us, which for me was all right, even though I had to sacrifice time with my loved ones. He made it look normal—the way it was supposed to be.

Without even knowing, I was getting myself into a cage with one key, and he was the keeper. Things started to change. I wasn’t the perfect girl for him anymore. Everything I said or did was wrong. This was very hurtful to me to hear from someone I loved more than myself.

It took me some time and various destructive situations to realize my love turned out to be an evil person who damaged my self-esteem. It was time to step away. Easy? It wasn’t, but it was definitely worth it. Don’t you ever let anybody tell you differently. You’re beautiful, you’re valuable. Say it to yourself every day. Fall in love with yourself first.

Saira Yudith Ventura Morey writes, “I was born in the Dominican Republic and have been in the United States for five years. I am a single mother of one. My daughter means everything to me, and believe it or not helps me with my English. I would like to finish the English program at the New York Public Library’s Bronx Library Center and pursue a career in nursing.” The site’s lead instructor is Barbara Martinez.
Sea birds fly overhead. The boats are reflected in the water. The Statue of Liberty is set perfectly in this beautiful scene. I have been sitting on a bench for an hour, staring at the views. The coffee in my hand has cooled down. Some images from the past show up in my mind—I am homesick. Today is the anniversary of my arrival in America.

Most Asians agree that family life is their priority. I went to my parents’ house a couple of days before I departed. I listened to Elvis’s songs before I went. My parents and I had breakfast together. “Try your best, son, never give up, all right?” My old father still has a strong spirit to encourage me. “Yes, sir! Loud and clear, sir!” I replied, smiling. “Don’t waste money. Take care,” my mom said, while holding my arms with her pale hands. “I promise I’ll never do that.”

I am used to giving positive answers. She looked at me with confused eyes. She knew her son very well.

Then I returned home. My two-month-old daughter was sleeping in my arms. I kissed her and handed her over to my wife. It was time to go to the airport. “Kiss me and smile for me,” I said, like in the John Denver song, to my wife. She smiled.

A lot of thoughts appeared in my mind while I was waiting to board the plane. I remembered my Uncle Edward, who departed from this airport 30 years earlier. At that time, we had a custom that all relatives had to go to the airport when someone went abroad. We sent him off with more than 25 people. He cried, and most relatives cried, showing that they were sad. Three years later, he sent a letter to his mother who had wanted to go to the United States. He said, “Ticket on the way.” Maybe it was a transportation problem, but the ticket didn’t arrive until seven years later.

It was Edward who suggested I go to the United States. He sent me to Niagara Falls, the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, the famous Disneyland, and Key West in Florida. Later I drove to Florence, Oregon and Albuquerque, New Mexico. I really enjoyed it. Now I am proud to live in the United States.

A big tour group crosses over beside me; I wake up from the past. The landmark of New York, the Statue of Liberty, is standing with dignity. Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi
Aung Zaw Lin comes from Myanmar. He is a chemical engineer by education and previously worked as an assistant manager in the timber industry. He has been in New York City for a little over one year. Aung Zaw Lin wrote this essay while studying writing at the Andrew Romay New Immigrant Center of the English-Speaking Union. Angela Wilkins is his ESOL teacher, and Tanzilya Oren is the site manager.

designed the statue in 1876. He used his mother’s face as a model. Mothers always have an important place. I pull out my phone and call my mother.

“Hello.” I hear a sweet voice. Now I really understand how much people respect their mothers. I want to see my mother and also want her to come America. “Mom, do you hear me?” I say, “Yes, I hear you very well, son,” she answers. Finally, I realize the only way to say what I want to say. I say, “Mom . . . ticket on the way.”
I was born on a small tropical island, in the tiny village of West Ipoh, in Perak, Malaysia. I am the second-oldest in a family of four girls. My parents were divorced by the time I was four years old. In our town we had no streetlights, and our water came from wells. We had outhouses, and the houses were built of wood. The stoves were made of brick, and the roads were all dirt. On the weekends, we had to go pick up the fallen branches on the rubber plantation. At nine years old, in third grade, I had to quit school to work full time to help support my family. They sent me far away from home to work as a babysitter and live-in housemaid.

When I turned 14, I became an assistant at a hair salon. Not only did I learn how to do hair, but I learned about the importance of an education. At 16, I decided to go to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur to work as a salesgirl. In the city, I also learned other skills, like sewing. Being in the big city was exciting. What a difference from the small village I came from where people did not have enough food to eat!

