



# The Literacy Review

VOLUME 16



# The Literacy Review

VOLUME 16

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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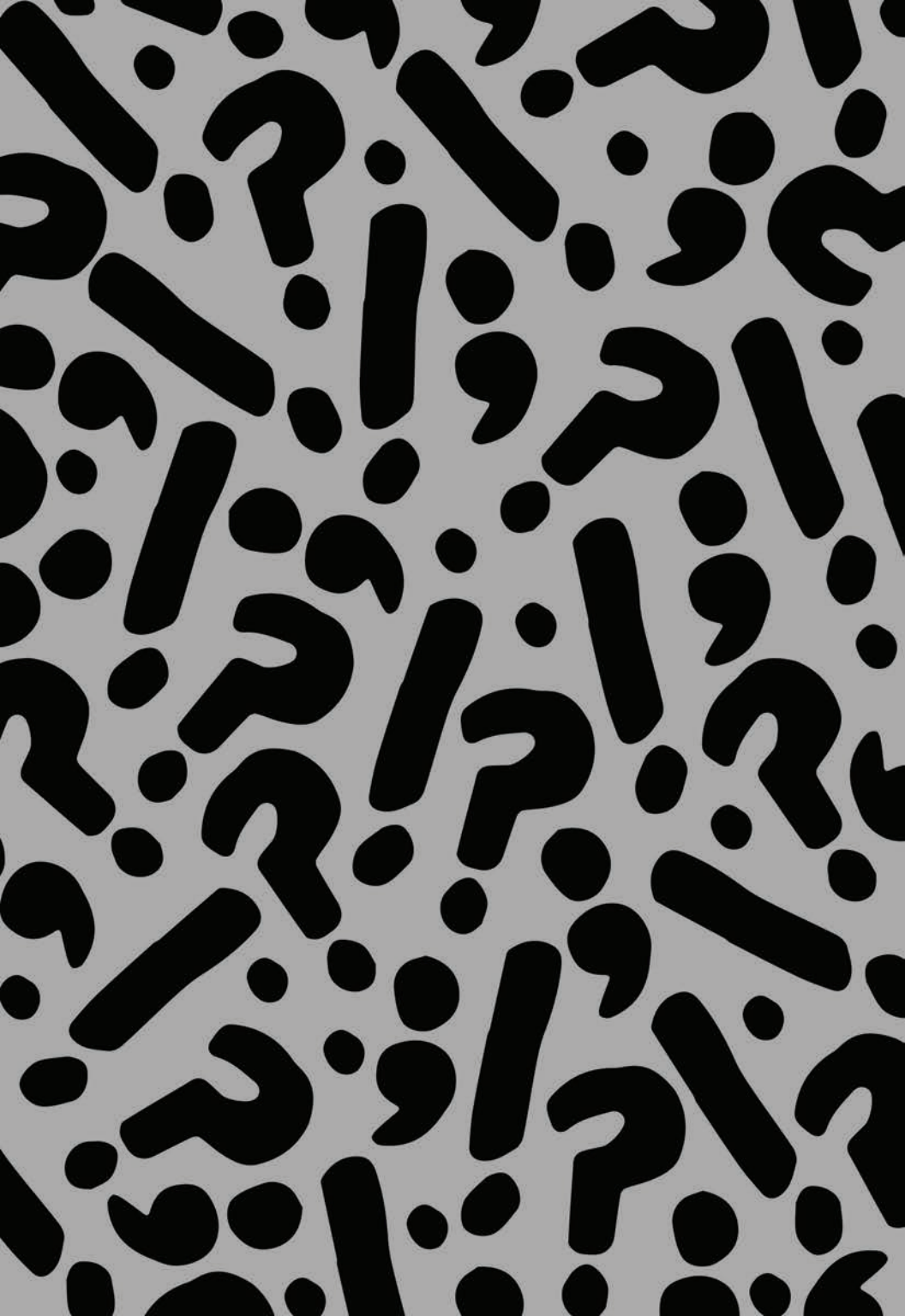
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# On Editing *The Literacy Review*

Sydney Rappis, Editor in Chief

As a two-time editor of *The Literacy Review*, with two years on the Editorial Board prior to that, I have been with this program throughout my college career. Truly, the May celebration and the release of the new edition has been one of the most constant things in my life these past four years. Each year, without fail, I am amazed by the final product.

This year, we got about 350 submissions. The writers came from all over the world, of all ages, and at a variety of proficiency levels. There were poems, essays, and flash-fiction. The seven main editors of *The Literacy Review* (along with June), read every submission. The Editorial Board, made up of around 50 other students, read 75 each. The votes get counted, determining which works will be seriously considered for *LR*. All this happens online over winter break—editors reading on planes, trains, and sofas all across the country. This process makes me grateful for computers and our digital age; it saves some trees too.

At the end of January, we get together for the Big Decision Meeting, where we finalize which pieces will be published. At this meeting, editors can advocate for their favorites, and we read some of the pieces aloud. It's beautiful the way reading aloud can make writing come alive. It helps us make the tough decisions. This is an all-day event, and we take many things into consideration, including length, content, style, and originality. But if a large number of the readers liked the piece, we include it.

After finalizing the selections, we email everyone with the decisions and begin assembling the book. We determine the sections, contact the teachers, organize the photo shoots, and edit each piece. We copy edit, work with the designer to choose a cover, copy edit, choose the author photos, copy edit, work to organize the celebration, and copy edit again. Finally, the book is sent to the printer, we read and correct the proofs, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Everyone featured in this book is brave. Whether the writing is published in an edition of *The Literacy Review*, somewhere else, or nowhere at all, those with the courage to commit themselves to sharing a story are writers and an inspiration to all those who work on the book. Those who write on the subway, on napkins at restaurants, in margins of other books, on computers at libraries, or in the notes section of a phone pave their own path as a writer.

I love editing *The Literacy Review* because I get to do what I enjoy while connecting with fascinating people I might otherwise never know. It may be a long, email-dependent journey from fall conception to the final product in the spring, but every year, *The Literacy Review* writing entertains, delights, and expands our understanding of the world.

The stories contained in this year's Review are all excellent in their own way. From "½ Teaspoon of Love" by Jonatha Medeiros, a work of fiction that surprised us all with its macabre plot, to the charmingly nostalgic tone of Dun Chen's "My Grandma's Dogs," which features furry friends Wang Choi, La La, Pi Pi, Lu Lu, Qin Ke, Cheng Chen, Hua Pi, and Tu Tu, we travel the world through these stories. I admire the honest way Yane Ozoria de Medina expresses her reluctance to move to New York in "Packing Feelings," and the amazingly relatable description of the city in Stephanié Jaquier-Redon's "My First Six Months in New York City."

We all know that writing is an invaluable asset to us as humans who coexist in this world. When it comes to wanting change, writing and sharing stories is a good place to start. So, congratulations to all those whose stories are being shared in this book. Thank you to anyone who submitted, who has ever submitted, and those who have yet to submit to *The Literacy Review*. Thank you to the teachers, site advisers, and program directors who answered all our questions, responded to our emails, and supported their student writers. Congratulations to my fellow editors, the designer, and the photographers—past, present, and future—on producing a collection of writing that features voices and stories we wholeheartedly support.



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# Sorrow and Beauty of Home

Sarath Jayarathne Tikiribandage

Whenever someone mentions home, my mind grows wings and flies back to the small, beautiful village where I spent my childhood, in my homeland, Sri Lanka.

Without a mother, my childhood wasn't pleasant. Many children and adults looked down on me. Always, I was bullied—in school, even on the road. Now I am wondering why some adults could not take pity on a motherless child. My younger brother and sister, even my loving father were helpless. My father was my hero. He always told me how important education is, and to study well.

As a teenager, I endured the cruelty of society looking down on me. I helped my father to earn a living farming, while I continued my studies. At night, I went to our farm in order to protect it from wild animals. That period of my life was enjoyable. There were two special places in my village that I always liked to visit: our farm and our water dam. I always enjoyed the natural green color seen in many kinds of vegetables and the rice paddies on our farm. And at the water dam, I saw the color blue. It was a fantastic scene before my eyes—the moving blue waves of the dam and the blue mountain range above it. I can still smell the fragrance of the uncontaminated environment and innocent village life.

Sometimes I still miss my beautiful, small village and the pure environment. Even now when I go to my village, and listen to the wind on quiet nights, I can hear, echoing in the mountain range, the tune of the bamboo flute I played in the small shanty on our farm every night.

Finally, I had to leave my beautiful, small village after getting an occupation, but those sorrowful and beautiful memories remain forever in my mind and heart. They wake me up some nights.



**Sarath Jayarathne Tikiribandage** was born in Sri Lanka and came to the United States in 1999. He lives in Manhattan and works for the Permanent Mission of the State of Qatar to the United Nations. Most evenings, he runs along the East River. He also likes music and reading. He studies English in the SPELL Program of Hunter College, where his teacher is Ruby Taylor MacBride. David Williams is the program coordinator.

# Born in the U.S.S.R.

Sergiy Savyelyev

When I was in school, my country of Ukraine was part of the United Soviet Socialist Republic. Secondary education was compulsory. Our education was good, but the curriculum was strictly controlled by the Communist Party. The content of our courses was approved by the Party, and it was impossible to change. The Party controlled the life of all people, from childhood on. At that time, there was a big confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States. It was called the Cold War. The population of the Soviet Union feared American imperialism, and our teachers told us that the Americans were our main enemy.

We studied many subjects, and one of them was geography. I liked the subject very much. We received a geography assignment to write an essay on any country of our choice. My classmates all chose socialist countries. It was politically correct to choose a socialist country. I chose the United States, but I had trouble finding truthful information. The official information was all negative, so I focused on history, geographic data, and the animal and vegetable world. I told my readers the United States was a beautiful, big country. I decorated the front page of my essay with the emblem of the U.S.A. I painted the coat of arms myself. I took drawing lessons in order to do a good job of it. I tried very hard and was very proud of myself.

Finally, the day arrived for announcing the essay grades. When they called my name, I expected the highest grade, but I was given three out of five. I was very upset and asked the teacher what mistake I made. I was told that the country I had chosen was ideologically wrong. It was then I realized, though I was still young, that I lived in a non-free country. The Soviet Union ceased to exist a long time ago, and I've lived in the United States for several years. This is my second homeland. Now I think that choosing that essay topic back in my distant childhood was no accident.



**Sergiy Savyelyev** was raised in the Ukrainian Republic of the U.S.S.R. His native language is Russian. He arrived in the United States in 2014. He studies English at the Institute for Immigrant Concerns, where his ESOL instructor is Andrew McDonough, the education director is Mark Brik, and Donna Kelsh is the executive director. Sergiy Savyelyev says, "I love freedom and creativity. My profession as a hairdresser combines these two passions."

# Ingrid's Story

Ingrid Trotman

I grew up in Georgetown, Guyana. My father was a carpenter, and my mother was a housewife. They had 14 children, and I was the oldest girl in the house. Growing up, I had to take care of my brothers and sisters, so playtime was very limited for me. Every morning, I had to care for my younger brothers and sisters. I had to give them baths and prepare breakfast for them before they went to school, and I had to clean up afterward. Then I went to school. It was hard work in our home, and my mother had a new baby each year for many years.

When I was 10 years old, I was taking my baby sister to visit my aunt. My shoes were too big for me, so my feet were sliding around in them. My foot got caught in a groove on the bridge, and my sister fell in the trench, which was like a small river. She was bobbing up and down in the water. Some boys nearby saw us, and one of the boys jumped into the water and saved my sister. When I got back home, we were both soaking wet. My mother punished me for not taking care of my sister properly.

Then, one day, my teacher called my mother to the school to discuss why I wasn't going to school regularly. My mother listened to the teacher tell her that I was not learning much and would have to transfer to home economics to learn cooking and dressmaking. I knew the real reason I wasn't able to learn was too many responsibilities at home.

By the time I was 14, I was working, sewing for a dressmaker. By 22, I had four children, so I started a business to support my family. I opened a food business and called it Home to Home and cooked for many years.

Later, my children immigrated to the United States and went to college. When my daughter finished, she sent for me. That is how I came to America and how I came to the Tompkins Square Library to get an education. I am very thankful to the Library.



But you know what I feel most proud of? While my generation did not go to high school or college, my kids finished college. My son said to me, “I learned everything from you. You didn’t have an education, but you’re smart. Honesty, loyalty, and how to work hard is what I learned from you.”



**Ingrid Trotman** emigrated from Georgetown, Guyana. Age 62, she hopes to go all over the world, as she loves to travel and craves adventure. At the New York Public Library’s Adult Learning Center at Tompkins Square, she studies with Lead Instructor Terry Sheehan. Ingrid Trotman gave wise advice to her *LR* editor, Keyli Peralta, at a photo shoot, “Just be you. Don’t let anyone tell you what is best for you, or what you can and cannot do.”

# Days of Simple Pleasures

Xiao Li Luo

Not long ago, I read an article on Facebook about people in China who were lucky enough to have been born between the late 1960s and the early 1970s. They just missed the Cultural Revolution, one of the darkest periods in China's history. During the Cultural Revolution, every household lived in fear of a sudden search. Books and statues had to be hidden away to avoid destruction and big trouble for their owners.

I was among those lucky ones, born in Hangzhou City in 1972. It was a lovely place, with bucolic mountains, clear lakes, and elegant temples. There were peach blossoms in spring and lotuses in summer. The moon's reflection shone on the lake in autumn. It was heaven on earth.

I was raised by my grandparents, who both worked full-time and had to pay a neighbor to take care of me. The elderly woman had two grandsons of her own, who were a little older than me.

Yes, we had our problems. Everything was rationed, and what you could buy depended on the number of people in your household. We got no fancy toys, and though nobody starved, the food we ate tasted pretty bad. But we coped by learning to appreciate little things. Instead of store-bought toys, for example, we played with marbles, popsicle sticks, rubber bands, paper airplanes, and metal hoops.

In summer, my great-grandfather sold popsicles. He would carry a mini-icebox loaded with popsicles on his back, and at the end of the day, he would bring me back the unsold goods. I would also keep a sharp eye out for the man who popped popcorn. He used to come around every other month or so, and the kids in the neighborhood would bring him their rice and corn to pop on the street.

The police station was surrounded by a four-foot-high brick fence with rose vines growing over the top. There was a big pomegranate tree inside the fence. When its four-inch fruit was ripe, it was too tempting for us kids to ignore. So, during the customary noon nap time, when only one policeman was awake, we would sneak out from our naps in pursuit of the

fruit. As the smallest member of the group and the only girl, I would stand on a boy's shoulders and hoist myself to the top. From there, I'd grab all the fruit I could handle and toss it down to the others. Every day played out just like this. The lone policeman, holding his lunchbox, would run out of the building, yelling at us. We always escaped with the day's booty, but I had a chronic case of bruised knees and the boys got frequent spankings at home.

Love was innocent. A boy would chase a girl for years without catching her. Classes were gender-segregated through high school, and if you had a crush on someone, about the best you could do was try to make eye contact across an exercise field, or make bird calls outside a girl's house, in hopes of stealing a glimpse of her in the bedroom window.

We were the first generation in China to see an explosion in technology. I remember visiting the home of the first family on our block with a black-and-white television set. Dozens of people would squeeze into that house to watch soccer games on Sundays. I had no interest in soccer, but I would run in and out of the house just to feel the excitement.

Everyone in our neighborhood knew everyone else and would lend a hand to those in need. Families lived in their homes for generations.

Then it all came to an end with China's land boom in the 1980s. The developers came, took our land, and constructed large new buildings on it. Many of my neighbors moved away and scattered across the country, never to come back to Hangzhou. We were no longer a developing nation. We were a modern state; there would be no turning back to popsicles on summer afternoons or snatching pomegranates under the noses of the police.

But we lucky ones from the post-Cultural Revolution generation have our memories. Those memories, I find, grow more precious every day.



**Xiao Li Luo** came to the United States as a young girl, in 1987. She works as a private home care attendant and has begun a college liberal arts program at an online university, where, to her great surprise, she is acing her pre-calculus class. Xiao Li Luo studies creative writing in Mark Mehler's class at the Jackson Heights Library Adult Learning Center. Tsansiu Chow is the library literacy center manager.

# Living on the Farm

John Elmore

I come from Cokesbury, South Carolina. My grandparents raised me there. We lived on a farm, but we also lived off the farm; we never went hungry because we raised all kinds of vegetables, corn, and potatoes. We had pigs and cows, and we even had a billy goat for a while, but we had to get rid of him because a goat will eat clothes hanging on a clothesline. A goat will eat whatever it can reach. We had a real farm, and a real farm means real work. You started working when you were knee high to a duck, and I was big for my age at six years old, around 1950. I would get up before it was time to go to school to milk the cow and feed the pigs and chickens. Then it was time to eat and walk a mile to school. The school was for black kids; the white kids went to the next town by bus. At that time, there was segregation, and there was no way that black kids and white kids would be in the same school. Our school was one room, with first- and second-graders on one side of a partition and third- and fourth-graders on the other. There were very few books; mainly, the teachers wrote the lessons on the board. Don't ask me how the teachers did it; they did what they had to do.

At lunchtime, we would play softball and the teachers would come outside to see us play. If my turn did not come before it was time to go back in to class, the kids would say, "Let John hit!" That's because I would hit the ball out of sight, and they would get such a thrill out of seeing me hit that ball. When you work on a farm, you are *strong*. I worked hard and was very strong.

