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Contributors

Nadreen Bagoun was born in Khartoum, Sudan. She grew up between Khartoum, Cairo, and Milwaukee, WI and now resides in Nashville, TN. From 2012 and 2016, Nadreen returned to Khartoum and was inspired to write about the experiences of the people she met. Besides being an aspiring writer, Nadreen is working toward completing a Master of Public Administration degree and plans to return to Sudan to work in the humanitarian sector.

Dikshya Bastakoty was born and raised in Kathmandu, Nepal. She moved to Berea, KY for college and then to Nashville, TN for graduate school. Currently she lives in Dallas, TX with her husband, and works remotely for the Clinical and Translational Research Institute at Vanderbilt. Over the years of migrating southwards, her love of science and writing have been the two constants in her life that have enabled her to find community wherever she goes. Although her published works so far have mostly been “science-y” articles, she hopes to change that soon.

Silvia Buttazzoni is originally from Northern Italy and moved to the United States for love with her two kitties. That is where she met her boss and then besty, Viviana, an Italian gal from her very same region. Viviana introduced her to the creative writing group in Nashville and Silvia has never stopped writing since then!

Mario A. Cardiel Fernandez was born on a Thursday in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, México. He was brought home by his parents in a beat-up Datsun with a loose passenger door, the mom held onto the door with one hand so it wouldn't fall off while carrying the baby with her other hand. The car was multicolored. Mario has one younger sister and an even younger brother. After 13 years of living in Juarez, the family's last day in their hometown was on a Tuesday, they left due to safety reasons, they arrived in Nashville the next day. Mario met his wife Emma on a Friday and they got married on a Saturday 7 years later; their family includes Jojo, Noah, and Winston. Mario is a chemist by trade but will begin pharmacy school in the fall, on a Monday to be precise. He likes to write, play soccer, read, and goes to trivia on Wednesdays. Mario is an aspiring filmmaker and hopes to open a bakery with his wife, it will probably close on Sundays. Mario would rather lose his wallet and car keys over his glasses so if you see him without them please help him find them because it means he is in real trouble.

Marcela Castaño Velez is a Colombian loom artist. Her belief, her purpose, her compass is weaving with her soul. She doesn't weave pieces of art, she weaves her past, her present, and her future. Weaving their dreams, she and her husband arrived in Nashville in 2015, where she experienced precious things like her volunteering which she does with passion and love. She started a creative writing workshop because she needed to practice her English, then discovered her abilities for this art. She could have never imagined she could do this and today she feels very happy, empowered, and confident of herself.

Veronica Castillo was born in Barcelona, Venezuela. Her family moved to Margarita Island located in the Caribbean Sea when she was still a baby. She lived in the island and grew up there until she was 14 years old. She went to the same Catholic school that was run by nuns from Pre-K until her family moved in 2001 to Nashville, TN and she learned a whole new high school public school life. New culture and language was a barrier but Veronica's spirit didn't let that stop her. She got involved in after school groups and events. She joined the tennis team at her

high school and enjoyed her new life. She graduated high school with interests in immigration and language. She went on to get training on Medical Interpreting and worked for different organizations including Vanderbilt Medical Center. She also worked with well-known immigration attorneys in Nashville, TN as well as in Fort Worth, TX. She is currently active in immigration, interpretation, and translation services but writing and raising her baby boy Ezequiel are top priorities right now. She is enjoying being a mom and learning new things through motherhood.

Elizabeth Gallardo was born and raised in Quito, Ecuador. Traveling is one of her passions. She has been to Tokyo, Cairo, Paris, Machu Picchu, Titicaca, the Caribbean, and the USA. Her love for traveling began as a child, when luckily she used to spend her entire summer exploring the Galapagos Islands where her family is from. In one of her adventures, she found her true love and after some years of relationship both of them made an important decision. To get married, they had an amazing wedding in a place called Palugo, thirty minutes away from Quito. Her whole family flew from Galapagos along with two of her best friends who came from Japan and from France. Eli left her country in February 2018 and started her new adventure in Nashville, together with her husband.

Alice Gatebuke grew up around storytellers. In Rwanda where she grew up, elders would recount parables and folktales called imigani to children. She grew up listening to these thrilling tales which helped shape her earliest worldview. This is Alice's foray into storytelling, which she hopes one day is as pleasing as the legends and stories of her childhood. But no pressure. Alice moved to the USA after surviving the Rwandan Genocide, and has since traveled across the world. Her stories reflect the places, people, and experiences she's encountered.

Tarek Hamami was born and raised in Damascus, Syria but ended up in New York by a stroke of luck at age 17. He then moved to Nashville, started off cutting hair, and is now pursuing a degree in biochemistry while studying for the MCAT. Sometimes he gets on stage for stand-up comedy and other times he's in dive bars writing poetry or quoting Jeff Goldblum.

Tatiana Hargrove was born in Russia and is a mother to one smart son. She got her Master's degree in chemistry and worked as a teacher. She likes the beauty of nature, people, reading, and traveling. A destiny brought her to Nashville, TN where she found a caring and loving husband. Writing short stories is her new hobby.

Christian Juru was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The first 14 years of his life were spent in Congo and the next 14 years in Nashville, TN, where he currently resides and works as a civil engineer. He's written fictional stories and scripts that incorporate elements of fantasy, science fiction, and superhuman abilities. He's also written personal pieces about his cultural identity and roMANTic interests. He's a lover of great cinema, carries his drone with him on his travels, and is passionate about filmmaking.

Seung Hui Kim was born in South Korea. Her life has been far from being stationary. She has travelled over 20 countries and lived in many different places including Tennessee, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Montreal, Canada to follow her husband who relocated for his career. She loves going to the library, learning new languages and writing short stories. She won

two prizes in the NJ Association for lifelong learning writing contest and the stories were published in the NJALL magazine in 2018 and in the annual book, *Dreams of a Better Tomorrow*, by the Essex County Consortium students in 2019. She is a school teacher. She lives in Korea, dreaming of more adventures to come and wondering where her destiny will take her next.

Drenusha Kolshi was born in Prishtina, Kosovo in 1994. Six years later, her mother led the way to escape from war-ridden Kosovo and reunite with her father in America. This new way of living at such a young age caused Drenusha to blend her knowing of life into two different cultures. Writing became her way of expressing the struggles of being a two-cultured woman in America. Today, she writes poetry that allows her to heal from family and war trauma. She spends most of her days educating herself on trauma and healing. She hopes to one day be able to share her journey through spoken word, impacting women of all cultures.

Giovanni Lages is a 19-year-old from São Paulo, Brazil. He arrived in the United States in 2015. Upon arriving in the land of opportunity he eventually graduated high school and now studies chemistry at MTSU. Leaving everything behind was excruciatingly difficult for Giovanni. With all his friends and family still back in Brazil, learning a new language and adapting to a new lifestyle was essential in order to succeed. This story elaborates on the journey and how difficult it can be to migrate as a kid.

Abey Assefa Lissane was born in Dubti, Ethiopia and moved to Nashville, TN in 2008. He is passionate about building creative communities where people can come together and share their own stories. He is president of the Ethiopian Community Association in Nashville (ECAN). He is Board member of Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) and Mayor's Office of New Americans Advisory Council (MNAAC).

Viviana Luison, originally from the small town of Azzano Decimo (near Venice, Italy), moved to England when she was 18 out of love, not for a boy, but for a language. She then moved to Nashville, TN in 2003 as an au pair (a fancy word for nanny) and made the city her home, with her husband Steve and dog Sally. Curiosity for the written word and her desire to learn how to better craft the stories in her head led her to The Porch where she took writing classes and workshops for a few years. She writes poems, short stories and memoir. In her spare time, Viviana is involved with the group Italian For Fun! and teaches Italian to adults. Besides being a professional Italian interpreter and translator, she is an avid reader and versed at taking classes on all sorts of subjects.

Uju Oramah was born in Nigeria where she completed her college education. She moved to the United States of America and now resides with her husband in Antioch, TN. Driven to make the world a better place, she is an Empowerment Writer and Blogger. She has a show called Uju TV with NECAT network where she inspires her audience to “Live Daily Empowered.” She recently published a book called, “Meditative Thoughts for Empowerment: 30 Days Spiritual Reflection and Renewal.” She is now working on her third book called, “Big Miracle: Witness Daily Miracles Beyond Imagination.” For more information visit <http://ujuoramah.com/>.

Doris Palomino was born in Lima, Peru. She worked in education and gender issues and traveled around almost all of her country. After moving to Nashville, TN, she has been involved in social justice, immigration, and education issues. She lives with her husband and her cat. She loves dancing, learning, and traveling. She took a creative writing workshop for the first time trying to improve her writing skills with Anna Silverstein. She learned much more than she expected. She plans to continue writing.

Marcela Pinilla is a Colombian-American singer/songwriter whose musical journey has taken her around the world since a very young age. Today, she calls Nashville, Tennessee home, where she performs with her band and also where she started exploring her interest in writing, looking for a way to document her memories and experiences. Inspired and supported by a wonderful creative writing class, Pinilla began to write more and has had the opportunity to publish her work and share her writing in different outlets. She is looking forward to continue learning and growing into the writing world now as a new mom to be.

Thanida Rasouy was born in Bangkok, Thailand where the traffic's light always shines in the night. She was an au pair in Nashville who took care of three sweet little kids for two years. After that she moved back from Music city to Bangkok city where she lives now. She is a cool person who lives in a warm city but no matter how warm under the sun it never stops her outgoing and cool style, which inspires her to travel around and write her memoirs down. Now her current job is as a teaching assistant who teaches English to adorable toddlers with their vivid attitudes. She likes travelling and believes in making her own destiny where she can create her own rainbows all around.

Ashley Rivera was born in Clarksville, TN and currently resides in Nashville where she works in the Refugee and Immigration department at Catholic Charities. Her experiences growing up "in-between cultures" have inspired her desire to learn more about the way cultures interact and the inherent desire to be understood. She believes one of the best ways to do this is through sharing stories with one another.

Ajay Sharma was born in New Delhi, India. He traveled throughout India and a few foreign countries before moving to the USA in 1997. He lived about six years in the Tampa area before moving to Nashville in 2003. He was associated with manufacturing of intra-ocular lenses, which are implanted in eyes after cataract surgery. He is interested in learning about unmanifested/nonvisible or physical aspects of life in general and specifically of human life. He is reading and learning more about those topics and is also involved in teaching yoga and other aspects of spirituality.

Karla Vazquez is originally from Mexico City and has lived in Nashville, TN with her partner, baby and two beautiful dogs for the last 17 years. Karla Vazquez currently works as the Senior Manager of Institutional Giving for the United We Dream Network (UWD), the first and largest immigrant youth-led organization in the nation. In 2009, Karla got involved in organizing and advocacy in the immigrant rights youth movement as an undocumented youth leader in JUMP (Jovenes Unidos por Un Mejor Presente)—a youth project of the Tennessee Immigrant Rights Coalition (TIRRC) and started her youth organizing and activism. She received the Orgullo Hispano/Unsung Hero Award by Conexión Americas in 2010 for her tireless work in organizing

and advocating the passage of the DREAM Act, a proposed federal bill that will open the path to citizenship for undocumented youth. As a first-generation student in her family she also founded the STUDY Foundation (Scholars in Tennessee Uplifting the Dreams of Youth) in 2010, a program created to help first generation students achieve higher education, and helped fundraise close to \$30,000 given in scholarships to local first-generation students. Her community involvement includes volunteering with the YMCA Latino Achievers, Futuro, and the TN Latin American Chamber of Commerce where she currently serves as the Vice President of its Board of Directors. Karla graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Accounting and Management with an International Business Concentration from Lipscomb University in the fall of 2012.

Vicky Villalta Gil is from Barcelona, Spain. She came to Nashville, TN in 2012 to pursue new professional opportunities. She expected to come back to Europe after four years but in the meantime she met her husband and her stepson, so her return has been postponed indefinitely. She doesn't define herself as a writer, or anything really. She joined the creative working workshop because she is interested in almost anything that occupies her mind and differs from her daily work responsibilities. She now lives in Durham, NC.

Sheen Yu was born in Zigong, China in the late 1970s. She is the only child of her parents, but she drifted far away after she grew up: the most remote endpoints in east China and north China, then across the globe to the U.S. Sheen holds a Ph.D. in bioinformatics and is a full-time research fellow. Nevertheless, Sheen has always enjoyed reading and writing in her spare time, and she plans to write more in the future.

Sheyla Zito was born in São Paulo, Brazil and had a formal Business & Computer Science career climbing the corporate ladder. Ever since she moved to the United States at the end of 2013, she started her own business, got involved with Creative and Expressive Writing and volunteered at Gilda's Club, conceiving and delivering Workshops for People impacted by Cancer. She is a passionate person who loves writing, reading, learning, sharing, riding her bike, walking, painting, sewing and quilting, and especially witnessing and enjoying the beauties of nature. Back in Brazil she had two articles published in two motivational books, NLP and Coaching related. Challenges brought self-development opportunities that helped her focus on the true meaning of things, people, and life. As a Life Coach, she helps people reach their full potential, become their best version with her leadership style of being an example in leading the way, overcoming obstacles, optimism, going above & beyond, making the difference, and paying it forward. She's been with the Creative Writing classes for Immigrants and Refugees ever since the very first edition and is committed to be with the group as long as it lasts.

Nadreen Bagoun

Home

“If y’all can’t be quiet, I’m kicking you off this bus,” boomed the bus driver’s voice, chiding the rowdy group of teenagers cackling at the back of the bus and interrupting Kamal’s thoughts. As usual, the teenagers immediately dialed down their merriment, but it would only be a few minutes before the noise returned to its original volume and the bus driver rolled her eyes in feigned disapproval. It was a weekly ritual that Kamal had come to cherish. Every Friday afternoon, he rode the bus to the Goodwill across town. It was the nice part of town, where he could escape the dirty streets of his dangerous neighborhood and the failure that was his life. He didn’t mind the teenagers’ joyful noise for it reminded him of the time he once thought he could conquer the world. Their incessant chatter always took him back to the deafening din of the neighborhood market where he spent most of his youth selling falafel alongside his father. It wasn’t pleasant, but it was reassuring.

A few months ago, Kamal had believed that his weekly bus journeys were coming to an end, having finally bought a car, a 1993 Toyota Corolla—a prize in his eyes—and a piece of junk, in the words of Halima. An unbiased observer would surely agree with Halima. The car’s condition was so bad it couldn’t even pass the emissions test. But Kamal couldn’t be bothered, even though the car hadn’t worked for months. Bakri, his mechanic friend, had taken a look at it and promised to fix it when he got a chance. As for Halima, she was just a pessimist who only knew to criticize his choices.

Kamal had never understood what motivated Halima to marry him. As far back as he could remember she had always seemed to despise him. She only had tenderness for their children who, he had come to believe, had inherited her disdain of him.

“Final stop,” the bus driver announced loudly, once more snatching Kamal from his thoughts. As he walked off the bus, Kamal smiled goodbye to the bus driver. This part of the journey always made him happy. There was a calming aura that engulfed Kamal every time he reached this part of his journey. The first time he knew this feeling was the day he landed in America twelve years ago. It was not a feeling he had thought possible before then. It was then that a long forgotten memory had visited him: America, so joyous, bright, and full of surprises, reminded him of Amna. She was his first, no, only, love. Amna had been the next-door neighbor and the kindest girl he’d ever known. When she smiled, she carried the world within her eyes.

The day Amna moved to the neighborhood, Kamal had been home sulking, as usual. Earlier that day, the neighborhood children had chased him home chanting, “Kamal, the donkey.” Their end-of-the-year examination results had come in, and he’d scored the lowest grade. Seeing it as an opportunity to change his mood, his mother made him come out and help the new neighbors carry their furniture. He immediately got to work, anxious to do anything to distract himself from that morning’s debacle. Tired and still dejected after a few rounds of hauling furniture back and forth, Kamal barely noticed the outstretched hand offering him a glass of water. “Are you going to help us but refuse to drink our water?” Kamal hadn’t noticed his new neighbor until then. No girl in the neighborhood had ever been kind to him. Not only was he short and chubby; he also sold falafel on the street like a helpless woman. *Just wait until she sees you flipping falafel in that giant pan*, he thought to himself. But the next morning, when she walked past his falafel stand, her face lit up with a brilliant smile and she walked over to have a

brief chat. Every day, Amna would stop by the falafel stand to exchange a few words with Kamal and his father. Every day, Kamal would fail to work up the courage to profess his love. How come he hadn't thought of Amna for so many years? *What a fool*, Kamal murmured to himself ruefully, bringing himself out of one of many bursts of reminiscences, lately more and more frequent.

Inside the Goodwill, Kamal's wandering steps came to an abrupt stop. There it was, like a dream, the most enchanting dress he'd ever seen. It was a dotted black and pink dress like no other. The loudness of the pink color, interrupted by numerous black polka dots, felt like a party and reminded him of happier times. It was the most beautiful dress he'd ever seen, and he wanted to buy it for Amna. As he gazed at the dress in wonderment, mesmerized by its cheerful patterns, Kamal saw Amna in it and felt her presence, despite the ocean that separated them. Never mind that it was a size zero and would not fit her; he was buying it for the Amna of his heart, of his youth; the one whose smile made the falafel stand bearable if just for a few moments; the Amna before Naji the shopkeeper came laden with gifts and took her for his bride.