When I turned 19, one of my sisters went to Singapore to work. I saw an opportunity, so I took a chance and decided to go, too. I did very well in Singapore. I was promoted to hairstylist. I worked there for two years. I had a cousin who came from the United States to visit me in Singapore, and I was able to convince him to help me when I got to America. I heard that life was very good in America, so it became very important for me to go. A year later, I got my visa, so I knew my dreams could come true, and the life I had was going to change for the better. I would be able to help my family live better. My family put together the money for me to buy an airplane ticket and some survival money for when I got to the United States.

Once I arrived in the United States, it was a big challenge for me. I worked as a hairdresser but many things were different, such as food, weather, climate, culture, different nationalities, and language. When I was 24 years old, I moved from Brooklyn to Manhattan’s Chinatown for the convenience of my job. I lived with an elderly couple who were very nice to me, and we became very close. During the three years I lived with them, their nephew from Baltimore came to visit often. They suggested I go out with him. He had a degree and was smart, and they said if I married him I could get a green card. So with my family’s permission, I started a long-distance relationship.
Stephanie Chang came to the United States from Malaysia in 1989. Despite not having finished grade school, she speaks, reads, and writes English at an intermediate level. She studies at the BMCC Center for Continuing Education, where Dominique DiTommaso is her ESOL instructor. Stephanie Chang says New York is the best place to live because it offers a lot of resources. She wants everyone who reads her story to know that the best way to get what you want out of life is to challenge yourself.
WHO DOES THE COOKING?
Sekou Camara

In Africa, we grew up in the kitchen. My mother cooked delicious food every day, and the kids would sit there talking to her. My favorite food was peanut soup with red fish. I liked chicken soup, too. Only businessmen eat in restaurants in Africa. Everybody cooks at home. And always it’s rice every day. Cooking is considered a woman’s job in Africa. Boys could learn to cook, but their mothers wouldn’t allow it. If I had tried to cook, my mother would have slapped my hand. I learned that cooking is only for girls and women.

When I moved to New York City, there was no one to cook for me. At first I ate out, but it got expensive. I had one friend who knew how to cook, and I had to learn. I knew what my mother had done from watching her so many times; I saw her starting everything with oil, tomatoes, and onions. But how long does it take for meat to cook? I had to try many times to learn this. I could see it takes time to bring out the flavor, and I could see how long to cook chicken by the color.

Now my feelings have changed. Cooking is not women’s work. I cook and clean everything myself.

Sekou Camara was born in Guinea and raised in Mali. He has lived in New York City for 25 years. He enjoys photography and painting. He writes, “I am a survivor of gun violence. The bullet is still lodged in my body.” He studies at the Tompkins Square Adult Learning Center of the New York Public Library, where the lead instructor is Terry Sheehan.
REBORN

Yijie Zhu

It is a frozen moment,
After midnight,
In a strange city.
Memories, like shooting stars, fly to my heart.
Dark evening,
Lonely world,
Forgotten under the moonlight.

Feelings wake up little by little,
Wandering in this night city.
The illusion of love has gone,
My sadness is more and more clear.

After the storm that has been my life,
I wait to see the colorful rainbow.
Time and time again,
My heart sinks.
How much weight can I bear?
Drowning in an ocean of my tears.
In another lifetime,
Brightness and happiness.
I can feel!
I can see!
I could not choose where I came from,
But I can choose where I go!

I look forward to my life
BLOOMING!
I look forward to my new life
R E B O R N!

Yijie Zhu emigrated from Shanghai, China, where she was a human resources manager. She is a domestic violence survivor. She studies at the International Center of Catholic Charities Community Services, where her teacher is Fred Dieckamp, and Elaine Roberts is the director of programs.
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Makheni Jean-Pierre
My neighbor in the next apartment was too noisy . . .
The girl played very touching melodies from 9:57 p.m. to 4:49 a.m.
Her violin played very, very gently, warmly, but I couldn’t concentrate on
my English homework . . .
But she stopped playing alone recently.
Her violin played with his flute together! Their hearts in love filled my soul
too much!
They played surprisingly gently, but they kissed very loudly . . .! Too
loudly . . .!
Allow me to sleep only five minutes . . . only . . . only . . .
Oh, my poor English.
EXERCISING MY FREEDOM

Thamirys Spyker

“We the People” are the first three words of the preamble to the American Constitution. For me, those words mean that we are a family with the same goal: freedom. I wonder, where can freedom be easily found? It can be found on a blank piece of paper. There, freedom does not have borders, only the margin. The power of writing our own stories is a political act, and a special act of love.