After lunch, we finished class, and before you knew it, it was three o'clock. Now we had to prepare ourselves for battle because on our way home, we had to pass by some white people's houses, and they did not like us. They believed that black people had no rights. Those kids started throwing rocks at us, so we, in turn, threw rocks at them. This happened about three times a week, until we started getting the best of them, and

then they started backing down because our rocks began to get bigger. Then they left us alone. I thank God nobody got hurt.

When I got home, I changed from my school clothing, got something to eat, talked to my grandmother for 10 or 15 minutes, and then started doing my chores. I started by getting the eggs, then chopped some wood for the stove, and next it was time to milk the cow, feed the chickens, and then throw down some hay for the cows and the pigs.

When you are raised in the country—anywhere in the world—you have to do what you have to do to survive.



Born in South Carolina 74 years ago, **John Elmore** now studies with Lead Instructor Terry Sheehan at the New York Public Library's Adult Learning Center in Tompkins Square. Another essay, "A Young Man's Journey," was published in *LR15*. Now he writes, "I'm thrilled to have another story selected for *The Literacy Review*! Last year's celebration was so beautiful that I cried when I got home afterwards—there was so much love in the room!"

# Revolution

Passant Zaki

Being part of the January 25th Revolution in Egypt taught me the meaning of home. When I decided to go out to protest, I didn't have any idea of what I would face. It was all about the feeling of anger toward injustice, and fear for my family—including my two-year-old child—and my home. I felt I would be much prouder of myself if I went out to the streets than if I sat at home pretending I was blind. Of course, I could not sit at home while young people were killed in the streets for my freedom and for protecting my country, my biggest home. That was how I decided to go to Tahrir Square in Cairo—the most famous square in Egypt—with the biggest protest. The Square is 45 minutes from my house on a regular day with the usual traffic, but on that day, it took me very long to arrive because there were loads and loads of people all over the streets of my city of Muslims and Christians.

As I was approaching the square, I heard the rising sound of national songs and slogans. Their words were empowering, inspiring us to achieve our dreams of a free, democratic country. The protesters made huge tents to aid wounded people, other tents to protect women and kids, or just for resting. People took shifts sleeping in the tents. The restaurants and the people who lived in the neighborhood near Tahrir Square were serving food to the protesters for free and letting them use the restrooms. The protesters were afraid to leave the square at the end of the day because they were sure that the people they were fighting against would take control of it. The protesters took care of each other. They taught me to cover my head, using a pot, and to wash my face with soda if I smelled tear gas because it helps to heal the face and helps with breathing. When it was time for Muslim prayers—five times a day—Christians circled the Muslim people to protect them, and the Muslims protected the Christians when they prayed, too. The air was thick with cries, fear, and anxiety. Those who lost hope were encouraged by those who still had hope. I looked around

and saw many different faces, different races, all ages, rich and poor—everyone joined the revolution as one family. We were strong together. This was my home, and I would die to protect it.



**Passant Zaki**, age 31, writes: “I’m an Egyptian woman, born in Cairo, the capital city. At six years old, I moved to Giza, which is near the pyramids. My native language is Arabic. My favorite writer is Naguib Mahfouz, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. I study English in Polina Belimova’s CLIP class at the College of Staten Island, and I plan to be a nurse. However, my dream is to become a film director or sound engineer.”

# Bread

Timea Wranek

My mom was born in 1954, in a Hungarian village in the countryside, far away from Budapest, the capital. There were four brothers and three sisters, and my mom was the youngest of the seven siblings. My grandmother was a matriarch without a husband. They lived, very poor, on the little farm—and everything changed in 1956.

This year is one of the most important in Hungarian history. The Revolution of 1956 was a nationwide revolt against the government of the Hungarian People's Republic and its Soviet-imposed policy. On October 23, students and workers took to the streets of the capital and issued their Sixteen Points. More than 2,500 Hungarians and 700 Soviet troops were killed in these days. Two hundred thousand Hungarians escaped because border fences had been broken down and minefields had been removed.

My grandmother and her family didn't perceive any problems from these historical events. One Sunday, one of the brothers, Ferenc, turned to his mother and said, "Mama, I'm going to get some bread!"

They never saw him again. My grandmother, the brothers and sisters tried to find him. They asked the Red Cross for help, but no trace of him was found. The family hoped that he had emigrated and was living happily somewhere, and that he would not seek his family because of the Hungarian political situation. Because of Communism, a relative living in the West could be dangerous. My grandmother died without ever seeing her son again.

Fifty years later, someone rang my aunt's doorbell. It was the lost brother. My aunt did not believe her eyes. They cried for a long time. Ferenc told her how he rushed over the border, and how he tried to find a better life in France. They tried to recall the past years and find out about each other.



After a long conversation, they decided to go to meet another sibling. Then my aunt suddenly turned to my uncle and said, “Okay, I understand now what happened to you, but my most important question remains: Where is the bread?”



**Timea Wranek**, age 39, was born in Hungary, where she was a Human Resources consultant. She moved to New York City in August 2015. Now she lives with her husband, Istvan, and their sons, Peter, Marton, and Samu, in Brooklyn. She loves reading and the theater. She is enrolled in the Intermediate ESOL class at the Prospect Park YMCA's New Americans Welcome Center, where her teacher is Hana Islam, and the program director is Nabila Khan. Timea Wranek was also published in *LR15*.

# War

Hanan Obadi

We lived in the beautiful city of Taiz. There were demonstrations in most of Yemen. Soldiers started to move south. That's where the war began. Protests intensified in other cities, in solidarity with the south. The war began to reach the city we lived in. It was in the center of the country between the south and the north. Most people left town. Others chose to remain.

The war continued in the west of the city for seven months. We were living in the north of the city. We could hear gun and bullet sounds, close. They were very scary.

One day, we woke up to snipers in the high buildings of our streets. They were shooting at all who were in front of them. Fighting had begun in our neighborhood. We were in our homes. We were enclosed in our homes for five days.

I gathered my children and slept in a safe place of the house, out of fear. They were difficult days. Awful. No one can envision it.

We left the city. The war is still on today. I hope it ends.

**Hanan Obadi** has studied English at the Arab American Association of New York since January of 2017. Her teacher is John Kefalas. She emigrated from Yemen to Brooklyn in October 2016, where she lives with her husband, their four children, ages 6 to 17, and her in-laws. She likes living and learning in the United States and hopes to become a doctor one day. She also hopes to return to Yemen someday, to reunite with her mother and sister.

# When My Mom Was Young

Anika Ahmed

Sometimes, when I was a teenager, I laughed at my mom. Even though this was cruel, it was because I was uncomfortable. But now I will share her story with you because my mom gave birth to me, and I don't laugh at her anymore.

My mom spent her childhood in Bangladesh, in the district Comilla. This is where my story begins. It was a Monday. My dad, who was 40 years old, wanted to marry. He had been searching for a girl for a long time. He went to my mom's house and told my grandma. My grandpa wasn't home, so my grandma made the decision without his advice and agreed. She set a date for the marriage. My mom would be forced to marry my dad because he was rich. She was 12 years old.

My grandma did not think it was important to tell my mom about her upcoming marriage because girls' opinions weren't important. My grandma just told her they were going to travel to my aunt's house for a visit. That was the first time my mom met my dad, and they were married then and there. My mom didn't understand what had happened. She didn't understand that she would start a different life with an older man.

After my mom moved to my dad's house, she cried and wanted to know, "Where am I?" After a few more days, she still didn't understand what had happened and demanded to go home. However, my father's family didn't allow her to visit her family, and my grandma didn't want her to return home, either. They believed that after marriage, my dad's family should be my mom's only family.

My mom always told us she would agree to marriages for my sisters and me only when we were older. She would never let what happened to her happen to us. I feel proud of my mom now. I know her decision changed our lives and the lives of our future children.



"I'm an outgoing person. That is what is special about me," writes **Anika Ahmed**. Originally from Bangladesh, she knows Bangla, Hindi, Arabic, and English. At age 19, she has been in the United States for two years. She studies English in Caryn Davis's CLIP class at the New York City College of Technology.

# The Pain of a Divorce

Salamata Compaore

The pain of a divorce—no one can explain the pain and how it affects the people around us.

I am 30 years old, and I am from Burkina Faso. I come from a Muslim family. In my religion, a man can marry up to four women, and if he wants a fifth marriage, he just divorces the first woman, which means he doesn't eat her food, doesn't go to bed with her, doesn't talk to her, etc.

I am in this situation. I married my husband when I was 18 years old. He was a gentleman. He loved me so much. He was paying me a lot of attention, and I loved it. I don't know why he changed his face to me. Only God knows.

When I was 27 years old, one night during my sleep, he woke me up and said, "I have something to tell you." My heart beat hard because it was the first time he woke me up in the night. I asked him, "What's wrong?"

He said, "You know our religion allows me to be with more than one woman, so I decided to marry a second." My marriage lasted only 10 years. I asked myself what to do in this situation. I didn't know. I thought all night. In the morning, I was thinking that I had a bad dream. But I was in reality.

My God, what to do? I knew Muslim men who lived with one woman to whom they had been married for a long time, since they were a young boy and a young girl. But the second woman came, then the third, then the fourth. I thought she was the last, but to my surprise, he told me he wanted a fifth woman. I did not have a choice; it was he who had the last word. When the fifth came, he divorced me. He didn't eat my food, he didn't come to my room, and he didn't talk to me.

The other women made fun of me. They said, "Your husband doesn't love you anymore. Why do you stay here with us?" I was so sad.

I have three children and my children say, "Our father doesn't love us." I am only 30 years old, and my husband divorced me for other women. Every night, I cry alone in bed. I need love, like other women. Every night,

I am cold. My children suffer from their father's absence, and I can't eat properly. I suffer in my soul. Now I know how difficult it is to live again after a divorce and rebuild your life, especially when you have children.

One lesson is that each person must think before asking for a divorce, especially if you have children. It's really painful.



**Salamata Compaore** comes from Burkina Faso. She has lived in New York City for 16 months. In her country, she worked as a secretary. Here, she braids hair in a salon and is going to school to learn Home Health Care. "I want to learn English because if you are in a country where the people don't speak your language, then you can't communicate, and you can't work." She is studying English at CUNY's New York City College of Technology, with teacher Jay Klokker.

# My Childhood

Lai Mei (Nancy) Wong

When I was a child, we lived on a small mountain in Hong Kong, where most people were poor. Our house was built of wood and iron sheets. There was no running water and no electricity. I always brought water home with my third brother. We carried a long wooden pole with a can of water in the middle. We held the front and the back of the pole on our shoulders.

I have six siblings, and I was the fourth child. It was a big family, and only my father had work. In that period, to find a job was not easy. My mother had to take care of us and the family. In our culture, girls had to help the family do everything, such as housework and taking care of younger brothers and sisters. Every morning, I took care of my younger brother and helped my mother with the cooking. In the afternoon, I went to school, and at night I did my homework. I used oil for light, and I shared this light with my siblings.

When I was 10 years old, I was contacted by a nonprofit organization that helped children of poor families get a better education. The organization had found a supporter for me. She was an American girl who was just a few years older than me. She became my “god sister.” She pledged to give my family five dollars per month.

Every month on the same day, my mother went to the organization’s office. I had to write a letter to my god sister about how I was living, and she wrote letters to me. Both letters were translated by the office workers. Then my mother would receive the five dollars. At that time, it was very valuable money for us.

I am very thankful for my god sister’s generosity and kindness. She was still a student, but she saved her pocket money to help the needy. I will always remember her.



**Lai Mei (Nancy) Wong** came from Hong Kong in 1997. She has many hobbies, but her primary joy is spending time with her family. She is currently studying English in the Consortium for Worker Education/Workers United Education Program. Nancy Wong says, “My teacher says it’s never too late.” Her teacher is Jackie Bain, and the program director is Sherry Kane.

# Hey, Chamo!

Luis Marcano

Chamo is a Venezuelan word that means “friend” (chama for women). But what is the origin of this word? Well, it came from the oil camps in Venezuela during the oil boom of the 1930s, when many American oil companies started working there. The American workers used the word “chum” with each other, and the Venezuelans started using a Spanish version, “chamo,” with each other.

Why do I miss using the word chamo? It reminds me of where I’m from: the country of beautiful landscapes, where it doesn’t matter how bad off we are, we still have a laugh or joke for each other. To me, chamo means the kindness of the people. Chamo means Venezuela. It also means brotherhood and solidarity with all the foreigners who immigrated to Venezuela during the oil booms from the 1950s to 1970s. I know that their love of Venezuela is as strong as mine. Nowadays, when I hear “Chamo!” on the streets of New York, I feel happy to know that there is another brother for me, another chamo.

**Luis Marcano**, a native Spanish speaker, also speaks French. He writes, “I am 21 years old. I am a chamo! I used to live in Merida, a mountain town in Venezuela, and I moved to New York City in 2017. I love New York! One of my aspirations is to become an architect.” Luis Marcano studies with Lead Instructor Terry Sheehan at the Seward Park Branch of the New York Public Library.





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# My First Six Months in New York City

Stéphanie Jaquier-Redon

Broker fees, credit history, guarantors. What else?

Food carts everywhere

Dogs in sweaters

Marveling at the cute squirrels

Becoming blasé about the squirrels

Foot, mile, inch, square foot, cup, gallon, ounce

Oh, and pounds, yards, Fahrenheit

Forgetting once more that the prices exclude taxes

Passing in front of French restaurants, imagining how Americans pronounce their names

Is it just me, or does all paper money look like the same denomination?

Downloading a tip-calculator app

The huge rats in Central Park at dusk

Why did I bring my high-heeled shoes?

“Swipe again,” and again, and again . . .

Express trains, local trains, uptown trains, downtown trains. I think I get the subway system. Wait, actually, I don’t get it at all . . .

The audio messages from the subway conductor that I never understand. Are they encrypted?

The express trains suddenly running local, and the local trains running express when they feel like it

How can the conductors drive if they are in the middle of the train?  
The ambulance sirens killing my ears  
Zigzagging through crowded streets  
The parcels in the hallway of my building every day  
The mountains of garbage in my street every Tuesday  
Where can I get quarters for laundry?  
The doormen outside of the nice buildings  
Hearing my neighbors' conversations from my bathroom  
Constantly switching the language of my phone keyboard, from French to English and from English to French  
The gap between doors in the public restroom (and the fear of being seen)  
The line at Trader Joe's in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening  
My radiator clanging loudly, just as I'm falling asleep  
Despite its peculiarities and oddities, loving this city a bit more every second of every day!



**Stéphanie Jaquier-Redon** emigrated from Marseille, France, to the United States in June 2016. At the New York Public Library's Hudson Park Branch, her teacher is Sandra Ham and the site adviser is Sherin Hamad. Stéphanie Jaquier-Redon is passionate about interior design.

# Dance Me to the End of the 1 Train

Bruna Nicolielo

No matter how good you are at directions, if you are a neophyte in New York, you will get lost in the subway at least once.

Here, you need to plan a subway strategy. Even the most attentive commuter might get confused: There are four stations with the name 125th Street; another four are identified as 34th Street. Which 34th Street station would be good for you? 34th Street and 6th Avenue? The one on 8th Avenue? Or the 7th Avenue line? Maybe 34th Street and Broadway? It's hard to know.

It took me a while and many missed connections to become familiar with the subways. I've been in the city three months now, and to be honest, the "going local or express" issue still confuses me. Not to mention the whole "heading uptown, east vs. west" topic. To be or not to be (east or west), that's the question. My advice to newcomers: Try to relax. At least there is free Wi-Fi at the stations. And subway performers. From rock-and-roll singers and mariachis to magicians, outstanding, or just okay showmen and women, one can find buskers to please all tastes. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority provides over 7,500 annual performances in about 30 locations by about 350 individuals or groups.

My most extraordinary experience with buskers happened on the 1 train heading to 86th Street. With my itinerary carefully planned in advance, there was no way to go wrong *this time*, so I breathed in relief as I hopped onto the train. Picture the scene on the subway platform: Five or six men perform for an insane crowd; people dance, take pictures, and clap their hands. Then the jam session decides to get on the train. It's rush hour. Would there be room for these men and their instruments? Everybody seems skeptical. An exhausted woman, probably after a long working day, scolds, "No way, man!" I personally think: *What a time to decide to enter the train. It will just add more confusion and chaos in a train packed with commuters.*

They finally come in. At the first chords, jazz tunes fill the train. Trombones, trumpets, flutes, and clarinets, full of energy, show it was worth squeezing in a little bit. They seem to announce, “Hey, guys, there’s beauty amid chaos!” People smile in agreement. An atmosphere of harmony and order inundates the car, which previously seemed cluttered, messy and, if not sad, certainly self-absorbed. The whole train swings and sways. The rhythm is contagious. Some people are amazed. Others abandon their expressions of concern for a while (and perhaps their tight deadlines, oppressive schedules, and unattainable goals). A baby stops crying. He just stares, mesmerized and truly interested. The complaining woman starts dancing in her seat. I imagine her thinking, *A drink wouldn’t be out of place.*

I am literally immersed in the music. As I listen, I try to identify the songs. Coincidence or not, two of them are related to trains, recorded originally by the Duke Ellington Orchestra: “Happy Go Lucky Local” and “Take the A Train.” (Later, I was to find out that hundreds of jazz songs were inspired by trains and railroads.) The first Ellington song, from 1946, starts with sounds that emulate a train starting to move. It tells the story of “a little train with an upright engine that was never fast, never on schedule, and never made stops at any place you ever heard about,” according to Ellington. It describes a Southern train but could refer to a New York subway. Let’s follow Ellington’s advice: Be happy-go-lucky, that is, easygoing.