Alarmed by the melancholic turn his thoughts were taking, Kamal quickly placed the dress in his shopping cart and continued with his mission. Aisle by aisle he swept the bleak store, looking for other people's unwanted treasures to bring home to his loved ones when he would finally visit. Eventually. He'd planned to visit for six years now. Or, as his wife liked to remind him, for eight suitcases. This would be his ninth.

Halima, she gloated over his aborted dreams. His thoughts went to the now abandoned 1993 Toyota Corolla he bought for five hundred dollars, the latest in a string of laughable defeats. *Who buys a five-hundred-dollar, million-year-old car from a shady neighbor and insists they'll fix it even though they'd never so much as driven a car?* But it was his dream car. Halima

never had a chance to talk him out of this naïve transaction, however; if he'd told her, she would have told him that he was being swindled. But he was not going to let her ruin this too. *Are you kidding me?* he imagined Halima screaming. *Who dreams of owning a piece of junk?* He did. It reminded him of home, the only thing he longed for these days.

Kamal never thought it possible to own a car until the neighbor, Ustaz, bought a brand new Toyota Corolla in 1993. Cars in Khartoum were rare then, especially in slums like the one where he lived. Ustaz treated his car so delicately, better than his own children. He only drove it on special occasions, covered it any time it was parked, and washed it every day, dirty or not. As much as Kamal despised Ustaz and his haughty demeanor, Kamal envied him the elite status that came with the car. People stood up in respect every time Ustaz drove by, their conversations ceasing as if undeserving of sharing the same air as the 1993 Toyota Corolla.

When, for the millionth time, Rodney, the drunk neighbor, leaning against his dark green 1993 Toyota Corolla, asked Kamal if he had a couple of dollars to spare, Kamal, never the cunning man, saw the opportunity of a lifetime. "You ask for change every day. How about you sell me that car so you won't have to ask anymore?" Not believing his sudden good fortune, Rodney quickly took out his keys. "Sure, man. How much you got?"

Everybody knew that Rodney's car was a piece of junk, that it couldn't be driven farther than the liquor store. Yet in his attempt to seize the moment, Kamal simply forgot. The only thing he thought of was how everybody back home would respect him the way they had respected Ustaz when Kamal returned home and drove past them in his 1993 Toyota Corolla. Never mind the impracticality of the idea of transporting a junk car across the Atlantic. Kamal only had to walk home to be made aware of that. Home was always where he learned about the dimwittedness of his actions.

A sense of dread descended upon Kamal as he neared the last unvisited aisle in the store because it meant he would soon have to start heading home. How he wished he had a different home. It felt like a tomb every time he entered. The crowded furniture, some secondhand, some picked up from someone's trash, and none matching, always closed in on him. The heavily layered drapes, one on top of another and never parted, made him feel isolated. Halima was always cooking, so the house smelled like a bag of onions all the time. Why she never burned *bakhoor* like the other women he never understood. Maybe she understood that she had occupied no space in his heart so she never made any effort to get close to him. They married without having met before. Their mothers had been friends, so his mother recommended Halima. *Halima is the most beautiful girl in the neighborhood; what an excellent homemaker; I never see her talking to boys in dark corners at parties like the other girls.* Kamal had obliged, mainly because he had no reason to object. Over the years, Kamal had come to believe that Halima deliberately made the house unwelcoming to spite him, to repulse him into one day leaving and never returning. Yet here he was, arms heavy with cheap, badly thought-out gifts for nieces and nephews he'd never met, heading home.

At the checkout register, an unexplained feeling of relief overcame Kamal. He smiled. The elderly cashier was folding Amna's black and pink dress so tenderly, as if it reminded her of a lost love too. Timidly she whispered, "Such a gorgeous dress." Kamal smiled again. The cashier's approval of his pick somehow reassured him that Amna would approve too. He asked the cashier to place the dress in a separate bag. This time, he didn't refuse to round up his total when asked. He was in the mood to help someone out today. Amna. Why had he never thought of marrying her? He'd heard that Naji died a few years ago. Surely Amna would have no objection to marrying him, a returned émigré, with dollars to spare. *That's it. I'm going to ask*

Amna to marry me. Such a simple thought, yet this was the first time it crossed his mind. “Thank you,” he cheerfully told the cashier. “I’m going back to my home on Friday.” He’d made up his mind as the words were escaping his mouth. The cashier would be the first and last soul he would tell of his plans. As he approached the door, he envisioned himself walking through the Khartoum airport gates, his family lined up to finally reunite, old faces that, until then, were young in his memory, and young ones he’d never seen before, all covered in tears of both sorrow from this lengthy separation and gratitude for reuniting once again. Amna would be there too, still seventeen, smiling at him, the same shy smile that captivated him forty years ago. How he would smile back at her, relieved that she had forgiven him for having lived a whole lifetime without her. *Amna*, he murmured, *I’m coming, ja-yeek.*

No one could recount the exact details, for it all happened so fast, but bystanders all agreed that it was not the truck driver’s fault. The police decided against charging the driver with homicide. According to witnesses, the man walked out of the Goodwill and straight into traffic. He was smiling and seemed to be saying something. Maybe he was deaf, or blind; he certainly was oblivious to his surroundings. Maybe he was suicidal. One person thought he saw him slow down as the truck drew nearer. Everyone knew he was dead the moment he was struck, if not from the collision with the truck, then from the force of the trauma of his body hitting the ground after projecting several feet into the air. His bags, mostly filled with rags, scattered all over the pavement. One by one, the rags disappeared underneath the tires of cars rolling by.

Dikshya Bastakoty

The Millennial at the Coffee Shop

The first “modern” civilizations began 15-20 thousand years ago. From the age of cave paintings and stone tools to modern computers and global societies of today, the history of human civilization is marked by many episodes of large revolutionary changes that upended the existing social norms and heralded new eras. In the arc of human history, the social evolution over the last few centuries trumps the changes brought about over tens of thousands of years in the early part of the human social evolution. The digital technologies developed in the last several decades have shaped the human race so significantly that the newest generation of human adult today can be arguably said to differ from preceding generations of Homo sapiens as much as the early Homo sapiens differed from our closest neighboring species the Neanderthal.

Shaped by the digital and technological advancement that nurtured its growth, the youngest of the human adults has embraced technology wholeheartedly to the point of melding with it. What is this elusive creature, which, over just a few generations, has managed to diverge enough to become practically a new subspecies of the Homo sapiens? Credited with disrupting and challenging every cultural staple of the modern human civilization—from cable TV, to books, to soap bars, to napkins—why has this elusive being chosen to leave by the wayside the cultural norms established by generations of humans before it? Matured into the world surrounded by wealth, technology literally in its palm and lap, and an utter disregard for

traditions, who is this mysterious being studied by many but understood by none? Who is...the Millennial?

Known to scientists for its deep aversion to eye contact and face-to-face conversations, the Millennial can most often be found peering at its favorite tool, the smartphone, and communicating with peers or potential mates using adept synchronous motions of its thumbs. Scientists have posited that the skilled use of the opposable thumbs for nonverbal communication by the Millennial is the most novel use of this organ since the pre-human *Homo habilis* pioneered the use of the organ to develop the first tools.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the Millennial is its avoidance of all social venues popularized by humans of the non-millennial generations. Abandoning the skating rink, the club, the pub, the disco—all venues highly favored by other *Homo sapiens* in their youth, the Millennial can be seen congregating with its peers at the coffee shop. This is the best spot yet to observe the Millennial in its most natural setting. Armed with a multitude of tools with brightly lit screens, the Millennial tends to spend many hours intently peering at those screens, its concentration broken only to capture photographic evidence of presence at the location. Records from the world-wide web identified by researchers have shown that the photographic evidence is shared with social groups for optimal “likes” and adulating comments, to signal high social standing, and to attract potential mates.

The coffee shop is also where the Millennial is observed in its most preferred choice of clothing: “the workout gear.” Expressing its aversion to formal clothing, and bright pigmentation, the Millennial appears at the coffee shop donning soft and formless clothing in various shades of black and gray. The female prefers a formfitting attire termed “yoga pants,” designed to accentuate and optimally display the musculature in the limbs sculpted through many

hours of intensely competitive activities termed collectively as “boutique fitness.” The Millennial female is also most commonly seen with a tower of hair strategically arranged over her head to simultaneously signal an “I-don’t-care-to-shower” attitude to a potential mate, while indicating “hip-ness” to another female. The male similarly prefers shapeless fabric in dark shades.

However, the ultimate gear of the alpha male is “the shorts” favored regardless of weather conditions, strategically designed to display muscle tone, and to indicate that the male “cross-fits” to a potential mate of the same or opposite sex. The upper body of the alpha male is similarly covered in fabric designed to optimally display the musculature in arms and shoulders.

As strong as the Millennial’s preference for the “fit” or “ripped” mate is its aversion to a fellow Millennial who uses frequent eye contact during conversations. Denoted collectively by the term “awkward,” such interactions are avoided at any cost. For this reason, the Millennial is known to limit its interaction with other humans of the non-millennial classes to a minimum.

This also explains a tendency that has been observed and documented by many experts, whereby the Millennials migrate away in large groups from venues, both physical and digital, that begin to be frequented by other humans, even if the venue once belonged to, or was created by, a Millennial. Such mass exodus from a social “watering hole” when the exclusivity of the venue is lost has been termed “Facebook-ing” by experts.

The coffee shop, however, is more than a social spot for the Millennial. The coffee shop is the hunting ground where the Millennial not only goes to set itself apart from other humans, but also to showcase its intellectual prowess. Shying away from the “offices” filled with humans of other generations, the Millennial is often found “gigging” at coffee shops. And even the rare millennial who is found at an “office” five days a week, detaches itself from the disengaged and disenchanting office-self at the coffee shop and engages in its “passion project” with enthusiasm.

No wonder the millennial has collectively dared to challenge existing social norms and create its own social, intellectual ecosystem. The coffee shop is arguably where the Millennial has invented many of the ideas and means of doing so, from new ways of engaging with fellow Millennials to new models of entertainment and eating habits. Appearances aside, the Millennial at the coffee shop is in fact, a force to be reckoned with.

Silvia Buttazzoni

Third Floor of Pirona Street

“Hi, sweetheart.” This was how you greeted me every time I came over to visit. You were there, standing with a big smiley face and your arms wide open, ready to squeeze me. Sometimes I did find your front door left ajar. You already knew it was me, before I even had the chance to ring your doorbell at 12:30 pm on Wednesdays. You didn’t even bother double checking if it really was me, you just trusted your sixth sense and went straight to let me into the building and left the front door open. You used to leave it half open and run immediately back to your hot pans in the kitchen, waiting for me to come up.

When taking the elevator, it took me less than two minutes to get up there. It would have taken a few more minutes if I’d decided to walk up the stairs all the way to the third floor. I’ve never liked doing the stairs, and the elevator was always my number one pick, even if sometimes it really took forever to wait for it to get to the ground floor. The best part of getting the elevator was that once I was in I could check myself out in the four mirrors that surrounded it.

Then there I was, at the third floor of Pirona Street. I never knew what your apartment number was; I just knew how to get there: the first door on the left as soon as I walked out of the elevator. I used to open the door wide open and say, "Hi, Grandma," in a loud Italian tone of voice.

The kitchen table was always set in the same way: it took up just half of the table, the right part of it. The white dishes decorated with little blue mountain flowers perfectly matched the shiny water glasses of the same floral pattern. The dishware had to be rigorously selected, a plate on the bottom and a bowl on top. Heaven forbid that we eat two different types of food on the same plate. The napkin, next to the silverware, was always a cloth cotton napkin, slightly worn with an intense perfume of clean laundry.

At the center of the table there was one of your favorite things: a wicker basket with different types of fresh artisan bread that you'd bought meticulously a few hours ahead at your trusted bakery a few blocks away from your house. There was always a large variety of different types of bread in the basket and you loved listing them all out loud: white bread with olives, wheat bread with poppy seeds, sweet pumpkin bread, soft milk bread, crunchy zoccoletti bread... and all that freshly baked bread emanated an inebriating perfume that grew my appetite.

Finding fresh bread on the table always made me happy mainly because I was not used to having it at my house. As soon as I sat down at the table, you told me not to forget to wash my hands. You used to do it even when I was grown up and an adult. As they say, a leopard doesn't change his spots. So without any objection I would head to the bathroom and while lost in thought I washed my hands in hot water with your Dove soap bar.

I always ended up staring at that weird brush holder that you kept on the vanity shelf. It was really ugly. Of a bright red color with some colorful writing stitched on it. I am sure that was one of the many presents given to you by the lady you used to work for. I never left your house empty handed, every time I left it was with a knickknack of little value that I loved. The one I remember the most is a blue traveling envelope from a hotel you stayed in. As soon as I got back

home, I filled it up with all my make up and body lotions. When you are a kid you settle for little.

Once I was done washing my hands I saw a big plate full of hot pasta that was waiting for me on the table. Most of the time it was dressed with one my favorite sauces at that time: cream, crunchy smoked ham, and mushrooms. Just thinking about it now I get hungry. Dad would always say that your pasta was overcooked, and you would get right back at him telling him that it wasn't your fault if he liked eating raw and very al dente pasta. I liked it anyways. It actually was that good that I always went for a second plate. A fact known well to anybody is that you, as a good traditional Italian grandmother, always cooked extra: it was just you and me at the table but the food was more than enough to feed a football team. By the time I was done with my second serving of food, you had already told me at least three stories, of which at least two of them were absurd.

Like that time that you told me about getting on a helicopter and crossing the Atlantic all the way to Argentina. I mean, for real? Or that other time that you got mad at your neighbor, who always, according to you, was on his deck staring at you while you were changing your clothes. Not to mention one of my favorite stories of all time: the appearance one day of a spirit in your bathroom that told you that you didn't need any make up to be beautiful and since then you never used it ever again, just a little bit of perfume. Let's be honest, you were full of crap sometimes but I didn't care if those stories were true or not because I had fun listening to them no matter what.

After my second plate of pasta I was very full and the only thing that sounded good at that moment was to lie down on the couch. Not even enough time to catch up with my breath and you were back at the stove getting me more food, that was the time of the famous "lemme give

you just a little tiny bit,” which translated to at least half a pound of tasting your meatloaf that you prepared the day before to make sure all the flavors came together. And that never came without a side dish. Normally a medley of seasonal roasted vegetables. What to say, your cooking was definitely a yummy homemade style, rustic and simple with an explosion of flavors but at very same time it was very heavy with all the butter and oil you used. There was not one time where I didn’t feel my belly flaring up. As soon as I mentioned to you that I was really full you stood up and went towards the credenza, you opened the cabinet door where you kept all the million different kinds of homemade herbal grappa and limoncello that honestly all tasted so harsh.

“No, Grandma, no grappa for me!” Not an easy task to convince a stubborn woman like you. A few minutes after our lunch it was your favorite moment. There you were, back at the stove turning the flame on and placing the three-serving moka on top of it. You let it go on low flame and as soon as you heard the coffee coming up you switched to medium for just a few seconds. You always said that that was the little trick you need to make a great coffee. It was my job pouring it in tiny espresso cups and getting the sugar bowl out of the credenza.

In the meantime, you sat down at the head of the table waiting for the coffee to be served. You really liked that I never forgot to give you a little spoon along with your cup of coffee, even though you didn’t really need it cause you didn’t like to put sugar in your coffee. You just loved knowing that I remembered that little detail: you liked stirring your coffee with a spoon “to get all its aromas mixed well together,” as you used to say. There you were, happy like a little kid, enjoying your steamy espresso. Every time you asked for a little bit more, if there was any left.

Then it was time for me to leave, story after story until it was already 2 pm and I had to go back to school. There was not one time where you didn’t offer to walk me all the way down

to my car. Rain or no rain, it didn't matter. While we were waiting for the elevator there was always time for a few more jokes. Once we were at the exit of the apartment building you loved to pause in front of the mailboxes and show me that yours was always already empty from the mail because you liked taking it inside your home first thing in the morning before anybody else. That always made you proud for some reason. A few more steps and we were in the parking lot, two kisses on the cheeks, a big hug and that was the moment when I thanked you for making me gain a few pounds with another of your lunches and you thanked me for stopping by. I got in my car. You moved to one side and I backed up with my car. You waved at me one more time smiling and I smiled back at you from my rearview mirror. Sweet to know, that also the last time we said goodbye to each other, we were smiling.