We become authors of our own stories when we tell or write them with our own voices and words. By doing this, we reach autonomy in our lives. While writing, we analyze, review, and reflect; and sometimes we face the fact that we are unfinished creatures receptive to learning. Through writing, we share knowledge, feelings, and thoughts, so writing becomes an important form of dialogue that brings people together in a humanizing process.

When I write my own story, it helps me to relieve oppression. I can build a new way, a new life, a new world. I can touch the purest freedom, turning into a free adult. I unpack a new way in each line. Behind all my words there is cultural, critical, and social activism. Writing is a movement to overcome the colonial culture of the past.

How can I write it all? What should I reveal, and what should remain hidden? This search is a strong political act and each sentence is part of the puzzle that has the potential to turn into actions. Writing gives me the possibility to produce knowledge instead of being only a consumer, oppressed by the dominant culture.

Time flies, but through writing it can be everlasting. While I write I navigate through unfamiliar territories, relive my memories, and discover treasures in those journeys that nobody else could describe. Writing helps me to see everything with wiser eyes. The paper is open for us to define our own reality, and to make and remake the world with the material that life offers us.

Thamirys Spyker emigrated from Brazil in July 2016. She began to improve her English at the New York Public Library’s Mid-Manhattan Library, where she exercises her love of writing. She thanks her ESOL teacher, Ruby Taylor MacBride, for motivating her to continue writing in spite of the difficulties of language. She says her teacher told her, “Just keep writing.”
TO BE ABLE TO WRITE

Erika Rivera

To be able to write, I would feel as if someone set me free.
As if I had the ability to fly,

I can see,
I can feel,
I’m in the right place.
I can feel accomplished.
I can feel normal.

Oh, just set me free.
You don’t know how tired I’ve been.
I feel like I’ve been in jail,
Ignored, pushed away,
Set aside like a dusty book,
Put away until no one remembered what the need was.
Oh, to be set free.

To be able to fly,
It’s as if I’d be soaring for years to come.
Oh, to be set free.
ANOTHER KIND OF SLAVERY

Jesus Rodriguez

“Once you learn to read, you are forever free,” said Frederick Douglass. I read this thought again and again, and it made me think of slavery: one kind obvious, and the other hidden. The first type is clear: If I am tied by a chain to a wall, I am not free since my situation was made by brute force. It is evident that I am a slave. Everyone recognizes it. But illiteracy is another kind of slavery.

When I read and write, I not only improve my knowledge, but also my critical thinking grows. Freedom and slavery are separated by just a thin line. Critical thinking will demonstrate where this line is passed. Hidden intentions can come in a law enacted by a government or from the words of a powerful man. It is now that our critical thinking must discover the lie. This is not always easy to do.

When someone wants to enslave us, usually it will be wrapped in false reasons. How can I discover these false grounds? Not knowing how to read, I can only hear the thoughts of other people. Usually, their ideas will be a mixture of reading and their own personal thinking. But I must form my own opinion.

In my country, Spain, the politicians say we are in the biggest crisis of our history. When I hear this, I am sure they are lying to me. The situation is the same as it was before. The only change is the time and the people. No one wants to say we are committed to the same mistake. Who wants to hear this? No one!

In my modest opinion, the absence of critical thinking of the majority, including me, drives us to repeat the past again and again. We may have new technology, but history is always the same. How can I change it to benefit me? By educating more people so that critical thinking is developed and change can happen. Then you will be forever free.

A native of Spain, Jesus Rodriguez speaks French, as well as Spanish. When he wrote this essay, he had been in the United States for only 10 weeks. He came here to study English, in order to have more job opportunities in his country. At the Adult Learning Center of the College of Staten Island, his instructor is Judy Falci, and the site advisor is Donna Grant.
Walter Fonrose was born in Haiti 21 years ago and has lived in New York City since March 2015. He is interested in world politics. He dreams of improving security and education in Haiti and helping Haiti’s homeless children. A student in CUNY’s Language Immersion Program (CLIP) at York College, he plans to become a computer engineer. The site advisor at York College is Stephanie Mueller, and Hamid Kherief is the director.
My best slogan for my children is “No Spanish—no food.” Why? Because I believe when someone immigrates to another country, we must not only learn about a new culture, we must keep our culture, language, food, etc., and teach our kids where we are from. My father immigrated from Communist China to Venezuela in search of a better life for himself and his siblings. My father was 18 years old at the time. He had only the clothes that he wore, and he made some friends during the trip. My father didn’t know, understand, or speak Spanish, but he and his friends got jobs in a small coffee shop. They learned how to speak, write, read, and understand by talking with their boss and the customers, listening to the radio and watching TV, and the generous and kind boss helped them with reading and writing. My father tried to memorize the whole menu, and his boss told him, “If you say correctly in Spanish the food that you want to eat, I will give it to you.” This is the real reason he learned a lot of Spanish and also saved money on food. He told me, “No Spanish—no food.”