On the other hand, “Take the A Train,” composed by Billy Strayhorn, and inspired by Ellington’s directions to his own home, refers to a particular train which, then and now, runs from Brooklyn to Harlem. “Hurry, get on, now it’s coming / Listen to those rails a-thrumming / All aboard, get on the A train / Soon you will be on Sugar Hill in Harlem,” say its lyrics, perhaps most famous from versions recorded by Ella Fitzgerald, starting in 1957.

It turns out that many composers have used trains as metaphors for life and its serendipities. I like this idea. People are like trains, making unscheduled stops along the way. And the “way,” let’s agree, is a combination of going forward and backward, advancements and setbacks, rush and ease. We are so obsessed with goals, outcomes, and timing that we forget to relish the route. Somehow, however, we reach the proper destination—even when it seems to be the wrong “station.”

Train imagery is so powerful that there are many other metaphors derived from trains: on the right track, the end of the line, on the wrong side of the tracks, light at the end of the tunnel . . . I guess you may have already used one (or all of them) to describe your own life’s twists and turns. And so, the train runs, as I gaze at the musicians.

At last, we reach the final stop: Van Cortlandt Park, 242nd Street, the Bronx. Where was I supposed to have gotten off? The 86th Street stop is long gone. I need to go back, but who cares? Now I can navigate the New York City subway system. Clearly, as the saying goes, the arrival is not as important as the journey.



Born in Brazil, **Bruna Nicolielo**’s first language is Portuguese. She has lived in New York City since the summer of 2017. She studies English with Manal Grant at the Aguilar Branch of the New York Public Library, where Stephanie Burnes is the site adviser. She published a review of Tarsila do Amaral’s show at the Museum of Modern Art for a Brazilian magazine, and is seeking opportunities to publish here, in English.

# A Sense of Subway

Regina Wurzer

Stiletto heels trample right on your toes  
A pungent smell of brown bags irritates the nose

Harassing hands go astray on one's butt  
Elbows of fighting teens punch straight to your gut

The drafty AC is a pain in the neck  
Pages of tabloids are plastered with hoaxes and fakes

A tourist's backpack slaps your cheek  
Curious eyes spot a pole-dancing freak

Endless office gossip bothers your ear  
A conductor's voice reminds you to stand clear

Holding on leaves sticky candy on your palm  
*Just take it easy and keep calm*



**Regina Wurzer** arrived in the United States in 2014. Born in Vienna, Austria, her first language is German. Her writing instructor at the Queens Library's Elmhurst Adult Learning Center is James McMeniman, and Michelle Johnston is the library literacy center adviser. Regina Wurzer likes reading, meeting new people, and experiencing New York City.

# The Red Throne

Maddalena Maltese

Red. Bright, intense, warm. Aggressive, evident, showy. That brash color stands out on the chrome of his wheelchair. The red is imposing, and in contrast with his obsidian hands that are pushing those scarlet wheels with extreme effort. And while that red chair is prudently moving among the scattered standing passengers on the bus, it becomes the magnet for my gaze. He places himself in front of my seat, diminishing all the others.

The Bx42's driver tries to harness the wheels with straps, and in that moment, my eyes meet those of the man in the wheelchair. I sketch a smile. He does too. He does not hide his embarrassment at having to depend on someone for safe travel. I wonder if he is imagining driving a Ferrari, instead of a red wheelchair: The red is the same, and perhaps his ears hear the roar of the engine when he pushes the spokes of the wheels to the maximum downhill velocity. At every stop in East Tremont, I see his body swaying back and forth, carried as if by the undertow of the sea. He squeezes hard against the red armrests. Resisting like palm trees in a storm, they wave, get up, bend, but do not break. We study each other with our eyes: It is inevitable. His stature on that purplish throne makes him regal in spite of his handicap, his shabby sweater, the crossbar cap, the unkempt beard.

"Next stop!" he shouts to the driver and to all of us. His race is over. His Ferrari leaves the box of the Bx42 and prepares to get on the Formula 1 race track—the streets of the Bronx. A neighboring passenger rings the bell, and our pilot begins to tinker with the straps to free his chair and snap out. At that moment, I realize that he has a bandaged arm, and he is trying laboriously to disengage from the disabled seat. I want to help him, but I'm torn. I am the only woman among many men. I'm not particularly robust. My English must struggle to understand the shrewd accent of the Bronx. I hope that my neighbor moves, but nobody seems to worry about the difficulty facing the man in red. Nobody cares about his acrobatics to



put his arms in his jacket or the grimace of pain that runs through his face. Indifference reigns.

I get up. I cannot resist. I find again the sleeve of the jacket that's slipped onto his shoulder, and I cover him, fumbling a little. And in that moment his free hand picks up mine and brings it to his lips. "You are my angel. God bless you," he whispers, still kissing the back of my hand. Now his eyes are red, as are mine. I shield myself. I finally free him from the straps, and he still smiles. Then he turns and starts for the door. On the back of his red racing chair are tied many white plastic bags full of an assortment of things. They look like angelic wings flying behind and lifting him.

My noble pilot is a homeless man. Those bags try to contain all his life, but I know that they are not enough. Those plastic bags are tied to a gentleman who knows how to express such delicate gratitude. In that last smile that we exchange as the ramp settles him onto the sidewalk, I see the dignity of a man whose house is a cheeky red wheelchair. On his back, there are dozens of plastic bags that I have no right to judge; I only know his "red" life in front of me.



**Maddalena Maltese** came from Rome, Italy, to New York City in January 2017. Involved in interreligious and intercultural projects headed by an international organization, she also works as a journalist for an Italian magazine. "I have loved playing with words since my childhood. I'm studying English with Manal Grant at the New York Public Library's Aguilar Adult Learning Center. He is great in encouraging our dreams."

# The Brooklyn Bridge as My Life

Alice Brunetta

The Brooklyn Bridge is a place of the soul for me. Its architecture always leaves me breathless, whether I watch it from one of its suspended walkways, or I stand on a rooftop and see it while looking at the lights of the city. It makes me think about my life.

A bridge connects two shores that are far from each other. In the same way, and now that I am far from home, I feel more connected to the people I love.

A bridge overcomes obstacles, like the way I overcame my fear of living far from my family and growing up.

The Brooklyn Bridge has metal cables as strong as the bonds that connect me to true friends.

It has solid roots that rest on the bed of the river, the way my family is the base on which I built the foundation of who I am.

It has arches like doors, to let you into the city, like when I meet a new person and let them become a friend.

But the thing that fascinates me most about the Brooklyn Bridge is that its construction was directed by its creator's son, who watched from his home with a telescope. In the same way, when you watch something from far away, you understand it better than when you are close. Being far from home made me realize a lot of things about myself and my life; it made me see how many precious people I had next to me. People in a distant place did not turn away.

Sometimes, with a telescope, you can construct something as extraordinary as the Brooklyn Bridge, as well as discover things about your life that you could not see before.



Born in 1988 in Treviso, Italy, **Alice Brunetta** speaks Italian, French, and English. She arrived in the United States in 2017. She studies at the Hudson Park Branch of the New York Public Library, where her teacher is Sandra Ham, and Sherin Hamad is the hub manager. Alice Brunetta studied architecture in Italy and loves the buildings in New York City. She enjoys walking all over and visiting the great museums.

# 9/11

Andres Molina

I was living on the Lower East Side,  
At the time of 9/11.  
That morning I saw people run by,  
Like God had opened the door to heaven.  
I realized it was a terrorist attack,  
My whole body went into shock.  
The towers were burning 10 blocks from me,  
I couldn't walk, I couldn't breathe.  
Over two thousand people died,  
Black and white put their differences aside.  
Cars and people couldn't go south of Houston Street,  
Only if you lived there, you could walk free.  
People started stealing stuff from an empty store,  
While cops were chasing them and leaving them sore.  
I remember when the towers finally crumbled down,  
There was a big silence, we felt the sadness in town.  
McDonald's, Wendy's, even the movies were free,  
To help us forget a little and not sail on a Dead Sea.  
Everybody started wearing the American flag on their heads,  
The L.E.S. was destroyed and New York shredded to threads.  
And we went on with our lives, we went on with our pain,  
Because that day made us stronger, it made us a country again.

**Andres “Jay” Molina** left the Dominican Republic in his late teens for the Lower East Side. A former professional baseball player and truck driver, he is now working toward a career in social healing and cares deeply about helping people living with disabilities. At Open Doors at Coler Specialty Hospital, he studied writing with Visiting Artist Jenessa Abrams (Gallatin alumna and former *LR* editor in chief). Jennilie Brewster is the site adviser.

# Sixteen Years Ago

Kentina Alcide-Julien

The morning of 9/11 was very emotional for me. All my belongings were packed because that afternoon I was returning to Florida, after vacationing here in New York City with my cousins. While lying in bed, I opened the curtain, and the clear blue sky and early morning sunshine had me thinking about my flight, plus how much I was going to miss my cousins. At that moment, my cousin Vernetta rushed inside the bedroom and asked me to come into the living room. Before I could ask her what happened, she told me a plane had hit the World Trade Center. As I entered the room, all I could see was smoke and fire on the TV screen. It seemed so close to me that I had to look from the hallway. A few minutes after nine o'clock, I yelled, "Vernetta, another plane is coming." I was in a panic, shaking my head no, no, no, not to feel or hear the sound. Because both towers had been hit, I assumed it was intentional.

Later that day, I would learn the word "terrorist" from Matt Lauer and Katie Couric. Meanwhile, my heart was racing so fast I was gasping for air, while watching people jump out the windows, as people were watching on the street. Just before 10:30, I watched as both towers started falling, with a feeling my body was in an elevator, going down, without stopping on the first floor. I turned away in horror and never watched the towers crumbling to the ground. Later that day, we learned about the Pentagon and Pennsylvania. I sat in front of the TV for days, sobbing for strangers who had become my new family in a nation in mourning. That day I fell in love with America, and I decided to stay in New York.



**Kentina Alcide-Julien** writes: "I am from the beautiful island of St. Lucia. Growing up, I loved to play outdoors and read. In New York City, I have been attending the Brooklyn Public Library's Eastern Parkway Adult Learning Center, and my confidence has improved immensely. My husband, John, is wonderful and supportive. We have a three-year-old daughter, Glakala, who loves to read." Donna Alleyne is the site adviser.

# Police Overkill

Leroy Mensah

It's a hot July night, and I'm riding in my new car with one of my closest friends I call my brother. We have a tank full of gas and nowhere to go. Just cruising through these grimy New York City streets. I suggest we drive downtown. Before I can even get to the highway, a flashing red and blue light appears in my rearview mirror. "Damn, it's the cops, Bro," I say to my friend.

Even though we are as clean as a whistle, I have a feeling we are about to get harassed. "License and registration!" I hand the officer my license. "I can't find my registration, Officer," I say to him, as I scramble through my glove compartment.

"Why are you pulling me over, Officer?" I squint my eyes to read the name on his badge. "Officer McGarber, number 21701," I blurt out loud. Officer McGarber glares at me. "You get out of the vehicle!" I unbuckle my seatbelt and say, "For what? What did I do?" I ask him. "We not doin' nothing." He repeats himself in a louder tone. "Get out of the vehicle. If I say it again, I'm locking you up!"

"Why it got to be all that, Officer?" I ask. McGarber replies, "All right, smartass! I'm not here to play any games with you." He grabs me by my hooded sweatshirt and yanks me out of the car, throws me to the ground and handcuffs me.

My friend who was in the car with me reaches for his phone to record the officer using excessive force. Officer McGarber pulls his gun on my friend and says, "Put down that camera, you piece of shit!" He snatches the phone and deletes the video, then handcuffs my friend as well. I lie on the ground for about 15 minutes while Officer McGarber ransacks my car, throwing my valuables onto the street as if they were garbage.

He doesn't find nothing . . . so he lets us go.



Twenty-five-year-old **Leroy Mensah** was born and raised in Harlem. Caught in the crossfire of gun violence at a young age, he incurred a spinal cord injury and is now committed to telling his story. He hopes one day to start a nonprofit to aid runaways and young people in trouble and in need of support. Visiting Artist Jenessa Abrams was his writing teacher at Open Doors at Coler Specialty Hospital, where the site adviser is Jennilie Brewster.

# Bitter Coffee

Jennifer Alonzo

Last Friday, I went to Union Square to buy things with my father and my brother-in-law. While we were out, I remembered that I had to buy a crochet magazine for my mom. She loves to crochet. We went to Barnes & Noble, and there I found the magazine that my mom wanted. While shopping, we found a Starbucks on the third floor, so we decided to buy coffee and talk for a while.

When we were ready to go, a big, well-dressed, old white man with a mustache approached our table. We didn't understand much of what he was saying, but we did hear him say, "These Spanish-speaking people think they are as good as anybody," and other silly things. At first, we were in shock. We couldn't believe he was saying this. We stood up and left the café. We told a manager about this bad moment with this crazy and ignorant man. He was still talking loudly as we were leaving the store.

It is sad to see how racism grows every day. There are ignorant people who think that they have the world in their hands and can walk in the streets humiliating other people. But this is real life. I just say: God bless this man. I hope that in some moment of his life, he understands that in this world, we are all the same. Race, religion, and culture don't matter; we are all equal. We should never forget where we came from and never lose sight of where we are going. We shouldn't allow people like him to make us feel inferior. We all came to this country for the American Dream—we are immigrants, we are dreamers, we are all a family, we are equal.



**Jennifer Alonzo** grew up in Honduras. In 2015, while she was celebrating her engineering degree by vacationing in New York City, her boyfriend proposed to her in Central Park. She has lived here ever since. "My family and my husband are everything," she says. She wants to continue her academic studies, but first she wants to improve her English. She likes to travel and take on new challenges. She wrote this essay in University Settlement's advanced writing class.

# My Secret New York

Maria Ester Venezia

There's a secret New York. This secret New York is not a sixth borough, a forgotten island, or an abandoned subway station. This secret New York can make me laugh, sing my uncertain musical notes, dance with my insecure steps, and sometimes can make me cry. In this secret New York, I feel free to be myself, I feel safe, I feel valued.

In the secret New York, I have the best company, the warmest hugs, the most sincere smiles. But sometimes, I can feel the deepest loneliness, and I cry my heartbroken tears. This secret New York has walls and windows, but it is not one specific place, even though it is the best place in the world. This secret New York is part of me and is part of another person. In my secret New York, I'm one and two at the same time. Yes, my secret New York is my home, where I have storms and the most beautiful rainbows, where I learn every day how to practice harmony, how to love and let myself be loved.



**Maria Ester Venezia** was born in Brazil. Her first language is Portuguese. She can also read, write, and speak some English and Spanish, and read French, and she studied Japanese for five years. She is an archeologist and an oceanographer, and she sang in the University of São Paulo Choir. Her teacher at the New York Public Library's Kingsbridge Library is Diana Vayserfirova, and the hub manager is Eric Rosenbaum.

# Love Conquers All

Marília Valengo

The other day, I read something about love and art, and how these two are, in a way, connected. One, like the other, will catch your breath the moment you experience it. This grabbed me so fiercely that it has stayed for days in my mind. Every place, every conversation, and every act over my last week has been influenced by this concept. It reaffirmed to me that art can't stand alone without love. And that love can be a piece of art. Sometimes, I think it is.

I know a young woman who laughed at me when I told her the reason I moved to New York, leaving my job, country, family, and language. This made me feel bad about myself and my decision. *Have I become a woman who just follows her man?* I questioned. She wasn't laughing; it was more like she pitied me. Then one day, I was reading about the Morse code, and I discovered that if Samuel Morse had not been widowed and endured the loss of his wife, then he would never have invented the code. Love made a man change history. That made me think about my situation, and it helped me make peace with my decision. I want a lot of things from my life; I want to be an artist, to write, to see the world, and most of all, I want to follow my heart. It knows best.

I never thought about having a family as my main goal in life. But it happens that for the last 14 years, everything seems to keep me on track for that. A lot of things have happened, and we learned how to keep improving together—from money to feminism and some noise here and there, but a lot of effort, too. Sometimes, I think of my marriage as an artist's portfolio, and I can see from the beginning how our "pieces" improved. How can I be ashamed of that? I've been many things in the past, but being someone in a relationship is the one aspect of myself that has never changed, although I have grown and am not the same as I used to be.

I don't know if I believe in God. Or, at least not the god I was told to believe in: the man, the old guy who judges us, and who will decide where



we will spend “eternity.” I don’t believe in eternity. I also don’t like how people hide their true selves to obey this god’s rules. But a life without a belief system is hard. Sometimes, I need to hold onto something, which, for me, has been love.

So, the next time someone asks me why I am here, I will answer the same—now with a hint of pride. After all, nothing is more powerful than love. That is my religion. That is my art and my real hometown. It has been my life. It is what has me in another country and city. A city that I dreamed of living in since I was a little girl.



**Marília Valengo**, who came to Brooklyn in 2016, was born in João Pessoa, Brazil. She has lived in Rio de Janeiro and in San Francisco, and she considers herself a “tropicalist”—one who loves everything concerning the tropical culture. She also loves words, books, and people. She attends the advanced writing class at University Settlement, where Michael Hunter is the director of the Adult Literacy Program.



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# I Haven't Changed, I Have Just Grown Up

Manal Naji

After you face the greatest pain of your life, does it ever get better? I think pain can't be unremembered, but at least we can leave it aside. Pain can teach us in some ways; for example, it can teach us to be patient, and it can make us capable and wise enough to overcome other kinds of pain.

For 16 years, I lived and was raised in my beautiful country, Yemen, in the city of Taiz. Every day, I used to wake up and hear my beloved compatriots yelling in the streets to catch buses and rushing to open their stores; students going to school and mothers meeting together to go to the market to buy food for lunch. At night, I would watch people going to Saber Mountain to hang out with family and friends, or closing their stores, their markets, and laundromats, before going home to relax. I would watch lights glowing from inside people's houses.