Mario Cardiel

Food, Family, and Fronteras

I

“What a wonderful time it is! The most wonderful time of the year!” The car is off and the radio goes with it. We get out of the car and there is a light snow curtain falling down on us. I clear my face of the melting snowflakes and see that there is an already crowded parking lot; the flickering colorful lights on the storefront sign, denoting the store’s name, “El Mercado,” aren’t all on. The night is crisp, almost encouragingly enough to want to put on another sweater but one more layer and I wouldn’t be able to enjoy the wintery atmosphere in this moonless night. We reach “La Juarez” taco truck that sits next to the store, it seems to be struggling to fend off the hungry crowd, just as they are likely to struggle to stay true to their origins. Once we enter the door the first thing that catches my eye are the piñatas hanging from the ceiling, this time of the year we see lots of star-shaped ones; it was fun when we made them in la primaria, back then the effort of thirty kids in the classroom made the endeavor a lot easier but nowadays my siblings and I have to start a month in advance to layer the countless coats of newspaper sheets. I look around and my instinct draws me to the candy stands, will my parents buy me some candy, perhaps some nueces garampiñadas? Maybe if I tell them I haven’t had such treasure since they moved us here, then they might feel guilty enough to buy me some. The traditional decorations and displays in

the “mexican” supermarket are only accentuated by the vociferous crowd coming in and out of this tiendita; we are all trying to get that last minute shopping done, not for electronics and unnecessary toys but for ingredients of the feast that this navidad brings. I have to juggle through various tight spots in the aisles looking for the condiments I’m in charge of finding; I notice that the younger generations can’t seem to find or remember the ingredients that the older students of life always recollect rapidly to create the most delicious heartwarming buñuelos. The sugary flaky delicacy is a staple my homeland can offer, now we just make them at our duplex. End of the year festivities aren’t like they used to be, my mom said this year we’d be making tamales and champurrado to add them to the table menu as a commemoration of those relatives and friends that have left us, especially those whom we never got a chance to say goodbye to when we left home; I always struggled to like the denseness of the champurrado, my dad said to think of it as a thicker hot chocolate milk, but only time would bring my taste buds to appreciate the nectar it truly is. Let’s see what else is on the list: Tecojote, manzana, caña, naranja, pera, canela entera, piloncillo, y pasas sounds like my dad is making calientitos but surely he will add some tequila to the punch to add a little kick to it. I see my dad with el carnicero ordering the meat for the tamales; I prefer the green ones with jalapeño and queso oaxaca over the red ones with pulled pork and red chili sauce, although I know the highlight will be the dulce ones with sugar, pineapple, and raisins. Back in the day, the kids’ job was to soak the maiz husks in the bathtub, but now since I’m all grown up I get to spread the maza over the husks to set the filling in. My sister is undecided on which papitas to get, I tell her to hurry and make a decision, I simply tell myself “betcha I can eat more than one” so I grab two bags, one for me and the second one for my youngest sibling. She and I catch up with my mom and my younger brother, they’re by the fruits and vegetables stand where she’s collecting the remaining ingredients for the punch.

Everyone seems to be ready to venture out to the checkout counter. I see a couple of guys reloading international phone calling cards to call their relatives back home, I don't remember the last time I called my cousins. Cousins are always your best friends out there in the vecindario, we used to play real "football" endlessly into the night or at least until our moms would call us in with a whistle, then "gol gana" would ensue; gol gana was a serious business, it was played to the death and whichever team would score the next goal not only won the game but also bragging rights until the next match. Back at the store, we're just one customer away so I put back the locally run spanish newspaper; the paper always ran stories at least a week old but it was still nice to be able to read how things stood back home in spanish. I never understood why the store only had one cash register, but no one seems to mind. Waiting in line in the tiendita gives everyone a reason to talk with strangers about what they were cooking at home this time of the year, somehow people even managed to encounter compatriots from the same pueblito that they came from; any sign of the hometown is held onto for dear life. Even though it's late at night, customers keep coming in and they bring along a gentle snow parade and a cold façade that warms up as soon as they enter through that candid and folkloric tiendita in the corner. I see in their faces how life was good at that moment, just while they were in that store, as they felt like they were home. We reached the counter, paid for our groceries, and went home. The year was 2005.

II

The end is near, but is it?

The day has come, the day is

Here

365 have come

And Gone,

light up the candles to let loved ones

See

their way back home. The soft buttery touch of

Grandma's

Pan de Muerto recipe and its naranja scent sticks

Around.

Rejoice, the dead are alive with

Love.

From tomb to tomb jumping around you can

Find

my grandfather's playful alebrije. Fruit tea is

What

He liked, maybe with some mezcal.

You

Can bring calaveras de azucar but they will

Love

Your intentions more.

Until

Night time we celebrate, come and disembark

Your

Sorrow since this is a time of joy and

Life...

Play the guitar to revive memories lost, they never
fade away even when they become dust.

The year was 1997.

III

Mario A. Cardiel Fernandez
0112 Who-knows-where Ave.
Pre-existence, LO 35813-2134
Unknown Month, No Year

Human Ancestors

5589 Everywhere-on-Earth Dr.

Afterlife, VE 14423-3314

Dear Ancestors,

My name is Mario Abraham Cardiel Fernandez. If you're reading this it means I've transcended this plane and I'm now on my way to the next great adventure: Life on Earth. By the time I leave this place, most of you will have left Earth and we will just have to wait to see each other again. I hope everyone is doing well there, we've never met but know that I care deeply for you. Remember that we will have lived on Earth in different occasions but we're still connected by this strong bond called family. I'm always here for you. What's on the other side of the veil? I like to think that there's something more exciting beyond this phase. Sadly, once I depart from this side my eyes and memory will forget everything I learned here.

I'm leaving my current state of being with peace and encouragement. I'd say it is an age of diversity awakening; we have had marvelous scientific advancements but not all for the improvement of our lives, politically tense and divisive times, spiritually challenged development, artistically playful creatures we have become, but in the end we are still childlike and we need to make progress elsewhere. Sadly, hunger persists, thirst has never gone away, and

we continue to pollute our habitat as well as our bodies. The hope for a better place was never lost; we looked for innovative ideas, searching for that beacon of light that would illuminate our path to salvation. Alas, how jealous I've become of the simplicity of the times when you were here, things have changed. We have become the inadequate sustenance of this dying place. I think about my mistakes and how you'd condemn them. I hope that wherever I end up in your world I'll be free of my decisions.

What's next? I feel dissatisfied, unfulfilled as well, even though I know the suffering is coming to an end. What can I tell you about myself you ask. Those gorgeous afternoons I spent with songs of the tumultuous crowds, coming and going, dead and alive, all at the same pace. I imagine it can't compare to what life you were assigned; only in books did I hear of the silence of nature, of the sound the heartbeat produced in the middle of a lonesome forest. I tried to travel as much as I could, most revealing trips were those with no return. We moved around a lot when I was a kid, not counting the numerous business trips I took with my dad. We ended up in the land of the free, but it was never the same. I was a different person, for better or for worse. I met my wife, made new friends and resorted to simply being happy. I learned to become a person of self motivation which led to success, eloquent to my advantage, but rudely impatient at times. I'm not proud of what I did at times. I am sorry. My mistakes made me grow and be ready, learning from them allowed me to overcome difficult times. Life delivered and I was happy. I spent my life trying to be a good person to everyone I met, I wasn't perfect, many can attest. Oh, how I could have used some of your advice. I was desperate at times, but content nonetheless. I hope you'd have told me everything was going to be okay. I've had significant improvements since I first arrived here. I know it's not over yet. Were you happy with your life? Tell me more.

Dear relative, I'm hoping for a new chance in your world. I will think of you every time I make the decision to take a chance. I will think about your ways and how I am simply improving them, or so I imagine. We are connected, dear old friend, by our actions and voices but more so by what we have left undone. I'll take up the torch of your flailing spark; don't worry and take a rest, because I want to learn from your leftovers. In preparation for my departure, I flipped through the human history books, looking at those pictures that showed what you must have gone through to stay afloat, a lively array of spectacles you witnessed. What was it like? Tell me what it was like to have lived in revolutionary times, times that now seem so inadequate, yet required such resourcefulness. Did you meet any world history characters? Did you become one? What were your goals and desires? Will we converge at any other points besides our bloody lines? So many questions but we'll have all the time needed to answer them later on. I had good and bad days. What were yours like? Did you have to milk a cow one day just to forget her the next and escape persecution? I wish I could have been there with you, just like I wish you could have been here for me. Will we ever cross paths without me knowing? I grow with excitement for the look of every face I will get to see, but I yearn for a chance to meet those that I will never see. Don't let go! I am coming soon.

I'm ready to move on, I think my time is near. Dear ancestor, what is next in my learning curve? What happened to you? Why did you become so silent? I saw pictures of some of you, only a few generations back. If I could only see you now, I could perhaps decipher my next step. Tell my grandmother I miss her. I can't wait to see her again. That toothless grin was worth an incandescent light even in the darkest of nights. I crave those crunchy churros she'd sell from her candy stand. Madre, Padre, I'm coming home. I have missed you guys. There were times when I resented you. I blamed you for leading me into a life I disliked, I was furious that I didn't get a

say in the life I landed. Later, I discovered I had a say in how I could lead my life and I'm at peace now; no regrets, I don't have time. I hope I made you proud because you never disappointed. I love you all and I miss you the most. I looked for you everywhere I went, even in made up conversations with myself like the ones you used to have with your own fathers and mothers. I'm sure you're happy since you've seen them, now it's my turn to see you. I'm coming home.

Dear ancestor, what would you have changed about your life? I want to know so I'll be prepared for mine. Are you listening? Is anyone out there? Anyways, I'm dying as I write these words but feel happy that I'll be born human this time, I'm going to Earth now. I'll see you there soon, dear ancestor. The year is 1992.

Mucho Amor,

Mario

P.S. What are dogs and cats? I keep hearing about them. I'm curious to meet them. I hear fabulous things about their affection.

Marcela Castaño Velez

Faith

January 19, 2016 was an important day for Perla, a lovely Latina woman. It was a winter, foggy, gray and pretty cool morning. Her first winter and all was strange: new country, new language, new culture, new weather, new clothes, new people, and she felt in another world. When she woke up at 6:30, she felt strange because she had started a new routine far from her former professional life. She had said goodbye to her office, her career in design, her high-heeled shoes, and her fashionable bags four months ago when she left her country to chase her dreams.

On the other side of the city, an American mother with her little baby girl waited to meet Perla. Perla felt awful, nervous and anxious, she had never carried a baby before. Last night she had prepared a piece of paper with baby's words with their Spanish translations: bottle, milk, wipes, diapers, potty, teddy bear, nap and so on... "Ohhh too many new words for me," Perla said while she was practicing on her way to meet the mother and baby.

Toc-Toc! Perla's husband knocked on the door and the baby's mother opened it and she said, "Welcome." Then they sat in the living room and went over care instructions, guidance, and questions while Perla's husband translated back and forth. Perla felt stupid, frustrated, and illiterate. She needed her husband to express her opinions and ideas. "This is too much. I can't do it. I need to leave." These were Perla's thoughts until the baby's mother said, "Wait a minute, I will find the baby, she is on the second floor." Perla looked desperately at her husband with tears

in her eyes and he gave her a huge hug while he said, “Don’t worry, my sweetheart. You will be ok, you can do this.” The mother and the baby came back to the room again, and she said, “Perla, it’s your turn,” and then Perla took the baby. The little baby girl who was only five months old opened her eyes, saw her new Nanny and Perla thought, “I can do it. I must have faith.” And in this moment, they started their beautiful, strong and lovely relationship.

The communication with the little baby girl was simple, because her parents wanted a bilingual girl so Perla talked with the little baby girl in Perla’s native language, Spanish. This was an advantage because the only difficulty that Perla had was needing to use the translator for texting the baby’s mother about the baby’s care. The days passed and Perla felt more comfortable because now she wasn’t carrying a delicate, fragile and jelly little baby anymore. Instead, changing diapers became a game, and burping the baby was funny.

Perla seized the time to study English while the little baby girl was sleeping in the crib next to her. Perla constantly checked the baby’s breath because she knew that taking care of a baby was a huge responsibility, and also she couldn’t allow anything bad to happen to the little girl because the baby already had stolen Perla’s heart.

Perla felt alone, and in many cases very sad because she was far away from home, learning the lifestyle in a new country, in these difficult moments she only had the little baby girl to talk to about her feelings. She told stories about her family’s reunions, her friends’ parties, her dance performances and all that she missed from home, and the little baby girl nodded and smiled as if she could understand, giving Perla motivation to continue achieving her dreams. When Perla had a moment to herself, she thought about her old life, missing her meetings, her designs and her projects back home, but when the baby’s gas interrupted her thoughts, Perla

quickly came back to reality and realized that she needed to change the diaper. She repeated to herself, “Keep an open mind. Keep an open mind,” while she was cleaning up the poop.

The days continued on and their love grew faster, the little baby girl used to wait for Perla every morning with a huge smile and in the evenings, she would cry when Perla left. These moments were the best reward for her job. Taking care of the little baby girl wasn't a job anymore: this was her passion, and the medicine for her soul. She felt strong with the baby in her arms because the little baby girl gave her confidence, motivations, and a true friendship, outside this, her world was difficult. She couldn't legally work, she couldn't study, and she couldn't communicate with other people. She couldn't understand anything, the people in the southern USA spoke too fast. Her world was gray, but the little baby girl had painted her world with colors of smiles, glances, and toys. Faith could change Perla's life, she achieved feeling positive and continuing to build her life in this country, and the little baby girl would always be in her heart.

Veronica Castillo

The Awkwardness of Life

I moved here about eight years ago. Sometimes from another planet I believe. It can be so awkward sometimes—actually life is awkward all the time. There is no moment in life that is not awkward. Even when you're by yourself and discover something new about you...even the comfortable becomes awkward.

For example, meeting people when you are an adult. Adulting, are we even adults? That's another whole can of worms, like seriously, let me tell you a story. Meet Paul and Laura. They just met, like you and I. Nice to meet you. Then boom! Sexual awkwardness. No one wants to talk about it but everyone wants to know about it. When is the right timing? Ask your neighbor when they think is the right timing. Would you even dare to ask? Funny, isn't it? So many different answers to the same question. Let's get back to the Paul and Laura story so it makes sense. Laura is my roommate's girl. Paul is a long-time acquaintance of mine. He was staying with us for a while till he could find a place. I think I've known this guy since the 3rd grade. But Laura had never met him before that night and Paul asked her, "Do you have sex with your boyfriend while you're on your period?" out of nowhere. No other question popped into his head but that? Ok, buddy. I must say, fair question, my man. I'm looking at it from a learning perspective (Disclaimer: I have my reservations on his timing, and the lack of relationship between them makes it awkward to me. Some might say disrespectful).

One, he goes straight to the source out of his curiosity. He is smart, maybe? He knows his friends would mess with him probably or they have already messed with him, not for “asking” maybe, but because they may not know themselves or are reserved people. He wanted to know the answer. He wanted to grab a complete stranger’s point of view, like doing a survey. My guess is that his delivery may have not been the best for the point of view of that question. The legend says that Laura was scared of Paul because of that question. Wives’ tales, another form of non-social social communication. Asking for a friend.

Other point of view is the only other option, the Social Psycho. Society’s favorite category for the unknown feeling of awkwardness. I think Paul’s delivery may have put him in Laura’s Social Psycho file. Whatever the right answer may be.

Everyone wants to be fully satisfied in life, right? But what is satisfaction? How does it work? How do we achieve it? Are there types? Was Paul looking for satisfaction with that question? Was he looking to satisfy his hunger for research and knowledge? Was he looking for sexual satisfaction in his personal life? Can someone be completely satisfied and happy at the end of the day just by having a satisfying sexual life? Is that why everything seems to revolve around sex? Everything feels like a breeze after an orgasm, in my opinion. No wonder sex sells. I can concentrate better, problems at work seem like spilled milk instead of mountains and many other benefits of that hormone that is released during the experience of an orgasm. The word itself gives you a tingly feeling down there, didn’t it?

What about this other story: Julia is a registered nurse currently finishing her masters, not married, no boyfriend, no time to socialize, no time for exchange of sexual activity. She is always tired. She comes home after work, she eats, she cleans, she studies. Maybe time to watch a movie. She takes a shower and masturbates. Gets to climax. She seems happy with her life. Is

she happy? Momentaneously? Long term? After that pleasurable moment. She can go to sleep now. She knows she is going to be doing all of it again the next day. Kim on the other hand is married, has three kids, and works for a publishing firm as an administrative assistant. Her husband, not a bad guy, a decent guy. What is a decent guy anyway? Anyhow, she wanted to be a success story, a legend, then she fell in love, ha. Her dreams became no longer important. Sacrifice became her new dream. Seeing her husband enjoy himself and smiling was euphoria to her. Why? Sex felt explosive but not always reaching an actual orgasm, but she didn't care. What she felt lasted longer than any orgasm she ever felt before.

Now the things he used to do to make her feel that euphoria are gone. Was it the actual things he did or was it the interested and attentive feelings that he showed her that brought the euphoric reaction to her life? He stopped asking questions so the annoying feeling took place when she talked.

Then, one day everything felt cold and lonely to the point she couldn't just ignore it anymore. She wanted to be that nurse, Julia. The funny thing is that Julia wanted to be her.

The awkwardness of sex and satisfaction. How do we communicate in this era of non-social communication without crossing over to the Social Psycho category? If you do express it, then you are in the limbo whether you are or not in that social category, check the box if... Either way you're stuck in a social category. You get in this state that feels like the *Interstellar* movie with Matthew McConaughey. I feel we, ourselves as a society fucked each other up big time but that's another topic, maybe even more offensive for some, or is it? I'm just another member of society trying to connect the dots of the universe like anybody else in this story. It's like every story connects but we are so afraid to show our faces. We are afraid we can see our actual reactions. What is the key?