My story is similar to my father’s, but I want my children to retain the old language as well as learn the new. I moved from Venezuela to Puerto Rico, where my children were born, then to New Jersey, and now to New York, because I wanted to have a good education for my kids and a better life for us. In the United States, I needed to learn English, which was not easy but not impossible. One way to learn English was helping my kids with their homework and talking to them in English. Since I had grown up speaking Spanish, and my children spoke Spanish in Puerto Rico, I thought they should keep that culture, food, and language. So we have an agreement: At least three days a week, we have to speak, read, watch TV or movies, and do any activities (playing card games, dominoes, etc.) in Spanish.

My youngest child, Victor, didn’t speak, read, or understand Spanish because he was only 18 months old when we left Puerto Rico. To help Victor learn Spanish, I said, “No Spanish—no food.” For example, Victor said, “Mommy, I want to eat something that looks like a white circle with ham inside—the food from Venezuela you made for us on the weekend.” Me: “If you want to eat it, you have to say it in Spanish. Please say ‘arepa.’ If you don’t say it, you don’t get it. No Spanish—no food.”
Elia Cheng was born in Venezuela, and moved to Puerto Rico, New Jersey, and then New York. She is dedicated to her husband and three children. For her University Settlement writing class, she has written “how to” essays on making homemade insect repellent and stain remover. She also brought her son’s science experiment to class, so her classmates could act as guinea pigs. Michael Hunter is the director of University Settlement’s Adult Literacy Program.
BEING DEAF
Alex German Beutel

I grew up in Argentina, in a family with seven children. Three of us are deaf, four are hearing, but everyone learned sign language. We were a close-knit family. I went to a school for the deaf with my two brothers. We communicated in sign language.

When I was 14 years old, I had to transfer to a high school for the hearing because there was no high school for the deaf. It was a rough transition. We were the first deaf kids to go this high school. It was my first time being in school with hearing kids. I found that it could be awkward meeting hearing people at first, but I could write notes and communicate in other ways. I used sign language with facial expressions. I have always found ways to communicate.

So it bothered me that some people didn’t want to communicate with me. They called me a deaf-mute. I was angry. I can vocalize and read lips if people enunciate. There was one bully who picked on all the deaf kids. I would shout to him with my hands. He was a hater and a bigot, but I was not afraid and made other friends.

One night I went out with my friends to dance. I love to dance! The hearing person asked me, “You are deaf, so how do you hear music and dance?” I told him that I don’t hear, but I feel vibrations. He was surprised!

I told many hearing friends about my life. They learned from me about my culture and my language. I use sign language with my deaf friends, my brothers, and my family. We are happy. That’s deaf culture. I go to school, I work, and I have traveled around South America and moved to New York. I do not feel limited.

I wish that all people all over the world could understand deaf culture. Now is a better time because there are many technologies, so it’s easy to communicate with my cell phone and email. If I have a question, I can use my phone to ask the question. It’s a good life!

Alex German Beutel, age 26, moved to New York City from Argentina three years ago. He speaks Argentine Sign Language and Spanish and has learned American Sign Language and English. He studies at the Seward Park Adult Learning Center of the New York Public Library, with lead instructor Terry Sheehan. In addition to wanting to attend college in the future, he says, “I love traveling a lot; the world is beautiful.”
TIME IS A TREASURED GIFT

Henry Allen

Time is a special gift given by God. It is given to every human being in all ages. It is to be nourished and cherished. It is to be used wisely. It is not to be wasted; rather, it must be cultivated because time lost is never regained. In order to get the most out of time, we need to plan well. How often do we hear someone say, “If only I had enough time, I would do this, or I would do that.” So we end up begging for, buying, or borrowing time.

Have you ever considered how much we waste this precious gift called time? We procrastinate, putting off what should have been done today for tomorrow. We mark time. We even kill time.