One night, at eight o'clock, my younger siblings and I prepared for dinnertime. My mother was in the kitchen cooking our favorite dinner—beans with her secret tasty sauce—while two of my younger siblings fought for the remote control in the living room, because their favorite cartoon shows started at the same time. Another younger sister listened to music on her headphones, and I was just hanging around the house, doing nothing. Half an hour later, my mother called us to the kitchen to take the food out to the living room. We all sat together and ate our dinner, two younger siblings still fighting for the remote control. My mother searched for something to watch while we ate, and she found a show that everyone liked, a funny Arabic show called *Yalla Nahki*. The show was about to start when suddenly, everything turned upside down. We heard a strong sound that left us in pin-drop silence with burst eardrums. We panicked, felt petrified, and didn't know what to do or what was going on outside. Incessantly, phones started to ring and people outside began to scream.

The security guard outside our house called and ushered us to the basement because it was the only place to hide. Two hours passed until

we could go back upstairs and turn on the TV, to see what had happened. Heartbreakingly, there had been an explosion in the Republican Palace. All kinds of questions and worries came to my mind: *What will happen to us and our country? Are we going to hear these explosions every day?* We couldn't imagine that our country was going to face a war. I didn't want our life to change.

That night, my mother told my siblings and me to sleep in her room. She told us jokes and made fun of how we were scared. We laughed loudly, and I understood that my mother wanted to calm us down, but I looked at her eyes and saw that they were full of tears. That night, I felt my mother was incapable and too weak to do anything. We all slept together on her bed. I put my head on the pillow and secretly cried. There was going to be a real war in our country, a war that would forever absorb our hearts and souls.

We lived with this fear for nine months, hearing explosions every single day and night, losing electricity, seeing shops close, no one going outside unless it was absolutely necessary. After nine months, we were forced to leave the city because the situation was too dangerous. I felt beyond depressed because I didn't want to leave my country, but the situation was stronger than I wished.

Moving from your native country to a foreign country because of war is beyond believable, but the time came when we had no choice. When we arrived in New York, everything seemed utterly different. The weather reminded me of the weather in my country, but it was drizzling. For a week, I felt something weird inside me, like I was dreaming. The people, traditions, and languages were all so surreal, but I wanted to know more, so I made learning English my priority, to cross the boundary between myself and the newness that surrounded me.

In class, I thought I would be the only one who didn't know English, but I soon realized that my equals, refugees on similar paths, surrounded me. My life became busy, listening to other people's immigration stories.

Thankfully, I made friends with so many others who were from different countries and who spoke different languages. Since then, my English has improved, and I can say that I'm more comfortable with my surroundings. My life is not perfect, but at least I'm dealing.

My family and I will never forget the nights when we did not sleep peacefully, wishing at least one night would go by without being scared awake by bombs. Pain can be planted in our hearts, but there are so many things to do to avoid being depressed and unhappy. Now, I believe pain doesn't last forever, but that it heals with time.



**Manal Naji**, age 21, came from Taiz, Yemen, about two years ago. Her native language is Arabic. She studies in Veronica Jordan-Sardi's CLIP class at the College of Staten Island, and she wants to continue learning English to more fully express her feelings and thoughts through writing. While missing Yemen and often thinking about how her life would be if there had been no war, she has learned to appreciate and be thankful for the life she now has in America.

# On the Banks of Abundance

José Reyes

One August morning, as the bus I was traveling on was approaching the city, I felt homesick and tired. But that did not prevent me from observing the metropolis that could be seen to my right, protected by an imposing lady, who, torch in hand, supposedly welcomes all. I could see only her back, but it still impressed one who rushed to penetrate the depths of the tunnel that would lead us to one of the most imposing and diverse cities on the planet.

I was invaded by thoughts, from the differences revealed in the events of Charlottesville to how so many deficiencies and abundances coexist at the heart of Western culture. Meanwhile, the bus moved slowly through the traffic that characterizes big cities, allowing newcomers to see less glamorous parts that are not perceived from a distance, but are just as significant as the impressive buildings in the history of the city.

It occurred to me that in places like this, on the banks of abundance, thousands of misunderstood people from all over the world found refuge and fought with every breath to find a place to settle down and achieve their dreams, or simply to pursue an illusion.

However, in these vast lands of prosperity, some of those who arrived first are angry because the descendants of those whose ancestors were brought in chains, and the immigrants who came after, motivated by the same desires of freedom and prosperity as the first settlers, have gained significant space in the decision-making.

They forget that this great nation is the result of diversity, that here, civilizations encounter each other and experience fierce struggles, from the Civil War to the digital revolution. They forget that in all the defeats suffered, there was division, and in all the victories, the eventual unity of those who arrived first and those who arrived later was the key to success. History teaches us that those who isolate themselves can win battles, but not war, and those who make alliances integrate, succeed, and prosper.



**José Reyes** is 42 years old and the father of two. He studies at Columbia University's Community Impact, where his teachers are Christine Webber and Bill Castleman. The ESOL Program Manager is Kent Katner. In June 2017, he left the Dominican Republic, where he studied computer science at Universidad Autonoma de Santo Domingo and was a professor at Centro Universitario Regional del Nordeste. From a very young age, he has had political concerns.

# Human Senses

Yei Florentine Niagne Epse Kimou

In April, I left my country, my family, and my children.  
I miss my son, Daniel Yepie.  
In the situation of separation, the heart and the senses feel pain.  
To this day, when I wake up, all my senses are in pain.

The eyes do not see again all the things that my son does:  
Do not see his face  
Do not see him when he wakes up  
Do not see him when he plays  
Do not see him when he is sick  
Do not see him happy  
Do not see when he grows up

The ears do not hear the things:  
Do not hear what he speaks  
Do not hear him call my name  
Do not hear his cries  
Do not hear him sing

The hands do not touch him again:  
Do not touch his head when he is sick  
Do not greet him when he comes home from school  
My lips do not touch him, either

The nose does not smell his perfume  
Does not smell his presence

It is very difficult to suffer separation  
Every day, I pray to God to live again with my children  
To find my senses in them again.



**Yei Florentine Niagne Epse Kimou** was born in West Africa and was an accountant in the Ivory Coast. She is married, with two daughters and one son. She came to New York City in April 2016, to join her husband. She studies English with Martie Flores at the Adult Learning Center of CUNY's New York City College of Technology.



# Crossing Boundaries

Hassan Bin Zafar

When my plane landed at JFK airport, my heart was pounding. *What would my new life be like?* I came off the plane and was standing in line at Border Control. Everyone was different from me. I saw Chinese people, Russians, Africans, and Arabs, but there were no Pakistanis, except me. I felt alone. Suddenly, an immigration officer came and asked me to come with her. I asked myself, *Did I do something wrong?* I followed her into a lobby. There were over 20 people there, waiting their turn, just like me. After a while, she called my name and asked me to come to a room. The room was small and bright, and there was a computer. She asked me to sit down in front of her. I felt like I was in an interrogation room. I was thinking maybe I was there because my appearance and way of talking were different from everyone in that airport.

“Why are you here?” the officer asked. I told her I was here to reunite with my family and to continue my studies. I felt scared, even though I had my passport, visa, and other documents with me. My voice sounded weak, and my legs were shaking. Then she asked me to give her my passport and other documents. The moment I gave her everything, I was completely at her mercy. She checked my papers on her computer. After a while, she asked for my social network accounts, like Facebook and Instagram. She wrote my accounts’ usernames and passwords and went outside. There was pin-drop silence in that room. I was sweating from being nervous. After 10 minutes, she came back, apologized to me for my time and said, “You can go now.” I felt relieved.

My whole family was waiting outside the airport. My mom hugged me hard, and I felt safe, like I had everything in the world. Going to my new home, I was thinking about why that immigration officer looked suspiciously at me: She thought I might be a terrorist. Being seen as dangerous was a new and strange sensation. Welcome to the new life.



**Hassan Bin Zafar** was born in Karachi, Pakistan. His mother went to the United States to start a new life and support the family, while he lived with his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. He writes, “By the time I reached high school, I was deep into computer games and technology.” Now, his main goal is “to finish my education and start paying back my family.” A student in Polina Belimova’s CLIP class at the College of Staten Island, he is also looking for a job.

# The Bird Poems

Shaimaa Eladly

## I. Sad Bird

I saw a bird standing on a tree branch. The tree was bare, without leaves, and the wind came toward him from different sides. The bird was without feathers, and I felt he was cold because he was trembling, and I saw one tear go down his cheek. I saw the bird's legs were tied to this branch. The bird couldn't fly or hide himself from the wind. I left him, but I am still thinking about him. Will this bird bear this wind until the end of winter?

## II. Freedom

If I had wings, I would fly and enjoy freedom. I think some of us are imprisoned inside by traditions that we grow up with, but every one of us has accomplished something in life. If we don't have a strong personality to fight in life, we cannot live this life. Sometimes, I wonder what would happen if I was like a bird with wings and could fly to another world, but I wake up imprisoned inside of myself, and I can't escape. Are all birds that fly full of freedom?

## III. Immigration Bird

There is a bird called Egypt with beautiful colors on its wings: red, white, and black. Once, I was woken up by her voice. She sang, and it was wonderful. I enjoyed her song but didn't understand that she was not singing, but wailing. I opened her bird cage to give her food, and she managed to escape. Now, this bird travels from country to country. She doesn't know where she was or where she is going, but she feels happy because she has the freedom to flap her wings in the sky. One day, the Immigration Bird will return home. Do you think that after she has felt freedom, she will return to her cage?



**Shaimaa Eladly** is a student, wife, mother, and worker from Egypt. She has been in the United States for 12 years and has been studying English for two. Currently, she attends Veronica Jordan-Sardi's CLIP class at the College of Staten Island. She completed a bachelor's degree in business administration in Egypt and hopes to complete another business degree here.

# The Machete

Elkainah Stewart

It was 1942. I was 13 years old. I was working in the sugar fields, but the man that my mother was with was a gambler, Wilfred, and after she passed on, I had to work to keep my brothers alive. I had someone, a friend of my mother, save some of my money for me to buy a house. But just as I was ready to go get the money, my mother's friend gave the gambling man the money, so I didn't get it. And because I didn't get the money, I had to work to buy clothes for myself and my brothers. When I went to the gambling man for the money, the gambling man wouldn't give it to me, so I decided I was going to kill him.

I went over to the store to buy a machete. I was sitting right down there by the store, and I was fixing up the machete. The shop man came out of the shop, and he looked at me and shook his head. The shop man said, "I see you up to something." But I couldn't talk. I could not talk because what I had to do was like a weight that caught me.

I decided to go to the gambling man's house. When I finished fixing the machete, I kept it by my side. I went back over to the house. I saw a girl, and I said, "Where is Wilfred?" The girl said, "Outside the door in the backyard. Let me go and get him."

I chopped the door in two. He heard the glass, and he started to run. I do not know who called the police, but the police came. And while I was running after Wilfred—the man was tall, and he could jump high—I was chopping in front of me. But soon, when I held the machete back, ready to strike, a policeman caught me and held my arm, and the man kept going. I tell you, it was like my heart was going to burst. The policeman kept asking me, "What's wrong? What's wrong? What's wrong?"

I told him, when I worked, I could not get paid. "You see that money that I am running after? I worked on the new road up top the hill, and

I got a little money, and my mother's friend gave the gambling man the money." The policeman said, "That's wrong. Because after your mom passed away, we see that you coming up."

The man never paid me back, and I never got back my money. It was finished. I had to work.

**Elkainah Stewart** is 87 years old. He was born in Jamaica. He studies at the Adult Learning Center of Brooklyn Public Library's Central Library, where Felice Belle and Christina Best are the literacy advisers, and Winsome Pryce-Cortes is the site manager.

# One Door Closes, Another Opens

Ranwa Bahit

I am an architect from Damascus, Syria, who grew up in a family of famous journalists, writers, painters, and lawyers.

My family lived in the old section of Damascus, where houses are palaces, in the full meaning of the word. Once you enter the house, you move from the dust and noise of the street outside into a magical world, a courtyard with marble floors, woodwork ceilings, fruit trees, and rose bushes often populated by songbirds, while the splashing water of a fountain cools the air and provides a pleasant song. How wonderful are these memories, which are shared with the many generations that lived in this house.

Art has been our family's best friend. You cannot love art without loving architecture.

Architecture is where space and passion converge. When you enter a space and feel comfortable, you can be sure that the creator of this space was a brilliant architect. When you admire the facade, the beautiful cladding, the decor, the furniture, and the lighting, you know a great artist is in the background.

But in war, when a space is destroyed, the lights are turned off, and the cladding exists no more, you have no choice but to leave and start a new life. That is what we did.

Now, after three years, and with the success of my children here, my husband and I are encouraged to continue in our new profession related to architecture.

We are living with renewed hope.



**Ranwa Bahit** is an architect from Damascus, Syria. Her native language is Arabic, and she also speaks French. War forced her, her husband, and children to leave their country three years ago. She now studies English with Lead Instructor Terry Sheehan, at the New York Public Library's Seward Park Branch. She thanks her teachers for assisting her. She plans to take classes to become a real estate agent, and in her spare time she enjoys swimming and playing ping-pong and squash.



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# My Grandma's Dogs

Dun Chen

When I was a boy of five years old, there were eight large dogs in my grandparents' house, where I lived. Their names were Wang Choi, La La, Pi Pi, Lu Lu, Qin Ke, Cheng Chen, Hua Pi, and Tu Tu. These dogs liked to follow me around, whether I went to the store, my friend's house, or school. In the morning, when my grandmother took me to school, they would always accompany us. So every day at my school gate, people could see a little boy followed by eight big dogs. Perhaps that's why no one dared to bully me.

I proudly rode on their backs outside, in front of the house, or in our garden when my grandmother was not at home. She would not let me do this because she thought a dog might run away with me or hurt me. But none ever did.

In the game where you throw a ball and a dog brings it back, I had to throw at least five balls. If there had been only one ball, my dogs would have injured one another because of the scramble they would have gotten into.

I often took naps with my cuddly dogs. I would lie in the middle, and Wang Choi, La La, Pi Pi, Lu Lu, Qin Ke, Cheng Chen, Hua Pi, and Tu Tu would sleep around me. Their fur felt warm, and their rhythmic snoring was my lullaby.



**Dun Chen**, who is 20 years old, came from Fujian, China, six years ago. He writes, *"When I first came here, I thought: How happy and excited everyone is when people talk about going to another country, but when you stand alone on the land of another country, then you feel strange and confused."* Dun Chen studies English in Polina Belimova's CLIP class at the College of Staten Island. Donna Grant is the program director.



# Paper Cranes

Yuliia Semenova

He didn't remember going into the hospital. Only in the eyes of his mother did he see a deep sadness.

It was late autumn. Heavy gray clouds hugged the city. The wind broke away and took the wandering leaves of the trees far away. Nature and the noisy hospital bed sang a song in unison. The doctor came in to review the patient and kept silent for a long time. Then, as if choosing the notes for the melody, he began to speak:

"Autumn has come, and the cranes have flown away. But you have to keep them here, as a reminder of the summer, of childhood, of the affection of your mother's hands. Start making origami cranes. When you finish making a thousand cranes, your health will return to you."

After that moment, it took a little time before the hospital room became a large poultry house, where the white origami figures of the cranes shimmered.

He didn't feel fatigue and pain in his body. His thoughts were busy with work, because it gave him hope. From his hands, every day, flew small origami cranes—a symbol of faith and resilience of the spirit. But it kept getting harder for him to fold paper.

Winter waited, but autumn didn't want to surrender. A single sheet of paper rustled in the wind. The last crane couldn't fly out of the hospital.



**Yuliia Semenova** was born in Burshtyn, Ukraine, grew up in Lviv, and has lived in New York City since July 2017. Her hobby is swimming, and she loves to read and go to museums and theater. She wrote "Paper Cranes" by combining an aspect of Japanese culture with a variation on O. Henry's short story "The Last Leaf." She studies at University Settlement, where Michael Hunter is the director of the Adult Literacy Program. Her sister, Laryssa Frankiv, was published in *LR15*.

# Grandmother—Her Life and the Vases

Yulian Ou

A pair of tiny, strong, antique ceramic vases sparkle with a fantastic crystal green color. In China, my grandmother gave me these vases. They were her dowry, and she wanted me to keep them in the family through the next generation. I had known and loved these vases since I was a child.

These vases are an inspiration for my life. They witnessed many of Grandmother's stories from when she was a small country woman with a simple life. She was a victim of the old society. She married at age 18 to be the second wife, and she was a good housekeeper and managed the finances to keep the family together through the end of each year. She gave birth to five boys and a daughter. My grandfather died in World War II, at age 45. My grandmother endured and worked hard. She raised her children and then took good care of her grandchildren. She was a traditional Chinese woman, with an honest and simple mind. I lived with her when I was young. She was the person who always cared about me and helped me grow up.

These vases are a meaningful treasure. They bring me many wonderful memories. When I look at them, I remember my childhood. When I touch them, I feel a smooth and comfortable feeling in my hand, right through to my heart. And I remember Grandmother always made me feel free, regardless of my errors or faults. I like to hear a sound from the vase, telling me not to give up. I understand my responsibility to keep these vases as our cultural heritage.



**Yulian Ou**, born in China during the Cultural Revolution, immigrated with her family to the United States. At first, English was an obstacle to her American Dream, and she felt lost. When she was struggling, she said, she found a place to relieve her pain and a person she could rely on: The Hunter College ESOL program has helped her to improve her English, and her teacher, Ruby Taylor MacBride, has motivated her to continue writing.