I have moved enough times, seen plenty of people. I have spoken with so many people from my hometown and people from all around the world. Nothing changes really, the context is always the same for the most part, the only things that really change are the props, the characters, the scenarios. Stereotypes are a thing but these days they're an offensive thing, we used to laugh at our own stereotypes that we ended up matching to. It was fun because for the most part it was true! Nowadays, just add offensive to anything before or after the action, word, gesture, smell, opinion, you name it and you are rolling with the masses of this era. 100, 200 years from now all of us as a society will be viewed as the Social Psycho or the greatest era of history, just like the medieval and Vikings era are to us. Normal to them...

How can you be yourself if you can't be yourself? Sounds like a question a self-help book can answer with how none of us know shit either but this is how I did it. Good luck, buddy. How do we meet or find the people that match our personalities, everywhere? Work and co-workers (too risky, you still have to pay bills...entrepreneurial people raise your hands), church (too judgmental, too fake, always too something), romantic relationships (where do we find these, again?), friendship (real friends, fake friends, acquaintances, family). How do we make it last? Why do we want it to last? What is it that we want to last? How do you use your acquired knowledge? When do we show our ignorance?

Awkwardness is a beautiful thing in my opinion. It pushes your boundaries and shakes you awake from your comfort zone. Survival mode. He who is offended offends the offender so they all become a big offensive training camp. Go team! How do we become family? How do we make choices? Secrets are kept from each other that will affect the others' decisions. Withheld information. Why? Life needs to be explored as it comes. Why not create a safe environment to do so?

Society is me, is you, is everyone that breathes. Animals too? some may ask. Maybe, who knows. I may offend someone with my opinion, but I'm going to say it someday. Not today because I only have five minutes. You need to buy the book I may write one day to find out...If I get enough fans requesting a continuance of this nonsense I may consider it.

Elizabeth Gallardo

Feeling Galapagos

Giving your guidance to a special soul
who needs to find her own path

Trying to hear your nature beat that
Wish to catch the right heart

Intending to calm down all the hurt you have

You are like the Giant Tortoise that after 100 years
Can give the best advice

You are like the playful Sea Lion that will
Never miss the fun

You are like the blue-footed booby
that always is ready for a dance

Galapagos you are the best in this life.

Alice Gatebuke

The Stirring

In the midst of a valley, the town center came to life. Though heavy rains had pushed through massive mudslides in the months before, everything appeared to be back in order. At the heart of the city center was the bank that opened by chance. Under normal circumstances, the bank had no discernable schedule or consistency in its opening. It was always a relief to townspeople when they stopped by, and the bank just happened to be open that moment. The bank was still closed after the mudslides, though rumor was that it was scheduled to open at least one day this week. That was last week, but still, it might open up any day now.

There was the bar with outdoor seating where men snuck away from their big city jobs to debate politics in the middle of the day. On this day, patrons had started arriving at the bar before noon, and now, in mid afternoon, as many more poured in, the early patrons were already too drunk to make sense or to walk. The one waitress, Abi, hustled quickly, trying to catch up with all the incoming patrons, while the grill master wiped sweat from his brow, both from starting the grill late this morning, and from the unusually hot temperature setting he put it on to try and catch up. It never occurred to him that the rushed and hotter than normal temperature was adding to his problems, since he had thrown out a few batches of grilled green plantains and goat because they were burnt. In fact, the more things went wrong, the more things went wrong.

The corner butchery bustled with clients coming and going, while a long line came out of Mrs. Saidi's tailor shop, and wrapped around a few other shops. Inside the fabric shop, a grandmother fitted her grandchildren with a fabric, sizing up the color and print, trying to gauge the most appropriate for her kin, before they headed to the tailor.

In the middle of the town center in the valley, street kids hawked various merchandise to passersby, including water, grilled peanuts, and sunglasses. The street market was starting to assemble, and women selling onions and tomatoes stacked in descending triangular shapes lined the fronts of the shops and wherever else they could find shade. A group of students dressed in school uniforms played pranks on each other while passing through the town center. They laughed heartily as they teased and poked, and pinched one another.

As though he had been standing there the whole time, a man in military green, a beret, and holding a long rifle stood gazing up and down the street, ruminating on which store to walk into. The townspeople had never seen a gun in person before, and came to a halt, tension building, as their eyes fell on this stranger. Heated debates had buzzed through the town center in the valley over the years, as the townspeople discussed the bravery and cowardice of those who used guns. Some argued that it was the ultimate bravery to use a tool that could take a life in a flash. Only a few could do that. Others argued that it was the ultimate cowardice to use a tool that could take a life in a flash. Who would do such a thing? they wondered. Only the weak, obviously, they would say. And on and on debates raged, always hypothetically, over the years.

And now, a man stood right in their town center holding a gun. The mood shifted as the man in military green with his gun came into focus. He moved slowly, turning methodically, bringing the town center to a stop. It seemed that everyone directed their focus to him. Just like that, the drunken men sobered up, because even though they had never seen a gun, they knew the

havoc it could wreak. And while it was fun to debate about guns, it wasn't fun to have a gun in their town center. Without much commotion, the line from the butchery cleared out, as the streets silently cleared to make way for the stranger with a gun.

The stranger scanned the town center, and landed on the thick and dense smoke spreading from the back of the bar. He walked towards it, assured this would be his appropriate destination. The children selling peanuts to intoxicated patrons cleared out of the four-step stairway as he walked up to the deck. The crowd, having taken a collective inhale and gasp when the stranger started walking towards the bar, all made way for him to walk through.

They stared at the man, who by all accounts was just a normal man. But he had a gun. And that changed things. He looked like them, could have been one of them, but their kind did not indulge in guns. Some were repulsed by him, while others quietly admired him. The mood was one of collective confusion, as the men in the bar, and the rest of the people in the town center tried to make sense of this man and his presence. Perhaps from fear, and maybe from confusion, or maybe neither, Lucas, an early patron who was fully inebriated, vomited on the stranger's boot as he walked past. The crowd gasped again and remained frozen, waiting for the stranger's reaction.

Anger quickly collected on the stranger's face, and a keen observer might have seen the swelling of his chest and clenching of his fist, had it not been for the other man, Samson, who stumbled off of the side of the deck, and plopped headfirst into the dusty ground, probably from drunkenness but also from the discomfort wrought by this stranger with a gun. The commotion broke the tension. Unable to hold their nerves or their laughter, the women in the street market started to laugh. Soon, mocking fingers were pointing at the fallen drunken Samson who attempted to raise himself off of the ground, as the news spread, shifting attention from the

stranger with a gun, to the man on the ground. Even inside the bar, the roaring laughter caught on.

As the crowd roared at the fallen drunken Samson, Amjad, the new Middle Eastern electronics shop owner snuck out from the back of Mrs. Saidi's shop in his underwear. At first, he attempted to make his way out of the town center unseen. But the grandmother in the fabric shop, out of shock, and anger, began ululating and pointing at him to shame him, while simultaneously attempting to cover her grandchildren's eyes. In the midst of the commotion, Mrs. Saidi walked out of her shop, slammed the door closed, and walked away, while adjusting her skirt.

"Come back tomorrow everyone," she was heard yelling at the people in line, who murmured in confusion.

Knowing he was caught, Amjad ran barefooted with one shoe covering the front of his underwear, and the other shoe covering the back. The stranger in military uniform with a gun caught a glimpse of Amjad as he ran out of the town center in the valley. He recognized Amjad as the womanizer he had caught with his wife before the mudslides began but in a different town. Without thought, the stranger pulled his gun from his back, started chasing after Amjad, and took a few shots, one of which landed on Amjad's foot, and clipped his little toe. The townspeople screamed and dispersed chaotically, many leaving the city center. Amjad fell to the ground, screaming in agony, his hands falling to his foot to quell the gushing blood.

The remaining townspeople were horrified as the stranger, gun in tow, dragged a screaming and wounded Amjad out of the town center in the valley.

That night, an unusual silence fell on the town center in the valley and the town as the townspeople reconsidered the bravery and cowardice of the stranger in military gear, wielding a gun.

Tarek Hamami

In Between

I was hanging right in between heaven and earth
Between reality and dreams
Between the fiction and non-fiction aisle

Where do I go? I asked. They said it's up to you but we close early today.
But can I choose something in a hurry that I may not love? I asked myself.

"Last call at the register," they said.
Didn't know what to do
Was the prettier cover the good choice?
Or that one that has so many many pages?
Or should it be the one in the corner that has been collecting dust and waiting for the right person
to pick it up and open its pages?

They said to never judge a book by its cover,
but then they said look at her cover it looks cheap and un-thought-of

I decided to walk upstairs and look at all of them from a distance,
hoping that no one would see me, and I could stay after closing time and take my time
between the pages

Tarek Hamami

Stormy

When the storm stops, the rain and the wind too,

and you can hear the birds chirping neither too close nor too far,
the sound of the shaking leaves is gone,

and it's all just quiet and subtle, emerging into the higher power,

As if: you are the master of your life.

Tarek Hamami

To Death

My soul
Don't go just yet
I'm ok with death but not so much yet
There's one more kiss left in me before you kiss me,

The silver lining was love and becoming and I did
I told them I did

I wrote them all letters, blowing one of last breath

My soul
Don't leave me just yet,
for the last few I wanna see is far away,
And I won't get to see it yet

My soul
If you're about to leave me now
Just let her know that
I'm leaving,
And leaving is just a breath a way

Tarek Hamami

To the Void

One day teach me what is Enouement

don't wait too long though

Every day your late bitterness eats a little bit more of me,

Like the black sheep just wanting to belong
knowing of the silvering but not seeing any.

Tatiana Hargrove

It Is Never Too Late to Change Your Life

I was in my forties when I decided to go to America.

There was nothing wrong with my life in Russia. I had everything: a 21-year-old son who was a student at the military institute, parents, other relatives, a place to live, a good job, and lots of true friends.

But everybody is always looking for something: I was looking for love.

I found an American man named Frank online, and actually, he picked my photo from a website.

Later he confessed to me that when he showed my photo to his 35-year-old son, his son said, "Be careful, she has smart eyes."

So the journey began.

We sent emails to each other and then we decided to meet. It was difficult for me to get a visa to the United States of America as an unmarried woman, 40-years-old, without a big bank account. For Frank, it was easy to get a visa to Russia.

We planned to meet in Moscow, the capital of Russia, and then go to St. Petersburg to enjoy the beautiful time of white nights.

Frank's mother and almost all of his friends advised him not to go to Russia because of the former Cold War between Russia and the USA. Frank did not listen to them.

From the beginning, Frank impressed me. He organized our trip very well. He bought all the tickets for me: from my hometown to Moscow, Moscow to St. Petersburg, and St. Petersburg to my home. In the Moscow airport a car was waiting to bring me to the hotel.

We spent two days in Moscow. When you think about Russia, what comes to mind is the Red Square with its gorgeous architecture from the XV-XX centuries, and the Kremlin, the former royal citadel and now the official residence of the President of Russia. There is the smell of history in the air.

We went to St. Petersburg on a famous train called Red One and experienced a funny story. Instead of a middle name, Frank has the suffix number III, because his grandfather and father also had the name Frank. When we went to check in to our hotel, the clerk looked at Frank's ID and asked me in Russian, "Is he a *tsar*?"

St. Petersburg fascinated Frank with its great architecture, museums, gorgeous cathedrals and churches, and friendly people. The State Hermitage Museum is the second-largest art museum in the world. We saw former imperial residences, such as Petergof, with majestic fountain cascades and parks, and the baroque style at Catherine Palace with the amazing Amber Room, which was considered an "Eighth Wonder of the World" before World War II. Due to the intricate web of canals, St. Petersburg is often called the Venice of the North.

Despite our different backgrounds and temperaments—Frank is impatient, realistic, makes fast decisions, and can see three steps ahead, whereas I believe in miracles, am patient and positive—we had good chemistry between us. I would say it was time well spent.

After our trip, Frank invited me to visit America. I agreed and in a year I got a fiancée visa for 90 days.

During that year of waiting for the visa, Frank called me almost every day at his lunch time, my evening, and we chatted about family, friends, work, and the weather. We talked about everything.

My friend, an English teacher, helped me prepare for my evening conversations. She taught me how to read transcriptions of words and sentence structure and then I took an English course. By the end of that year, I was thinking I could speak and understand people in America.

I was completely wrong.

First, when I arrived, I did not understand the accent and second, the pronunciation was different (in Russia people learn British English).

I flew from Moscow to Frankfurt and then to Chicago, where Frank met me, and together we flew to Nashville.

In the Nashville airport Frank's boss and his wife waited for us with a welcome sign: "Dear Tatiana! Welcome to America!"

It was such a touching moment.

Frank took a vacation for a week to be with me. The next morning he suggested to me that we go to the store and buy a new bed comforter set. He drove me to Walmart and told me to choose what I wanted. I looked at the price, converted it to rubles, and understood that it was expensive. I did not say a word just walked around. Probably, he decided that I did not like the selections and our next stop was at Dillard's department store. He again asked me to choose but at Dillard's I did not see any price tag. I just pointed and he bought the item.

Frank showed downtown Nashville to me. In 2004 it was a dying scary place with lots of homeless people. It was a different America compared to what I saw in the movies with Richard Geer, Nicole Kidman, and Julia Roberts.

Soon, we drove to Atlanta to meet Frank's family. I was in front of the door to his mother's apartment and my knees were trembling. I was ready to faint, but I took a deep breath, and closed my eyes. Frank opened the door, I opened my eyes and saw a big smile on his mother's face. She looked at me and said: "I like her."

Frank introduced me to his friends and to the people at his church. Everybody tried to encourage and help me, and they found other Russians for me to meet. Later, many of them became my good friends.

In a month Frank asked me to marry him. I liked him because he was an honest, trustful, magnificent, caring man.

In a few weeks we had a beautiful wedding ceremony with guests, flowers, cake and photos, and I started to build my new life.

Where to start?

Frank said, "You need to learn how to drive a car."

"I never had a desire to drive a car."

He said, "Without the ability to drive, your life will be not complete."

I got a learning permit. Frank bought an automatic car and started to teach me how to drive. It was not easy for him.

I took the driving test three times.

The first time, I was scared that I would not understand what would be asked of me. I did not even get into the car because the instructor refused to drive with me because when she said,

“Get into the car,” I tried to open the passenger door.

Fear is a huge obstacle in moving forward.

The second time, I made a wide turn and the instructor screamed at me, “Pull over!”

Finally, I got a driver’s license and a new chapter in my life began.

My friends helped me to find a job. My life became more active. Frank financially helped my family. All the time Frank was proud of me. I felt fully safe and secure with him. With his support I found myself again.

It’s the power of destiny that brought us two together.

I like my life here in America but I have just one regret: I did not get any education here. Education is a little door to great possibilities.

But I am sure, it is never too late to change your life, just do not give up, trust yourself, dream a big dream and fight for it.

Christian Juru

Desertland

You soar above a vast sea of orange
under a cloudless blue sky
an unexpected journey
a coveted privilege
you're kept insulated and cool
you marvel at the sight and wonder about the heat
the heat you usually don't mind and sometimes even crave

The grand shimmering displays
the abundant possibilities
all live up to what was promised
the once distant dreamscape
now unfurls itself in front of your eyes
dazzling your adolescent mind
laying out your hopes closer than they've been before

You bask in the gentle warmth outside
but shiver when you step inside
the desert exists in the new world too
and you get swept up in its sandstorms

You become of this land seamlessly
no distinct turning point in memory
but your authenticity raises eyebrows
and your speech tilts heads
your truth is of a different kind
the spotlight unveils your ineffective mirage
and your origin story is now a guessing game

An oasis thrives in the midst of all that is new
a place where shared differences nurture the soil into fertility
and individuality spikes each growing plant with vibrant color
this is where you quench your thirst for inclusion
this is where you grow into yourself
among the other dwellers who embrace under the canopy of the date palm
and the migrating birds who fly away with a piece of your heart

But you're far from the oasis
equipped with only your sense of self
a hybrid of your former self
and what you've gained from the new world

And so, you say:

All branches trace their origin to one single tree

Their silence begs for more

My people are like cacti
They refuse to die in the desert
They're resilient like life
And bloom in defiance.

Seung Hui Kim

A Lesson from Walking

I like walking. I enjoy walking and feeling alive, my heart pumping and legs moving. It's also a great joy to find subtle changes in the scenery while walking the same route over and over for quite a long time. I don't mind walking alone since it allows me to be a thinker. When I walk alone, I can simply focus on my thoughts, which are usually scattered, bounce and fly everywhere as free as a bird in the sky.

I used to walk from my apartment in Montclair, New Jersey to the Bloomfield Library where my English tutoring was held. The walking route was mostly in a residential area but there were occasional four-lane roads. While I was carrying out this routine twice a week, I found that crosswalks with traffic lights were a nuisance. I often had to stop for traffic lights or had to run fast before green turned to red. Whenever a crossing stopped me, it interrupted the flow of my walking. Finally at some point, a "Don't walk" signal started to look like disapproval of my walking and an obstacle I had to overcome.