Time is very important, and it means different things to different individuals. So I took a little time to ask a few people what time means to them. This is what they said: Time is money; it is the master of all things; it is like a stage—there is an entrance and there is an exit.

The big question is how do you see time? What is your perspective? Will you leave the stage with a sense of regret or with a standing ovation? Well, maybe only time will tell.

I reflect on the essence of time and the swiftness with which it passes by. I say to myself: If I knew then what I know now, I would have made greater efforts to accomplish my goals.

The truth is time waits for no one. There is a season, a time for everything. Therefore, whatever you do, do it quickly. Time is running out. Remember, time is like a coin. You can spend it any way, but you only spend it once.

I encourage you again to spend it wisely. Do enjoy the rest of your time, and I hope to see you another time.

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Henry Allen, born in Jamaica, has been in the United States for two years. He joined a class at the New Lots Learning Center of the Brooklyn Public Library in 2014. Nicolas Simon, the literacy advisor, was his teacher, and Jean-Marie Buonacore is the site supervisor. Currently, Henry Allen is studying in a Pre-High School Equivalency class at the Brooklyn Library’s Central Library.
THINKING MEAT
Makheni Jean-Pierre

We are flesh and bloody-being.
Without it, what are we?
Like a small cantaloupe, made of cells,
Holding a vague understanding of the universe.

Without it, what are we?
Strong connection, quantifiable speed, and electric signals.
These altogether say what to do and who we are.
It controls our movement, so who controls it?

Thinking meat! Are we indirectly your subordinates?
Should humanity change into Thinking Meatnity?
Tremendous meaning of life, and even fate;
Are we living, or are you living?

Fundamental part of us, embodying complexity,
Turning us into perpetual travelers, probably for eternity.
What’s so worthy that needs to be concealed?
Be our guest, Thinking Meat.

Born in Haiti, Makheni Jean-Pierre speaks English, French, and Creole. He has lived in the United States for two years. He studies in the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP) with Vincent Zompa, the site advisor, at Queensborough Community College. In addition to “Thinking Meat,” Makheni Jean-Pierre wrote another piece popular among the LR14 editors, about an acquaintance’s insistence that on Thanksgiving in the United States, turkeys fall from the sky.
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A LIFE-CHANGING TICKET

Jennifer Ranfla

I was born in California, but when I was almost two years old, my parents separated and my mom decided to return to her country, Peru. I grew up in Peru for 17 years, but I always knew where I was from.

When I graduated from high school, I wanted to study in the university, but I couldn’t because I didn’t have the right paperwork. The only thing I could do was wait to turn 18, when I could make the decision by myself.

When I decided to come to the United States, I first needed to go to the immigration office of Peru to get information about my status. The administrators told me all that I didn’t want to hear: They explained that I had a debt with the country because when you arrive as a tourist to Peru, they give you a time limit to stay legally, but if you pass this time, you need to pay one dollar for each day that you stayed on. I stayed for 17 years, so my debt was seven thousand dollars.

That day was perhaps one of the worst days in my life because the bill was a lot of money, and I couldn’t pay. On that day, I cried a lot. I felt sad and desperate. I spoke with my mom, who was in the United States, and she told me, “Don’t worry, honey. I will work hard and save money to help you.”

These words made me feel comfortable, and I said to myself, It’ll be okay.

A few months later, my mom came back to Peru for a vacation. In March, my aunt invited us to go to an anniversary of a casino. It was a big party. When we arrived, my mom and I saw a banner that said “BIG RAFFLE,” but we couldn’t participate at that moment. So we spent the night there.

My mom and my aunt were playing the slots for a couple hours. Then my mom told me, “Go to the machine and print the tickets. Maybe we have some tickets for the Grand Raffle.”

We only had one ticket for the big raffle, so I took it and put it on the box with the other tickets. There were one or two thousand tickets. There were four raffles to select the four finalists who would participate for the big prize.

What was incredible was my mom kept winning each round, one by one. Then she was one of four contestants in the final round. At that time, we couldn’t believe what was happening.
There was a game board with four doors. My mom chose the third door. Then came the moment to see what was behind the door. The door opened and my mom first saw a hundred dollars. Then she looked again, and there was the grand prize, 10 thousand dollars. All the people were saying, “Wow! Look! She won the grand prize!”

But I couldn’t see how much she won. I only saw my mom crying, screaming, and very nervous. Someone close to me said, “She won 10 thousand dollars!”