# Hush, Baby

Arnold Serieux

I can vividly remember the time when I had my first child. How I used to sing that special song! As I sang, I would rock her in my arms.

I sang, "Hush, baby, hush,  
Your mama go shopping  
To buy sugar cake  
To give baby food."

And so, her eyes would close. And she would fall asleep.



**Arnold Serieux** is a student of Mindy Levokove at the Adult Learning Center of Lehman College. He writes: "I was born in the countryside of St. Lucia. I speak English and Creole. I come from a family that did both farming and fishing. I can remember how my dad would wake my brother and me very early in the morning, to go to the farm to plant bananas and yams to sell. That was how we survived."

# A Silent Love

Tanjie Alex Tan

One afternoon, I gathered with my friends to play basketball in Sunset Park. On that chilly day, it seemed that my feeling for shooting the ball was frozen; the sound of the ball clanking off the rim was heavy, as if someone had smashed my heart. I was losing every game. I sat on the ground blankly, trying to take some time to recuperate, when I unintentionally saw a woman standing on the other side of the court. She was watching something.

*Come on, Man. The most important thing now is to turn the basketball situation around and get your glory back. Don't focus on a meaningless thing.*

A roar burst out from deep inside my heart, but I could not stop staring at the woman standing on the other side of the court. She was wearing a thick coat, shrinking her body. She was so concentrated, her gaze stuck on a little boy playing basketball with his friends. I imagined he must be her son.

The woman found the chance to say something, "It's getting dark, Son, let's go home."

"Can I just play one more game?" her son begged.

She nodded slightly and walked away.

After a while, I rejoined my friends and our game. We kept playing and my familiar feeling for shooting returned. It was getting colder. Even the sun was frightened by this wintry day, dodging behind the buildings early. The clouds' romantic pink was faded, and finally, the last ray of sunshine was swallowed by the earth. Everyone else left early. Only my friends and I, and the little kid, were left on the court.

"Hey, little boy, it's time to go home. Your mom's waiting for you to have dinner," one of my friends shouted mockingly.

The boy, standing on the other side of the court, holding his basketball, replied with a grimace, "You are little boys. I can beat you all."

Some grocery stores were still open, and the usual cops patrolled the streets nearby, so as we grew more tired of the cold, we thought it would be fine to leave him alone.

Tired, we ran away, against the cold wind. In our hurry, I caught sight of a trembling shadow, reflected on the ground by a dim light. On the dim light's path, countless firefly-like dust motes landed on the shadow's curling back, trying to protect it from the cold. It was the little kid's mother, sitting on the bench, still gazing in the same direction.

"Who is this person, sitting in the wind and doing nothing?" one of my friends whispered.

Instead of telling him what I knew to be true, I kept silent. You can never explain how powerful a mother's love can be.



Twenty-year-old **Tanjie Alex Tan** emigrated from China to the United States in February 2017. He studies in the College of Staten Island's Language Immersion Program, where Veronica Jordan-Sardi is the instructor, Donna Grant is the director, and Blerina Likollari is the assistant director. New York University is one of his dream universities, and a major motivation to improve his English.

# Doing Something for the First Time

Miguelina Salcedo

My youngest son asked me, “When was the last time you did something for the first time?”

I answered, “A long time ago.”

He told me, “Let’s go up to the roof.”

I agreed to go the next morning when the sun was coming up.

We did this. The view was wonderful. I could see the sun beginning to come up on the horizon. We stayed for an hour. I took a lot of pictures. I loved doing that with my son.

With time, we can fall into routines. But it is good to do something new. I will continue to try to do new things.



**Miguelina Salcedo** was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, and emigrated in 1990. “I came to the United States for my family. The proud mother of three children, I love the theater and like to travel. I am learning English with a very good teacher, Osmara Lopez. I am grateful to her!” Miguelina Salcedo studies at the New York Public Library’s Wakefield Library, where the hub manager is Eric Rosenbaum.

# Hijab

Wafaa Jaghama

I have worn the hijab since the age of 12. It was a beautiful day when I put it on. I put it on on my own. When my father returned from work, he was surprised to see me wearing my hijab. Dad got very happy when he saw me in the veil, and he gave me money from joy.

As the days went on, my heart grew to love my hijab more. I wear it to earn satisfaction from God and my father.

The color hijab I wore that first day was pink. I like this color.

A native of Palestine, **Wafaa Jaghama** is an ESOL student of John Kefalas at the Arab American Association of New York. She has been living in Brooklyn since she arrived in the United States, in 2012, with her husband and her mother-in-law. She has a daughter, age four. Wafaa Jaghama dreams of returning to Palestine one day to reunite with her parents, her four siblings, and their families.





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# The Outsider

Dieudonne Ndje Bayi Seh

The sun is up in the middle of the sky.  
104 degrees, the weather is hot, the wind is dry.  
People are talking and drinking, sitting around a table of Songo'o's.  
Sellers are yelling on the streets to get people's attention.  
Children are playing soccer, dreaming of being the next Eto'o.  
Moms are carrying their children on their backs, beside their bags.

Walking on Harlem's streets, I keep tight those memories.  
Already 40 minutes past, I am thirsty, I need a drink.  
I take a look around me.  
Here I am, entering a Starbucks.  
I see a line. What's going on here?  
I try to understand how I can get a drink.  
It is tough.  
Everything is going so fast.  
I take a closer look, but it's already done.  
People are speaking fast, I can't follow the pace.  
There I go, it's my turn now. I don't know what to say.  
"What may I do for you?" the barista asks.  
I am zoned out.  
"What can I do for you?" the barista repeats.  
I look behind me. Angry people are staring at me.  
I look up. Fortunately, I see a menu board,  
I point at a drink.  
The barista figures it out and says loudly, "Hot chocolate."  
It's not the drink I wanted, but I answer "yes."  
  
I feel ashamed that I can't express myself as I used to.  
Nobody to console me.  
I miss my country,

where people are kind and compassionate.  
I miss my skills,  
my confidence, and my ease when I speak in French, in Bassa, in Duala.  
No French, no Bassa, no Duala anymore.  
I miss my friends,  
who know what to tell me when I am frustrated.  
No Daniel, no Crispain, no Franck,  
they are far away.  
I miss my family,  
they are busy with something else.  
  
Fear about my future,  
regrets about leaving behind my comfortable life,  
sadness about my poor social life,  
shame on me, I can barely communicate.  
  
Big dreams, where are you?  
I left everything for you, and now you make me dizzy.



A native of Cameroon, **Dieudonne Ndje Bayi Seh** is a trained accountant. He emigrated in 2016 and hopes to reenter the field here. He studies with ESOL teacher Angela Wilkins at the Andrew Romy New Immigrant Center at the English-Speaking Union. He remarks that in Cameroon, he did not write for pleasure, but in the United States, he has found it to be both a way to improve his English and a new hobby.

# **My Journey from a Small Village in Sudan**

Abdalsslam Abdalla

I was born in a small village located in the middle of Sudan. My mom didn't go to school. When she was growing up, there were no schools, but she got a traditional education. She studied the Quran (Islamic studies) and my father did, too, but he grew up in a different place.

My father has five brothers and six sisters, and he is the oldest. He came to my mom's village in 1975, looking for work. At that time, people came to Gezira state because there was the largest natural irrigation project in the world (2.2 million acres). Farmers cultivated cotton, wheat, durra, and beans.

That means I grew up in a rural area. When I was a child, my dream was to have my own farm, with some animals. That's why I felt happy when I went to the farm with my father. Sometimes we rode on donkeys, other times we walked.

My father encouraged us to study. He told us he would be happy to pay our tuition and that we had to study; then we could take over responsibilities in the future.

He sent me to a secondary school. The school was almost six miles from our village. For three years, I went from home to school. When I graduated, I enrolled in the University's Faculty of Education. There, I became a human rights activist. We made many campaigns calling for freedom, civil rights, social justice, and democracy. Many times, the security arrested us, but we didn't give up!

In December 2012, I left my country and went to the United Arab Emirates. There, I got a new job, working as a security supervisor for two years. At that time, I was very active on social media against the government's policies in my homeland.

In February 2014, I got a new job in a private school, and I worked as a teacher for two years. Then, in May 2016, my life changed when I won

the Diversity Visa lottery program. I asked myself, *Why am I going to the United States?* My friends felt happy for me, but my feelings were mixed. I had a dream opportunity, but I was thinking about my family because I was going to move to a place far from them. I started listening to music that connected me to my homeland, mother, father, brothers, and sister.

In November 2016, Americans elected their 45th president, and I felt frustrated because Mr. President announced that he was against the immigration policy in the United States.

Mr. President officially took on his duties on January 20, 2017, and he issued a travel ban on January 27. My country was third on the list. I had already prepared for my interview, scheduled for February 12.

At that moment, I saw my dreams falling apart, but I couldn't do anything. I was angry, thinking, *I'm unlucky. Why was Trump elected this year? Why couldn't he wait? He could be a good president if he waited four years.* I felt disappointed. Many questions filled my mind.

Suddenly, while I was deeply depressed, I got a text message from a friend. He told me that a judge from a Seattle court had canceled the travel ban on February 9. That message returned me to life, like someone had woken me up and given me a beautiful bouquet of flowers. The day after, I got an email from the United States Embassy in Abu Dhabi, telling me to go to an interview on February 12. I felt happy and prepared to be on time at the United States Embassy.

My visa was issued, and two days after, I received my passport with my Diversity Visa in it. From that moment, I started my new life story. Studying English at Columbia University's Community Impact has been a dream opportunity for a person who came from a small village in the middle of Sudan, but I believe that nothing is impossible under the sun, when you work to achieve your dreams. I will start my master's in

international education next fall. In three years, I'll be qualified to start my dream project—to reform the education in my country. We can build the best education system that will enhance values, global awareness, and knowledge for our next generations.



**Abdalsslam Abdalla** is a 29-year-old immigrant from Sudan. His first language is Arabic. He arrived in the United States in April 2017 and feels he's been given a golden opportunity to work on his education. At Columbia University's Community Impact, his teachers are Christine Webber and Bill Castleman, and Kent Katner is the ESOL program manager. Abdalsslam Abdalla believes that it is everyone's responsibility to build the education and health systems.

# The First Page of My Novel

Laila Elkabany

I am on a big train that has everything I have ever loved in it, except him. I sit next to the window enjoying nature, with its pure beauty, like a land undefiled by human evil. My heart beats with the same rhythm as my favorite music, which I am listening to now. The train goes up a bridge, above a sea or a great river. The sun is huge and very close, and it seems to be swallowing the sea, instead of how I've always seen it at sunset. Even though the train had already started speeding up as it went over the bridge, just now I suddenly feel terrified. I feel like a snake's venom is numbing my veins, while I am watching the bridge turn downward. I drown in the train, with everything I own and love, even some of my books. I have a feeling that I will become extinct. I still sit, doing nothing, just surrendering and waiting for what will happen. There is a strange pain in my stomach . . .

I wake up. I don't realize that it was a dream until that pain comes again, the tone of fear still in my voice when I try to say gently, "Stop kicking me, please."

I am expecting a baby soon. He is very nice, except for those times when he gets mad and becomes like a child who is kicking the ground in anger, and I am the ground.

At this time, I don't feel with him this pleasure that I felt with you. I don't taste the pineapple wine on my lips as when you kissed me. My body can't remember this feeling like a land that had been watered and bloomed the life in my spirit, only now there is literally a life inside me.

To be continued . . .



**Laila Elkabany**, who is 20 years old, emigrated from Cairo, Egypt, with her family, in 2015. Her first language is Arabic. She studies English in Heidi Fischer's CLIP class at the New York City College of Technology. Heidi Fischer writes, "Laila Elkabany is a wonderful cook, who generously brings her cooking to share with her classmates and teachers. She loves creative writing. While her dream is to become a novelist, her immediate goal is to begin college and major in journalism."

# Packing Feelings

Yane Ozoria de Medina

One day, I woke up and saw in front of me the ready suitcases. For me, it was like an obligation; it was not my wish.

I remember exactly the joy of my husband in contrast to my sadness. He hoped I would be happy, but I didn't feel that. I didn't want to leave my family, my work, my house, and my country, to go where I knew nothing.

I arrived in this country, but my heart stayed with my people. I saw many things that I had never seen before, but I could not erase everything from my country. If I were to be born again, I would want to be born in the Dominican Republic. But I am here now. I need to learn English, study, and become a productive person in this country because no matter where we are, the important thing is that we want to contribute to our society.



**Yane Ozoria de Medina**, a native of the Dominican Republic, immigrated to the United States in December 2015. She has a background in philosophy and literature and taught high school in her native country. She has a four-year-old son and is expecting a daughter in spring 2018. She plans to go back to school to study early childhood education. Her teacher at BMCC, Susan Rhodes, says Yane Ozoria de Medina “has the biggest smile you ever hope to see.”



# Rewrite My Journey

Marthen Bone

People say, “I wish I could turn back time.” At this very moment, I wish I could, at least, turn a few hours back. When I was younger, I didn’t spend my time wisely, or should I say, I didn’t have a good time. Can I just blame my parents, the system, or was it totally on me? Was it my fault that I couldn’t read any books because there was no library where I lived? Should I blame my parents for not sending my brother to college, even though he was a straight-A student, but we were poor? Was it my mom’s fault that she couldn’t buy me a pair of soccer shoes?

For a very long time, I couldn’t stop wondering if I would ever taste some knowledge, like everyone else. This question remained unanswered until I reached United States soil. It is here where I can write and tell my story. Every single one of us has a journey, of course, but mine wasn’t meant to be easy or as shiny as a crystal ball then.

We all know we can’t turn back time, but we can turn our thinking toward the optimistic and leave pessimism in the past. I wasn’t born in this country and barely speak the language, but I strongly believe I have a chance to rewrite and complete my journey in this great nation.

Along with my five-year-old son, I learned to ride a scooter, roll on a skateboard, and copy Neymar’s rainbow soccer trick. Most of my friends were laughing at me for doing those things. Some even told me, “Are you nuts? Grow up, Bro! Let your son ride that skateboard.”

Little did they know, I hadn’t had a chance to do it in my childhood. If they want to know, I didn’t have a choice of what food to eat or what clothes to wear. I had no iPad to play games on all day, and I didn’t have time to go outside chasing games. I wish, I wish, I wish I could turn back time, so I could rewrite my journey.



**Marthen Bone** emigrated from Indonesia in 1996. He studies with James McMeniman at the Queens Library’s Elmhurst Adult Learning Center. Michelle Johnston is the library literacy center manager. Marthen Bone loves spending quality time with his five-year-old son and writing his every thought as often as he can.

# The Familiar Stranger

Zhiying (Kimmy) Huang

I used to study in a high school in Manhattan before I enrolled in the College of Staten Island, so I would take the Staten Island Ferry to school every day in the early morning. There was a lovely mother and son who took the ferry at the same time as I. We always said hi to each other, but we never talked, until one day, she broke our silence.

The mother stood beside me when we were waiting at the terminal. I found that this day she looked different; oh yes, her child was not with her. Maybe she felt my eyes on her, because she turned her head, smiled, and said, “Today my husband took care of my son.” I nodded, and she continued, “Are you in high school now? High school and college are the best times in our lives.” Her eyes were shining. She kept talking with me. She was good at conversation and didn’t mind any topic. “How long have you been living in New York? It must be a hard time for you,” she continued, and we began to talk about life. “A grown-up’s life is filled with helplessness,” she said with a sigh, and then, she told me a story that I will never forget.

On May 28, 2010, they met at their friend’s birthday party, where they were chosen to sing a song together. After that one song, he came over to talk with her.

“Hi . . . I’m Matthew,” he said, clearing his throat.

“Ohh . . . I’m Gretchen.” She took a sip of apple juice from her glass, spilling a few drops of the juice on her friend’s table.

“Thanks for singing with me. You have a good voice,” he said, putting his trembling hand in his pocket, trying to calm down his heartbeat.

“Thanks.” She was flushed.

“Your dress is beautiful,” Matthew said, finding topics unskillfully until they exchanged contacts naturally.

From that moment, their relationship grew closer, and they gradually became lovers—lovers who shared a favorite song, a favorite meal, and a

favorite author. She loved to watch dramas and tragedies and would wail with him. And he, sitting beside her, would pass her tissues, even though he didn't like to watch dramas. He was more fond of singing, and she had been playing the guitar since she was 10 years old. Whenever she played the guitar, he would sing immediately. She told him about her dream, and he promised they would share a home and she would carry children of their own. He held her hand, they danced in the dark, and she kissed him slowly because they were so in love.

They were looking forward to the future.

They were made for each other.

They were so perfect for each other.

"What happened next?" I asked eagerly. My familiar stranger shook her head and continued the story.

October 2, 2014 was a sunny day. Gretchen and Matthew had broken up some time ago, and since then, she'd married and had a child. She was happily carrying her son around Central Park when she saw the figure of a man hurry by in front of her.

"Matthew?" she said loudly, and somehow, he heard her.

"Hi," he managed to say a few seconds later.

"Hi." She smiled.

Matthew waved goodbye to Gretchen and left right away.

After that, they never spoke again.

"Well, that's life. Who knows what will happen the next second?" she told me and shrugged her shoulders. Meanwhile, a deep voice announced we were arriving at the Whitehall Ferry Terminal, so we said goodbye.