Over the frequent unpleasant battles with traffic lights at crosswalks I began to learn how to handle the situation. While walking, as a crosswalk was coming up, I found myself alert. I tried to look ahead to check the traffic light. If it was green and I knew I couldn't get to the crosswalk before the green disappeared, I would slow down instead of speeding up and catch my breath. There was no need to hurry or push myself. Then, by the time I got there the light would

have turned red and I would consider it my resting time. On the other hand, if I saw a red signal flashing ahead, I would walk fast to make to the upcoming green light. Predicting signals to adjust my walking pace made me realize that it was I who had the control of my walking, neither a crosswalk nor a traffic light ahead of me. After being aware of the fact that I was in control of my walk, crosswalks didn't bother me anymore.

It may sound funny, but I think our journey through life is somewhat similar to this walking. Along the way to get to our goals in life, we face obstacles like a crosswalk with a red light. If we realize that we actually have the power of controlling our lives, it will help us get through the difficulty of these obstacles. Furthermore, it may even be able to change our viewpoint on an obstacle. A red signal at a crosswalk will not remain an obstruction or a barrier any more. Rather, it will be a break time to catch our breath or a chance to look around. So are the difficulties in our lives. We might blame them for blocking our paths or wasting our time at first. In the end, however, we can learn the wisdom of contemplating these challenges as opportunities of introspection and self-reflection. Hopefully we can find inner peace and strength to keep us going forward by realizing we still have the power of controlling our own lives.

Seung Hui Kim

Thanksgiving: Homeward bound

Home. The word has carried special emotions along with its meaning since I left South Korea, my home country, three years ago. Whenever I hear it, or say it out loud, the sound warms my heart. From time to time it brings me a wistful smile, reminding me of the fact that I am 7,000 miles away from home. During the holiday season in the States, especially around Thanksgiving, I find myself thinking of home a lot.

I like Thanksgiving because I enjoy watching TV commercials around the holiday, showing a family gathered around a dining table covered by a giant roast turkey with stuffing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, warm dinner rolls and a pumpkin pie. Regardless of what these advertisements are about, they unfold the ideal holiday spirits and bring them to my living room. Watching the commercials feels as if I were peeking at the happy Thanksgiving dinner. The scene is heartwarming and delightful enough to give me vicarious satisfaction.

I like the holiday because of the beautiful story of the first Thanksgiving celebration, even though some people think its origin has been idealized over time. As far as I know, the very first Thanksgiving was the feast held in the fall of 1621 by the Pilgrims in Plymouth. It must have been a really special moment because it was the meal after the first successful harvest in America. It was shared with families, friends, neighbors and even with the Native Americans

who taught them how to fish and grow corn. It was a meal filled with love and gratitude. This is how I want to remember the origin of Thanksgiving.

Most of all, I like Thanksgiving because it reminds me of a Korean holiday, Chu-seok, which literally means “autumn night.” It falls in late September or early October according to the lunar calendar, but always on the night of the full moon, which is considered sacred. During the three-day long holiday, a ritual is held to show appreciation towards ancestors and to wish for a successful harvest. Candles are lit up and incense is burned. Participants kneel and bow before an altar. The altar is full of dishes including seasonal food such as persimmons, chestnuts, and pine nuts. The image I come back to Chu-seok is golden rice fields, fully ripe grains hanging down, dancing as the cool crisp air blows, surrounded by vivid red and yellow mountains. It is a time of fullness and expectations.

The holiday season is coming. People will travel to get to their homes and meet their loved ones. I know I will be enjoying the festive atmosphere of the year’s end, but I also know I will be thinking about my home, feeling a sense of loss. I might be skimming through Hmart fliers of Thanksgiving deals, hoping Korean food can fill the missing part of the holiday. Although I might spend the holiday torn between Korea and the States, one certain fact is that it is a perfect time to express love and gratitude to others. It is time to ask myself the classic question, “What am I thankful for?” Luckily, finding the answer is not too difficult for me, thinking of my family and friends who are always praying for me and supporting me from home.

Drenusha Kolshi

Inheritance

I imagine being birthed with hesitance.

My mother asking the midwife

Are you sure she's ready? Will her softness turn to stone?

I imagine those fears traveling inside of her.

Finding the space my freedom lives and prodding at its plush mass.

My body disassembling itself to make room for them.

Fears being developed before my body can.

Nine months of shared space.

Without consent.

I imagine my mother pushing, eyes shut.

Fears first, then me.

I'm the youngest I would explain.

As they would stand in front of me.

Paving the path.

Checking the boxes.

My mother assuring me that they're wise beyond their years.

That I should listen to them.

For they lived in her before they ever lived in me.

Drenusha Kolshi

The Spell of Winter

In the beginning, the spell of winter will hold you down laboriously. The crisp air will feel polite while it cracks your lips open. Blood bursting through, seeking refuge outside this cold body. In the beginning, you are an earthquake, you will think that your limbs will try to escape you, seeking refuge outside this crumbled body. “Please leave,” you will insist, “escape what I cannot.” They will form vines around your pattern in protest. So tight are the vines that you start to realize that you’re not fucking going anywhere. That this winter will not freeze you over. That the blood will decorate itself into an oil painting, a depth red your eyes cannot seem to register. You will thank this body for the beauty she has bestowed on you. You will allow your feet to walk through the needle sharp weather. Every step will dishearten you, but your feet will not stop when given permission to move. Every morning, the sun will rise, she will give you a kiss of question: “Is it worth it?” Before you can answer, your feet will inch themselves closer to the cold, waves of shivers will climb up your neck and over your mouth. You will close your eyes, the sun will wrap her arms around you and she will answer for you, “It is.”

Drenusha Kolshi

The Walls Are Screaming

Spirits were passed down from my mother to me. My mother who held onto fear with the desperation of a neglected child. There were nights where she would scrub the spirits off of my duvet by rubbing two parts of the fabric together aggressively. The spirits would scream at me through the fabric. She would silence them with “hush” and “I’m here for you.” When I explained to her that my body was frozen and that there was a constant ringing in my ears, she didn’t flinch. The sound would follow me to bed at night.

“Don’t sleep on your back,” she would say, “they will sit on your chest and find a way in.” I would listen. It felt as though I had angered them by protecting my body from what wasn’t theirs. That I had asked for the attention they possessed. They found a way to seep into the seams of my pillowcase. Causing my sleep to crawl out of eyelashes and abandon me. My mother would switch my pillowcase every night, hoping that one day she could wash them away forever. Hoping that my sleep would find her way back to me.

“You’re lucky they only find you at night.” Her mouth said words as her hands smoothed out the wrinkles from my perfectly made bed. I always wondered how my mother knew the answer to everything. She would clean the house with a routine that never faltered. She knew survival and the spirits loved her for it. Her eyes were laced on the stitching of the fabric, she could never see the way I prayed for her too. The spirits would sit at the edge, mouths stretched ear to ear, eyes staring passed me. My sleep would whimper. My mother would pick off any traces of fear I had left on the bed from the night before and stuff them in her pocket. Her body would shift away from the bed as the spirits invited me in. She would swiftly exit and I would smell the traces of

her while her footsteps were already downstairs and on the way to the kitchen. I would get into bed and wait for my sleep to follow. My eyes would scan the room hoping to find her before the spirits did. But they always had her tangled into them. They would brush my eyelashes up and my eyelids would lock themselves in place; my sleep would reach for me but always seemed too far. And then it would happen. My hands would clench onto the sheets in hopes that they could bring my arms together to scrub them off like my mother taught me. But they wouldn't move. My neck would bend herself into a c-shape, refusing to let them come near all the weight she carried. My chest would leave me. *Breathe*. My eyes would well up with fears, rushing down my cheeks, into my ears. *Breathe*. Drowning my being, staining the fresh pillowcase. *Breathe*. My mother. Where is she? *Breathe*. I could hear myself screaming through the house, through the walls. *Breathe*. Coming from the ceiling. *Breathe*. Spilling down the headboard. *Breathe*. My voice would find my mouth and the scream would find me.

Drenusha Kolshi

The Tea

when he walks through the door; your words must slide in between your teeth and behind your tongue; you must stand; ask him about his day; is he tired; *if so arm yourself*; make sure dinner is served on the dishware he bought; make sure the spoon is to the right; *the left is haram*; make sure you gather your breath and hold it when you serve him; make sure your hair is away from your face; *you can't hide the emotions he owns*; walk away without turning your back to him; *he must see you the way he sees himself in the mirror every day*; once you hear the spoon dip into the bowl of the pasul you made; turn on the stove; allow the water to boil; *boil with it*; reach into the cabinet and find the tea; set it on the counter and wait until you hear the cry of the spoon on an empty bowl; *cry with the spoon*; *feel the emptiness of the bowl in you*; remember to only take away that empty bowl when his hand pushes it away; *like he does you every night*; serve the tea with the sugar to the right; he will scoop a tablespoon full; watch it disintegrate into the red water; *you may evaporate also*; you are not boiling anymore; *the tea is yours and he is drinking*

it

Giovanni Lages

Brazilian Kid Gone Global

I remember growing up and watching movies like *High School Musical* and wondering if that's what American schools actually looked like. With yellow buses everywhere, huge football fields, lockers that allowed students to leave their textbooks at school, popular kids bullying other kids, and even the ability to choose what you want to focus on during your high school career.

Although it was all true, there was also a lot more that was never advertised in the movies, such as what it would look like if a foreigner tried adapting to that environment.

It all started in September of 2013, when my mom decided to move to the United States to take her shot at the American Dream. She wanted to bring my brother and me with her, but in order to make that happen she would need to file thousands of things in order to get the immigration process going. My mom told us that we wouldn't see her for three months, because that's how long she thought the process was going to take. Turns out she was wrong by a long shot, but we didn't know that just yet. The day she left we moved in with our dad. He lived in a city called Osasco, which is currently the tenth biggest city in Brazil, and since their divorce we were only able to see him every other weekend. Even though we didn't spend as much time with him, all my closest friends lived in the same condo as he did, and given that we kind of grew up together it wouldn't be a problem adapting to that lifestyle.

Three months went by, and my mom realized that the process would take a little bit longer than she had expected. We talked to her on Skype and after receiving the bad news of the delay we found out that she was getting married to my stepdad, which would speed up the process. She said that in three more months I was going to have my Green Card and finally be able to move in with her, so I got my hopes up again. At that point, if things worked out I would simply move to the United States and start high school in a new country, but if they went south I would just keep going to school in Brazil. Not knowing what was ahead of me was the scary part, and there was no way to find out until it actually happened. I was eventually able to forget about all of it and simply enjoy my summer break.

Time went by and without even realizing my summer break was almost over. My mom's birthday is on January 20th, and somehow I forgot to call her and was only able to talk to her the day after. She was happy, after all it is not every day that someone turns 44, but then she followed up with some news about my process. The immigration office had accepted her request, and all we had to do now was wait. The problem was that the lines at the immigration office can take years, so she recommended that I go back to school in Brazil until she had more information about the whole situation.

A lot happened in that year, but none of that information is really relevant to this story so I will just skip ahead to December 2014, when my 9th grade year was finally over. The main problem was that without knowing when the immigration process was going to go through we couldn't really make any big decisions. On one side, if things really worked out the way we wanted I would have roughly a six-month break since American schools only start in August. The other side had a not-so-good scenario, where I would simply go to high school in Brazil and not know if things would ever work out the way we wanted them to. So once more I tried to

enjoy my summer break as much as I could, but I couldn't stop thinking about how it was eventually going to be over and my friends would move on to high school, leaving me behind.

I called my mom looking for news, and she finally had a good one. My interview was scheduled to happen in Rio de Janeiro a few months from that day, in April 2015. She told me that she was personally going to come back to Brazil and join me since she really wanted to see us. In order to be ready for a new life in a new country, she enrolled us in an intensive English course that would help me improve my English communication skills. This got me very excited since I was finally going to see my mom after one year and seven months. But with the excitement came preoccupation. As an almost 15-year-old kid, I was not sure if leaving everyone and everything behind, even though I knew it was better for my future, was something I wanted to do. I didn't really have a choice, but since this moment had always been talked about as a positive thing I was directed to think that this was something I wanted. But like the “grown man” I was, I chose to simply accept my fate and take my shot at the American Dream.

Faster than the blink of an eye April had finally arrived. Since my English course took most of my time, I didn't really realize how fast time was going by. I had arranged it with my mom so that she would pick me up after class the day she arrived and we would ride back home together. She was going to arrive on a Thursday morning, and since my class was over late in the afternoon I thought our plan was actually going to work. I woke up that Thursday and I was very excited, after all I would get to see my mom again. My dad drove me there, and for very obvious reasons I was not able to concentrate in class whatsoever. After we were finally dismissed, I checked my phone and Mom said she was not going to be able to pick me up that day, so I called my dad and he picked me up. Upon arriving at the condo, he parked his motorcycle and we started walking. In the parking lot I saw a vehicle that seemed really familiar, it looked a lot like

my mom's car. For a brief moment my heart stopped. Could that be her car? Was she really here? I asked my dad but he also didn't know what was going on.

I was baffled but full of hope, so instead of standing there, lost, I decided to walk inside and check for myself. I opened the door in a hurry, looked ahead, and there she was, looking at me with a huge smile and eyes tearing up. She pulled and hugged me harder than a raindrop falling without air resistance, and didn't let go. We hugged and cried for a straight minute. The moment we looked forward to for so long was finally happening. After blowing her nose and drying her eyes with a tissue she was stunned; her "baby" was the same height as her.

We had a few days to enjoy ourselves before my interview in Rio, but the first thing we did was go for some ice cream while we had a nice mother-son conversation in the car. She told me all about her trip and I shared some fun facts about my class. She wanted to make sure I was prepared, so we had a small conversation in English and if I am being honest I have never felt so nervous. To this day I don't know why I felt like that, but it most certainly showed that I still had a lot of work to do in order to be able to understand and adapt to high school in the U.S. Instead of freaking out even more, I chose to simply enjoy my mom's presence while we drove through Osasco and talked about what things were like during the time we were apart. After talking for a while she drove me back and asked me to pack a small suitcase. It made sense since the plan was for me to stay with her until we had to go to Rio.

After staying with my mom for a few days, we had to leave for my interview. We got to Rio the day before to make sure we would have time to prepare everything. The next day we woke up relatively early and headed to the embassy. There we had to wait until my name was called, which took about 40 minutes. My mom was more excited than I was, and since she was the one putting in all the work to make sure everything came through, it made sense. When they

finally called my name, we went to a room where a guy was going to ask us a few questions. The questions were straightforward, which honestly helped a lot since I was a little scared. After a few minutes he finally gave us the good news, congratulating me, and saying that my Green Card was going to be delivered to my mom's address in Tennessee. All we had to do now was buy the plane tickets and start our new lives.

We ended up getting tickets for May 11th, and since we were going to leave soon my mom orchestrated a farewell party. My whole family came. That party was a pivotal moment for me, it was where everything finally hit me. I was in the couch when my cousin approached me.

“Hey Gi! Are you okay?” she asked. “It's not like you to be down like this at a party.”

“I don't know,” I replied. “Everything just hit me. I'm leaving and I don't know when I'll come back. I think you could say I'm a little scared hahaha.”

She gave me a hug and said what I already knew deep down. That moving to the United States was better for my future, and as long as I focused on that, everything would be okay. That helped me a lot and I was finally able to enjoy the rest of the party. After it was over we helped with the clean up and then left since we had to pack everything up the next day. Everyone woke up early at my grandmother's house, we celebrated Mother's Day as much as we could and then started packing. Our flight was going to leave around 11 p.m. the day after, and since we were moving to another country, every minute counted. The next day we left right after dinner, getting to the airport three and a half hours before our flight. After going to security and finally getting in the airplane I turned on the little television and started playing Avengers. The first flight took about nine hours, and the second only took one. After waiting for so long we were finally in the United States of America!

My stepdad picked us up at the airport, and before going home we stopped at Logan's Steakhouse. The meal was great, but everyone was super tired, so instead of going somewhere else afterwards we went straight home. My brother and I went in first, and my mom was right behind us with a camera to take pictures. The place was, and still is, pretty great. Since we were very tired, all we did was get comfortable and sleep. The next day we woke up and had a great breakfast, with all kinds of American things that I loved at first but I'm already tired of, like pepperoni. My mom spent her day downstairs cooking and my brother and I just chilled in the bonus room watching anime and playing games. That was my last summer break before going to an American high school, so my stepdad gave me a book and asked me to read it, saying that it would help me with my English. I read part of it, but I mostly just tried to relax and enjoy the time I had left.

My brother ended up going back to Brazil on July 7th given that he had some personal things to take care of. My mom and I were devastated. For the first time in my life I had no one to look up to. I had to develop my own persona, different than my brother's. As much as it sucked at first, I was eventually able to understand that if my brother had never left I would have never turned out to be who I am today. Exactly one month later, high school was going to start. The day I looked forward for so long was finally here. I woke up early, and after getting ready I walked down to the bus stop with my mom. She had her camera out and wouldn't stop taking pictures, and I honestly don't blame her. It's not every day that a Brazilian kid gets to go to one of the best high schools in Tennessee. Everyone was proud of me. I was proud of me.