At that moment I was in shock. It is funny now, but at that time, it was like an incredible dream. The only thing I could do was cry and say, “Thank God.”

If I were not there, I would not have believed what happened. That was the best gift I have received in my life. Maybe you think it was the money, but it wasn’t the money. It was the opportunity to come to the United States.

I have been in the United States for almost two years, and I have done many things. I’m improving my English every week, as much as possible. I got a job, and I achieved the most important goal: I have been accepted to college. I know college is hard for someone whose first language isn’t English, but it is not impossible. If you want to do something, you can.

Now I can tell you: Nothing in life is impossible as long as you believe.

Jennifer Ranfla was born in the United States, raised in Peru, and came to New York City less than two years ago. Studying English at the Harlem Adult Learning Center of the New York Public Library, she started at the beginning level and graduated to the intermediate and advanced levels. Her ESOL teacher is Myrna Holguin. Jennifer Ranfla has been accepted as a student at CUNY’s LaGuardia Community College.
THE PRICE OF RESIDENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

Clarivel Delance

My story about how I got my residence in the United States begins with a difficult family separation.

When I was 25 years old, my little six-year-old daughter, called Zeudy, came with her father to the United States from the Dominican Republic. It was very hard for us because we had to separate. But she was excited about her trip with her father. She exclaimed, “I’m going to New York in a plane!” But she never imagined that she would stay in the United States for many years of her life.

Time passed, and she visited me every summer vacation. Each time was very sad for us because I had another baby girl, and Zeudy wanted to share more time with her sister but had to go back to New York.

When she was 12 years old, she made a promise to bring me to the United States. When she was 18 years old, she was thinking it was time for my application process to start, but it wasn’t. That was another disappointment to her.

Finally, she was 21 years old, and she started the process to bring me to this country. We were happy about our coming together. It was very emotional for her siblings and me, but the happiness was not complete. She got married in the Dominican Republic, and she moved there with her husband. Now she stays there, and I stay here.

Sometimes happiness is not perfect.
Mrs. Jones lived with her husband and two daughters in a lovely house with a manicured lawn. She practiced law at a prestigious firm in the city, and she loved her job and family. But something was about to make her world unravel. One Friday, when she got to work and opened her office door, she saw a bunch of red roses. Mrs. Jones walked toward the roses on her desk, but there was no card. She sat in her chair and thought about who would send her 13 red roses. She recalled that she’d won a high-profile case the Wednesday before the roses arrived.

That evening, she went home and told her husband, Tom, who was a doctor in the city, “When I went to work this morning, I received 13 red roses.”

“Do you have any idea who they’re from?” asked Tom.

“They might be from my client,” said Mrs. Jones.

“A client?” said Tom.

But Mrs. Jones was too tired to talk, so she went upstairs to bed.

Mrs. Jones went to work on Monday, still thinking about the roses, but she had a lot of work to do, so she started focusing on her new case. On Friday, at four in the afternoon, Mrs. Jones heard a knock on her office door. “Come in, Mary,” said Mrs. Jones to her secretary.

Mary was holding a gift box. “This box was dropped off,” she said.

When Mrs. Jones opened the box, it was a vacation hat. *Why would someone send me a vacation hat with my initials on it?* thought Mrs. Jones.

She went home and told her husband about the strange gift she had received. Tom sounded suspicious. “Why is someone sending you gifts?”

“I don’t know!” said Mrs. Jones, exasperated. “I’m nervous about this, Tom.”

The week continued like before. The case she was working on got pushed back, so Mrs. Jones had more time to prepare for a new case. Then one day she heard a knock.

When the door opened, it was not her secretary, Mary, but a deliveryman. “I have a package for you to sign for, Mrs. Jones,” he said.

Mrs. Jones took the package, signed for it, and opened it. This time it was a red swim suit. She called her husband right away.

“Tom, I received a gift again, and I’m coming home now,” fretted Mrs. Jones. When she got home, she found her husband in his office.

“Come inside,” said Tom. “Why are you receiving all these gifts? Is something going on I should know about?”
“What are you talking about, Tom? If something were going on, I would not have shown you the gifts,” said Mrs. Jones.

“Sorry for accusing you, but we need to get to the bottom of this,” said Tom.

The next day, it was 3:30 when Mrs. Jones had a great lunch and a glass of wine at Labala, her favorite restaurant near where she worked. Mrs. Jones went back to her office at 4:30 and saw a package on her desk when she opened her office door. She opened the package and was shocked. Mrs. Jones called her husband immediately.