Gretchen's love story is carved deep in my mind. It has led me to make several hypotheses about the end of the couple. Perhaps Gretchen's and Matthew's becoming familiar strangers is the best ending for the both of them. Meanwhile, everyone in this complicated city has their own secret

that they do not want their family and friends to know. Sometimes, a stranger is the best listener. Talking with strangers is free, and there are no scruples. Even if we hardly see each other, I still remember that she taught me about life and love.

Thank you, my familiar stranger.



**Zhiying (Kimmy) Huang** was born in Canton, China, in 1996 and has been living in the United States since February of 2016. She is a student in Veronica Jordan-Sardi's CLIP class at the College of Staten Island. She believes learning English will expand her views and ways of thinking. She would like to one day be a chemist and work in a laboratory.





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# Home

Doaa Alwahwah

Home is the noise Shiraz and I make  
when we fight about who has to do the laundry,  
and also the nicknames Isa gives everybody  
except for me because I keep it nice with him.

When we sit around the fireplace watching TV,  
home is waiting for Osama  
to get up to get a drink for himself,  
so we can ask him to bring us a drink.

Home is Helal, the first to sit at the table,  
so he can grab the salad and the pickles  
to have them closer to himself.

Home is Areen, who likes to laugh at everybody  
but gets upset if we laugh at her,  
and home is Kaian, the baby monster,  
the life of the house, the cherry on top of the cake.

Home is my six siblings  
under my parents' love and care.

**Doaa Alwahwah** studies at the College of Staten Island with Dorian Kula. She writes, "I am 28. I come from Palestine. My country is under the government of Israel. My first language is Arabic, but I also speak Hebrew. Nine years ago, I fell in love, got married, and moved to United States. It was very hard in the beginning. All I knew was 'Hi' and 'Bye.' But now I speak the language better, and I have made a lot of friends."



# An Ode to My Grandfather's Snoring

Natalia Fedonenko

What is it?

A roaring of a running tractor's engine?

Or, maybe, it is my neighbor's car starting to cough?

No. This is my grandfather's snoring.

Thunder rolls do not scare me

because my grandpa's snoring could compete with them.

At times, so loud and drastic,

it would fill up all my brain!

It could make me sleepless.

It could be annoying like a pesky fly.

It could be barely audible like the rustle of leaves in a quiet wind.

As the song of a shaman drives away the rain,

this sound could cast away my sadness.

When I heard it, I felt safe—

it created peace in my soul.

I do not hear it any longer,

And life seems a little more difficult to bear.



**Natalia Fedonenko** was born in Kharkiv, Ukraine. In addition to Ukrainian, she speaks Russian. At 41 years old, she has been living in the United States for less than a year. Currently, she is enrolled in the CUNY Language Immersion Program at the College of Staten Island. Her teacher is Polina Belimova, and Donna Grant is the program director.

# My Mother and Me

Ruth Boirie

In 2002, I was living in my own apartment and always started the day with morning gongyo, my Buddhist prayer and chant. One morning, while I was chanting, I saw in my prayer that I was going to be taking care of my mother. I didn't quite understand why that came in my prayer at that moment. I felt a little puzzled, so I left it where it was and continued chanting. As I had moved on with my life, I'd always kept in touch with my mother to see how she was feeling, and if she needed anything done in the house. My mother was getting older, and I knew eventually she would need my help.

Eventually, it did happen. On February 28, 2003, I had to leave my apartment to live with my mother and take care of her. When I finally arrived at my mother's house, I sat down for a moment and looked at her. I said to myself, *How am I going to manage the house and my barber shop, along with taking care of her?* My mother was then in the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease, but she was able to talk and understand things very well. I had never taken care of a house before. I was going through hard times, too.

I knew that I had a lot of challenges in my life now. I needed to start chanting to the Gohonzon (the reflection of myself) right away. When I started doing morning gongyo and chanting "Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo" in the house, I worried my mother was going to feel funny about that because she was a devout Catholic. She always went to church or prayed in the kitchen. When I started chanting, I was really surprised that she got up and joined me. She wanted me to teach her to say it with me. As we were chanting, she stopped for a moment to tell me not to worry because everything was going to be all right with us in this house. I looked at her with so much compassion and love, and we both turned to the Gohonzon and started chanting. I felt that nothing was going to defeat us.

From that moment on, my mother chanted as much as she could with me, but she still believed in her prayer and her church. In the years that

she was still well, I brought her to a few general women's meetings, so that she could see what this Buddhist practice was all about. I thought if she didn't accept it in this lifetime, she would in the next, because she chanted "Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo" in the present. I brought her a daimoku book, so that when she wanted to chant with me, she could put down the daimoku minutes in her book, just as I did.

Being with my mother in those years that she was able to talk to me, I learned many things about her I didn't know. I'm glad I did. For example, when she served us kids food and looked like she was sad, she was wondering how she was going to get more food for us to eat. As I continued caring for her, I realized she was deteriorating from Alzheimer's, so I started chanting for her to be all right, but the truth was that I had to accept death as part of life. On April 16, 2012, I watched my mother pass away in the emergency room. Later, they gave me her body in a private room, and I got to say a few words to her. I said, "Mommy, I know you're taken care of, and when it's time for me to come, I will join you. I love you, Mommy. You're always in my heart."

I feel proud that I was the one to take care of my mother, and because I did, I found out about her struggle to get food on the kitchen table for us, which made me feel proud of the way she took care of our family.



**Ruth Boirie** is a native of Brooklyn, New York. She is currently working her way through the Pre-High School Equivalency program at the Brooklyn Public Library, where Avril DeJesus is the supervisor. She formerly participated in the Library's Adult Learning Center, and she was previously published in *LR*. A professional barber, she has owned and operated Ruthie's Neighborhood Barber Shop in Brooklyn since 1996.

# Amazing Grace

Farida Akhtar

I learned all about forgiveness from my mother.

I remember the day—March 26th—Independence Day in Bangladesh. I was in the sixth grade. It was a full day of athletic competition, topped off by a musical performance in the evening. My nine-year-old brother, Sheenan, and I participated in many of the games. I signed up for the high jump, long jump, jump rope, and 100-meter dash, among others. I ended up winning several of those events and the overall championship trophy. Sheenan also did well, winning a bunch of prizes.

Our cousin, Jashim, who was the same age as Sheenan, fared much less well. He didn't win a single event, and that afternoon, he went home very upset. When my brother and I came to his house late in the day, we found Jashim sitting alone beside a pond in his backyard. We could see he was depressed and didn't want to talk. I went inside the house, leaving my brother behind to see if he could cheer up our cousin.

Suddenly, there was a loud whooshing sound from the backyard, and I rushed outside. Jashim was sitting quietly by the pond, but there was no sign of my brother.

"Where is Sheenan?" I asked Jashim. He said nothing before getting up and running off.

Then I noticed a sliver of Sheenan's dark brown hair sticking out of the water. I started to scream, and all my relatives gathered around. My older brother and my uncle leaped into the pond and pulled out Sheenan, who was unconscious. My uncle began working on him, and after a few anxious moments, he was coughing up water.

It took me a few moments to piece together what had happened. Jashim, in his depressed and angry state, had thrown Sheenan, who could not swim, into the pond. When confronted about this, Jashim had become frightened and fled.

The whole house was in an uproar. My uncle, Jashim's father, raged that he would never allow his son back in the house after he had done

such a terrible thing. After we got back to our home, my mother sent a servant out into the night to find Jashim and bring him to us.

When the servant returned with Jashim, the little boy was sobbing and so overwhelmed with shame that he could barely speak. I will never forget my mother's response, wrapping Jashim in her arms and kissing his cheeks and forehead.

"You are a good person, but you acted badly today," said my mother. "But I love you, and I forgive you."

Hearing these comforting words, Jashim admitted to his awful deed and apologized from deep in his heart. My family gathered all around Jashim and each of us followed my mother's lead, hugging and kissing our little cousin. Forgiveness was contagious, and Jashim's father and the rest of his immediate family eventually joined in.

Jashim grew up to be a fine young man and is currently a successful business owner in Bangladesh. He and Sheenan remain close friends to this day.

As for me, I learned the lesson of unconditional love, which is strong enough to overcome even an attempted murder. I have applied that lesson many times with my own children over the years. It is when I do this that I feel closest to my mother and her wonderful spirit.



**Farida Akhtar**, with her husband and two children, came to the United States from Bangladesh in 1991. Since then, the family has grown to six. Farida Akhtar used to work in the restaurant business and is now happily retired. She is partial to expansive parks, waterfalls, and other natural wonders of New York State. She studies creative writing with Mark Mehler at the Jackson Heights Adult Learning Center of the Queens Library. Tsansiu Chow is the library literacy center manager.

# Father in My Heart

Weiwen Zeng

My father was born in 1932. He has four brothers. He is the second child in his family. When he was seven years old, his father and his uncle walked out of their house and were shot by Japanese soldiers. His uncle left two children. My grandmother had to raise seven boys by herself. Fortunately, she worked in the local orphanage, but it was still very hard to live.

When my father was 14 years old, he started working in a cotton-thread factory with his older brother and two cousins. He supported one of his brothers to go to school until that brother graduated from college.

In 1949, China ended the Civil War. He joined the army for four years. Then he became a policeman. He worked as a policeman until he retired. He loved his job very much. In my earliest memories, he is coming back home in the morning, when I am getting ready to go to school.

My father wasn't talkative, but he was very organized. He always educated us in a special way. I remember I got a score of just 68 on a math test in middle school. I didn't dare tell my mom. I waited for my father to come back home, and I gave the sheets to him. My father held the sheets upside down so 68 became 89, then said to me, "It's great!" My face turned red. After that, I studied harder than before.

My father had special skills. He and his brothers were able to catch fish in the river by hand. Their family was very poor, so if they wanted to eat fish, they needed to catch them by themselves. My father liked to practice calligraphy in his free time. His calligraphy is beautiful.

My father always sees the glass full. His four daughters all graduated from college. When his coworkers and neighbors sometimes said to him, "You are very great!" he always answered, "Not because of me—it's because of my wife."

Now he is 86 years old. When someone asks him, "How do you keep so healthy?" he always answers, "My wife's cooking is wonderful."

My father has a bad habit. He has been smoking for almost 60 years. He quit twice, for just a very short time, but then he smoked again. He always said to my mom and his daughters, “I’m sorry. I can’t leave smoke like a fish can’t leave water.”

I’m so happy and lucky because I still have parents to call, and they are both healthy. Every Friday at midnight, I talk with my parents for more than an hour. I hope I can call my parents until I’m 80 years old.



**Weiwen Zeng**, who was born in Nanchang, was an engineer in China. She writes: “I came to the United States in 2013. I have a daughter, who studies business at Boston University, and a son, a freshman at Stuyvesant High School. I like walking, cooking, and traveling. I plan to go to college to study international business. My dream is to speak English as fluently as my native language.” Weiwen Zeng wrote her essay in Jon Eckblad’s University Settlement class.

# Kumgang Mountain

Sooyoung Kim

When I was growing up in South Korea, most of my friends visited their grandparents at their father's family home on traditional Korean holidays. But I couldn't visit my father's home because it was in North Korea. That made me lose a big part of my identity, so I was always curious about my father's home.

My father was born in North Korea, but he didn't talk much about his home and his childhood. However, he mentioned Kumgang Mountain several times. He said that there were waterfalls, beautiful mountains and trees, and all over the mountains was wonderful scenery. When he was growing up, he went to the mountains very often and loved it.

But after he moved to South Korea, he was not able to visit North Korea because of the political trouble between North and South Korea. So, since the Korean War, in 1950, we couldn't go to North Korea.

However, something special happened in 1998. From 1998 to 2008, the North Korean government allowed visits to certain places in North Korea, including Kumgang Mountain, which I visited in 2008. Kumgang Mountain was very impressive. The mountain was not just beautiful, but also the most amazing place I had ever been. My heart was beating not just because of the mountains, but also because I kept telling myself, *Now I am in my father's home*. A melancholy mood was surrounding me, the way it had surrounded my father because he was forever separated from his birthplace. Kumgang Mountain was the most special place in my life. When I first looked at the mountain, I imagined my father's childhood, which I had only heard a little about from him. I finally felt I belonged to my father.

Since visiting Kumgang Mountain, I am even more interested in my father's birthplace, North Korea. I hope to visit again, when North and South Korea hopefully come together as one country. I pray for this.



Born in South Korea, **Sooyoung Kim** was always interested in her father's home. Her father went from North to South Korea when he was 19 years old, before the Korean War. After that, her father was never able to visit his own family. She wanted to write about this, but she didn't have confidence writing in English. Now a student in the Hunter College SPELL Program, she is gaining more confidence from her English teacher, Ruby Taylor MacBride, who motivates her to keep writing.



# I Am Home

Oryet Dawood

I am wife and mother at home.  
I am everything at home. I am.

I am the one who must wake up early  
to bring my children breakfast,  
to dress them and send them to school,  
to make breakfast and tea for my husband,  
and lunch for him to take along.

I am the last one to leave home, for college,  
and at that moment, when the house is empty  
and quiet, I feel lonely.

After college, I pick up the kids,  
and cook, and clean the house,  
and do my homework, and help with theirs.  
When I go to bed, I am tired  
but happy. I am wife and mother,  
I am everything at home. I am.  
I am home.



**Oryet Dawood** writes, "I am 37 years old. I was born in Egypt, and my first language is Arabic. I came to the United States two years ago. I would like to succeed in my studies." Oryet Dawood studies in Dorian Kulla's CLIP class at the College of Staten Island. Donna Grant is the program director.



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# My Most Frightening Moment

Abdoul Tamboura

I was driving on the highway through the mountains. I was listening to Salif Keita. I was thinking about those old-time Western movies with robbers stopping people. Out of nowhere, a man came running very fast toward the road. I didn't know why he was running and waving his arms, but he seemed to be running for his life. He threw himself to the roadside. Then he was calling again and again, "Help me, help me, help me!"

I was thinking, *What if this guy is a bandit? But maybe this guy really needs help.* Now I was thinking, *Do I speed away or do I stop to help?* I hit the brake, put the car in park, and jumped out. I ran over to the man. I tried to help him get up and get in my car. I looked up. A mountain lion was running fast with his mouth wide open.

We both ran to the car quickly and jumped in.

I turned and took a good look at the beast—yellow body, big red eyes, long big teeth, and long tail. I put the car in drive and pressed the gas. That was the most frightening moment in my life. Thank God we both got away safely.



Born in Senegal, **Abdoul Tamboura** speaks English, French, and Fulani. He arrived in the United States in 1991. At the Brooklyn Public Library's Bedford Learning Center, his tutor is William Toonk, Matthew Greene is the literacy adviser, and Susan Knott is the site supervisor. He describes himself as an "honest, hard-working man" who "loves to help people." His "Most Frightening Moment" is vividly imagined fiction.

# Back in My Day

Ursula Arlette

I can't believe we made it. When we were kids, we drank water from garden hoses. We would make up our own games. Take stones and send them into trees to see if fruit would fall. Or take a plastic bag, tie thread at one end, and at the other, old clothes cut into strips, and fly it like a kite. We walked home from school; it was a group of us, and it was a long walk. We had no child caps on medicine bottles. If we had a stomachache, we would take a few leaves from any bush and make tea. We would ride bikes without helmets. We used to eat bread with lots of butter on it, eat cupcakes, and drink soda, and were barely overweight because we were outside playing all day. During summer vacation, we would walk to the beach, swim in the rough sea, and get knocked under huge waves. There were no lifeguards. We would eat seaweed, and if we were thirsty, we drank seawater. We picked any fruit, like guavas, plums, and fat poke. We climbed up trees to pick coconuts. We would fall from the coconut trees, get cuts, broken bones, lose our teeth, and no one was to blame. We would walk to our friend's house, knock, or open the door and walk right in. It's hard to believe we made it this far in one piece.



**Ursula Arlette** writes: "I come from St. Lucia, from a family with seven children. My mother was a seamstress, and I like to sew. I currently work in childcare, and I have two boys of my own." Ursula Arlette is a student at the Eastern Parkway Adult Learning Center of the Brooklyn Public Library. The site adviser is Donna Alleyne.

# The Old Radio

Alicja Z. Szarzynska

It happened many years ago. My daughter Diana was a little girl. She had an old radio, which was always next to her bed because she liked to listen to music before she went to sleep. We came to the United States two years ago, when Diana was 14 years old. She brought her radio with her from Poland, as it was her childhood friend. Every evening, she would listen to Polish music, disco polo. The radio was very old. It didn't always work well, and sometimes it wouldn't even turn on.

One day, I was cleaning our apartment, and I decided to throw away the radio. When my daughter found out about it, she got very upset. She ran outside to bring the radio back, but it wasn't there. I promised to buy a new radio for her, but that didn't make her happy. One day, walking in the neighborhood, we stopped in a thrift store, and to our great surprise, we saw Diana's radio on one of the shelves! The owner sold it to us for five dollars. You can't imagine how happy my daughter was!

Soon after, I bought Diana a new radio for her birthday. She was thankful for the gift and put both radios on the table next to her bed. Every evening, she listened to different kinds of music on her new radio, but she still loved listening to Polish music on her childhood friend, her old radio.



A native of Lezajsk, Poland, **Alicja Z. Szarzynska** emigrated to the United States in August 2015. She wrote "The Old Radio" in Alvard Berberyan's ESOL class at the Adult Learning Center of CUNY's New York City College of Technology. The mother of three, she works as a babysitter. Her goal is to improve her English in order to obtain a better job to support her family.