The one big question still standing is whether that Brazilian boy actually succeeded. And I can't really answer this question till the day that I die, but as of right now I am in my second

semester of college, in one of the best universities in Tennessee, writing a narrative essay in my second language about the story of how I made it this far, so I'll let you decide.

Abey Lissane

Helping to Cross the Road

We are living in a fast-changing world. People evolve in many ways. It's been said that we are living in the 21st century. One's creativity becomes one's addiction. Civilization becomes self-centered ways of living. Human morals rushing to dive to the deepest loss. Everyone is in a hurry. No one has time to stop and think, share, help, or listen.

I ask myself what's the value of living without crossing the road. What values do we carry that don't have a helping to cross the roads of life? How can we be best in everything without making it available to everyone?

Our determination to be a person we hope to be is great work but isn't sustaining without involving others. Life is a self-determined path but with a consideration of others. As we all agree we are living in the 21st century that has made our world even smaller than what we thought it to be. What happens in one part of the world has an impact on the rest of the world: economically, socially, politically, psychologically, mentally, and spiritually.

The idea of self-development should include empowering others too. After all, we are a human species that depends on the past, present, and future. Helping someone to cross the road should be our way of living to prosper life. Someone's creativity is millions' dependable income source, economic empowerment, and future dreams. Likewise, someone's bad decision is a cause for millions to die.

Helping someone to cross the life road, dream road, hope road, economical road, political road, social road, etc. would offer much more benefit than revenue to society. We don't have to be religious people to help someone to cross the road, we just need to have a caring soul.

They say, "What goes up must come down." What we are planting today is what we will harvest tomorrow. Helping to cross the road is not an easy task but very productive for our human kind. We do more and faster when we do it together. Some things don't kill us but make us stronger. I always try to see the life behind someone before I make my decision. I believe kindness is a good moral character and doesn't cost much. Did you know that negative thinking uses more energy than positive thinking? Did you know that anger and envy shoot others and kill one's own self?

Some just need you to help them to walk across the road, some could want to see you walking the road, so they can follow, some just need you to witness them crossing the road. Life is too short but worthy if we live it with positivity, kindness, and support. We need to leave this world in a better place for our future generations.

I remember an old man who was staring at the crossroad over twenty years ago when I was walking back home from school. I stood next to him. He then asked me if I could help him to cross the road. I said sure. Then we started walking together. He taught me a very simple life lesson by saying, "All I wanted was a person to talk to me while walking this crossroad, so I wouldn't have my anxiety push me down and be hit by these cars." Today I remind myself that life has an easy solution. All I need to do is start from optimism. Tomorrow is a new life that we have. So, let's have good minds that discuss events and great minds that discuss ideas.

Viviana Luison

Rose

Wood shavings and sawdust were filling the ground and the air. A dusty veil draped every surface and in the haze even the light struggled to peek through the windows.

Rose walked aimlessly among the other workers, from station to station, picking up a tool, sanding it down to a smooth and lucid consistency. One shovel, one rake, one broom. Another shovel, another rake, another broom. Each day similar to the next and similarly without end. The monotony of the tasks slowed time down.

Her pale hands were calloused and coarse, each cut, mark, or scratch the result of another work day in the shop. Her pale face was almost emaciated from the lack of sleep and cold temperatures in the room. Cold and loneliness seemed the only consistent points in her life. Her features though were soft and sweet, in stark contrast to her hands. Long, straight strawberry blonde hair crowned her face and her deep, intense blue eyes could be seen from a distance. She was pretty in an unconventional way but her worried look and constant sadness aged her. When she was younger, her mother used to introduce her to strangers by saying: “This is my Rose, she is way too mature for her age because she has a big head.” And others: “That girl would make something out of herself if she had been born in a better family,” words whispered behind her back when she walked by, on her long way home.

It took over an hour by foot for her daily commute but usually longer at the end of the day as her pace was heavy and slow from fatigue. The evening road was mostly unlit and she rarely encountered another soul. At that time, most women were home, tending the kitchen and the children while most men sat at the local inn for a pint before bursting into the house and demanding to be served food. Sometimes travelers on the way to town would cross her path, nodding politely a hello under their breath and waving their lights, to which she always replied. Other times they pretended not to see one another, both visitor and local too absorbed in their thoughts to be disturbed by the etiquette of politeness. When she had enough vitality left in her, the route back was a time for reflection and the only moment of complete solitude in her day.

During that time she could think about her previous schooldays and her learnings. She thought about her classroom so vast and gray. Everybody wore similar uniforms and both teacher and students seemed to camouflage into the dullness of the room. The windows were small and very high, and that room was frigid too. The voice of the teacher reverberated high and strong. She remembered it was hard sometimes to keep concentration because both feet and hands would go numb and lifeless. All of that dullness changed though as soon as the science books opened. The thought of a world of information unraveling in front of her immediately transported Rose to her happy la la land where everything was colorful and joyful. She loved learning, she loved the idea of making herself useful one day with the knowledge she had partially been acquiring and she was still hoping to become the best nurse there was as one of the few females allowed to get an education. Her dreams of finishing school one day cuddled her all the way to the house and those thoughts lifted her spirit so that a faint smile appeared on her face. It was easier to fake joy when she entered her warmer house, when her two siblings rushed to greet her at the door, hungry for both dinner and the details of an outside world they were not yet allowed to see.

For years Rose spent her evenings between house chores, cooking, cleaning and making sure both children had everything they needed for bed and for the morning after. Mother in the corner, lifelessly sitting in a chair, looking aimlessly at the stone floor. “How are you today, Mother? Feeling any better?” Sometimes a gesture, a nod, or a spark in her mother’s eyes revealed life, more pleasantly than her random scream or gargle that scared and worried everyone.

This was Rose’s life for a long time. She hadn’t asked for it. She had asked only to finish school but someone had to take care of mother and the children. She didn’t know at that time that one day not far away she would travel with her siblings for many hours in the stow of a boat to a land far away. A land that was not somber and melancholy, a land with dark people in colorful dresses and stone white houses, where there was no dust. A land with many travelers and merchants, interesting animals and unusual food. A land that allowed her to work in cafes and restaurants, even though she couldn’t understand the foreign tongue spoken by those people. Her hands were still calloused and scratched by water this time, but her eyes would have a sparkle because at the cafe she could think all the day about the lessons she learned at night. She would finish school and become a nurse, care for sick people during times of natural disasters and wars, in a tongue that was a little more familiar but still felt like cotton balls in her mouth.

Rose would build a comfortable life for herself and her siblings but alone she walked the streets at night from the wooden shop to her house and alone she would die, looking at the stone floor of a cold, empty house, her lungs tired by millions of sawdust particles that had settled in many moons before.

When Rose would die, her spirit would lift in the air, travel through to the next life and would enter a new body and bring some of those learnings to bodies of her future lives. I, too,

have tired, heavy lungs that seem full of sawdust and maybe this is how I learned where it comes from.

Viviana Luison

Father

Grumbling, sputtering, and muttering.
A little gray cloud of smoke rising.
Complaining, grouching, griping.
Not very much indeed.
The sound, an effect, the impression.
A volcano, grandiose and impressive
my father took over the room with his size and presence.
Old ashy hair and gray skin,
always fire, fire in his tired eyes.
Feverishly fermenting something inside,
like heat, held in until it needs to be released.
The redness creeps up,
furrows on his face dug in from years of unhappiness.
The world and his time were unfair to him,
and left him with little kindness for others.
Steam of tears
out of eyes and ears,
loud, louder, and loudest.
He is cross,
he wears a cross on his chest and carries one on his back.
Bubbling, simmering, boiling.
It's an eruption of loud words

and curses
spilling out and destroying everything they land on.
What, you don't love me now?
Love, one word I begged you to repeat to me.
"I love you, Dad."
"ok"
The fire destroys what it touches,
the skin around my heart burns.
The smoke settles and silence reigns again.
When it's dormant, everything is ok, everybody is ok.
and you can, for a brief while,
forget when the last explosion happened
and get close again.

Uju Oramah

Mom's Courage

At the center of our downstairs living room lay our mother, Elizabeth Nkoli Odimegwu, in a casket made with wood, white lace, and glass.

I was dressed in a light colored Buba: a blouse with long, wide sleeves that ended at my wrists. I wore the Buba over a wrapper, which I tied around my waist in such a way that it wove freely down to my ankles. My siblings also dressed in the same material in varied styles. In a sense, we wore uniforms: a tradition that attested we grieved a common loss.

The walls of our living room and the ceiling were decorated with purple and white lace. Some of Mom's pictures, from youth to the present, were on display. I looked at my siblings and saw my own grief mirrored on their faces: long faces, red eyes, and lines of uncontrollable tears. This picture showed my state of mind since Mom passed on October 23, 2012. I had wanted to give her the world to express my gratitude to her, and now death had taken my chance forever. Devastated, I risked losing my job by traveling from the United States of America to Nigeria to say my last farewell to Mom in person.

As we circled her casket, my siblings and I said our farewells and prayed for our mother's repose. Then with our hands linked together, we stood in silence. In the stillness, my memories of my mother rushed like a flood through my mind.

When I was about six years old, Mom, armed with her basket, would go to the market to buy food on Saturday mornings. As my siblings and I waved goodbye, we would call after her, “Mama, buy Akara and mango,” and any other treats we could think of.

Finally, when her many steps took her away from our sight, we would go back to play, excited in anticipation of the many mouthwatering treats she would surely bring us from the market.

Soon, however, my excitement would be replaced with a sense of foreboding, as the time of waiting, in my mind, stretched without reason, and I would play no more. I would create pictures in my head of what might have happened. As in a horror movie, I would envisage Mom being taken away; then uncontrollable tears would flow from my eyes.

“What would happen to us if she didn’t make it home?” I would wonder.

I would remain on the lookout for her like a watchman for the first morning light. At the first glimpse of her on her way home, I would leap for joy and call out to my siblings, “Mom is home!” We would rush down and welcome her while dancing and singing, “Mama anatta oh! yo-yo!”

At home, we would sit around her, eating and laughing, while she shared her experience at the market and told other stories. We teased each other amid laughter. She would also watch us. She once told me, “I love watching you all eat.”

My mother, in contrast, had a different experience of childhood. David Brinkley once said, “A successful person is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks that others throw at him or her.” And that was exactly what my mom did.

She was born in Igbo land to Mr. and Mrs. James Uduh of Amamkpume Nsukwu Abatete, Anambra State Nigeria. Unfortunately for Mamanukwu, as we fondly called my

grandma, she had no male child until her eleventh child. As a result, Mom's dad married a second wife after Grandma gave birth to her third child. Fortunately for the second wife, she gave birth to male children and became the favorite. Subsequently, she made the life of Mamanukwu hell on earth.

In Igbo land, it is said that "di bu ndidi," meaning, to be a married woman you must have patience. Married women were expected to endure everything from their husband and his family. Mamanukwu thus persevered and gave birth to ten girls, until finally, her eleventh child was a boy.

Growing up with this experience, Mom realized her only way to freedom lay in education. She studied hard and was an excellent student. However, when she was promoted to elementary five, her father decided to stop paying her school fees.

She was devastated.

"I invited my school teacher and other respectable people in our village to speak to my father to make him change his mind but he refused. So, in tears, for many days, I pleaded with him. Instead of granting my request he said, 'You're a girl, another man's property. Investment on you is a waste of my resources.'"

Grandpa was a man who built the first upstairs in his village, owned a car when most men either went on foot or with a bicycle. For Mom, his refusal to pay her school fees made no sense.

She watched in despair as her perceived gateway to fulfillment was blocked. She endured the fact that her father continued to pay school fees for her half-siblings.

At that time, a woman had little or no economic power. Family wealth and land were transferred only to the male children, or to their father's male relatives; as a result, a woman

depended on her father or her husband for survival. For that reason, Mamanukwu had no means to pay Mom's school fees.

Mom believed that her mom was out of favor with her father, therefore, she was punished for her mother's sins. She told me once, "Men know how to punish their wife without beating them. My siblings and I understood that Father refused us many privileges to get back at our mother."

Mom's faith in God gave her strength: "When it dawned on me that Papa had made up his mind, I stayed up and prayed and cried all night. That Sunday at Church, I put my head down on top of a pew and cried all through the Mass. I made two requests of God: I asked Him to give me a husband who would never raise his hand against me, and I asked Him to bless me with children. God granted me both." I can still remember the expression of satisfaction on her face when she told me this story.

An unknown writer said, "We may not choose our circumstances, but we do choose our attitude and our response." So, instead of giving up, Mom turned to God for help. She also applied wisdom gained from her experience to her advantage. She once told me, "My mother played the victim instead of seeking help from her in-laws when Papa stopped paying our school fees. She wanted the world to see how Papa mistreated us, but she failed to realize that nobody really cared."

In retrospect, Mom's strength was rooted in her resolve. She was five foot three, and fair in complexion. Her cheeks were full, with thick lips that easily parted in smiles of recognition at familiar faces, as a welcome, and in admiration of another. She had eyes that would peer at you with tenderness. At times her eyes would light up with curiosity as she sought clarification.

These qualities may have been what motivated Dad to marry her after they met. After she lived with Dad, she faced many challenges and endured many trials. She lost three sons, two of whom were stillborn. She was very creative but never had the opportunities to explore her talents. She once had a tailor shop, sold provisions, and designed earrings, which gave her economic power, but at some point Dad stopped the business. He instructed her instead to focus on raising us. She was sad about it but obliged after her efforts to convince my father otherwise didn't work. She never allowed that to affect her happiness, relationship with my dad, or with others. She always found positive things to make her and all those around her happy.

At that time, it was a man's pride to be the sole provider for his family. In general, too, men dread women having economic power. It was a common belief among men that any woman with economic power was a threat to her husband's authority. Mom did not know if these reasons influenced Dad to stop her business.

Mom used her wisdom to help our family prosper. She advised us in subtle ways, without giving in to force or violence. She encouraged our educational pursuits. And she enjoyed our successes. I learned so much from our conversations together.

In her tribute to Mom, my sister Lucy likened her flawless writing in Igbo language to that of Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwakpa. "She has a unique and an unequivocal way of telling stories filled with wisdom and lessons of life." Lucy regretted her failure to harness those stories for posterity.

My sister Maria recalled, "There was once a bachelor tenant in our house when I was in junior Secondary school. He plied his business between Nigeria and Cameroon. One day, he gave me gifts of a big tablet of scented white soap with a customized rope for hanging and a box of assorted wraps of chocolate. When I showed the gifts to my mother, she said they were very

beautiful. About an hour later, she called and told me a story about a couple with a teenage daughter who was sharing a compound with a hunter. The hunter always gave their daughter bushmeat from his kills. The girl always gave the meat to her mother for the entire family's enjoyment. One day, the couple noticed that the girl was pregnant and on asking her who was responsible she said it was the hunter. That day, I learned from Mother that things are not always what they seem. Actions that appear innocent might spell doom in the long run. So I politely returned the gifts, despite their loveliness."

Mom was wise. She often responded with silence to our suggestions to compel Dad to give in to her desire to own a business. She would be all smiles, and the conversation would naturally flow to other topics. Looking back, I can see how naïve we were to wish that Mom had insisted on having her way. If she had, we might have been victims. And the successes we now enjoy might never have been ours. In her own way, she opened doors of unlimited opportunities for us.

I remembered many families where the children suffered immense hardship because their mom could not live with their dad, and their father's new wife treated them as slaves, and at times stopped their education and made them street sellers.

To Mom's siblings, Dad indulged Mom. "Your Dad pampered and protected your mom. We all knew that," Eunice, Mom's sister said. "It amazed me how he would bring her to our meetings, wait, or come back to pick her up." I also came upon Dad caressing Mom's picture one day after she had passed.

Furthermore, her patience paid off: We, her children, provided for her and our father as we matured and earned money. Through our provision, she gave out many gifts to widows, orphans, and the less privileged. Many widows came to attest how her generosity helped them.

Her philosophy empowered her to protect us from life's limitations like Parisian mothers who I saw in a 1944 picture, using their bodies to shield their children from German sniper fire. Mom and numerous mothers across the globe protect their children like hens that protect their chicks at all cost. They uphold our world as strong pillars buried deep in the ground to erect skyscrapers.

I was naïve to think I needed to give Mom the world when she had already conquered, dominated and used it to her advantage. She raised nine smart and successful children, her husband loved her in his own way, and her siblings envied her of her good marriage, and she lived to see her grandchildren have money, even to share with others. Thus, her resolve to let go, endure, forgive, and to make conscious effort to reconcile with others paid her huge dividends.

On that day of her funeral, I turned my gaze back to her body. I couldn't help but notice that even in death her face and her body remained flawless, smooth like an egg without any sign of wrinkles. Her hair too was without any shade of gray. Death took her life, but not her beauty. She looked deeply asleep.

Like a gentle breeze that gradually became loud, I heard hurried feet that moved about, low voices and drumbeats beyond the closed door. Then I heard loud drumbeats, flute, and stamping of feet enhanced by the jingle sound that flowed in harmony to the rhythm of the drum. The music was a reminder that it would soon be time for others to view Mom's body before she would be laid to rest. Also, it was a sign that a great woman, a mother, and achiever was about to be buried.