“Tom,” shouted Mrs. Jones, “I am going to call the cops! Tom, this is crazy.”

“Come home,” said Tom.

When Mrs. Jones got home, there was no light in the house. Then she noticed flickering from the dining room. She opened the dining room door wider, and she saw Tom holding a bottle of her favorite wine, with the candles flickering.

“I have something to tell you,” said Tom. “I sent you those gifts, for our anniversary, on April 30th. I knew that you were busy with your case, so you would forget it was our anniversary,” he said. “The 13 red roses are for the number of years we’ve been married. The vacation hat is for the vacation I planned for us, when you lie with me under the sun. The red swim suit I sent you because it is your favorite color, and I love to see you in red.” He then took the box she was holding.

“Open it. I bought you this lingerie and necklace from Paris, knowing how much you love your birthstone, sapphire, because it reminds you of the ocean. The lingerie is for our special night together under the stars,” teased Tom.

“Tom, I am so happy you remembered! And I’m sorry I forgot our anniversary,” said Mrs. Jones, smiling.

“Sophia,” said Tom, “we don’t have much time. I have a car waiting for us across the street to take us to the airport.”

“Tom, I love you,” said Mrs. Jones, with a giggle. She took his hand and they headed toward the door.
It was my second week in the United States. New people, new country, new culture, everything was new! I was really excited and interested. I was living in Ocean City, Maryland. It is a small and very long city. I worked at a small store that sells frozen yogurt. It was a quiet day, at the end of May; the busy season usually gets going at the end of June.

While I was checking my products in the back, I saw on the security camera that somebody came in the store. As I left the back, I was saying, “Hellooo, how are you?” When my eyes stopped on the customer, I was a little bit confused at first and then—shocked. She looked puzzled, too. In front of me stood a woman with two kids, one in her arms and the second one behind her in a stroller. At this moment, in my mind there appeared the same picture from a few months earlier in Lutsk, the city I come from, where I used to be a waiter in a small and cozy café.

I asked first, in Ukrainian, “Are you from Lutsk?” Smiling, she said, “Yes.” Then she asked me, “Were you a waiter at Café Coffee@Coffee?” My answer was the same as hers. We were so confused, happy, and surprised at that moment. The questions arose one after another.

During our conversation, I found out how and why she came to the United States. She told me that she and her family were visiting her friends on the West Coast and afterward had a plan to visit the East Coast to see the Atlantic Ocean. They had been in Ocean City for only one day. She walked on the boardwalk and saw many different stores. No one knows why she chose exactly my store.

When I was 16 years old, I thought that my hometown was more like a village than a city because it doesn’t matter where you are walking, usually you will meet somebody whom you know or someone who knows you. Everyone who lived or is still living in a small city can understand that. By age 18, I’d visited different cities in my country, and it happened that I met some people there that I already knew. So I started thinking that my country is not so big.
Now I’m in another part of the earth, in one of the biggest countries in the world, and I met a woman that I had already served in my small hometown. I don’t know how it happened, but I know two things: The world is round, and everything is possible in our lives.

Oleksandr Ostapchuk, age 21, emigrated from Lutsk, Ukraine seven months before he wrote this essay. He speaks Ukrainian, Russian, and English. He enjoys many extreme sports, as well as traveling, discovering new things, and learning about new cultures. He is interested in positive thinking and the power of the mind. He likes improving himself in different ways. At the Bell Language School, where he studies, Stacy Hall is the program coordinator.
I am from Africa. I came from the northern part of Cameroon. Our culture is very different from the American culture.

One difference is we practice a lot of respect and humility. We learn it from childhood, at home, and when we start schooling as well. But the strange thing I have seen here in America is totally the opposite. For example: In my country, children do not talk back to their parents. Children do not look an elder directly in the eyes when they are wrong. Children in my country never have it their own way. They are submissive to their parents and to their elders.

Also, a lot of people in the United States curse. They are very insolent. I cannot tell why it is a part of their language. The F-word is strange to me but is normal to them. In my country, you can curse only when you are mad at someone, but not the F-word.

I have worked with an American lady who had a problem with me being too humble and respectful. To her, I was foolish and even dumb. I do not blame her because you can only give what you have. The American people take humble and respectful behavior as a weakness.

One thing I will never give up is the good manners my parents brought me up with. Nothing on earth will make me copy this part of the American way, because respect and humility pay and even help people. We all like to be respected.