# The Blue Dress

Jenifer Langford

My two sisters and I visited our aunt in England. It was a surprise for her. When we knocked on her door, her daughter Jenny knew we were coming, so she sent my aunt to the door. My aunt, standing there, said, "Who is it?" I replied, "I am your niece, Jenifer. I came from America to see you." My cousin Jenny came to the door and said, "Mummy, come and see your nieces." My aunt said, "I don't know these people." I told her, "Aunt, we are the daughters of your oldest sister, Angela." Again, my aunt said, "I don't know you," with the funniest face I have ever seen.

When we found out our aunt had Alzheimer's, my sister Claire held my aunt's hand and put her to sit. We all sat around her, and she stared at us. The first person she recognized was my sister Hazel. My aunt asked, "Hazel, how did you get here?" My sister told her we came on a plane. My aunt laughed out loud, saying, "I'm glad to see you. Where is my sister, Angela?" I told my aunt, "Your sister, our mom, is dead. Three years ago." My aunt said, "No, but I saw her last night, in the hallway." I asked my aunt what Mom was wearing, and she said, "A blue gown."

My mother was buried in a blue dress, and my aunt did not attend the funeral because she could not travel to America.

**Jenifer Langford**, age 52, was born in Guyana. She studies at the Brooklyn Public Library's Central Library Adult Learning Center. Winsome Pryce-Cortes is the site manager, and Felice Belle and Christina Best are the literacy advisers.

# 1/2 Teaspoon of Love

Jonatha Medeiros

Mrs. Butzke was a normal dreamer, an untalented woman who had an open-hearted husband and a permanently closed restaurant. Every day, she tried a new recipe she always got from her strange mind. Mushrooms, caramel, sugar, and paprika on top of a charred chicken was the dinner on that hot night of summer. Mr. Butzke was patiently seated at a table. He was praying that maybe this time he would not go to the hospital after eating his wife's food. Well, it was not so bad at all. It was different from the last dinner, of raw pork with marshmallows, but unfortunately, he lost his night going to the restroom. In bed, Mrs. Butzke decided to put the end dot in this story.

The following morning was gray and muffled in the small village where our peculiar couple lived. Mrs. Butzke crossed the village, looking for the only apothecary store in the neighborhood. She often told her dramas to the pharmacist, and he looked bored, but this time, he sold her his new invention, a food tonic. He gave her a green bottle, smaller than a finger. He also told her that it was a very concentrated and powerful potion, and she should use just a little drop, no more than one. With the "miracle tonic" in her hands, Mrs. Butzke ran home to use it. She was so happy because, for the first time, she would be successful with her cooking. Meanwhile, in the kitchen, pasta with tomatoes was waiting to be prepared by her. Everybody on the street could hear her singing while she was getting ready to cook. It was the time of truth; it was time to use the food tonic. She was so excited that even though she remembered what the pharmacist told her about the quantity, she dropped all of the tonic into the food. "It's okay," she said. "Finally, my food has the best smell in the world."

At dinnertime, Mr. Butzke was waiting at the table because he could feel that there was something different in the kitchen. Nevertheless, he was apprehensive. In front of him, his wife set down a generous plate of pasta with tomatoes. On his right side, Mrs. Butzke hovered, with her big



black eyes, waiting for his reaction. The silence was everywhere, when finally, Mr. Butzke, with a great hand movement, took the first portion of pasta and put it all into his mouth. She could see on his face how amazing the food tasted. She was happy, and he was eating. She started to sing with much happiness, and he was eating. She jumped to dance, and he was still eating. “Enough!” she shouted. And he was still eating. Then, he died.

The plastic butterfly on the clock was close to midnight. Mr. Butzke was lying on the dinner table, and his wife was crying because she had lost the love of her life, and she was scared of the possibility of somebody finding out about everything and calling the police. “I have an idea!” she said suddenly. She had a big oven with a tall hood. “It’s time to say goodbye.” Mrs. Butzke kissed his hand while crying. “Wait.” She stopped crying. “What is this?” She was tasting something good on Mr. Butzke’s hand. “That’s weird, that’s strange, and the solution to my problems!” she whispered. With her body filled with hope and giving him a last goodbye, Mrs. Butzke pushed her husband into the oven. The following morning, she got up before the birds and took all of Mr. Butzke’s ashes and put them inside of a big pot. She could experience the great smell of the ashes for a second.

A couple of days passed before our dedicated woman got back into the kitchen and started to cook again. While her crazy food was being prepared, the entire neighborhood could smell the delicious aromas that were emanating from the restaurant. In a short time, the whole village was talking about this; her restaurant was full of hungry people, and it continued for many, many months. She became famous and rich, and always, when she was asked about the secret to her recipes, she would answer: “My secret is that I put my love in my food!”



**Jonatha Medeiros** comes from Brazil. He writes about himself: “An art and media director, he loves tales and chocolate, which also helps him learn English. The tales, not the chocolate. He has also received awards. Doing chocolate, not tales. He studies with Instructor Jean Choi, who loves chocolate, at the New York Public Library’s Jefferson Market Branch, where he wrote his tale.”

# Tak(c)

Fernanda Siqueira

I never thought two minutes was such a long time. And there I was, standing inside a museum's bathroom in Warsaw, Poland, waiting for the pregnancy test result to come in. We had been trying for a year, and the moment we decided to forget about it, I found myself late.

It had never happened before; my body always worked like a clock. That was what I told my husband that morning, while we were getting ready to spend a lovely day in a city utterly strange to us. Our one-month trip through Eastern Europe had just begun, and I had to know if I could drink; that was my excuse to drag him to look for a pharmacy with me. We tried asking around but couldn't find anyone who spoke English. We looked everywhere. I was about to give up, when we saw a green cross outside a store.

At the counter, I asked the lady for a pregnancy test. She looked at me as if I were asking for the oddest thing in the world. Maybe pregnancy tests are not sold at pharmacies there? She stared at me and frowned. So I tried mimicking a big belly while repeating very slowly, "pregnant," as if the slow speed would suddenly enable her to understand me. The lady, at last, said something—in Polish—and showed us a few different boxes. None of them seemed to be what we wanted. Then she got one box from the counter with a picture of a pregnancy test on it. I was so happy that I almost kissed her. We took the box. As we were leaving, I realized the instructions were in Polish. I came back, opened the box, pointed to the illustrations in the instructions, and desperately asked her to show me which was the positive result. After some jumps and hands in the air from me, she eventually understood, pointed out some images, and did a thumbs-up. She circled two of the images and wrote down "Tak."

Happy that we had done it, we went back to our original schedule. The moment we arrived at the palace, I went straight to the bathroom and opened the box again. The funny thing is that this was the first time I was doing this kind of test, but I knew the drill.

The result came in. I compared it with the images, and it looked like a circled one, but suddenly I realized that “tac” could mean yes or no. I remembered the thumbs-up, but I couldn’t tell if the pharmacy lady would think that being pregnant was a good or bad result. I put the lid back on the test, folded the instructions, tucked everything in my pocket, and exited the bathroom.

My husband was visibly trying to read my face. I got closer and told him I didn’t know. I gave him the instructions. He asked for the test. I was embarrassed to take the thing out of my pocket, but I did it. He pointed at the “tac” word. “I think it’s positive,” he said. “But I’m not sure either.”

We spent the whole day walking around the city, not talking about it, while that thing was “burning” in my pocket. I was very aware of its meaning and also that I was carrying some of my pee with me. Finally, we got back to the apartment and opened Google Translate on our laptop. First, we tried “tac,” but nothing came out of it. I proceeded to read the instructions, letter by letter, while he typed them in that small box. It took us about an hour.

After that, I found out that the word is actually spelled with a “k.” I’ll never forget what the word “tak” means. I almost named my son after it.



Born in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, **Fernanda Siqueira** has lived in São Paulo and in Lisbon, Portugal. She arrived in New York City in 2011 with her husband, when she was expecting their son. She has worked as a copywriter and a screenwriter in her native language, Portuguese, and as a video editor here. She is a student in University Settlement’s advanced writing class, where, through her diverse classmates’ writing, “I take an imaginary trip around the world every week.”

# Someone I Have Grown to Love

Jackie Rosado

Natalie and I met when I was 12, and she was 11. We were on the same yellow-cheese school bus. I was the odd girl out, still playing with baby dolls. Natalie and her friends, Stephanie and Jason, would make fun of me together. It hurt me because I had a crush on Jason. I tried my best to be their friend. But after a while, I started making fun of them by calling them names. Natalie and I found each other on and off throughout the years because we had a lot of mutual friends. So this time around, I made fun of her love life to other people. We really disliked each other, so we stopped talking for nine years.

After all these years, we connected with each other on Facebook, and we began apologizing and talking about all types of things. Then on November 27, 2014, we became a couple, even though I was living in the Bronx and Natalie was living in Reading, Pennsylvania. We fell in love and spent every chance we could together. After a long conversation, she moved to New York, and we got an apartment together. We also got a dog named Freya. I am so thankful that Natalie treats my daughter, Milania, as her own. At first, it was hard for my daughter to understand that she now has two mothers. It took a lot of time and talking for Natalie and Milania to bond. What helped was their time together, when they took the dog for walks and went to the store to buy Freya her food. After all this, I can say we are a truly blended family.

One day, Natalie and I figured out why we disliked each other so much when we were younger. It was because we didn't understand how to say, "Hey, I really like you." I can truly say I fell in love with my best friend. I went from disliking her for all the times she made fun of me into a liking that turned into love. She's always there for me and my daughter, and I am always there for her. I see us having a bright future together.



**Jackie Rosado**, who is 28 years old, was born and raised in the Bronx. "I got pregnant when I was 17 years old and have worked hard to raise my daughter in the right way. I am studying at Phipps Neighborhoods to get my High School Equivalency Diploma, so I can work in a beauty salon." Gale Shangold Honts is Jackie Rosado's instructor.



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# Attitude Adjustment

Thanapapha Amornpimonkul

Nursing school in my native Thailand was awful, and not just because I found the work exhausting and frustrating. The real problem was that becoming a nurse was my parents' choice for my career. It was never mine.

Like many parents, they wanted their child to have a secure future and a well-paid job, and I couldn't deny them their wish. But the harder I studied, the more frustrated and uninterested I became.

And then, in just one night, my whole attitude changed.

I remember it was dark and cold on the ward. I sat beside the bed of a patient, a 50-year-old man with a serious heart condition, who was refusing life-saving surgery. I had been caring for Mr. Sambut for three days, administering his IV, handing out his meds, and taking his vital signs. All the while, his pensive manner had not changed. In the quiet of the ward, we listened to the drip of the IV and said nothing. But I felt I needed to ask a big question. "Why are you refusing surgery?" I asked.

"My son is still at university," he explained. "I can't afford to pay for the surgery and still have enough to pay for his school." He seemed completely resigned to his fate.

"Did the doctor tell you the risks of not having the procedure?" I pressed him.

He nodded yes. "My hope is that I can just live long enough to see my son graduate, but I know that's kind of a faint hope."

I suggested that even without the surgery, there were some things he could do, including some dietary changes, that might prolong his life.

"I know that. Thank you," he said. "I'm glad you're here with me tonight, and I'm glad it was you taking care of me for the past few days. You're a good nurse, and you're going to help a lot of people."

I recall that we talked a little more, but mostly we sat silently. And by the end of the night, I knew two things for certain: Mr. Sambut was going to die in the coming days, and I would be staying in the nursing



profession. Not for my parents this time, but for me.

I finally realized that helping people didn't just mean carrying out medical chores and fluffing pillows, although those things matter a lot. But just as important is connecting person to person, making my patients feel understood and valued. I could see ahead of me many more quiet nights on the ward, just being myself with another human being.

That was five years ago.

Today, my parents still worry about me. They think I work too hard and am too involved with my patients. They tell me I should have chosen another kind of work.

There's just no pleasing some parents.



**Thanapapha Amornpimonkul** emigrated from Bangkok with her younger brother in April 2017. Preparing to take the exam to work as a nurse in the United States, she supports herself as a restaurant cashier. She is still adjusting to life in New York City. For example, she recently realized that a passerby who inquires, "How are you?" does not expect a lengthy reply. She studies creative writing with Mark Mehler at the Jackson Heights Adult Learning Center of the Queens Library.

# My First Job

Mayra Ramos

At 23 years old, I finished my college degree at Higher Polytechnic School of Chimborazo, Ecuador, with a major in business administration. Having studied for five years, my dream was to get a job as a manager in a company. This was what the professors from my university told us all the time. “When you finish your studies, you will be a manager in any company you apply to.” Immediately after graduation, I started looking for a job. I applied to many companies, but they never called me back. I spoke with friends about this traumatic experience.

Unfortunately, I had the problem of unemployment for a long time. But I had time to think and create new projects. I decided to provide a new and exclusive service for my city, Riobamba. I researched and learned that my city did not have any pet salons or dog and cat grooming businesses. There were a lot of dogs but no grooming services for them. Luckily, I had the opportunity to go on vacation in California. In Sacramento, I worked as a volunteer at an excellent pet grooming salon, Pet Club. I helped with bathing, brushing, walking, and I learned dog and cat grooming. I quickly discovered that was my passion. I learned fast, and I felt happy. I washed 16 dogs per day and practiced grooming four dogs per day, as well. The light bulb went on in my head: This was my opportunity! Animal grooming would be a new exclusive service for my city.

When I returned to Riobamba, I made an investment in my new dream pet salon, Pet Club, the same as the salon in Sacramento. I set up the business: I installed the tub, grooming tables and some accessories I bought in California, such as a dryer, scissors, brushes, combs, and blades. I invested my money in marketing on the local TV channels and newspapers. In the beginning, I was criticized because my friends and family believed grooming wasn't a job I deserved after I'd studied for five long years in the University, and I felt very disappointed at this reaction. Still, I opened my new business, and the potential clients were waiting for me. I worked very hard on weekends grooming dogs. I had interviews

on TV, as many people from my city had never heard about this service. Twenty years ago, the pet culture of my city was very basic. Many people kept dogs outside of their houses, in low temperatures, as Riobamba is located in the mountains. They did not know about pet salons and how to take care of dogs living with families. I started educational campaigns on how to love and care for dogs. I had a segment on local TV each Monday morning, when I informed viewers about dog culture. I felt I was important for Riobamba. After one year, a professor from my university visited and congratulated me because I had created something different, exclusive, and special for the dogs and cats in my community, as well as their owners.

My small business was successful, and many people in my city wanted to learn this new profession. I taught many people, including my brother and sister. Now she is a dog groomer and he is a veterinary doctor. They work so hard helping animals and providing information about pets. My satisfaction is enormous because I singlehandedly changed the way dogs were treated in my city: I was the first groomer from Riobamba, and I opened its first pet salon. All this, because I had the opportunity to come to learn this beautiful profession in California 20 years ago.

I hope my story can be an example to all students not to give up their dreams. Career paths are often winding, and sometimes you end up in a profession that is completely different from what you studied in college. Don't let anyone tell you what you "should" or "should not" be doing with your professional life. I never thought I would open and successfully run the first pet salon in my city, but I am forever grateful to have taken that winding path and made a lasting contribution to Riobamba.



**Mayra Ramos** studies English at York College's Adult Learning Center, where the site adviser is Sarah Marranca, and the director is Hamid Kherief. Mayra Ramos emigrated from Ecuador 12 years ago. She has two advanced degrees and has become a professional dog groomer. She says, "Life gives us a lot of opportunities to make changes and to help other people."

# The Reason I Became a Police Officer

Saori Seki

I am a Japanese police officer who is studying criminal justice at CUNY in order to develop new law enforcement plans in Japan. The Japanese Police Department has no witness protection program, so I am studying this in the United States. This is one of the most precious experiences for me.

I have two reasons for choosing my job. One of them is my experience as a teenager. When I was a high school student, I lost my friend. He was involved in a crime. The criminal offender who killed my friend was a high school student, the same as us. It happened in the park. My friend was beaten, and he fell down and hit his head on a block. The perpetrator didn't help. He didn't do anything; he just ran away.

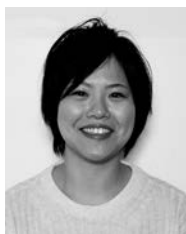
I couldn't believe that happened. Of course, I was very sad. My friend was a nice guy, who would always make us laugh and was very kind to everyone. He was a popular person in our school. On the other hand, I did not know anything about the criminal offender because he was a student at another school. Anyway, even if there had been conflicts, he shouldn't have killed my friend. The criminal's identity was protected by law, so nobody could know the truth, not even my friend's family. In Japan, people under 20 are protected by law. The boy was arrested, but his name, the judge's name, the perpetrator's statement—everything—was sealed. Nobody knows the truth.

I thought I'd never want to go through such an experience again. Also, I thought I'd like to protect my precious people, friends and family.

The second reason I became a police officer is my father. My father is a police officer, too. He always said to me, "Don't tell a lie. Don't do anything that will make someone sad. Try to help people in trouble."

He was always working, so he wasn't often at home. He wasn't able to go to most of my school events, such as graduation ceremonies or sports festivals. I couldn't understand that when I was a child. I even thought

that my father hated his family. But now, I can understand him. He was just trying to help people. Also, he was trying to protect his family because he loves us. I'm very proud of my father. He is the best police officer, in my mind. I would like to be a police officer like my father. I'm trying to do my best now.



**Saori Seki** writes: "I am 32 years old. I am from Tokyo, Japan, and my first language is Japanese. I came to the United States in July 2017. I am studying English with a great teacher, Michele Persaud, and nice classmates, at the Kips Bay Branch of the New York Public Library. It is an amazing time for me." Stephanie Burnes is the hub manager.