Doris Palomino

Back at Home

In October 2008 I had my first birthday abroad, far away from my family and lifelong friends. My new friends in the United States asked me what I wanted to do. I said, “Dancing!” almost jumping to my feet. “Let’s go to Ibiza,” I told them. “The lights are dim and the music is loud.”

I’d met Jesse through my roommate. He’d mentioned the best place to dance Latin music was Ibiza. We decided to meet there at 8:30 p.m. so we could be there as soon as they opened, at 9:00 p.m. We went through security and the coat check with curiosity. We noticed there was not much space to sit. Of course! Everybody was supposed to be dancing. But also, most of the tables and chairs were far away from the dance floor. There was a big mirror next to the dance floor, and there was also a disco light hanging from the center of the ceiling, as well as lights hanging from different parts to create a dramatic effect on the dance floor. I was so excited, and I kept thinking to myself, “It’s my birthday and I want to dance!”

I felt so lucky to have found these wonderful friends that had become part of my new family in Nashville, TN. My beautiful and sweet Lita, with her angel face and kind smile, the one who got me completely about why dancing was so necessary. Of course she did—she was Colombian! My gentle and handsome friend Steven, with his long arms and legs, who was great at spinning me when we danced together. He was Belgian, and had taken dance classes before. My German friend Sophia, whose warm smile made her look like the coolest person in the world

to move around with, and who had a caressing and calming voice. My new American friend Jesse was also there. He'd told me he was into dancing because he believed it was a way to connect and experience intimacy with other people. I had never thought about dancing like that before. I felt great because I had my people around me to dance. I didn't need them to dance, but I enjoyed their company and their support. They were my new family.

And suddenly the DJ played a Peruvian Cumbia song. My legs started moving, and my face drew into a smile. "That's my music!" 1, 2, 3, let's do it!

The music was loud. The dance floor started getting crowded. I didn't care. I only needed a small place to dance. My guy friends were into the spinning. It felt nice, but I didn't really need all that. Dancing was not about connecting to other human beings for me, but connecting to my own body, and exploring new rhythms and movements. I only needed to stay hydrated, and keep flowing.

Going dancing could seem like something vain or trivial, but if you were in my shoes, you'd know the story was different. When the music was on, I could listen to it, but at the same time there was silence. No one else could break into my silence. It was like my body flowed, my mind was silent, and my heart was happy. Time to let go. The beats led to old movements that my body remembered but then, out of the blue, my body's flow allowed itself to explore, to move joints, and to create new movements I hadn't tried before.

I saw people around me, but I couldn't connect with them. Not in that moment. This was my personal time. My body flowed, my heart enjoyed, my ears listened to the music. I could only dance. Now I could really celebrate my birthday: I was finally back at home.

Marcela Pinilla

Juhari

There are times when our troubles feel as big as a tsunami. But there are also those times when a real tsunami comes and changes life as we know it.

In December 2004, the life of young Juhari was forever to be changed. It all began with an earthquake, followed by seawater withdrawing. No one really knew what was going on: the beach became a lot wider and they could see fish fighting for their lives since the water had just left them there, helpless in the sand.

The people who were brave and adventurous started walking to this “new beach” hoping to get some of those fish either to eat or to sell. Nobody ever imagined what was about to happen.

Animals began running looking for shelter, birds flying as fast as their little wings allowed. Something is wrong, Juhari thought, and not long after that she heard terrified alerting voices, sirens, children crying. What was going on?

Waves, huge waves, waves as big as buildings, 20, 30 meters or more, from the hill they could be seen, the waves were coming without mercy, erasing everything they found—total devastation. Men, women and children, animals, houses, cars, everything.

I met Juhari in 2005 at the immigration offices in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a city where I was singing and going to college at the time. There she was, a sweet young Indonesian girl full

of life but with deep sadness in her eyes. After talking a little of this and that she began telling me her story. Her family had lost everything that tragic December morning, all they had, but most importantly, they had lost their father, their rock, the sole breadwinner of the family.

Following the death of her father, it was decided they needed to eat somehow and since she was the eldest child and there were no jobs at her hometown, 15-year-old Juhari migrated to Malaysia to work as a maid. At the beginning everything went well, but as time went by, she had to endure abuse and injustice from the family that had in the beginning so graciously opened their house to her.

They took away her passport and would only allow her to have two days off per month. Juhari cried and cried but never told her mother: her employers were still paying her and knowing that her family was able to eat because of her work was enough to dry her tears. However faith had yet another challenge waiting for her. In one of those days off she had, Juhari encountered an immigration officer who requested to see her passport. She told the officer her passport was in the hands of the family she was working for. The immigration officer accompanied her home and when they got there, she learned the family had stopped paying for her work permit and her visa had expired. She was taken to the immigration offices and that was where I met her.

As Juhari was telling me her story, I remembered how on that 26th of December after learning about the tsunami I was totally shocked for two days. I had actually felt the earthquake that day and I was supposed to be in Pattaya, Thailand that devastating morning. But my manager at the time had scheduled the beginning of our new contract on January 1st, which made it impossible for me to come back in time, so burning with anger and frustration I had ended up staying in Kuala Lumpur.

Pattaya was one of the places that was completely destroyed and staying in Kuala Lumpur saved my life.

Sadly poor Juhari had not been as lucky that day. It was almost a year later and shamefully I had kind of forgotten about that day, as many did when the news had moved on to another misfortune. However, for Juhari, the tragedy and suffering was still there, real and hard as it had been since then.

While she was telling me her story with tears in her eyes, not knowing how much trouble she really was in, the only thing in her mind was, what is going to happen to my family now?

At the time, I had never met someone so giving and who put the wellbeing of those she loved far above her own, and let's not even talk about happiness. She touched my heart so deeply.

I never saw Juhari again and I don't know what happened to her after that. But when I think of her, I like to imagine her happy and smiling, I like to imagine her mother and siblings are well and that now she has a beautiful family of her own. I like to imagine life has showered her with blessings for all she had to endure and that now she just has those memories in her mind as something that made her the amazing woman she is today.

Thanida Rasouy

Life is a Piece of Cake

Many people say life is a journey. And for some reason that journey is just a piece of cake, but why? For me, a piece of cake falls onto the floor when I am trying to cut it and put it on my plate. A piece of cake is not the word I would use to describe something easy to do at all, but it can sure make for an awkward moment. Especially at that birthday party where you drop the cake and everybody sees it. That is the awkward feeling I can tell everybody for this idiom.

I still remember last year when I was going to come to the US for the first time. My body was freezing. I could feel the hair on my skin stand up in the air. I wasn't sure if it was happening because of the aircon in the car or my nerves but either way I couldn't stop my shivering body and my heart was shivering even harder.

Two hours earlier my phone had died. The screen went completely black in my hand. I had used this phone for two years and I didn't know why it needed to die on this important day: the day I was traveling to the US. I didn't have time to figure it out because I needed to get to the airport by 10 p.m., but my phone had died around 6 p.m. It was a stressful situation and also my luggage broke at the same time too because of the large amount of clothes I'd packed. The luggage's zip popped out like a button that was trying to get away from a full tummy. So I needed to run to the mall and spend around \$500 for that one day, my last day of 2017 in Thailand, the country where I was born and which gave me my strong personality.

I was sitting in the car and looking at my phone, which told me it was now 9 p.m. and my friends were already waiting for me at the airport. I really wanted the car to move faster and faster but I needed to act like nothing was bothering me. I didn't want my parents to feel upset because of my acting frustrated. Too many things were happening to me that day and I knew my life was going to move on to a new step: I wasn't just a college girl anymore. The thing that I realized is after I went through that gate I would turn into a young adult who needed to take care of everything by herself. But the biggest thing that I would learn when I turned into an adult was loneliness. It would push me from a normal to an extraordinary life.

Before I came to the U.S. I had no idea what things were waiting for me but now I know. For one, I had to learn to travel by myself. It was hard to find friends who could travel with me because an au pair's vacation time is up to their host family and I didn't want any reason for them to block my vacation day so I decided to travel around the U.S. by myself.

On my way to Canada I had a 12-hour layover in Dallas, so I decided to go downtown by myself. I was so nervous and overthinking the Dallas trip but everything started out going really well. I liked the historic buildings and their transportation was so convenient until the time I needed to come back to the airport. I hopped on the wrong line and that is when my nightmare began. When I stepped onto the train I could feel my shoes stick to the dirty floor and the train smelled like urine. I didn't know I had hopped on the wrong train line until I saw the downtown buildings disappear and I saw the other Dallas area. The houses in that area were not the same as I had seen in the morning. They looked old and junky. I came to understand the phrase "social class difference" from them. My heart skipped so fast as I thought, "How can I escape from this train?" The only way I could think to get out was to ride the train until the end and then take it back to the downtown station. While the train went back from the end to downtown 1 station, I

smelled cigarette smoke even though people weren't supposed to smoke on the train. Not only did the guy behind me try to smoke but the guy in front of me tried to talk to me. I was scared of talking with him but he walked straight up to me. He should have known I didn't want to talk to him at all but I didn't know how to talk politely so I just sat and tried to be quiet.

Beep Beep. The train stopped and I saw the door open so the first thing I did was run out of there. I ran straight to the head of the train without looking back thinking that might be the safest place on the train because I could sit with the staff who control the train so if something was wrong I could just tell them. After I took my seat I looked at the door; I had no idea if the man was going to follow me, but the good thing was he didn't. I had never pushed myself into a situation like that before and I thought it was a bad decision to travel like a local. If I'd wanted to travel like a local I should have researched the area better before traveling, but the interesting thing was that this way I saw how different people's lives were in society, which happens in every country. How are we going to manage and improve this thing? That was the question that popped into my head, but anyway the fascinating thing was the way you never know what's going to happen along the way until you figure it out by yourself. That was a journey that made one of the biggest impressions on me.

Ashley Rivera

Learning Not to Dance

“You know I don’t dance,” I said, trying to keep my tone lighthearted. Inside, I could feel my heart beat faster, tension knotting in my shoulders, anxiety rising. The rhythmic music seemed to pulse louder, controlling the room as people got up to dance. My friends were among those hypnotized, drawn to the dance floor where couples were moving together fluidly—salsa, bachata, rumba? I couldn’t tell.

I insisted on staying behind at the table, littered with dirty plates and napkins. “No no no, I’ll watch our stuff.” As they finally, reluctantly left me behind, memories flashed through my mind.

I am really young, three or four, at Abuela Linda’s house in Virginia. There is a horse’s saddle in the corner of the living room, which really impresses me. The music is turned up and my parents laugh with me as I move wildly around the small room, crowded with too much furniture, as I try to shake my hips like Abuela Linda. I love their laughter, their surprise at my fearless joy.

A few years later I am sitting outside with Papi at a neighborhood party. I am visiting Puerto Rico for the first time. The smells of cooking meat, the tables piled high with home-cooked food, the music screaming out of every driveway overwhelm my senses. I watch from the safety of Papi’s lap, as people move so naturally to the rhythm, as if they are celebrating

themselves and each other and life itself. I wish this kind of thing happened back at home. It's so different from our quiet neighborhood where we don't really know anyone.

I am in 6th grade and I have learned to be self-conscious. Sitting in a hard chair at a cluster of desks pushed together, I realize for the first time that I don't dance. Our teacher asks a series of questions about what we do, our identities. We raise and lower our hands, claiming and rejecting. "Raise your hand if you're a dancer." I see all the popular girls I know are in dance companies raise their hands, and I know instinctively to keep mine down.

I am in 10th grade now, standing in the wide open hallway. The girls are in one line, the boys in another just across from us as the Spanish teacher shows us some simple steps to Latin dances for our short dance unit. As we try different moves, my partners and I move awkwardly with poor form. Even so, my heart is racing and I think to myself, "I could dance all day." Motivated, I go home and ask my dad to keep teaching me. We are in the half-finished basement with the red leather couch and his custom-made domino table. I try to show him the steps I've learned so far, but he doesn't understand. Dancing is pointless without music, he says. He turns on a song and starts moving, and I get lost trying to remember the steps. Deflated, I give it up and go back upstairs.

We're back in Puerto Rico, inside my aunt's house. I am in college now, and my sisters and I hang out with our cousins as my dad and his sisters lounge and laugh and poke fun at each other. It's nighttime and my cousin, who dances professionally, is teaching us some salsa steps and spins in a crowded living room. The space is small and we try not to step on each other. In the darkness of that night, surrounded by family, my confidence slowly rises.

I snap back to the present, the last memory warming me. I just can't seem to recreate the confidence that came with it. My friends are making their way back to me, through the crowd

and the tables. “Are you sure you don’t want to dance? No one cares how you look!” they try to convince me. I think back to just a few months ago. I am sitting in the front seat of Papi’s new truck, next to him. It is huge and black and shiny, and we call him a Puerto Rican hillbilly because of it. “Why didn’t you ever teach my sisters and me how to dance when we were young?” And as the question slips out of my mouth, a longing rises within me. I want to know what response he will give, and will it make up for this love/hate relationship, this social anxiety, this desire and this fear that have been building my whole life?

Very simply he says, “You never asked.” And I realize for the first time that my dad has no idea what goes on in my mind when I think about dancing. He never knew he’d have to teach his daughters, who grew up removed from Puerto Rican community, something that came so naturally to him growing up on the island. Somehow, knowing this helps.

My mind returns to my friends in the present moment, music still beating, lights turned low, carefree, joyful movement surrounding me. I answer them again, softly this time, “You know I don’t dance.”

Ajay Sharma

Health and Equanimity

Throughout my life journey I have observed a lot of suffering among my fellow human beings. I used to wonder why there was so much suffering and whether it was essential. Over the years, my observations, experiences, and reading have helped me to reach a conclusion that suffering can be eliminated or mitigated.

Our mind is a screen through which we see, experience, judge, and analyze this world and vice versa. Our mind expresses itself through the physical body. Our mind is a very important tool and device through which we can experience a peaceful and healthy life. In fact, a healthy mind is a prerequisite for a healthy body. We must try to cultivate and preserve the sanctity and clarity of mind. Just like we remove the lint from the dryer after every cycle or clean and defragment our computer hard disk now and then. Likewise we must do the same with our minds, preferably at the end of each day. This will help us to clear our minds to get a good night's sleep, which will allow us to reset ourselves.

A reactionary and repetitive mind is a reason for suffering. We must learn to let go of things and situations irrespective of good or bad experience. If it is a bad experience, we hurt ourselves by repeating/reminding ourselves of the pain and making it deeper and harder to forget. Similarly, when it is good, we want to experience that again and chase to recreate the

same experience that we are never able to recreate. In this process, we become frustrated and angry.

Now the question is: how do we train our mind knowing that our mind is not a single unit? It is divided into four categories: conscious mind (sense), subconscious mind, and unconscious mind, which is divided into two subcategories, active and latent. The unconscious mind is the most powerful and contains our beliefs and deep-rooted habits, which are very difficult to raise or to change. With the help of sense and the subconscious mind we can reach to our unconscious mind to rectify, edit, or defragment it and similarly by using our unconscious mind we can achieve a focused mind by training our conscious and subconscious mind.

Karla Vazquez

The Bittersweet Reality of Being Undocumented

June 15, 2012 was a memorable day: I came downstairs to my mom's kitchen to ask where my blue swimsuit was since I was leaving for California that day to visit my aunt in LA. As soon as I got downstairs and saw my mom glued to the TV instead of by the stove I wondered what was happening. She said that President Obama was making an immigration announcement and that it could affect us. I stood next to her and froze as the President read his Executive Order and the requirements for the Deferred Action of Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program; I remember having more questions than answers, even though according to the requirements, I would qualify. I remember thinking, this is it, we are finally documented!

I immediately told my brother and my partner, both of whom are undocumented. It was unbelievable that this was happening. This meant that I could find a job after I graduated in December and that I could get a driver's license! I was overjoyed, as I called and texted, and Facebooked all my friends who I'd met through organizing and advocating for this type of relief. I felt sad that I would miss all the celebrations and gatherings that evening to catch my plane to LA. I remember the tears, the excitement, and the conversation of what this would mean for our future. However, I also remember that small part of me questioning what happens now? What if I become documented? I remember realizing that being undocumented had become a part of my identity, just like being a woman, a college student, a Nashvillian, or a pet lover. Being

undocumented had introduced me to friends, given me purpose, and helped me find a passion for advocating for social rights. I will soon realize that having the work permit that DACA provided didn't mean to be documented but to be DACAmented, meaning I had legal presence but not legal residency. I know it sounds complicated but basically, the government acknowledges that I am here but hasn't decided if it wants me stay here.

Before DACA I was always worried about being undocumented. I mean, I had to worry on a daily basis about how I would get to school and work the next day, about whether I could afford college by paying out-of-state tuition, about why I could never join the color guard team because I had to work on weekends during football games to help my family. And after getting DACA it made me appreciate the small things that many often miss: it is like the blind woman who grows up in the dark and one day can see. She finds wonder in every color, and any detail. She appreciates the sun, the grass, and the random flower in the garden. Getting DACA was a lot like this, I was really excited that I could finally get a library card to check out books, because you are required to present a state ID to check out a book. I remember feeling proud to go get my parking permit for my car that I could now drive with my Tennessee Driver's License. And I remember the first day that I could finally get an adult drink with my meal because I didn't have to feel odd when I pulled out my passport to show to the waitress.