But the American people are not bad in all things. They are so very fast in saying sorry, please, thank you and are good at giving a fake smile. But they really do not mean it. It is a sad situation that no one seems to notice.

After thinking about all this, I concluded that because of their freedom, the American people think they are allowed to do whatever they want. I think that if we are all equal we have to consider other cultures with respect. That is why America seems a strange place with strange people to me.
A STRANGER IN THE DARK

Amy Fang

One very dark night, I was alone at home. I finished my work and didn’t know what to do. Before I knew it, silence filled the house. I decided to sleep, so I turned off all the lights and drifted off.

I woke up with the noise of the doorbell. It was still dark, but I was curious. I peeked through the window but couldn’t get a clear view of who was there because of the darkness. It felt like a stranger, so I didn’t dare go near the door. Immediately, I got all my important information and quickly found a place to hide and call for help. I didn’t want to wake the neighbors, so I decided to call the police.

However, I was too afraid to call the police. While I took my time thinking, I heard a click. Then a creak. My heart beat fast, and I began to sweat. I tried to find a place to hide, but I couldn’t, so I took a stick and tried to find the stranger or thief who entered my house.

As I searched, I saw a figure walking toward my sister’s bedroom, so I ran toward it and tried to hit it. However, the thief or stranger defended the attack somehow and began to attack me. Both of us were attacking each other, but because it was so dark we kept missing each other. Somehow one of us flicked the lights on, and we realized who we were attacking. I saw my sister standing awkwardly with a few bruises. We made eye contact then started laughing.

Who knew my own sister could be a stranger to me? It was so unexpected. But we enjoyed the rest of our time together. And finally, we drifted off to sleep.

Amy Fang, who is 33 years old, comes from Taishan, China. She has been in the United States for about eight years, and speaks Mandarin, Cantonese, Taishanese, and English. A Brooklyn resident, she has two daughters, one in seventh grade and one in first grade. Her ESOL instructor at CUNY’s BMCC is Susan Rhodes, and the site advisor is Denise Deagan.
THE PROPOSAL
Souleymane Diallo

I t was morning. I was sleeping, and I heard a strange sound. Someone was calling
“Help!” I thought I was dreaming. Then my mom came to the room and said, “Get
up! Get up! Our neighbor’s house is on fire. Let’s go help them.”

I got up quickly, wearing only my underwear, and ran straight to their house.
I asked the owner of the house if anyone was inside. He said his daughter was in there.

I ran inside the burning house so fast. When I got inside, there was a lot of
smoke, so I couldn’t see well. But I could hear the girl screaming, though I didn’t know
exactly where the screams were coming from. Since it was early morning, I guessed she
was in her bedroom. As I was feeling around, finding my way about the bedroom, I
couldn’t feel her anywhere.

Then I heard screams again. She was under the bed. I tried to lift the bed, but
it was too heavy, so I began pushing it to one side. As I pushed and pushed, a hook on
the bed stuck to my underwear, the only piece of clothing I was wearing. Next thing I
knew, snatch! My underwear!

Oh well, I continued pushing the bed until I got the girl free. I knew I couldn’t
go outside naked, so I took the blanket from the bed, wrapped it around us, and we ran
out fast. When we got outside to safety, I went to my house and put on clothes. Then
I returned the girl to her family.

Since that day, people say I should marry her.
I was in Kings County Hospital, in Brooklyn. I had a car accident when I was eight months pregnant, and I needed a C-section because my leg had been broken.

After my daughter was born, a beautiful, smiling nurse entered my room. I heard her whisper to the other nurses that she had never seen a case in which all of the mother’s fingers were black, and she was worried about how to help me.

I tried to sit up, and she looked at my feet, too. She looked astonished and asked me if I was ill. I was so surprised. What had happened? What was wrong? I thought it was strange that next she tried to feed me. Why? I told her I could eat by myself. She asked me if I was in pain. I felt confused. Finally, I realized it was the black henna on my fingers and feet. She thought I had a strange disease! She thanked God when I told her it was only henna.

The next morning she asked me to tell her about henna. I explained that in Sudan, it is like tattoos but will wash off after two or three weeks. I also told her that married women must use henna because henna is a sign of marriage, just like wearing a ring in the United States.

I learned that sharing a small tradition can be a good way to make new friends. This is the most important part of my story.
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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 several partner organizations; a weekly writing class at University Settlement Society; publications of writing by adults, including The Literacy Review, Refugee Writing, Changing Every Day, 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 the Bronx Academy of Letters, 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.

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