# No Place Like Home

Giselle Fitzpatrick

When we think of the word “home,” we usually think of the roof that covers our head. The first thing that pops in our minds is where we’re from or the house in which we live. As for me, home has a much deeper meaning. It is not just the mere thought of a bed to sleep in and a place to eat, or the places and people I’ve known throughout my life. You can be sitting in a house with all the material things a house can have, and yet you might not feel fully at home. You can be physically present, but your heart can be a thousand miles away, possibly in another country. Wherever my heart is, that is my home.

It’s where I can be myself without pretending to be someone I’m not. It’s where I can express all my hurt and reveal all my scars, wearing them proudly for the world to see. It is free of people pointing fingers, blatantly saying what they heard or think. Home is where I can wholeheartedly reveal all my flaws and still be loved as a person and not be judged for once. The only place I can be like a child again.

It is where all my people, whether black, white, or yellow, can be treated equally, united and living as brothers and sisters. Where I can fit in society, whatever my culture, race, or religion. Where I am just another human. Somewhere I belong, where I have affirmation, where I can be safe and feel at ease.

My home is the sentimental feeling I have created to protect myself. There, I can be comfortable in my own skin and learn to love myself unconditionally. My safe haven, my escape, my personal sanctuary. A part of me I take wherever I go, no matter how near or far. To be truly at home is my happy place, a place I want to be each and every day.

This is what home means to me. There’s no place like it! My home, sweet home.



**Giselle Fitzpatrick** is a student at the Young Adult Literacy Program (YALP) of the Brooklyn Public Library. Her teacher is Anna Limontas-Salisbury, and Aneicia Washington is the coordinator. Giselle Fitzpatrick writes, “I was born in Guyana, and raised in the capital city, Georgetown. I graduated from high school in my home country, then continued my studies in Spanish and Portuguese. My goal is to graduate from college and one day become a pediatrician.”

# The Most Valuable Possession

Qiao Bing (Nancy) Zhu

I often think, *What is the basis of our happiness, and what is the most valuable possession in our lives?* Everything has changed since I came here three years ago. For example, my husband got more and more impatient after a long day's work. Happiness gradually disappeared, yielding to a busier and faster pace of life.

I read in an article that men tend to be less communicative, sociable, and concerned about others than women. I had to find strategies to talk to my husband to change our situation a little bit. Eventually, I figured out a way to recover his resilience. I approached him and said, in a whisper, "I miss my red bike so much, the one you bought me 20 years ago." It was a gift for a wedding anniversary—a beautiful red bicycle. It probably cost him an entire month's salary. The most important point was that the red symbolized "positiveness," as he said back then. Unfortunately, I lost the bike the following week, because I forgot to lock it, and someone stole it.

One day after I mentioned the bike, a brand-new red bike was waiting in the corner of our backyard. The glittering sun was shining on my present. I now ride it every day.

This memory really inspired my husband again. Since I talked to him about this, he faced his emotional problems with courage and patience.

I now realize that the most valuable possession is not a magnificent house, a luxury car, or a twinkling diamond. It is mutual understanding and caring in the family.



**Qiao Bing (Nancy) Zhu**, age 50, a native of China, emigrated three years ago. In China, she had her own boutique. Now she and her husband run a clothing line in New York City. She dreams of becoming "a real American," and loves the diversity of cultures here. Nancy Zhu currently attends Diana Vayserfirova's advanced ESOL class at the Kingsbridge Branch of the New York Public Library. She was also published in *LR15*.

# Consequences of Disobeying Parents

Mamadou Diallo

My brother Ousmane and I were best friends, and my life changed the day that I lost him in a motorcycle accident. I was 14 years old, and my brother was 16. I will never forget that day, October 14, 2010. We lived in the city of Dalaba, which is 300 miles from Conakry, the capital. It was a shiny day, and nature was smelling like an early morning cup of vanilla from Starbucks.

My father had traveled to the capital for business the previous day, and had left his motorcycle at home and warned me three times not to touch it. I remember his exact words. He said, “Mamadou! When you drop me off and come back from the station, do not touch the motorcycle until I come back. Do you understand?” I nodded, but he was in doubt. After he left, I was so excited that we had the motorcycle for the weekend. “What is the plan?” I said. Ousmane replied, “What do you mean? Didn’t you hear what Dad just told you before he left?” I said, “I actually did, but we can make an exception and be more careful. Come on, Bro! It’s going to be fun.” He was reluctant, and I pushed him to accept.

When I was about to leave the house, my mother was in the kitchen, cooking lunch. She ran as quickly as she could to the garage when she heard the motorcycle power on. “Where are you going?” she said. I looked her in the face and lied to her. “Father told me to take it to the wash and fill it with gas.” She said, “Make sure you take it back when you finish, and do not go anywhere else, okay?” I said yes, but I knew what I had in mind. At noon that day, Ousmane and I planned to go visit a relative of Booba, one of our friends. I took the motorcycle to be washed and to put in gas, and my brother told me where to meet him afterwards. We never thought about the consequences of disobeying our father, that something bad or unpleasant would happen. We were teens, and all we were thinking of was entertainment.



Before we left, Ousmane and Booba were arguing because neither of them wanted to sit in the middle. "Booba, sit in the middle," my brother said. "I am not comfortable sitting in the middle." Booba replied, "No, you do it. I don't want to, either." They continued the same conversation over and over again. And finally my brother took the middle seat. After riding a few miles, we reached a narrow road, and I was speeding because the motorcycle was brand new, and we were all happy. I did not decelerate because I thought that I could make a sudden stop. A car appeared in front of us on the opposite side. I tried the best I could to avoid the car, but unfortunately my speed was too great, and we collided with the car.

People were shouting. I was hearing voices on all sides. "Are they dead? Let's call an ambulance!" The motorcycle was shattered in pieces, and we were each lying a few feet from the others, suffering. A woman approached my brother because among us, he was clearly suffering the most. She said, "Take a deep breath, and you will be okay." Ousmane's right leg was broken in three parts, and his patella had fallen. Booba also had a broken leg, and all I had was scratches. I felt so much guilt that I hated myself, and my brother was yelling over and over again, "You killed us, little brother." I will never forget those words coming out of his mouth as he suffered from pain. I was able to move, and I did not feel any pain. All I was thinking of was my brother's words.

Before the ambulance arrived, he lost so much blood. They took us to the general hospital in the city, but Ousmane was still bleeding, and the doctors could not stop it. The doctor who was in charge spoke to my uncle, and said, "Mr. Diallo, your nephew has lost a lot of blood, and he has internal bleeding, and if we try to operate on him here, we could lose him." My uncle asked, "What other choices do we have?" The doctor replied, "We suggest you take him to the capital or to Freetown, Sierra

Leone.” Therefore, they chose to take him to Freetown, where he could be treated. It was heartbreaking for me, seeing them taking him away from me. I did not think it was the last time I would see my brother. Twenty miles away from the border, my mother told the driver, “Stop the car, and let me see if my son is still alive.” Unfortunately, he had lost so much blood that he passed away before they could reach Freetown.

I had not been able to sleep that day because all I was thinking of was my brother. Everyone went to sleep because it was so late, but I was up, speaking to myself, “Is he gonna make it? Am I gonna see my brother again? What will happen if I lose him?” At three in the morning, a phone call woke up my sister. “What’s the news? Are they safely arrived?” I asked. I saw my sister’s face turning red, and at that moment, I knew that Ousmane had passed away. I still feel guilty for his death because if I had listened to what my father had told me, he would be alive. Since then, I know how valuable our parents’ words are, and that no one should disobey their parents because that could lead to peril.

**Mamadou Diallo** writes: “I’m 21 years old. I am from Guinea, West Africa. I have been living in the United States for a year now and have been studying English with Instructor Lester Lambert in the BMCC Adult Basic Education program. My first language is Fulani, and my second is French, because my country is a former French colony. My goal is to get a college degree in computer science.”

# Change of Heart

LeVar Lawrence

Why couldn't God just ease my pain and let me die  
Have people at my funeral with tears in their eyes  
Screaming out *Why*  
Why couldn't he just open up the gates and let me in  
I would've promised not to sin  
I'm lying  
I'd be up there passing around cups of gin  
Asking the angels can I put just the tip in  
Be up there having parties every night  
Taking bets on who's gonna win the fight  
I'd have God looking at me shaking his head  
While I'm laying with two of his angels in bed  
Boy, would I have the time of my life  
But then I'd start thinking about how I left my kids and my wife  
Now I'm praying to God that he saves my life  
So I can be around to watch my kids grow  
And teach my sons things about the streets that they don't know  
To make sure that my daughters don't end up with the wrong man  
Let them know what they're worth and that they need a ring on their hand  
Well, remember me, God?  
The one that got shot in the head?  
I've changed my mind  
Because what use am I to my kids if I'm dead?



**LeVar “Var” Lawrence** was born and raised in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. As a child, he spent hours drawing, nurturing a life-long love of visual arts. He studied writing with Visiting Artist Jenessa Abrams at Open Doors at Coler Specialty Hospital. An active family man, he says his seven children keep him going. In his spare time, he practices digital art and speaks to children about gun violence. He hopes one day to walk again.

# Reading Sets You Free

Ruth Santamaria

The first moment that you learn how to read, you feel that exultation and the strength inside of you. You forget your daily routine; there is nothing that will transport you away from that ordinary moment of your routine better than a book.

To read is to discover another world. You experience places without traveling; you can learn about different cultures, people, and places. No matter the context of the book, the characters and places come alive, and you can picture all these things in your mind.

To read is to be informed in your daily life through newspapers, websites, and magazines. You can read the news and share with other people topics such as politics, economics, sports, health, and lifestyle.

To read is to progress in imagination and creativity. Your brain expands, and you create pictures in your mind that are unique because they are yours. They serve as inspiration for anything that you want to create for your job, school, or anything else.

Reading improves your writing skills, grammar, and vocabulary, which enhances your level of communication.

To read is a form of entertainment. And you can do it on the train, in the waiting room—pretty much anywhere, if you put your mind to it and your heart desires it.

Also, it makes you a better person and helps you understand yourself and the world around you.

To read is to emulate Frederick Douglas: “Once you have learned to read, you will be forever free.”

Born in Ecuador 66 years ago, **Ruth Santamaria** has lived in the United States for 40 years and considers it her home. She has a wonderful family—two sons and two grandchildren. She runs and cycles, and loves to read, preferably nonfiction and biography. She is inspired by her English classes at the College of Staten Island. Judy Falci is her instructor, and Donna Grant is the program director.

# Why I Came to Creative Writing Class

Mohamed Mahgoub

When I attended college, in Egypt, many years ago, I took an additional English language class at a private institute. We were assigned to write an essay every week on a different subject. After a few weeks, the teacher began to have a good idea of our writing ability, and she gave each student a grade. Mine was a C plus, or, at best, a B minus.

One week, we were given the assignment of writing about something interesting that happened in our lives. That week, I was very busy, and I asked a friend whose English was much better than mine to write my essay for me.

That week in class, the teacher was silently reading all the class essays, when she suddenly got up from her seat and shouted, “Hooray! We have a winner!” I wasn’t paying much attention, until she called out my name and handed me the essay with an A plus at the top. The whole class stood and clapped.

What everybody must have thought was a great day for me was, in fact, one of my worst days. I was deeply ashamed of putting my name on someone else’s work and getting an A plus, and having the class applaud made my shame even deeper.

I believe my teacher knew that it wasn’t my essay and that she did what she did to embarrass me, so that I would never again do such a thing. And I never did.

I am here in this class this morning because I want to enhance my writing skills so that if I ever get another A plus, it will be mine.



**Mohamed Mahgoub**, a native of Egypt, emigrated with his family from Kuwait in January 2017. He currently works as a Human Resources manager. He and his wife, Rania, both study creative writing in Mark Mehler’s class at the Queens Central Library Adult Learning Center, in the belief that writing ought to be a family affair. This essay is his response to an in-class exercise on the first day of class in fall 2017.

# **You Can Teach an Old Dog New Tricks**

Marie Alcindor

It's been a long time; I was a little girl, in my hometown, Petit-Goâve, a city not far from Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. At that time, it was delightful to live in Haiti. The beauty of the landscape, the welcoming smiles of the people invited you to come to Haiti, to visit and to live.

Children walked to school, and it was enchanting to see the street full of them, dressed in their uniforms of all colors. The girls with ribbons and barrettes in our hair were talking, laughing among ourselves. We were happy. The boys looked at us, talking about us; we felt important, beautiful.

Amid all those enchanting moments, there was a solitary man, a beggar, who was always sitting down under an almond tree, with his bowl, saying to passersby, "La charité, s'il-vous-plaît," meaning "Something to eat, please." To make fun of the man, the boys put stones in the bowl and ran. Everybody laughed, and the man, undiscouraged, continued to ask for help, playing music with his harmonica, and the passersby would give him some money.

One day, an abandoned dog came and stayed with him. As time went by, I saw the man and the dog playing in the street. The man played music, and the dog danced; his head under his tail, he turned, turned. Sometimes he jumped, jumped; rolled, rolled on the ground; yapped, yapped at the music. After that, he took the man's hat with his mouth, passed in front of all the spectators, and got money. Everybody was so amazed. That is the story of teaching an old dog a new trick. With the same idea, I can speak about myself.

At first, I was so intimidated about going to an adult learner program because by nature I am shy, and above all, there was the language barrier. If it wasn't for pride, I would have given up, but I always had this faith in my heart. "No mountain can defeat me," I encouraged myself, telling myself that nothing was impossible if you really wanted it.

I remember, one Monday in math class, the teacher came with a box of calculators and said, “The problem we are going to do today requires the use of calculators.” He gave one to each of us and went to the blackboard to do the problem. I looked at the calculator, saying to myself, *What am I going to do?* All of a sudden, somebody said, “Teacher, I don’t know how to use it.” The teacher replied, “You have to know that,” and kindly left what he had started and explained the mechanism of the calculators to us. I was so happy, but one day wasn’t enough. I borrowed a library book that explained how to use calculators. From time to time, I studied, and finally, I got it. I can’t blame the teacher. He didn’t think about us elders, who skipped school decades ago. We hadn’t had those technologies in our time. I was thinking. *This is it!* Learning how to use the calculator was a big challenge, a “casse-tête chinois,” meaning “a headache” or “a puzzle” for me. Now, if I needed to, I could teach it.

Here comes the computer. I had just come to school and was talking about the test we were taking that day, when one of the students said, “Do you know the test is being given on the computer?” I said, “What? How come? I know nothing about computers.” I was so overwhelmed. I said, “Oh, God! What am I going to do?” I felt desperate. And, then like a rainbow after the rain, I saw the sun; the light coming in my heart, in my head. I said to myself, *Find time to take a computer class.* So that’s what I do now. The class isn’t easy because you have to know the keyboard, etc. I have made some progress. One day, I will celebrate, saying as I did about the calculator, “I have mastered it!”

Because of all those experiences, I can say that you can teach either an old person or an old dog new tricks. It’s only a matter of time. Be patient and courageous. You will see the fruits of your hard labor. Like the saying “Vouloir c’est pouvoir,” meaning “Want it? Do it.”



A native of Petit-Goâve, Haiti, **Marie Alcindor** studies at the Queens Library’s Peninsula Adult Learning Center, with teacher Todd Capp. The center manager is Barbara Miller, and Ebru Yenil is the library literacy specialist. Marie Alcindor immigrated to the United States in 1999. On retirement, she started taking writing classes to improve her English. She wants her story to inspire women who were not able to finish their schooling.

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# Participating Adult Education/ESOL Sites

Arab American Association of New York  
Andrew Romay New Immigrant Center, The English-Speaking Union  
Community Impact, Columbia University  
Consortium for Worker Education/Workers United Education Program  
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New Americans Welcome Center, Prospect Park YMCA  
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**THE GALLATIN SCHOOL OF INDIVIDUALIZED STUDY** is an innovative school within New York University that began in 1970 and grew out of the educational reform movements of the late 1960s. As a small college within a highly regarded research institution, Gallatin provides the best of both worlds for its 1,500 undergraduates and 200 graduate students. In close consultation with faculty academic advisers, students create their own curriculum and unique plan for learning, combining Gallatin's own interdisciplinary courses with more traditional courses in various schools of NYU; self-directed education through independent studies; and experiential learning through internships at New York City's numerous institutions, businesses, and arts organizations.

The Writing Program includes about 35 courses each semester; a Writing Center staffed by undergraduate Peer Writing Assistants; several event series: Global Writers, Careers in Writing and Publishing, Writers in Progress, Gallatin Teachers Reading, and Students Reading Their Writing; *Confluence*, an online platform for student writing, art, and research; *The Gallatin Review*, an annual student literary and visual arts magazine; and Civic Engagement Projects—the Literacy Project, Great World Texts, and High School Writing Mentors.

The Literacy Project dates from 2001 and is comprised of an Adult Literacy for Social Change course, which combines the study of the adult literacy/ESOL field with volunteer work at several partner organizations; a weekly writing class at University Settlement; publications of writing by adults, including *The Literacy Review*, *Refugee Writing*, and *Unique and Incomparable*, and the annual all-day *Literacy Review* Workshops in Teaching Writing to Adults.

Great World Texts, which began in 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. Faculty and students study a canonical or “contemporary classic” work and create writing projects, including essays, stories, poems, and plays, related to it.

High School Writing Mentors sends two students every semester to two New York City public high schools to guide students in writing.

For further information, and/or a free copy of *The Literacy Review*, email June Foley, senior director of the Writing Program: [jaf3@nyu.edu](mailto:jaf3@nyu.edu)

Look for *The Literacy Review*, Volume 16, online at the Gallatin Writing Program website: [gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/undergraduate/writing.html](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/undergraduate/writing.html)