But having DACA has been just as bittersweet as being undocumented. It's good because it has made me feel safer, well at least it did before the 2016 election. But it's sad because it wasn't for everyone. It wasn't for my dad who had worked here for over a decade to provide for our family and it wasn't for my best friend who had been advocating with me for it to pass. It wasn't for those who didn't qualify because they came to the country when they were 16 instead of younger than 16 or because they came too late or too early, or because they weren't educated

youth but instead hardworking people. It was hard to face those who have been fighting with you along the way and celebrated with you only to find out that they don't qualify while wondering when it'll be their turn. It is hard then and it is hard today to think of how to give them hope and to explain why they should continue to believe in a system that keeps leaving them out.

I often wondered what my life would have been like if I had never been undocumented. What if my parents hadn't decided to leave their house, their lives, and friends to seek a better future for my brother and me? What if they had known that moving to the States and seeking better opportunities would result in feeling persecuted, afraid, and ashamed for not having that document with your dignity attached to it. I wondered if they would have made a different choice if they knew that coming to the US and working hard does not guarantee access to college for your children or equal opportunity. What if they hadn't brought us here to pursue happiness, would I have had the same friends? Would I have lived the same experiences, would I even be the same person that is standing in front of you today?

I thought about what if we hadn't moved to Tennessee. What if I hadn't met my best friend or met my partner in crime? What if we had stayed home in Mexico and I had never learned English? I did tell my mother once when I was in 6th grade and had a D in English that it was only because it was a pointless subject and I would never use it. What if I didn't have the opportunity to have running water every day or walk outside my house without the fear of getting kidnapped? I never considered that being undocumented had come with challenges but also with many opportunities. I realized how especially during the hardest times and toughest moments we often wonder what if we lived a different life or we could be a different person. But the reality is that despite the challenges I appreciate the life I live and the friends I have, even if they came by being undocumented.

I've slowly learned to see the beauty of my situation. And it is not to say that I became unfazed by the challenges of being undocumented or that I stopped wondering what if but merely that I chose to see the silver lining of it. I've chosen to appreciate all the things that it had brought me and not the ones that it has taken. I've chosen to honor my parents' dream by not only pursuing happiness but by choosing to be happy. It made me realize that being in disadvantage makes you value every advantage, that it builds your character through navigating adversity, and it that makes you conscious of other people's struggles even if they're not your own struggle. It makes you stand up and be a warrior because you find strength when you have no option but to be strong.

Now that DACA is being threatened I've felt sad and scared at the possibility that my work permit could be taken away. And I try to remember how much I had before DACA and how each undocumented quest was rewarded before belief. I want to believe that during dark times such as the one we are living in, it is especially important to make time to continue to enjoy the beauty surrounding us and count every blessing, even those that might sometimes come as a blessing in disguise such as being undocumented. But even more importantly, I want to remember that being undocumented has given me a community, a community that won't back down despite the challenges, a community that is resilient to fight for their family, a community that it is #HereToStay.

Karla Vazquez

Always There

Driving by the place where it all started. That gray office building in South Nashville surrounded by immigrant businesses, chain restaurants, and the senior group that meets at the YMCA across the street. Who would have thought that inside those dull walls history was being made?

I so clearly remember the flavor of justice and resilience which filled our bodies and was always as bittersweet as the bad coffee from the kitchen. The ongoing laughter that took over the space always surrounded by the uncertainty and tears from ongoing battles and defeats.

The growth and renovation of the room was ongoing such as the lives of those within. We literally brought down walls to make space for more and allow for our growth. And the brightness of the room as the walls filled up with art from campaigns, actions, and just creative days and retreats. While the room was penetrated with the smell of paint and the ink from multiple dried out Sharpies. Or the rainbow couches that once were white and now bear the marks of multiple signs with colorful remarks. The feel of that coffee table whose surface was getting wrinkles and new age bumps. Not even the furniture could withstand the test of time.

I wonder if I walked in there now if I would still see your beautiful smile, iconic glasses, short to bald hair and stubborn self ready to stir up the room and challenge us to think beyond ourselves.

You brought so much to our space from history to love and the strength in which you carry yourself. The poster child of the movement for so long, challenging the hearts and minds of those who didn't believe us to be worthy enough.

I sometimes wish time had stopped so that I could look forward to seeing you this Thursday night but progress needs time and time has its own agenda.

Vicky Villalta Gil

A Tree of Infinite Beauty

Once upon a time there was a tree of infinite beauty. Its flowers had an exquisite aroma and it bore the most delicious fruit that one could imagine. All the residents of the valley adored the tree profoundly as there was no other tree that could beat its beauty or produce such wondrous sweet fruit. For the valley residents it was impossible not to boast about this tree that they were so fortunate to have and its fame spread beyond the hills and as far as you could see past the river. Every day, more and more creatures, from all over the region, came to the valley to have just one taste of that most delicious fruit.

The valley residents were very fond of their tree. To let the tree grow bigger and to give it more light, the beavers chewed the surrounding trees until they collapsed—those trees had been less pretty than the most beautiful tree in the valley.

The pretty tree had long been home of an old owl. The owl had seen many things in life; it was very observant. The owl was very upset that the beavers had cut down the surrounding ugly trees.

“Don’t you understand that you are spoiling the tree?” yelled the owl.

“I can’t see how,” replied the sightless mole.

“I can’t make heads or tails of why,” replied the earthworm.

The rest of the residents stopped paying attention to the owl as everyone knew it was old and grumpy.

“You don’t need big eyes to see it is on the line,” muttered the owl to himself.

Anyway, the tree was looking leafier than ever and its flowers were more aromatic than ever—the tree was more beautiful than it had ever been.

The residents were extremely proud and decided to organize a party and invited more creatures to admire the beauty of the tree and the sweetness of its fruit. On the first day of the festivities 50 invitees could taste its fruit; they were extremely pleased, and exclaimed all around the wonders of the fruit. On the second day, even more invitees went to try the tree’s fruit, but the tree only gave 40 pieces and many visitors were very disappointed that they could not try its fruit as they had been promised that the fruit was abundant. On the third day the tree gave 20 pieces; after that, every day less until one day it did not give any more fruit and many residents felt disenchanting. At the beginning, the residents thought that all the visitors were taking all the fruits that the tree was giving and none was left for them. The residents asked the beavers to build a cage surrounding the tree with the wood from the ugly trees that they had chewed down to protect it from strangers.

The owl was madder and madder. “But don’t you understand that enclosed trees spoil?” he yelled to the other residents.

“The tree smells the same to us,” replied the anosmic birds, after some chirped deliberation.

“I see, the residents have taken leave of their senses,” muttered the owl to himself.

The most beautiful tree in the valley was sadder and sadder because it had very aromatic and majestic flowers but none became fruit anymore.

The owl, which we have said was very observant, explained to the tree that it could not bear fruits because the residents had cut the surrounding ugly trees; the ugly trees gave pollen to its flowers and only when pollen was given to the flowers was a fruit created. The most beautiful tree in the valley was surprised that it needed such ugly surrounding trees to give delicious fruits, but believed the owl, as it was very wise. The tree was hopeful as it thought that the solution was easy, they could plant other trees that could give it pollen. The owl explained to the most beautiful tree in the valley that trees needed many years to grow, even if they were not that pretty. This made the tree extremely unhappy, it understood that it was not going to be able to give fruit to the residents easily, and without fruit the residents would not come to eat and it would soon be forgotten. Then it missed the surrounding ugly trees, as without them, it suddenly felt very lonely.

The owl, despite its age and its grumpiness, wanted to help the most beautiful tree in the valley, after all, the owl still thought it was the most beautiful tree it had ever seen. It realized that the cage that the beavers had built with the wood of the ugly trees did not allow other birds to bring pollen from distant places. Moreover, autumn and winter were close and fewer birds and insects were travelling around and stopping by the tree to give it the pollen it needed. The owl tried to convince the residents to tear down the cage. “Don’t you understand that if we open the cage, the most beautiful tree in the valley can still be beautiful next spring?” cried the owl. The sloth and the tortoise understood but had many errands to go through first. The other residents were not fully convinced. “Why should we open a cage done to be closed?” whined the mule; and again they thought that the owl was grumpy and old and it only wanted to be annoying.

“I have seen some things can be undone...” the owl unconvincingly muttered to himself.

The owl also realized that the cage did not allow the light through and the most beautiful tree in the valley every day was less and less leafy and its flowers were less colorful and were smaller. The old owl started to fly around to gather pollen to bring it to the tree's flowers. Some flowers gave fruits, but they were not as big, not as juicy or sweet as they had been before, although their flavor was still delicate. The fruit fell from the branches quickly, as the branches grew weaker every day, and was left to rot on the ground. The residents did not like the fruit nor the smell anymore and slowly stopped visiting the most beautiful tree in the valley and started to forget that it was there, as it was hidden behind the cage made of wood of the surrounding ugly trees.

During winter the owl incessantly brought pollen from all over, it never got tired, hoping that the tree would feel happier if it still bore fruit. But the fruit was not as spectacular as it used to be although the owl still found it delicious. And the fruit was falling to the ground quite rapidly.

Winter was cold and rough and by the next spring no one remembered the most beautiful tree in the valley, only the owl was finding refuge within its branches.

That spring started very rainy but by April the rains stopped, and new herbs, flowers and little trees started growing right next to the most beautiful tree in the valley, in every place that a fruit had fallen a new plant grew thanks to the pollen that the owl had brought. The tree was every day weaker and its flowers, despite being spring, smaller.

Then summer came. With summer troops of fireflies settled next to the most beautiful tree in the valley and their courtship provided the light that the other herbs, flowers, and trees needed to grow stronger, beneath the most beautiful tree, next to the walls of the cage built with

the wood of the ugly trees. Each day, the other plants had stronger roots and the most beautiful tree had weaker ones.

And with summer, hordes of insects brought pollen from all around the region, from more places than the owl could have travelled to in its whole life. And the herbs, flowers, and trees grew and grew and they gave fruit, a fruit that was lovelier than the one the most beautiful tree in the valley had given before. And they grew around the tree, within the constraints of the cage.

One day in mid-summer it rained, and the herbs, flowers, and trees around the most beautiful tree in the valley were thirsty and drank a lot, so much that they expanded. And their expansion made the cage crumble. The cage made of the wood of the once ugly surrounding trees fell on top of the weakened most beautiful tree in the valley while the owl, tired and old, was sleeping in its branches.

The residents who had not been around that place for a long time and had long forgotten about the most beautiful tree in the valley, saw a circle of herbs, flowers and beautiful trees with apparently delicious fruits. They were all surprised as for them it seemed to have grown there overnight, because the cage had hidden the uncountable trips that the owl had made to bring pollen to the most beautiful tree in the valley, the flowers that became fruits that had fallen onto the earth, the light of the fireflies that had helped the herbs and flowers and trees to grow stronger, the hordes of insects that had provided pollen to the flowers of the new trees, and how altogether had strengthened the roots that were growing and growing until they had made the cage crumble onto the most beautiful tree in the valley where the old owl was sleeping quietly and deeply in its branches.

Sheen Yu

A Couple on Fire

"Fire! Firefighter! It's not fair!"

I was sitting on our shabby couch while breastfeeding our four-month-old baby girl. In the dim light of the lamp by the couch, Devin was reciting an essay on firefighters from his English textbook. Once again, he mistakenly pronounced the word "fire" as "fair," and it pissed me off.

"Ask yourself: how many times have I corrected your pronunciation?"

Devin stopped reciting, yet ignored my question. My mom came out of the kitchen, vigilant about a burgeoning flame. Accidental quarrels went off easily in such peculiar tutoring settings. Recently, I tended to be more and more harsh towards Devin, and such overt tutoring tension disturbed my mom very much.

If I had a chance to choose, I would not turn myself into my husband's English tutor. I wished our relationship remained simple and pure, just love and sharing, free from pushing and criticism.

Unfortunately, I had no other choice. Devin had been jobless for months since he moved to U.S. as my alleged "dependent." English turned out to be the biggest obstacle in his way. In the tightening tension of these early immigration days, the jobless husband became a frustrating and frustrated student tutored by his anxious wife.

Sheyla Zito

Did She Know?

Did she know it would be the last time she went grocery shopping and bought the very same things as always: tomato soup, pumpernickel bread, tuna, light squeezable Hellman's mayo, an extra-large package of 18 paper towel rolls, a large package of 24 rolls of toilet paper, decaf coffee, a package of Kit Kats, Hershey's Kisses, and Sensodyne tooth paste?

Did she know it was the last time she would do her evening routine prior to going to sleep? Pre-set the table for breakfast, paper towel on top of the placemat, the white oatmeal bowl in the middle, the tall blue cup on the right and the OJ glass on the left? Put all the thirteen pills in a Dixie cup covered by a couple of Kleenex? Carefully squeeze the Olay cream at the tip of her fingers and scrub her skin, massaging every inch of her 96-year-old face miraculously without wrinkles?

Did she know it was the last time she would peel 5 lbs. of apples and prepare her own applesauce? That it would be the last time she would turn the stove on, boil water, and prepare her own oatmeal? Would carefully pour it into the bowl she laid out the night before? Did she know it would be the last time she was capable of preparing her own cup of coffee, pour a cup of orange juice, and have her half donut for breakfast?

Did she know it was the last time she would wash her few and very same dishes? Turn on the faucet to a trickle of hot water on top of a few drops of dish detergent, so that by the time she

was done with breakfast, she would roll her chair back, look through the window and then drop her cup, the OJ glass, the oatmeal bowl, the tiny pan she used to cook the oatmeal, the spoon with which she got the applesauce and ate the oatmeal and the wood stirring spoon all into the bubbly sink?

Did she know it was the last time she would choose which clothes to wear, a pair of earrings to match the sweatshirt, the black sweatpants and the white pair of sneakers? Did she know it would be the last time she was capable of putting make up on and be excited to go to the Home Town Buffet on top of the hill? Did she know it was the last time she would wrap a slice of pizza she couldn't eat and stick it into her pocketbook?

Did she know it would be the last time she would do laundry? Carry her reinforced USO jeans bag, used as a hamper, down to the basement? That it was the last time she would carefully put a small amount of Tide Delicate Skin into the washing machine? Did she know it would be the last time she would sit in her chair and watch TV waiting for the dryer cycle to end, so that she could fold her things, put them into a basket and crawl up the steps, pushing it upstairs, back to her room and into their drawers?

Did she know it was the last time she would tell the yard worker to trim the bushes, to not touch the red tree, to blow the autumn leaves, to shovel the driveway? Did she know it was the last time she would open the front door to get the mail and lock it right behind her?

Did she know she would never get back to that pair of stockings that she had worn just once and carefully folded in her drawer, so she could wear once again before washing or throwing them out? Did she know that beautiful black lace set she bought from a magazine, perhaps to impress her husband, for a romantic evening, or just to feel beautiful, would never be worn?

Did she know that blue cut of fabric, matching the flowery pillowcase, she cut in pieces would never become whatever she dreamed of making?

How many unfulfilled dreams, projects started, ideas not initiated? How many letters not sent, others not written; clothes, jewelry, and shoes never worn, waiting for a special occasion? How many days not lived, waiting for someone to show up, to visit, or some companion? How many phone calls not placed waiting for the other side to apologize, to want or just initiate the conversation? How many moments of self-importance wasted? How much money not spent doing something she wanted, buying something she didn't need but that would be nice to have? How many places not visited, because pride got in the way, things not done, because stubbornness prevailed?

Did she know she would lose it? That she would have no idea of who she was, which season, which month, or even which year we were living in? Did she know she wouldn't know who the president was or even remember her own name? Did she know that the moments she'd lived for the last 75+ years would just be erased?

Did she know she wouldn't be able to make a decision for herself, or remember anything else other than her beloved mom and her childhood?

Did she know that we wouldn't be able to take care of her, even though we wanted to? Did she know we would leave her somewhere, trying to convince ourselves it was better for her? Did she know we would promise to visit her often, but couldn't, not because of time or willingness, but because we needed to rebuild our hearts and souls broken from the last visit? Did she know a daughter-in-law would love her this much?

I pray that when it is finally her time to leave us physically, God be merciful and use the sleep machine as the transportation, perhaps during a sweet dream, where she is walking in a

beautiful place, curiously smiling, watching her favorite scene, calm, serene, at peace. That He comes just before she gets to the margins, smiles at her, takes her hand affectionately ensuring she won't be alone, and side-by-side helps her cross the bridge...

For us that stay, I hope we are able to comprehend the power of here and now... that there is no special occasion to do something, to wear something, to create something, but at the very present, each day, each moment. That it might just be that we have already done many "lasts" in our journey...

For me, once I do all these things for the last time, I will enjoy a nice and hot cup of cinnamon apple tea with my favorite coconut cookie, brush my teeth, take a nice and warm shower, use a perfumed and expensive moisturizing soap, and choose the softest gigantic towel. Then I will lay in a bed perfectly made with clean 1000-thread Egyptian cotton sheets, cover myself with my work-of-art quilt, feel warm and cozy in my brand new comfortable PJs. I will lie on my back, say a prayer in thanksgiving for all the blessings I was granted, smile and then finally and happily close my eyes for the very last time.